

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE'S MINGLED YARN AND
'MEASURE FOR MEASURE'

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THIS will not be a lecture for purists. I propose to examine a trend that troubled Sir Philip Sidney when he lamented the fashion for 'mongrel tragi-comedy'—a shift in literary taste that owed much to the genius of William Shakespeare. It started, perhaps, with the mixing of comic and more serious matter in medieval drama; Kyd and Marlowe gave it a new impetus; and it had certainly arrived by the time of *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's darkest comedy. But I have in mind something more far-reaching than the hybridization of kinds, or the doctrine of purity of genre. As Elizabethan drama moved towards realism, and simultaneously lurched in several other directions as well, many kinds of 'mixing' were developed—prose and verse; natural and stylized language, and stage behaviour, and acting; Elizabethan and 'historical' costume, as in the Peacham sketch of *Titus Andronicus*; plot and sub-plot—to name just a few 'mixings' that must have been in general use by the 1580s. Then Shakespeare appeared on the scene, pressed a button, and the mixer-speed accelerated remarkably, much to the disgust of purists (like Ben Jonson). Shakespeare delighted in mixed metaphor; Jonson reputedly said of some of the grandest speeches in *Macbeth*, which 'are not to be understood', that 'it was horror'. Shakespeare specialized in crazily complicated plots, cross-wooing comedies, plays with time-jumps, plays that zigzag between different countries—disgraceful 'mixings' that Jonson castigated publicly. More modern critics discover the same tendency wherever they look: Shakespeare's expert interweaving of different views of the same person, of past, present, and future, of slow time and fast time, of conflicting motives, or the interplay of many emotions in a single phrase—'Pray you, undo this button'; 'Kill Claudio'. If, as I shall argue, Shakespeare's mixing skills were of the essence, as indispensable to his success as his inventiveness in metaphor, it may be no accident that he so often peaks as a poet in scenes of intense emotion or madness

(Hamlet's, King Lear's), where a 'mixer' mechanism in the play triggers off his own special talent. I believe that these mixing skills are conscious artistry, not inspired fumbling, if only because the dramatist so often draws attention to them:

You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once: her smiles and tears
Were like, a better way. (*King Lear*, iv. iii. 16 ff.).

We need not doubt that a writer who said that 'the web of our life is of a mingled yarn' would know, even without Ben Jonson's unnecessary help, that he himself was a purveyor of intricately mingled yarns.

The 'mixing' principle in Shakespeare is my subject today. Ben Jonson was merely the first of many good critics who could not come to terms with it, and one or two other examples will illustrate the range of problems. Dr Johnson, though he defended tragic-comedy, thought that 'the poet's matter failed him' in the fifth act of *Henry V*, 'and he was glad to fill it up with whatever he could get'; in Johnson's view, Act V did not mix with the rest. Coleridge repudiated the 'low' porter-speech in *Macbeth*, which reminds us that bawdy, once removed by editors as intrusive dirt, is now praised as an integral part of the Shakespearian 'mix' in both comedy and tragedy. T. S. Eliot faulted Shakespeare's 'mixing' even more ingeniously, arguing that it is

strictly an error, although an error which is condoned by the success of each passage in itself, that Shakespeare should have introduced into the same play ghosts belonging to such different categories as the three sisters and the ghost of Banquo.¹

These are all 'mixing' problems, and they warn us that Shakespeare's imagination scrambled the ingredients of a play in so many new ways that even the very best critics 'hoppe alwey bihinde'.

Examples of supposedly bad 'mixing' are alleged, and have to be endured, in almost every book on Shakespeare. Yet the mixing principle itself has not had the attention it deserves. This may be because criticism finds it convenient to deal with detachable units—imagery, character, genre, scene-by-scene analysis—rather than with the intermeshing of such units, which I consider the heart of the mystery. After four centuries criticism is still largely defeated by a procedural problem, how to grapple with the play as a whole: I suggest that we may solve this problem by focusing on

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (ed. 1953), p. 116.

the mixing principle, searching for its unique functioning in each text. Not only Shakespeare criticism could benefit: we do not have to look far to discover similar needs elsewhere. Let me illustrate, tactfully, from *Juno and the Paycock*, where, it has been said, the tragic element 'occupies at the most some twenty minutes . . . for the remaining two hours and a half this piece is given up to gorgeous and incredible fooling'.¹ Who has not heard that *The Winter's Tale* consists of three acts of tragedy followed by two of comedy? Or that some scenes in *Measure for Measure* are 'tragic', others 'comic'? It is the interpenetration of comedy and tragedy that now needs our attention—or, more exactly, the interaction of everything with everything else, in these unfathomably rich plays.

