

12. *Measure for Measure*

Measure for Measure is in some ways an unattractive play. It is austere, schematic, and, literally, monotonous. Its characters are unsympathetic and not perhaps, in comparison with other mature Shakespeare plays, fully alive. The Duke, never developed as a character himself, acts as puppetmaster, thereby depriving the other characters of free-will and the chance to live out their individual fates. The plot creaks and the resolution is arbitrary. The language is unidiomatic, often with tortured syntax. The play has neither the genial warmth of comedy nor the inevitability of tragedy. It is, in more than one sense, a problem play.

What is meant by the term Problem Play? It can hardly mean a play about problems, since all Shakespeare's plays are that. The histories are about the problems of kingship. The comedies are full of problems, which tend to be problems of circumstance and chance – mistakes, misunderstandings – with clear solutions which are reached at the festive conclusion, rather than deep problems of character and morality for which only ambiguous or partial solutions, if any, are possible. In the tragedies the problems are internal, and insoluble in the terms of ordinary life. You would not, for example, describe Hamlet as a man who has problems. The word is not big enough, and implies that solutions exist. The tragedies are about people first and their dilemmas second; about their dilemmas only insofar as they are theirs. Hence their titles are simply the names of the tragic protagonists.

Who is *Measure for Measure* about? The Duke, Angelo, Isabella, Claudio? It is, surely, not so much about them at all, but about the situation, the moral dilemma, in which they are all caught up; about the moral lessons which can be drawn from the solutions the Duke imposes. As the title implies it is primarily about an abstract moral concept, and only secondarily about the people involved. The characters are conceived to illustrate the morality and have little existence beyond that function.

Another characteristic of the Problem Play is that the moral lesson or solution is itself problematic, unlike the obvious and only possible endings to the comedies, with every loose end neatly tied up. Schantzer defines the Problem Play as

a play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible and even probable.

The problem, that is, is the audience's problem in trying to understand where the play as a whole stands in relation to the problems presented within it. We are not sure what Shakespeare expects us to feel about these characters. There are no heroes or villains, no blacks and whites, only shades of grey, and to discriminate between them, as the play demands that we must, requires of us that we do not respond with large gushes of emotion, such as are appropriate in both comedies and tragedies, but objectively, analytically, with very close attention to the exact use of language.

The Problem Plays were probably written for a relatively intellectual, academic, audience at the Inns of Court rather than for a popular theatre such as the Globe. They assume a different relationship with the audience, which is put in much the same position

as a jury in a court of law. Hence these plays are close in spirit to the dramatic principles of Bertold Brecht, in whose work, for example, the actor playing the defendant in act one might play the judge in act two, a device to be recommended by King Lear:

See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear, change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which the thief?

The title directs us to the central problem of the play:

Judge not that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

[Matthew 7: 1-2]

This text has always been highly problematical, especially for those who, like the Duke, are responsible for good government in the state, and for the rule of law. Taken literally, it seems to say that since all men are sinners, none is qualified to judge or punish others. There is also the biblical text: 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone'. Since none is without sin, no stone may be cast. Yet the state cannot function without strict laws to curb the raging appetites of its most refractory members. Who, then, is to administer these laws?

At the beginning of the play we are led to believe that both the Duke and Angelo have lived monkish lives, in obscurity and seclusion, studying to frame theories of human nature and of government. The Duke has long had the opportunity to put his theories into practice, but has been unable to do so. He ends up with strict laws which he cannot bring himself to enforce. The result is that the law loses all respect and liberty breeds licence. Vienna has become a 'permissive' society (he uses the very word). D.G. James quotes Frazer's report that in many cultures the attempt by the priest-king to exercise spiritual and temporal powers simultaneously proved so burdensome that 'they sank under its weight into spiritless creatures, cloistered recluses, from whose nerveless fingers the reins of government slipped into the firmer grasp of men who were often content to wield the reality of sovereignty without its name' [128]. The Duke is in not quite so bad a case, but the split in him is projected onto Viennese life with its polarized and life-denying extremes of convent and stews.

The Duke regards his own leniency as a vice rather than a virtue, and prefers Angelo as someone more likely to have the courage of his own convictions, as a man apparently without sin, whose own life could stand up to the most searching judgement. Angelo's severity is approved not only by the Duke but also by Escalus and others, including, however grudgingly, even Lucio.

But it is typical of the manifold ambiguities of this play that the Duke's motives should be mixed. His admiration for Angelo is from the first qualified by a slight suspicion that he might be too good to be true, a 'seemer' most likely to reveal his true colours when corrupted by absolute power. In a sense he is conducting an experiment to see whether harsh laws and harsher punishments, rigidly enforced, will in fact produce a better life in the commonwealth, and also whether, in Wilson Knights' words, 'extreme

ascetic righteousness can stand the test of power'. The experiment shows that too much restraint is as damaging to the state as too much liberty, and more damaging to those who enforce it.

