ANNUAL SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

MEASURE FOR MEASURE: THE PLAY AND THE THEMES

By J. C. MAXWELL

Read 24 April 1974

IT is thirty-seven years since the last lecture to the Academy in which *Measure for Measure* figured prominently—R. W. Chambers's 'The Jacobean Shakespeare and *Measure for Measure*'. Chambers was largely concerned with attacking the belief in a pessimistic Jacobean Shakespeare, as the first half of his title indicates. On *Measure for Measure* itself, his lecture was influential in encouraging the belief—already urged a few years earlier by Wilson Knight[1]—in a Christian interpretation. Since then, this type of interpretation has been carried further—sometimes, it may be thought, well beyond the bounds of good sense—by other critics.

But a more basic question than 'What sort of ideas does the play embody?' is 'How much is it concerned with embodying ideas at all?' And some of the more recent studies have laid heavy emphasis on specifically theatrical qualities and, in particular, have insisted that this is a comedy. Still, ideas cannot be expunged from the play. No one can deny that questions about justice and mercy are raised in it—whether or not with answers that are meant to be applicable outside it—and the currency of a recent catchword has led to the observation that the word 'permissive' occurs here and nowhere else in Shakespeare; not, however, with its now faithful companion, 'society', or, indeed, in any particularly 'modern' sense. It is also possible, without manifest distortion, to see the germs of twentieth-century psychological ideas, and I have even been told of untutored playgoers who thought that it was Jonathan Miller and not Shakespeare who conceived the notion of setting it in Vienna.

The most elaborate recent edition of the play, that of J. W. Lever, in an Introduction which devotes nearly thirty pages to 'Themes', claims that: 'In the broadest sense of the phrase,

[1] '*Measure for Measure* and the Gospels', in *The Wheel of Fire* (1930).

Measure for Measure deserves to be considered a drama of ideas.'[1] And A. P. Rossiter, in a book, *Angel with Horns*, which contains what are among the most stimulating discussions of all the 'problem comedies', wrote that 'the accepted *code* itself may be on trial. Order is, I think, in *Troilus and Cressida*; in *Measure for Measure* nobody questions that justice is on trial' (p. 153). I shall be questioning it later, though certainly not denying that we are invited to think about justice. It is, indeed, not possible to study *Measure for Measure* without paying attention to the handling of problems such as the enforcement of law and the relation between law and mercy. What I am more doubtful about is whether the critical examination of ideas on these subjects is quite as prominent and important as critics have often claimed.

It will be best to start with a particular question which, though technical, is also of considerable importance for the play. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with a number of earlier versions of the story, but he has made one innovation of central importance. Only in *Measure for Measure* does the heroine not yield to the unjust judge, and this is made possible by the so-called 'bed trick', by which Mariana, already betrothed to Angelo, is substituted for Isabella. Whether in the interests of parallelism, or for some other reason, Claudio and Juliet are also represented as betrothed. The corresponding pair in *Promos and Cassandra* are also willing to marry, but are not said to have engaged in any formal betrothal.

This introduces questions of law unfamiliar to the modern reader, since a betrothal had legal consequences.[2] To talk about these is to risk seeming to drag in extraneous historical material; but unfortunately it is necessary to make explicit what would have been every-day knowledge to the original audience. The bare essentials are these. What were known as *sponsalia de praesenti* actually made the parties man and wife, though the church regarded cohabitation after the contract, but before a church ceremony, as fornication. *Sponsalia de futuro* were more complicated. They could be dissolved, but until they were, neither party could marry anyone else. Moreover, if they were followed by cohabitation, though once more the church regarded this as fornication, the parties became man and wife. A paradoxical state of affairs, with obvious dramatic potentialities.

[1] *Measure for Measure*, The Arden Shakespeare (1965), p. lxiii.

[2] Those who want a fuller account will find all that is required for most purposes in Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (1963).

The use that Shakespeare could make of this aspect of the law is clear. The purpose of the Duke's plotting is to force Angelo to marry Mariana, and this can be done by cohabitation after *sponsalia de futuro*. We must suppose that, though Angelo had refused to fulfil his contract, it had never been formally broken off. It is true that at one point he says that

> five years since, there was some speech of marriage
> Betwixt myself and her; which was broke off, . . . (v. i. 216–17)

But he is clearly lying, in so far as he implies that the 'speech of marriage' fell short of an actual contract. Later in the scene, when the direct question is put to him, he admits as much.

> *Duke.* Say: wast thou e'er contracted to this woman?
> *Angelo.* I was, my lord. (v. i. 373–4)

He does not venture to add: 'But I no longer am.'

Which sort of spousals there had been between Claudio and Juliet is less clear, and less important. Since they have cohabited, they are now man and wife in either event. But since there had been no open marriage ceremony, their act could be brought under the revived law—tyrannically, but with technical correctness.