O'Casey once remarked: 'I never make a scenario, depending on the natural growth of a play rather than on any method of joinery.'² Shakespeare criticism, when it attempts to explain the mixing principle, still tends to think too much in terms of joinery—as in a brilliant paper on *The Winter's Tale* in which Nevill Coghill showed that the bear, the famous bear, 'was calculated to create a unique and particular effect, at that point demanded by the narrative mood and line of the play. It is at the moment when the tale, hitherto wholly and deeply tragic, turns suddenly and triumphantly to comedy.'³ Much that Coghill said about the bear seems to me perceptive, yet his is largely an explanation of joinery. Looking at the play as an organic growth, I am struck by the fact that each of its two movements ends with an addition to the story by Shakespeare—the bear, and the statue. In each case the bystanders, astounded, react aesthetically, as if the bear and statue are merely a thrilling spectacle, then struggle comically to adjust their bewildered feelings—and thus lift the scene, emotionally, in a very similar way. If the bear and statue are connected, as I think, then the mixing principle works not only in local joinery but also, more elusively, in shaping dramatic units that are far apart.

I am going to assume, in what follows, that in 'organic' drama everything joins on to everything else; that bears and statues can shake hands, as over a vast, and embrace as it were from the ends of opposed winds. The logic of our bread-and-butter world need not apply; the linear structure of events, and of cause and effect, is

¹ James Agate, quoted from *Sean O'Casey Modern Judgements*, ed. Ronald Ayling (1969), p. 76.

² Sean O'Casey, *Blasts and Benedictions* (1967), p. 97.

³ Nevill Coghill, 'Six Points of Stage-Craft in *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare Survey XI* (1958), pp. 31-41.

not the only structure that concerns us. Although we are sometimes told that a literary work grows in the reader's mind as does a musical composition, being a process experienced in time, and should not be compared to a painting, which is frozen in time, a play that lasts two to three hours differs from longer literary works, such as an epic or a novel, in so far as its process can be held in the mind as a single experience, somewhat like a painting. Aided by memorable dialogue and good acting a poetic drama will not pass away from us while we surrender to its magic, as do the trivia of day-to-day existence: such a play grows in the beholder's mind in a present continuous, partly insulated from time, a single shared experience framed by the stage, one that remains present, like a painting, even as it unfolds, challenging us to connect the ends of opposed winds, a bear and a statue, Claudio's guilt and Angelo's, Angelo's ignorance of the world and Isabella's and the Duke's. 'Only connect' is the dramatist's command, and the more unexpectedly he mixes the play's ingredients the bigger the challenge.

I would like to illustrate the 'present continuous' of drama from a soliloquy that some of you may remember—'To be or not to be, that is the question'. I find it surprising that, according to some competent editors, Hamlet here talks not of his own suicide but only of the general problem of life after death. Dr Johnson paraphrased the opening line succinctly, as follows: 'Before I can form any rational scheme of action under this pressure of distress, it is necessary to decide whether, after our present state, we are to be or not to be. That is the question . . .' Another editor soon offered a different interpretation, 'To live or to put an end to my life', which, he thought, was confirmed by the following words. Johnson had his supporters, and I find this surprising not because of the following words but because of preceding speeches that prepare us for 'To be or not to be'. Hadn't Hamlet wished that 'this too too solid flesh would melt'? (Knowing what we know about the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters, I had better say firmly that 'solid flesh' is the reading of the only authorized text . . . of this lecture.) 'You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.' These and other passages determine our immediate impression that in 'To be or not to be' Hamlet meditates upon his own suicide; the soliloquy is not a detachable unit, it throbs with implications planted in our minds in earlier scenes.