Within this framework of the problem of Justice, the real interest of the play lies in the delineation of two characters, Angelo and Isabella, in the way in which Shakespeare puts the conspicuous virtue of each under such pressure that it breaks open to reveal something ugly and destructive lurking unacknowledged beneath it, from which it has derived its extreme severity. The psychology is strikingly modern, and still shocking to those who believe in Victorian moral values. It fleshes out Blake's proverb of Hell 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires'.

In Angelo this is worked out in a fairly obvious and mechanical way. It is implied in his very name, surely a spiritually pretentious and unnatural name for a man:

They say this Angelo was not made by man and woman,
after this downright way of creation.

Montaigne knew these victims of moral hubris: 'They want to get out of themselves and escape from the man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts'. The man who denies his kinship with humanity and nurses the spiritual ambition to be like an angel is in the way to overreach himself, fall, and become, instead, a devil.

When Angelo finds himself attracted by Isabella, what is to prevent him simply declaring his love for her? He is the kind of man she admires. If he freely pardoned her brother he would stand in her good grace. But for him love and lust have become separated as good and evil. When, in his desire for Isabella, he is forced to recognize his own humanity, he can only recognize it as sinful lust. Wilson Knight describes this very well:

Sexual desire has long been anathema to him, so his warped idealism forbids any healthy love. Good and evil change places in his mind, since this passion is immediately recognized as good, yet, by every one of his stock judgements, condemned as evil. The Devil becomes a 'good angel'. And this wholesale reversion leaves Angelo in sorry plight now: he has no moral values left. Since sex has been synonymous with foulness in his mind, this new love, reft from the start of moral sanction in a man who 'scarce confesses that his blood flows', becomes swiftly a devouring and curbless lust.

[*The Wheel of Fire* 87-8]

There is also a very pertinent passage by Ted Hughes in *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*:

The boar that demolished Adonis was, in other words, his own repressed lust - crazed and bestialized by being separated from his intelligence and denied. The Venus which he refused became a demon and supplanted his consciousness. The frigid puritan, with a single terrible click, becomes a sexual maniac - a destroyer of innocence and virtue, a violator of the heavenly soul, of the very thing he formerly served and adored. ... This metamorphosis is triggered by a simple and one might

think academic factor: namely, Adonis's Calvinist spectacles, which divide nature, and especially love, the creative force of nature, into abstract good and physical evil. Nature's attempts to recombine, first in love, then in whatever rebuffed love turns into, and the puritan determination that she shall not recombine under any circumstances, are the power-house and torture-chamber of the Complete Works. And the vital twist, the mysterious chemical change that converts the resisting high-minded puritan to the being of murder and madness, is that occult crossover of Nature's maddened force - like a demon - into the brain that had rejected her.
[192]

What Hughes describes as the supplanting of consciousness by a demon, a mysterious chemical change, an occult crossover, a 'single terrible click' is a psychic experience recognized and named by modern psychology. Carl Jung calls it 'enantiodromia'. We can give Jung the last word on Angelo:

Virtuousness is always inwardly compensated by a great tendency towards baseness; and how many profligates are there who inwardly preserve a mawkish virtue and moral megalomania? One completely forgets that one can most miserably be carried away, not only by a vice, but also by a virtue. There is a fanatic, orgiastic self-righteousness which is just as base and which entails just as much injustice and violence as a vice.

[*Psychology* 142]

There is no fundamental critical disagreement about Angelo; but Isabella is another matter. For centuries she was regarded as one of Shakespeare's most pure and noble heroines; and there are still critics who find her wholly admirable. In terms of plot she is set against Angelo and suffers much at his hands. But it seems to me that in terms of the deeper meanings of the play she is essentially his female counterpart. Both are puritans dedicated to unusually harsh disciplines. Her seeming, screened by her youth and innocence and habit of a nun, is much less obvious than Angelo's, and less melodramatically revealed; but revealed it certainly is, if we are alive to the implications of the lines she speaks. She knows herself as little as Angelo knows himself, and is also deficient in common humanity.

Isabella's first appearance in the play is inauspicious. For we find that she is so far from accepting her own sexuality that she is about to enter a nunnery where she will never again speak to a man but with covered face and in the presence of the prioress. She freely chooses the terrible fate with which Theseus threatened Hermia. She gives no moral or spiritual reasons for this. The first thing she says is that the rules of the strict order of St. Clare are not strict enough for her. Her desire for 'a more strict restraint' upon the sisters parallels Angelo's desire for stricter laws and law-enforcement in Vienna - and the previous scene had ended with the Duke's expression of his doubts about the genuineness of that.