If we ask why the question of putting Angelo to death for *his* act of fornication never arises, the answer is twofold. 1. It is unnecessary, because he is threatened with death on quite another count. 2. The Duke is under no obligation to enforce the obsolete law, any more than Angelo was. But although no formal contradictions arise, Shakespeare has, by this complicated business of spousals and bed-trick, created certain difficulties for himself. I now want to ask what dramatic gains he could promise himself in compensation.

It is not likely that he first decided to make Isabella a novice in a religious order, and then thought that she must be saved from committing fornication, like her predecessors in earlier versions of the story. For one thing, such an explanation of his procedure would suggest the idea that only nuns or novices are under a strict obligation to abstain from fornication, or at least that only a nun or a novice could be plausibly represented as doing so in the situation in which Isabella is placed. Some critics come close to suggesting this. Thus Geoffrey Bullough:

> Isabella, unlike her predecessors, is 'a novice'. This daring change was probably made for several reasons. First, to make quite obvious the difficulty Shakespeare saw in having his heroine agree to Angelo's proposal. If she agreed the play must be a tragedy, for Shakespeare

was the author of *Lucrece*, and Whetstone's play revealed the psychological improbability inherent in making her suddenly turn after the forced marriage from a vengeful pursuer to a dutiful angel of mercy. She must not agree, and her refusal is in full accord with the best moral teaching . . . Yet if she were unmoved by [her brother's] pleading an ordinary woman might be thought unsisterly, however right she was. Make her a novice however, austere and prevented from leaving the world only by her brother's danger, and her refusal becomes inevitable, his demand outrageous.[1]

I cannot believe that it would have been beyond Shakespeare's powers to make the refusal acceptable from a heroine with no aspirations towards the religious life. And, of course, the history of critical comment on the play has shown that he has been by no means successful in shielding her from charges of unsisterly behaviour. A much more obvious dramatic reason for his choice—Bullough goes on to make a similar point—is to present a particularly appropriate temptation to the austere Angelo:

> O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint,
> With saints dost bait thy hook!
> (II. ii. 180–1)

Nor am I sure that Bullough has correctly diagnosed Shakespeare's probable reaction to *Promos and Cassandra*. What must have repelled him is its sheer dramatic crudity, which scarcely allows the question of specifically *psychological* improbability to arise. Bullough is not quite right in saying that Cassandra turns into an 'angel of mercy'. What concerns her is not so much mercy as her own role. As if the ceremony of marriage mechanically turned a switch, she becomes the dutiful wife instead of the loyal sister: outside these fixed roles, she has no character at all:

> My Brother first for wanton faultes condempned was to dye:
> To save whose life my sute wrought hope of Grace, but haples I
> By such request my honor spoyld, and gayned not his breath:
> For which deceyte I have pursude Lorde *Promos* unto death.
> Who is my Husbande nowe become, it pleasd our Soveraigne so
> For to repayre my crased Fame: but that nowe workes my wo.
>
> * * *
>
> Nature wyld mee my Brother love, now dutie commaunds mee
> To preferre before kyn or friend my Husbands safetie.[2]

I do not want to read too much into the sort of departure from Whetstone that even a lesser dramatist than Shakespeare

[1] *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. II (1963), p. 408.
[2] Part II, IV. ii; Bullough, ibid., p. 506.

could scarcely have avoided making in the 1600s. All I ask for is a provisional concession that the changes we have glanced at so far have intelligible dramatic reasons, and that we shall do well to be cautious about seeing them as evidence for a profound Christian message in the play.

Rather than follow the action scene by scene, I should now like to jump right forward and see what Shakespeare makes of the situation he has created out of his more complicated version in the final scene.

Angelo and Mariana have re-entered after the marriage ceremony. The Duke speaks to Isabella:

> For this new-married man approaching here,
> Whose salt imagination yet hath wrong'd
> Your well-defended honour, you must pardon
> For Mariana's sake: but as he adjudg'd your brother,
> Being criminal in double violation
> Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach
> Thereon dependent, for your brother's life,
> The very mercy of the law cries out
> Most audible, even from his proper tongue;
> 'An Angelo for Claudio; death for death.
> Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
> Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.'[1]
> Then, Angelo, thy fault's thus manifested,
> Which, though thou wouldst deny, denies thee vantage.
> We do condemn thee to the very block
> Where Claudio stoop'd to death, and with like haste.
> Away with him. (v. i. 398–414)

What I am going to do with this—play it in slow motion—is open to objection, as dwelling on what an audience in the theatre would not have time to grasp in detail. But I think the very contrast between what is and what is not fully intelligible at first hearing is itself instructive. And examination of it will help to remove certain misapprehensions about what Shakespeare is doing.

Isabella is urged to forgive the offence against herself, and this at once assures us that the Duke is not going to condemn Angelo to death simply for fornication, as Angelo had condemned Claudio. Whatever the measure meted out for measure, it is not going to be precisely this. But the pardon, at this stage, is of no more than theoretical interest, since Angelo is to die on another charge, cryptically formulated as:

[1] Some editors restrict the quotation to the first line. In extending it to all three I adopt the New Arden text.