If my example seems fanciful, let us take two that are more

straightforward. Let us take the one sentence that occurs in both *Othello* and *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth waits for Macbeth; he appears, the daggers in his hands, blood on the daggers; the deed is done, and wrings from her a terrible, gloating cry—'My husband!' Othello explains to Emilia that the murder of Desdemona proceeded upon just grounds ('Thy husband knew it all'), and she reacts in shocked surprise—'My husband!' The same words, but the effect is totally different, because the words mingle with previous impressions, there is an inflow of power from very different sources. Lady Macbeth had taunted her husband that he was not man enough to commit the murder; when he has proved himself she cries, in effect, 'My true husband, at last!' Emilia had suspected that Desdemona had been slandered by 'some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office'; as soon as Othello names Iago it dawns on her what has happened, and she feels that she has come to a crossroad in her life. Her exclamation marks the end of a marriage, Lady Macbeth's a new beginning (as she thinks) of hers. The words that are spoken out loud are only a small part of the complex communication that goes on at the same time; whether we are conscious of it or not, these words mix with other impressions—are, indeed, completely dwarfed by momentous implications that immediately rush in upon us.

So far I have concentrated on the play's organic growth, indicating how important lines or episodes grow out of others, mixing with what we may have heard or seen much earlier in the play's 'present continuous'. The mixing principle can also be illustrated from 'joinery', as O'Casey called it—an unkind word that refers, presumably, to the way one episode is cobbled on to the next. Such local joinery, in the hands of a Shakespeare, can serve to illustrate the highest skills, where the craftsman's conscious mixing and the play's organic growth are indistinguishable. We can observe how felicitously each episode joins on to its neighbour and fits the needs of its individual play by comparing three with very similar functions—the grave-digger episode in *Hamlet*, the porter-scene in *Macbeth*, and Cleopatra's interview with the clown who brings the asp. In each case a clown's 'low' humour precedes and follows scenes of high tension, or of tragic seriousness, yet each of the three has unique features determined by its play. In *Hamlet*, where there had been much talk of suicide and the hereafter, the two clowns pick up these themes and fool around with them as naturally as grave-diggers pick up bones. Hamlet's interest in the question, 'How long will a man lie i'th'earth ere he rot?' is related to an earlier topic, how long will a man's memory outlive his life (two

hours? twice two months?)—two kinds of survival after death. The play being filled with mock-interviews, in which the prince pretends to misunderstand a questioner (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Claudius; Osric), first grave-digger turns the tables on him, answering knavishly—so the shape of their exchanges is another thread that hooks into a larger design. ‘Alas, poor Yorick’ mysteriously echoes ‘Alas, poor ghost’; and so on. The grave-digger episode, in short, mixes with the rest of the play in its larger themes, in specific questions, in verbal echoes, and in using a special dialogue-device, the mock-interview; and no doubt in other ways too.

A word will suffice for *Macbeth*. The dramatic irony in the porter’s soliloquy is familiar: it is Macbeth who is an equivocator, who has ‘hang’d himself on th’expectation of plenty’. True. I am equally struck by the porter’s exchanges with Macduff—for the porter, in the delightful afterglow of his carousing, also resembles Macbeth in the previous scene in being present and not present; his tipsiness has the same effect as Macbeth’s imagination—he only gives half his mind to the matter in hand. And in each case there is a cool observer and questioner, Lady Macbeth and Macduff, whose presence measures the distance of Macbeth and the porter from normality. Just as the knocking in the porter-scene spills over from the previous scene, the porter’s tipsiness grew out of Macbeth’s intoxicated imagination and his slowness in answering the call of the here and now and his psychic distance from Macduff were also influenced by the previous scene. It should be noted in passing that alcohol plays a part in the grave-digger *and* porter scenes, yet its effect is adapted to the needs of the play no less than is each clown’s distinctive way of speaking and relating to others.

Next, Cleopatra’s clown. Plutarch mentions a ‘countryman’, who brings the asp in a basket of figs, but not a word about his interview with Cleopatra, which is pure Shakespeare—perhaps his most daring ‘mingle’ in the tragedies, because here comedy modulates immediately into the tragic climax. Appropriately, it is comedy shot through with sexual innuendo, and even the chastest ears cannot miss it.

You must not think I am so simple but I know the devil himself will not eat a woman. I know that a woman is a dish for the gods, if the devil dress her not.