Of course there are vast differences between Isabella and Angelo. He is a mature victimizer, she a young and innocent victim. The text does not specify her age, but the most theatrically effective of many Isabellas I have seen was the youngest. We can focus the issue by asking where Isabella lives, and with whom. There is no mention of home or

parents for her or Claudio. Indeed, there do not seem to be any ordinary houses in Vienna. When Pompey says that all the houses in the suburbs must be plucked down, he means bawdy houses; and it seems that, apart from the public buildings, ducal palace and gaol, there are only two kinds of houses, religious houses and bawdy houses. Even Mariana's moated grange is at Saint Luke's, that is, part of a religious establishment, and moated as if to keep out the corruption of the city. We must assume that Isabella's parents are dead. Perhaps she has been living with Claudio; but he has left, or is about to leave to live with Juliet. Pompey claims that if the brothels were closed it would be necessary to 'geld and spay all the youth of the city'. Claudio and Juliet try to live in terms of normal sexual love. Claudio is condemned to death for it, and Juliet imprisoned along with the whores. It is not surprising that a passionate but high-minded and inexperienced girl such as Isabella should in such a moral environment equate her integrity with her chastity, and, feeling that she is obliged to choose between a pure life within the nunnery and a corrupt life out of it, unhesitatingly chooses the former. Nevertheless, the play judges that her decision is deeply mistaken. In her desire to protect herself against corruption she rejects not only sex, but all intercourse with men and most forms of intercourse with women; she rejects the world, including love, and, in doing so, compromises her own full humanity.

Angelo did not recognize himself to be a man. Isabella is immediately presented to us as aspiring to be something more than a woman, 'a thing enskied and sainted', an 'immortal spirit'. She succeeds only in being something less than a woman. In the dichotomy the play sets up between nunnery and brothel, it is Mistress Overdone, a bawd, who exemplifies womanly compassion and Christian charity by taking in Lucio's bastard. Can we imagine Isabella doing as much for her brother's child? (Mariana has to give her another lesson in compassion at the end.) The sterility of the life to which she aspires is underlined by the imagery of richness and fertility in which Lucio describes to her her brother's 'sin':

Your brother and his lover have embraced;
As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
Expresses his full tilth and husbandry.

It is the Provost, a man distinguished by a mature and balanced humanity, who describes Claudio as 'more fit to do another such offence, than die for this'. Claudio is a very ordinary young man, concerned not with abstract morality, but with living and loving. Yet Isabella is persuaded, very reluctantly, to intervene on her brother's behalf, not because a palpable and cruel injustice is about to be performed, but solely because Claudio happens to be her brother. Had it been any other man she would have concurred with Angelo's handling of the case. That is why she is so cold for so long and needs so much prompting.

When Isabella comes to plead for Claudio she never asks what harm he has done, or why his offence should be a capital one (as do not only Lucio, but also Escalus and the Provost). On the contrary, she claims that it is

a vice that most I do abhor,

And most desire should meet the blow of justice.

Why should she abhor the lovemaking of a young man and his fiancée so much if not in fear of her own sexuality - for the same reason, that is, that she wishes to enter a nunnery?

Just as Angelo's puritanism ensured that sex could only present itself to him in perverse forms, so Isabella's also diverts her sexuality from its normal course. There is a kind of perverted sexuality in the language she uses when Angelo makes his proposition - what Leavis calls 'a kind of sensuality of martyrdom':

Were I under the terms of death,
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.

She feels that her integrity is dependent on her 'honour', a term she never questions, and which she confuses with her chastity. She is in no doubt that her chastity weighs more than her brother's life:

Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother die:
More than our brother is our chastity.

How can those who admire Isabella justify that vicious line? It is a product of sheer panic. She is under extreme pressure, but her total moral collapse in the name of morality calls that morality in question. And there is worse to come. When Claudio suggests that a sin done in charity, to save a life, is no sin but a virtue (and he is theologically impeccable), she becomes as ruthless as Angelo in defence of her puritanical self-esteem:

Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death;
No word to save thee.

Yet she has no objection to the plan to let another woman make the same sacrifice on her behalf. The Duke has already told Juliet that sorrow which is merely for the shame sin brings 'is always toward ourselves, not heaven'. He speaks in the same vein as many Elizabethan moralists, such as Tyndale, who was very hard on Lucrece, another woman who placed an absolute value on chastity:

She sought her own glory in her chastity and not god's. When she had lost her chastity, then she counted herself most abominable in the sight of all men, and for very pain and thought which she had, not that she had displeased god, but that she had lost her honour, slew herself. Look how great her glory and rejoicing therein, and much despised she them that were otherwise, and pitied them not, which pride god more abhorreth than the whoredom of any whore.

But it is not against such vehemence that we are required, within the play, to measure Isabella, rather against Mariana. Mariana has a very low profile in the play, but that we should not allow that to obscure her centrality. Whereas Isabella chooses to enter a nunnery, Mariana is forced into exile and isolation at her moated grange. Vienna cannot accommodate someone who refuses to accept its division of body from spirit, sex from love. Mariana has no compunction about making love to a man to whom she is not yet married, and the Duke not only sanctions but sets up the act. Mariana corresponds to Venus, a woman of candid sexuality defined entirely by her unconditional love for a man who rejects her, taking him to her bosom in the end after he has undergone a symbolic death and resurrection. Mariana represents, in almost token form, the values embodied much more explicitly and richly in Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*. Her simple plea for Angelo's life has all the total commitment in love and charity which was lacking in Isabella's plea to Angelo. When Isabella sinks to her knees beside her and speaks in like terms, she recovers her humanity, and that, in the terms of this play, is the only redemption.

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