> double violation
> Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach
> Thereon dependent, for your brother's life.

First of all, 'violation of sacred chastity'. When Isabella is later induced to plead for Angelo, she is able to take this up:

> My brother had but justice,
> In that he did the thing for which he died:
> For Angelo,
> His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
> And must be buried but as an intent
> That perish'd by the way. Thoughts are no subjects;
> Intents, but merely thoughts.

Angelo intended to violate sacred chastity, but he did not really do so. And the fact that the sexual act he did commit could have been brought under the law by which Claudio was condemned, is ignored by tacit consent. But Isabella has nothing to say about the second charge, 'promise-breach', and that for a very good reason. As far as she knows, *this* bad intent of Angelo had been o'ertaken by the act. Equally, she cannot plead that Angelo does not deserve death on this count, because, quite apart from her own feelings in the matter, such a plea would challenge the whole basis of the Duke's judgement. And it would be fatal for Shakespeare to allow any such challenge. If the Duke's condemnation were one claiming to rest on ordinary legal principles, a defending counsel would have no difficulty in demolishing it. 'You say', we can hear him pleading, 'that my client is a "promise-breaker". I admit it. He has behaved disgracefully, and he has already resigned from the bench. But since when has it been a legal offence—let alone a capital offence—to break a promise, privately made, to mitigate a perfectly legal death-sentence? I submit that there is no case to answer.' The court reluctantly acquiesces and Angelo leaves the courtroom a free man, though to the accompaniment of loud hisses from the public gallery.

But the Duke gives no opportunity for any such plea. He simply declares, in the exercise of his sovereign power, that it is *right* that Angelo should die since he is responsible for Claudio's death. Even the consideration of 'promise-breach' falls into the background, though it remains the immediate cause of Claudio's supposed death. It is given just enough prominence to prevent it looking as if the Duke were condemning Angelo for a legal sentence he had given him full authority to pass:

> Mortality and mercy in Vienna
> Live in thy tongue, and heart.
> (I. i. 44–5)

Shakespeare here tones down the crudity of *Promos and Cassandra*, where Andrugio says of Promos that he

> must lose his subtyll head
> For murdring me, whome no man thinkes but dead.
> His wyll was good; and therefore beshrewe mee
> If (mov'd with ruthe) I seeke to set him free.
> (Part II. v. i, Bullough, p. 507)

One consequence of putting the issue in these terms is that, immediately Claudio appears alive, it is assumed that Angelo's life is no longer in danger.

This arbitrary power of the Duke to overrule ordinary law has an interesting parallel in a version of the original story seldom cited. I owe my knowledge of it to E. T. Sehrt's *Vergebung und Gnade bei Shakespeare* (1952), p. 165. This is the version recounted by Martin Luther, and is one of those in which the wronged woman is the wife of the victim of the judge's promise-breach. The Duke here makes the villain marry the widow, and then has him executed, and Luther's whole purpose in telling the story is to hold the verdict up as one which

> sprang from untrammeled reason, above the law in all the books.[1]

So far, this final scene suggests that questions of law and justice, though by no means unimportant, are wholly translated into terms of dramatic effectiveness, and should not be probed too deeply for their own sake. Let us see what happens if we turn our attention to the concept of mercy, which some have thought to be the central theme of the play, and its relation to equity, considered as the mitigation of law within the total legal system.

The distinction between mercy and equity, in Shakespeare, cannot be made in technical terms. He seldom used the word 'equity', and only once in technical contrast with justice, when Lear addresses Edgar as 'thou robed man of justice' and the Fool as 'his yoke-fellow of equity' (III. vi. 37–8), and three times simply in the sense of fair dealing. 'Mercy', on the other hand, is often used for what would more technically be called equity, and not for unconditional forgiveness, as an earthly reflection of divine mercy. Sir Thomas Elyot, discussing the duties of the governor, argues 'that a governor ought to be merciful', and

[1] 'Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed' (1523) in *Luther's Works*, General Editor, Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. xlv (1962), p. 129.

distinguishes between 'mercy' and 'vain pity', where 'mercy' corresponds to Latin 'clementia' and 'vain pity' to 'misericordia'.[1] It is the latter that corresponds to Christian forgiveness, but it is the former that a governor ought to exercise.