The richest insinuation and ‘mingle’ in the clown-scene, however, grows out of one keyword, repeated eight times—‘Hast thou the pretty worm of Nilus there?’, ‘I wish you all joy of the worm’. It’s a

word not used by Plutarch at this point, and conjures up a very different image from Plutarch's one specific description of the asp: Cleopatra pricked the creature with a spindle, so that, 'being angered withal,' said Plutarch, 'it leapt out with great fury, and bit her in the arm'—not really what one expects from a bona fide worm. In Elizabethan English, of course, *worm* could mean reptile, or serpent, or other things—and, since no one in the play's first audience is likely ever to have seen an Egyptian asp, the uncertain meaning of *worm* was particularly useful. We are made to wonder exactly what this hidden worm may be. 'The worm will do his kind', the clown explains, helpfully. 'The worm's an odd worm.'

I have dwelt on the spectator's inability to imagine exactly what to expect because there must have been a reason for the dramatist's teasing vagueness. I am reminded of another teasing device in the play—its concealed penis imagery, a joke repeated several times, in different ways, by different characters. Since learned editors don't feel obliged to explain what can't be seen, I had better give some examples. (1) The soothsayer tells Cleopatra's ladies that their future fortunes are alike. 'Well,' says Charmian to Iras, 'if you were but an inch of fortune better than I, where would you choose it?' Reply?—'Not in my husband's nose'. (2) Cleopatra, bored, asks Charmian to play billiards; Charmian suggests Mardian the eunuch instead, and Cleopatra quips 'As well a woman with an eunuch play'd / As with a woman'. (3) A third concealed image is given to Agrippa:

Royal wench!
She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed.
He plough'd her, and she cropp'd.

The wicked word is not mentioned—indeed, was not known yet, though the English language was rich in alternatives. Here, then, are three examples of concealed penis imagery—a distinctive series in the play that puts us in a state of readiness for the clown's *worm*. We have to remember at this point the infinite variety of Shakespeare's sexual imagery, and that he had used the same image before, when Lucrece exclaims against rape—'Why should the worm intrude the maiden bud?' (a traditional image long before Blake's *The Sick Rose*). Recalling also how tirelessly the Elizabethans punned on the sexual sense of *lie* and *die*, we observe that the general context also nudges us towards concealed imagery. 'I would not desire you to touch him', the clown tells Cleopatra, for his biting is immortal; those that do *die* of it do seldom or never recover.

Cleopatra. Remember'st thou any that have *died* on't?

Clown. Very many, men and women too. I heard of one of them no longer than yesterday: a very honest woman, but something given to *lie*, as a woman should not do but in the way of honesty; how she *died* of the biting of it, what pain she felt—truly, she makes a very good report o'th'worm.

The extraordinary power and flavour of this clown-scene partly depends on concealed imagery, imagery reactivated by the puns on *lie* and *die*, by 'a woman is a dish for the gods, if the devil dress her not', but the clown's winking knowingness and by Shakespeare's teasing vagueness as to what the worm might be. At one and the same time the worm refers to the asp (a word carefully excluded until the clown has gone), to the worm in the grave, and to the sex-worm whose 'biting' is also immortal—hence the pungent rightness of the clown's parting shot to sex-obsessed Cleopatra, 'I wish you joy o'th'worm!' Here, marvelling at a treble pun that has its tentacular roots in other local puns, and in concealed imagery that acts upon us subliminally, one is tempted to cry, with Cleopatra, 'O heavenly mingle!'—for what more is possible? Yet the mingling continues:

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me.

'Longings for immortality', thought the New Arden editor. Perhaps; but, after 'I wish you joy o'th'worm' she also means 'immortal longings' as opposed to 'mortal longings'—a higher form of sexuality, a kiss from the curled Antony 'which is my heaven to have'. The sublime 'Give me my robe', a speech structured round the idea of 'immortal longings', grew out of the largely latent sexuality and low comedy of the clown-scene.

The three clown-scenes, possibly written for the same actor, have been thought to have a similar function in three of the greatest tragedies. Yet they are not merely 'comic relief', since each one builds upon ideas, images, mental states, or relationships from previous scenes—that is, flashes back to more serious concerns, mingling seriousness with laughter. (Meredith's phrase, 'thoughtful laughter', is peculiarly apt: an awareness that the clown-scene somehow mingles with what has gone before pulls us back from surrendering wholly to laughter, even though we cannot stop the play to trace all the connections.) More important for my purposes: not only are the clown-scenes sewn into the fabric of the play in so many ways—each one is sewn in in its own distinctive way. There may be superficial resemblances, but we

fail to appreciate the dramatist's skill unless we see that seemingly similar devices always 'mingle' quite uniquely with their dramatic surroundings.

That brings me to the notorious 'bed-trick' in *Measure for Measure*. It was Shakespeare's error, we have been told often enough, that he chose to solve the problems of a realistic plot by resorting to pure folk-tale. After the 'realism' of the early scenes, of Angelo's passion for Isabella and of his demand that she buy her brother's life by yielding her virginity, comes the bed-trick—Angelo's betrothed, Mariana, takes Isabella's place in his bed—a hangover from folk-tale or romance, it is said, quite out of keeping with what has gone before. This account of the play assumes that Shakespeare had got into trouble with his plotting, and that the bed-trick was an attempt to slither round a difficulty. Shakespeare had departed from his sources in making Isabella a novice in an order of nuns, and in giving her a passionately virginal nature; unlike her prototype in the sources, therefore, she could not comply with Angelo's demand—so we have the bed-trick instead, a desperate expedient.

Before I argue that, on the contrary, the bed-trick is beautifully right where it is placed, no less than the bear in *The Winter's Tale*, a multiple 'mingle' in a self-consciously mingled yarn, let us examine our terminology—realism and folk-tale. So-called realistic scenes in the play do employ non-realistic devices: the low-life characters meticulously finish their sentences; Angelo soliloquises—in verse. Realism is adjustable; so, too, folk-tale episodes can be presented more or less plausibly. Much can be done to bring realism and folk-tale together, to make them tone in with one another; before we denounce the bed-trick as a desperate expedient it is our duty to ask how it mingles with its surroundings.

First, though, I must correct a common misrepresentation of the bed-trick in literature. Bed-tricks, though familiar in folk-tale and romance, were not restricted to one or two *kinds* of literature: we have all read Genesis 19: 33, and *The Escapes of Jupiter*, and *The Magus*. Next: a bed-trick story can be told in the spirit of the *Reeve's Tale* or of the *Knigh's Tale* or—somewhere in between. The use of significant detail will sharply differentiate one bed-trick story from another.

We can learn what Shakespeare might have done, had he thought a bed-trick too 'unrealistic' after his play's earlier scenes, by glancing at some other literary versions. Even Malory, not the most realistic of writers, felt that a drugged drink was needed to trick Lancelot into sleeping with the fair Elaine—'as soon as he