It has been pointed out that earlier versions of the story used in *Measure for Measure*, notably that of Cinthio, belong entirely to the world of a humanistic ethic of equity, clementia, mercy in Elyot's sense. It has also been claimed that this is precisely where Shakespeare, with some rather muddle-headed foreshadowings in *Promos and Cassandra* transforms the story by making Christian mercy central.[2]

This requires careful consideration, and I approach the question indirectly by asking what the nature of Claudio's offence has to be, for the purposes of the play. It has to be a real moral offence. If it were not, we could not enter at all into Isabella's feeling of revulsion when she has to plead with Angelo in Claudio's favour. But it must not seem a capital offence to ordinary common sense. Claudio and other characters, in fact, waver between taking it quite seriously and talking of it as if it were hardly an offence at all, most notably when the Provost describes Claudio as

> a young man
> More fit to do another such offence
> Than die for this. (II. iii. 13–15)

This comes across as a natural exaggeration, provoked by a monstrously excessive sentence.

In fact, this sounds exactly the sort of situation which calls for equitable mitigation of over-strict law, and if Isabella pleads not for this but for sheer mercy, the fact would seem significant. That she does so plead is clear from the famous lines:

> Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
> And He that might the vantage best have took
> Found out the remedy. How would you be,
> If He which is the top of judgement should
> But judge you as you are? O, think on that
> And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
> Like man new made. (II. ii. 73–9)

But once more, one must ask whether this need be interpreted as a central Christian message of the play. It is wise to keep close

[1] *The Boke named the Governour*, II. vii, chapter title.

[2] This contention is, for instance, prominent in E. T. Sehrt's discussion in *Vergebung und Gnade bei Shakespeare.*

to the precise dramatic situation, and to ask what pleas were available to Isabella at this point.

One thing that has been made clear from the outset is that Angelo will have nothing to do with equity, or with any mitigation of the law. Isabella—who has been described by critics from Mrs. Lennox on as a prude—has begun by assuming that the obvious solution is for Claudio to marry Juliet, but has been told that this will not make Angelo relent. In spite of this, she starts by rather feeble legal quibbles which Angelo has no difficulty in disposing of. When she says:

> I have a brother is condemn'd to die;
> I do beseech you, let it be his fault,
> And not my brother, (II. ii. 34–6)

the retort is obvious:

> Why, every fault's condemn'd ere it be done;
> Mine were the very cipher of a function
> To fine the faults, whose fine stands in record,
> And let go by the actor. (II. ii. 38–41)

When Isabella finally reaches her Christian appeal, though we do not doubt that it is deeply meant, it is also important to bear in mind that it is the *only* plea left to her, Angelo being clearly impervious to any less extreme one.

The other place where a plea for sheer mercy is made is in the final scene, part of which I have already looked at in connection with the contrast between established law and the independent decision of the Duke. This turns out to be closely related to the question that is now engaging us. Isabella, once more, is pleading for unqualified mercy, and the Duke calls attention to the unreasonable nature of the plea. 'Against all sense you do importune her', he says to Mariana, and on the word 'sense' Dr. Johnson makes the excellent comment: 'reason and natural affection . . . a single word that implies both'. Once more, we must ask whether this is really because of the overwhelming importance of a Christian message that Shakespeare wants to drive home. Again, attention to the exact dramatic situation is to be recommended. As we saw earlier, it creates difficulties for Isabella that the Duke's condemnation of Angelo neither is nor claims to be based on the legal code that has so far governed the action. The reason why Angelo is to die is that the Duke, as absolute ruler, judges that it is right that he should. In other words, an appeal to equity is again out of place, but for the opposite reason to that which had dictated the type of plea

available in the scenes with Angelo. Whereas Angelo had made it clear that he was not prepared to listen to any plea of equity, the Duke claims that he has *already* arrived at an equitable judgement—one adapted to the merits of this individual case, though, as it happens, one that is more, not less, stern than strict law would dictate. Isabella can only ask the Duke to look on Angelo 'as if my brother lived', and point out that he did not in fact commit *one* of the acts—'violation of sacred chastity'—that he thought he was committing. The brute fact is that, as far as Isabella knows, he has committed the other: her brother does not live. Moreover—a point strangely overlooked by many commentators—Isabella's plea, for all its eloquence, is rejected—'Your suit's unprofitable'. He then turns to what seems to be a quite unrelated question—why was Claudio 'beheaded at an unusual hour'?—and it is in the process of clearing this up that Claudio is shown to be alive, and, as an immediate consequence, Angelo is reprieved. Immediately on the revelation, the Duke says: 'By this, Lord Angelo perceives he's safe.' It is the result of very careless reading to say, as Muriel Bradbrook does, that the Duke is 'overruled with regard to Angelo'.[1] But she only makes explicit an inattentiveness to what is actually going on that other critics wrap up. The Duke sticks to his principles throughout; that he in fact knows all the time that Claudio is alive is neither here nor there, and it would be fatuous to ask how he would have responded to Isabella's plea for mercy if Claudio had been dead. All that happens is that the facts are revealed not to be what the characters other than the Duke, and his immediate confederates, had believed them to be.