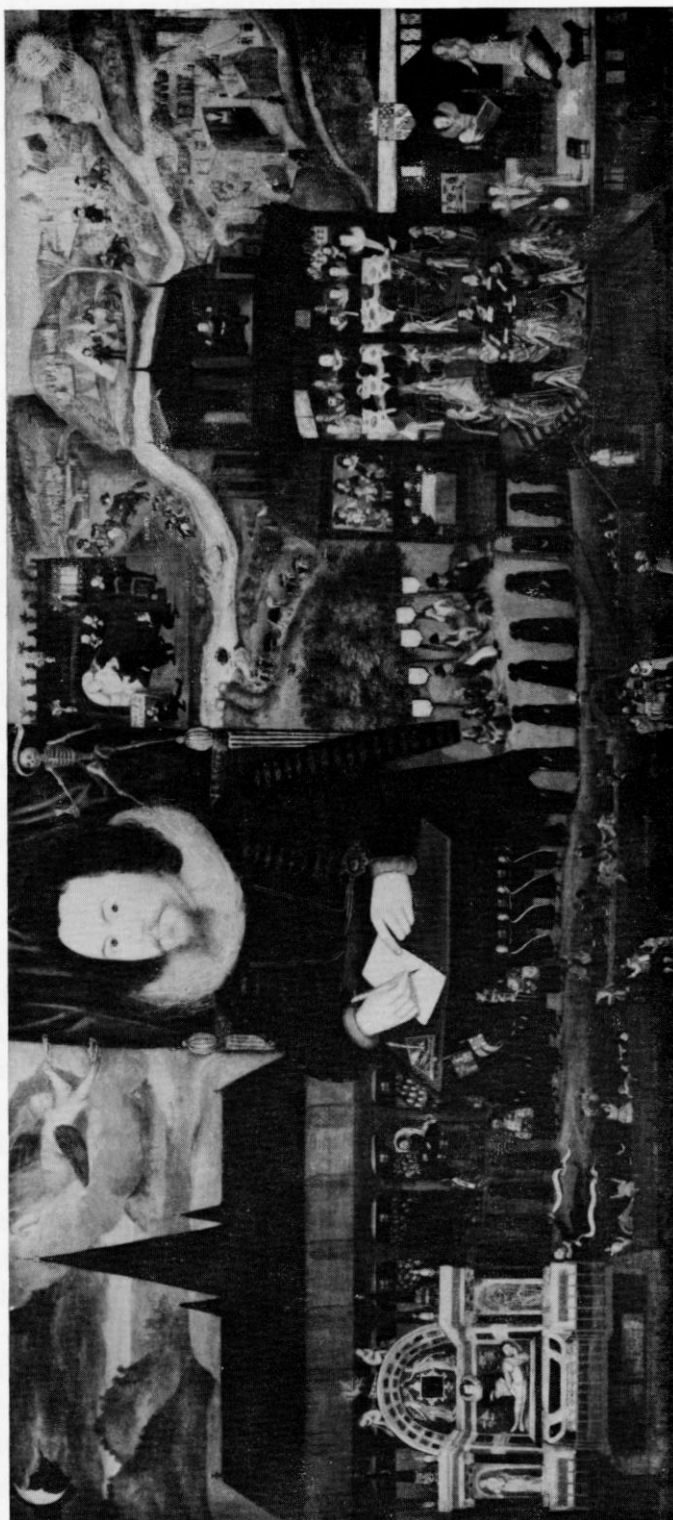
had drunk that wine he was so assotted that he wened that maiden Elaine had been queen Guinever' (xi, 2); later Elaine's lady-in-waiting 'took him by the finger' (there's realistic detail!) 'and led him unto her lady'. Deloney's *Jack of Newberry*, a rip-roaring narrative, provides a more representative example of bed-trick realism. An English girl, Joan, had an importunate Italian lover, who became a nuisance until Joan's kinsman taught him a lesson. The kinsman gave a 'sleepy drench' to a young sow, put the sleeping sow in Joan's bed, 'drawing the curtains round about', and told the lover that his opportunity had arrived. But, he warned, 'you must not . . . have a candle when you go into the chamber, for . . . dark places fits best lovers' desires'. The Italian knelt down by the bedside, saluted the invisible sow with a love-speech, slipped into bed, ardently embraced her, and only discovered his mistake from her non-human grunting.¹ I hesitate to call this realism, but we may say that Deloney made room for more 'realistic' touches than Malory. In Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*, which is close to *Measure for Measure* in genre and date, two ladies plot to sleep with their own husbands (the husbands each having importuned the other's wife), 'and the better to avoid suspicion', one wife explains, 'thus we must insist: they must come up darkling'. 'But,' says the second wife, 'is my husband content to come darkling?' This problem solved, she thinks of another difficulty. 'I am afraid my voice will discover me.' 'Why, then you're best say nothing . . .' 'Ay, but you know a woman cannot choose but speak in these cases.'² The dramatist positively delights in applying a 'realistic' imagination to the bed-trick, without damaging his play.

It appears, then, that you can choose between comedy and seriousness, between more and less realism. In bed-trick scenes you can adopt almost any position, as it were. This is hard for us to grasp today, because we have been taught to think of the bed-trick as a purely literary device, one that belongs to literature at its furthest possible remove from life. Before the invention of electricity, however, the night-life of Europe must have been much more tricky than now, and there is plenty of evidence that strange things happened in the dark.