When, after looking at these crucial scenes, we stand back and ask questions about the role of justice and mercy in the play, it is hard to believe that it would be very satisfactory as a play in any obvious sense *about* these concepts. Important things are said on the subject. Striking predicaments are dramatized. But, as I said at the beginning, I feel uneasy about such a claim as Rossiter's, that 'nobody questions that justice is on trial'. The resuscitation and rigorous enforcement in an inappropriate case of an antiquated law is about the least apt example that one could think of to prompt searching reflection on generally accepted ideas about justice. Angelo's ideas are not shared by anyone else in the play. It may be a profound Christian truth that Mercy should supersede Justice, but it is not well illustrated

[1] *Review of English Studies*, xvii (1941), 396.

by a plea that a young man should not be executed on an obsolete technicality for sleeping with his own wife. As Marco Mincoff has said, in one of the best discussions of the play, 'The very word mercy becomes slightly absurd when we are so constantly reminded that what is needed for Claudio is not mercy but a modicum of common sense.'[1] And a modicum of common sense is what has often been lacking also in criticism of *Measure for Measure*.

Even if one stops short of extreme Christianizing interpretations, and recognizes that the case for equity as well as the case for sheer mercy gets a hearing, though not from Angelo, the extractable inferences about justice are not very impressive. The enforcers of the law should not be corrupt. They should take a middle course between excessive laxity and excessive rigour. There needs no Duke come from Vienna to tell us this. There is nothing nearly as disturbing and challenging as what the mad Lear says about justice, perhaps a year or two later. This, though it is still not what *King Lear* is centrally about, might subvert our ideas about justice as nothing in *Measure for Measure* does.

In connection with his claim that justice is on trial, Rossiter lays special stress on the low comedy: 'The comic part of the play . . . acts as a commentary on the difficulty of applying *law* (a reasoned thing) to matters of *instinct*.'[2] Difficulty, yes; especially when one has to work with officers as stupid as Elbow. But does one come away feeling that there is any basic paradox or absurdity in trying to keep brothels under firm control while not nursing any hopes of stamping out lechery? This is linked with another question that the low comedy raises. Do we feel that, even after the years of what the Duke regards as his culpable leniency, we are being shown a conspicuously corrupt society—'a world in whose fetid air no wholesome thing can grow',[3] as Una Ellis-Fermor rather melodramatically put it? I think the play has been distorted by ignoring the dramatic context of the speech which contains the most vehement denunciation of Vienna. The Duke as Friar says:

> My business in this state
> Made me a looker-on here in Vienna,
> Where I have seen corruption boil and bubble
> Till it o'er-run the stew. (v. i. 314–17)

[1] *Shakespeare Studies*, ii (1966), 145.
[2] *Angel with Horns*, p. 155.
[3] *Jacobean Drama* (1936), p. 263.

The immediate point of the speech containing these lines is to provoke Escalus's reaction: 'Slander to th' state; away with him to prison.' Presently, the Friar is about to be hustled off in custody, when Lucio pulls off his hood and reveals him as the Duke. Is there any need to suppose that the Duke as Friar, let alone Shakespeare himself, really sees such radical corruption in Vienna? Indeed it is interesting that *Promos and Cassandra* presents a much more generally corrupt and oppressive society, and that Shakespeare rejects most of what it offers him. Earlier in the play, we are left feeling that, were it not for the rigorism of Angelo and the incompetence of Elbow, Escalus and the bawd Pompey could easily have arrived at a reasonable accommodation or armed truce.

What I have said so far has been concerned with some difficulties in seeing *Measure for Measure* in terms of any elaborate system of themes and values. There is not time to supplement this with an equally lengthy discussion of the characters and their interactions, but since it is precisely confrontation of characters, in specific predicaments, that I am seeking to reinstate, at the expense of thematic patterns, I should like to examine some of the scenes that best exemplify this.

The scenes which have deservedly attracted most attention are the two interviews between Angelo and Isabella. But I prefer to begin with Claudio, who is a less prominent character, but who is given what is perhaps the most famous single speech in the play, the outburst on death in III. i. Outside this scene he has a speaking part only in I. ii (less than sixty lines) and IV. ii (two lines and a half). He is in the play, then, for his crucial role in the plot and for this one great confrontation in III. i. I mentioned earlier that, at different points in I. ii, he speaks rather differently about his offence, and he is lightly sketched as a young man who readily takes a colouring from his immediate situation: 'highly impressionable, easily swayed',[1] as Ernest Schanzer puts it. Hazlitt, we may remember, thought him 'the only person who feels naturally' in the play. From the first scene, we recognize him as neither a fiercely defiant nor a strong character, and we learn that he has 'great hope' (I. ii. 175) from his sister's powers of persuasion. This is all we know of him when we hear of Isabella's plan to visit him, and as she thinks, brace him to meet death by the news of Angelo's monstrous proposal:

[1] *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 77.

I'll tell him yet of Angelo's request,
And fit his mind to death, for his soul's rest.
(II. iv. 185–6)

The scene changes, and the first thing we hear is a very different attempt to fit Claudio's mind to death—the great set-piece by the Duke as Friar. This has often caused difficulty, because of its non-religious character. I am not going into the problems of the Duke's role, here or elsewhere, but simply considering the place of this speech in this particular scene: as something addressed to Claudio at this moment. A friar-like concern with the state of Claudio's soul would have been dramatically inappropriate. The dialogue must centre on death, as such. And Claudio's responsiveness to immediate influences is illustrated by the way he accepts the Duke's rhetoric and even sums it up in a neatly paradoxical way:

I humbly thank you.
To sue to live, I find I seek to die,
And seeking death, find life. Let it come on.
(III. i. 41–3)

But this attitude does not survive Isabella's entry. His first words to her are, 'Now, sister, what's the comfort?' Isabella, in a rather high-flown metaphorical vein, offers him good comfort, but not the comfort he is looking for, and he rejoins, 'Is there no remedy?' The dialogue that follows is extraordinarily skilful. We get the impression that Isabella has prepared her rhetoric with great care, but she is very slow in conveying, and Claudio in picking up, the plain sense of what she has to say. There is an interesting parallel to the cross-purposes of her second interview with Angelo, where it was she who took a long time to grasp what he really meant. Here, what happens first is that Claudio, naturally enough, takes 'fetter you till death' literally. 'Perpetual durance?', he asks—life imprisonment? And after her cryptic reply, he is still asking matter-of-fact questions, 'But in what nature?'—what are to be the conditions of my imprisonment? Her next speech is enough to let him see that there is more than meets the eye, but not to make clear just what it is. He begs her to cut through all this verbiage: 'Let me know the point.'

Her next speech shows that already his whole bearing has weakened the confidence she had felt in Claudio's response (or had professed to feel: some critics, like Rossiter, think that her hyperboles at the end of the previous scene conceal her real doubts about Claudio). She still won't come right to the point,

and falls back on generalizations somewhat reminiscent of the Duke's speech: 'The sense of death is most in apprehension', and the like; and so she provokes his outburst:

> Why give you me this shame?
> Think you I can a resolution fetch
> From flowery tenderness? If I must die,
> I will encounter darkness as a bride,
> And hug it in my arms. (III. i. 80–5)

After this rather forced profession of defiance, and in spite of the 'if', Isabella at last thinks she is sure of him, and, for a short time, his response, in substance if not in manner, is all that she can wish—'it cannot be', 'thou shalt not do't'. But then comes the turning point: would the wise Angelo commit such a sin if it were really damnable?—leading to the great speech, 'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where'.

We can now see that the Duke's speech at the beginning of the scene has been there, and has taken the form it has, principally in order that it should be repudiated, not as the result of point-by-point refutation of its arguments, but simply because the hope of life has offered itself. Isabella's rejoinder has often been felt to be excessively vehement. This may be so, but its most obvious function is that it prevents Claudio from saying anything at all, and so saves Shakespeare from having to devise anything that he could plausibly say. Any further opportunity is removed by the Duke's re-entry. This is where Claudio's susceptibility to the immediate situation is again exploited. The Duke at once tells Claudio that there is no hope, on the basis of the false assertion that Angelo had merely been testing Isabella. It needs to be emphasized that this belief on Claudio's part is the necessary condition for the renewed courage and resolution he now displays. One unfortunate result of failure to grasp this is seen in R. W. Chambers's whole-hearted defence of Isabella's denunciation, largely on the strength of its success:

> If Isabel's speech had been intended to depict a 'cold' and 'remorseless' woman, . . . why does Shakespeare show Claudio, far from resenting his sister's reproaches, wishing to ask her pardon, and henceforth courageous and resolute?[1]

Whether justification by results is such a clear moral defence as Chambers supposes may well be doubted, but in any case Shakespeare gives us no excuse for supposing that Isabella's tirade, without the Duke's announcement, would have had any

[1] *Man's Unconquerable Mind*, p. 294.

such effect. It is to be observed that Claudio's state of mind is not just resignation, but is a complete return to his attitude at the end of the Duke's earlier speech: 'I am so out of love with life that I will sue to be rid of it.' And in case we should doubt how long this will last, Shakespeare hurries him off the stage, and lets him say hardly anything else for the whole of the rest of the play. If Claudio had been left thinking that he still had a chance of life, it would have been repulsive to the audience that he should still, in cold blood, want Isabella to sacrifice herself for him. But Shakespeare would have found it almost impossible, after his previous outburst, to make convincing his resignation to a death that he did not believe to be inevitable. Though the plots of the two plays diverge so widely at this point that detailed comparison is of doubtful validity, it may just be worth remembering that the Andrugio of *Promos and Cassandra*, having been allowed to escape from prison, deliberately risks his life to come back and save the life of Promos, by revealing that the latter has not, after all, been responsible for his death.

Shakespeare, then, diverts our attention in the later part of the play from any question of how Claudio is facing the death which still seems inevitable. Perhaps it is partly to keep our minds occupied with something related, but very different, that we have so much of Barnardine, 'unfit to live or die'. There is just one other aspect of the proposed bargain that I should like to touch on. Isabella is in the difficult situation of having to say, 'I would do anything for you except the one thing that is asked of me'.[1] There is no doubt that she would, as she says, face torture or death to save Claudio. But an irony of the position is that, as soon as we ask the question, it is perfectly clear to us that, if the price proposed *had* been Isabella's life, there is not the slightest doubt that Claudio's courage would have been perfectly equal to rejecting any such proposal without a moment's hesitation. It is one of the brilliant things about Shakespeare's handling of the matter, in comparison with earlier versions, that we feel that it is intrinsic to the action, and not just an arbitrary piece of mechanism, that the price demanded should be a sexual one. Claudio inevitably draws the parallel between Angelo's conduct and his own. Angelo would not commit such a sin unless it were the least of the deadly seven; and when Claudio urges on Isabella that it is so, he is concerned

[1] This is an element in the situation which Scott also handles impressively in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*; cf. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (1950), pp. 119–20.

not just with breaking down her resistance, but with smothering his own sense of shame and guilt in so urging her. Ironically, the generally accepted distinction between murder and fornication has been crisply formulated by Isabella herself, pleading with Angelo for Claudio: ''Tis set down so in heaven, but not in earth' (II. iv. 51). The contrast with *Promos and Cassandra* is worth emphasizing here, if only because some critics have treated the formulations of that play as relevant to *Measure for Measure*. There is a point beyond which Claudio is not prepared to go in describing what it is he asks of Isabella:

> What sin you do to save a brother's life,
> Nature dispenses with the deed so far
> That it becomes a virtue.

It becomes a virtue, but it needs a dispensation and does not really cease to be a sin. Contrast the shuffling of mechanical counters in *Promos and Cassandra*.

> But where as things are driven unto necessity,
> There are we byd of both evyls choose the least.
>
> * * *
>
> *Justice* will say thou dost no cryme commit:
> For in forst faultes is no intent of yll.[1]

It is incredible that critics should have thought that this frigid logic-chopping has any bearing on the predicament of Shakespeare's Isabella and Claudio. There is no obligation on us to share the view that fornication is a mortal sin. But if it is, then the act Isabella is urged to commit is certainly an instance of it, and the concept of compelled sins cannot possibly be stretched to cover it; Lucrece, and Augustine's strictures on her suicide, are quite beside the point. I have not found it necessary, up to now, to introduce the question of the 'problem play'; but if the claims of *Measure for Measure* to be a problem play depend, as Ernest Schanzer holds, on Shakespeare's desire 'to make us question [Isabel's] decision',[2] I do not believe that they can be sustained.

To say this is very far from committing one to R.W. Chambers's notion of a wholly admirable and sympathetic Isabella. I am sure we are meant to be shocked and offended by her soliloquy at the end of Act II and still more by the scene with Claudio which we have been examining. But it would positively weaken the effect of these scenes if it were complicated with

[1] Part I, III. iv; Bullough, p. 462.
[2] *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 105.

doubts whether her basic decision was right, or at the very least, inevitable in terms of her whole nature.

To raise the whole question of how Shakespeare wishes us to see Isabella would involve treading some very well-worn ground. Rather, I wish to end by inviting attention, once more, to the actual sequence of events, which, I have been arguing, critics have been too apt to skate over, or even to misrepresent, in favour of thematic patterns.

This involves yet another look at the final scene, but from a new point of view. One of the crucial things about this scene is that it has been rehearsed, but not in the minutest detail, by the Duke and Isabella. Now, the audience is certainly concerned principally with following what actually does happen. It would be a very perverse spectator who asked, for instance, 'How would the Duke have contrived the denouement if Lucio had not removed his hood?' None the less, it is commonly said that some sort of test is made of Isabella in this scene, and we must at least avoid interpreting this in a way which flatly contradicts what we must suppose about her preparation by the Duke. In the first place, it is surely clear that she is not meant to remain in any doubt that she will be fully vindicated. This might seem too obvious to state, yet when she says:

> Heaven shield your Grace from woe
> As I, thus wrong'd, hence unbelieved go,

and the Duke commands, 'To prison with her!', Bertrand Evans is constrained to comment:

> For Isabella the dismal affair seems to have ended in that utter defeat which Angelo foretold.[1]

This must be nonsense. No doubt, with part of our minds, we respond to the play within the play, the one staged by the Duke and Isabella in collusion, but as soon as we explicitly ask the question, 'How is Isabella feeling about all this?', the answer cannot fail to be, 'All is going according to plan so far'. It may be permissible to conceive Isabella as an inexperienced actress playing a difficult part with a half-sense that it may not wholly come off; certainly not as an actress who fears that she may have strayed into the wrong play altogether.

There is, of course, one central fact that the Duke is concealing from her, that her brother is still alive. But, for that very reason, it would be distracting if we had to think of her as uncertain about anything else that concerns her role in this scene.

[1] *Shakespeare's Comedies* (1960), p. 213.

Considering what a linchpin of 'Christian forgiveness' interpretation has been the notion that the Duke tests Isabella's capacity to plead for forgiveness for Angelo, it is worth while to observe that the one thing the Duke actually tells us about his intentions concerning her relates solely to this withholding of information:

> But I will keep her ignorant of her good,
> To make her heavenly comforts of despair
> When it is least expected. (IV. iii. 108–10)

This ignorance would, of course, be a necessary condition of any forgiveness-test, but it does not imply that such a test is envisaged.

When we come to the final scene itself, the one thing that is clear is that it is Mariana's appeal that immediately provokes Isabella's plea. And it would seem absurd to suppose that this has been rehearsed behind Isabella's back between the Duke and Mariana: it has all the air of spontaneity, as has the Duke's rejoinder:

> Against all sense you do importune her.

No doubt a near-providential Duke could be conceived as preordaining or at least foreseeing all that happens, but I agree with those critics who find such a figure impossible to believe in. As far as what clearly belongs to the Duke's plans is concerned, nothing would have been lost if the action had passed straight from 'Away with him to death' (l. 427) to 'I have bethought me of another fault' (l. 454). I think that these considerations ought to make us very sceptical of such claims as that of R. W. Chambers that 'the Duke is keeping her brother in reserve, to produce him when Isabella shall have fulfilled her destiny, by making intercession for the man she most hates'.[1] Equally difficult is it to believe in the 'suspense' that Chambers credits to the original audience at this point.[2] It cannot be suspense as to the total outcome. As soon as we know that Claudio has been saved from death, we are assured that this is a comedy not a tragedy; and we scarcely have time for anything that can properly be called suspense between Mariana's appeal and Isabella's response to it.[3] Moreover, Isabella's words are not

[1] *Man's Unconquerable Mind* (1938), p. 300. [2] Ibid., p. 298.

[3] It is hard to accept Schanzer's description (*Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, p. 102) of Isabella's 'prolonged silence in the face of Mariana's repeated appeals'. This is partly a matter for the producer, and Mariana's appeal is 'repeated' in the literal sense that she has two speeches. But the stage time taken by the whole episode must still be very short.

manifestly an expression of wholehearted Christian forgiveness and have indeed been criticized as carrying on the self-centredness with which she has been charged:

> I partly think
> A due sincerity govern'd his deeds
> Till he did look on me.
> (v. i. 443–5)

There are perfectly good reasons, as I have argued, for the line Isabella takes here. The fact remains that this short episode is not calculated to convince a supposedly sceptical spectator that she has risen to new heights of selflessness. The supposed 'test' is either unnecessary or inadequate.

There are many other aspects of the play that I have no time to explore. I have not thought it appropriate to dwell on the dramatic weaknesses that are undoubtedly present, especially in the second half. All I have tried to do is to recommend the view that it has much to offer as a direct presentation of human predicaments and human confrontations, without the need to lean heavily on thematic—let alone allegorical—interpretations; and also that we are in danger of going astray as soon as we allow our attention to be distracted from what is actually happening on the stage.

When Chambers gave his lecture, he felt himself to be joining battle with an established orthodoxy about *Measure for Measure*. I am conscious of swimming with the tide rather than against it. Besides the essay of Marco Mincoff from which I have quoted, let me single out the chapter on the play in Harriet Hawkins's *Likenesses of Truth in Elizabethan and Restoration Drama*. I would also associate myself with what has recently been written by Kenneth Dover of another play which it has been customary to ransack indefatigably for themes, the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus:

> I am not satisfied that 'with all the powers of his mind', as Professor Lesky puts it, 'he wrestled with the problem arising from the conflict between human existence and divine rule', nor do I take the view that a dramatist passionately involved in metaphysics and theology is a wiser and greater man than one who devotes the powers of his mind to concrete problems of poetic and theatrical technique.[1]

But it is with the words of a slightly earlier critic that I should like to conclude. I have once or twice referred to A. P. Rossiter, in connection with points on which I disagree with him. I have

[1] *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xciii (1973), 58.

no such reservations about the concluding paragraph of his chapter on the play:

I can imagine *Measure for Measure* being read, for its humanity, its keen and subtle inquisition into man's nature (into justice and truth, sex and love), by humans in a remote future to whom all the Gospel references belong to a bygone myth—'a local faith called Christianity'[1] —no nearer to them than the Gods in Euripides. And I can imagine it holding them none the less, as *we* can be held by the human tangles of the Greek problem-playwright.[2]

[1] Rossiter's memory betrayed him here: Thomas Hardy's actual line (*Dynasts*, First Part, Act 1, scene vi) is, in the final version, 'A local cult, called Christianity'.

[2] *Angel with Horns*, p. 170.