Now 'tis full sea a-bed over the world,
There's juggling of all sides . . .
This woman, in immodest thin apparel

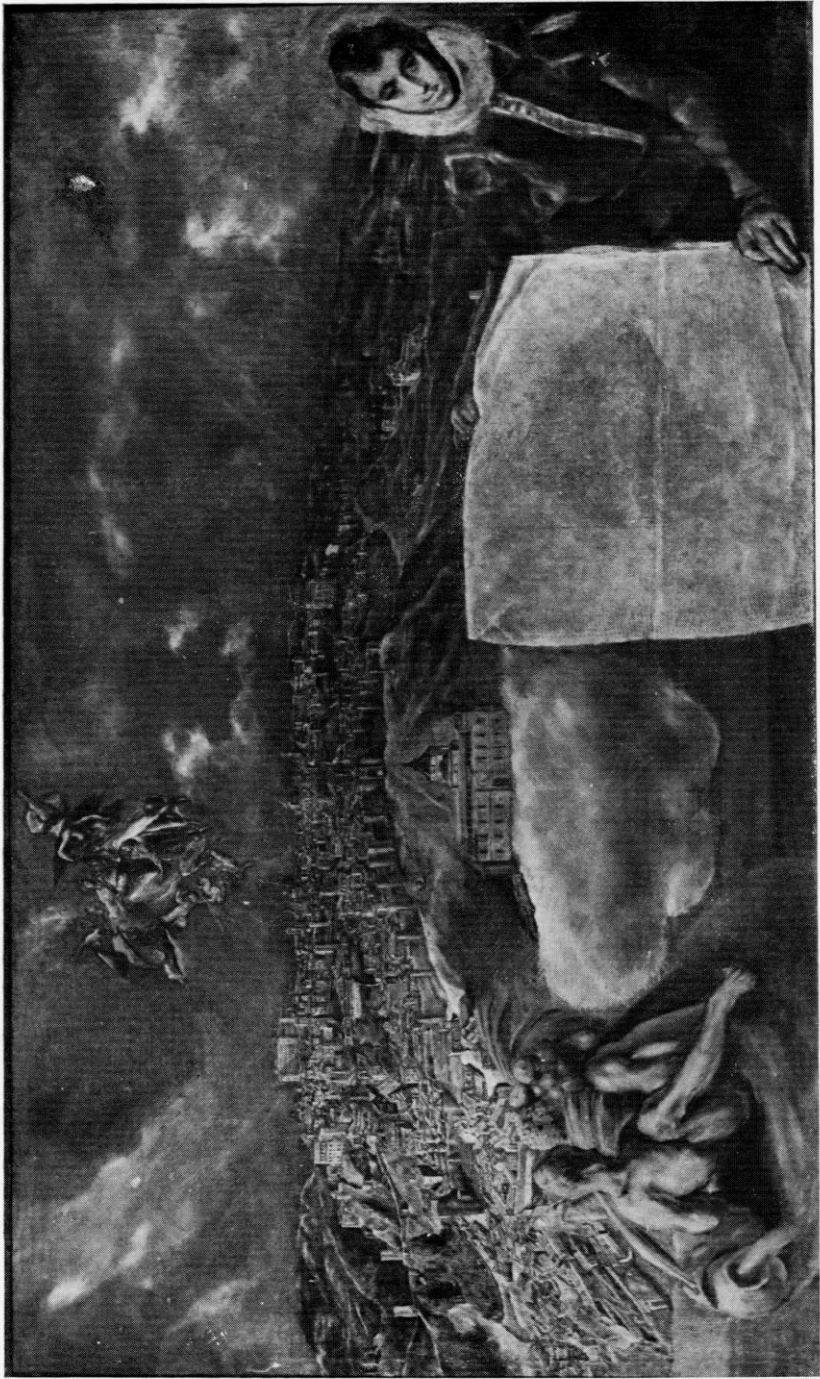
¹ *The Works of Thomas Deloney*, ed. F. O. Mann (Oxford, 1912), pp. 51-2.

² *The Plays of John Marston*, ed. H. Harvey Wood (3 vols., 1939), iii. 29.



The Life and Death of Sir Henry Unton. Anonymous (c. 1596)
National Portrait Gallery, London.

PLATE II



El Greco: *View and Plan of Toledo* (c. 1608)
Muscos de las Fundaciones Vega-Inclán

Lets in her friend by water. Here a dame
 Cunning, nails leather hinges to a door
 To avoid proclamation.
 Now cuckolds are a-coining, apace, apace, apace, apace!

I have laboured the point that Shakespeare did not have to fall back on a 'ready-made' bed-trick, the figmentary bed-trick of folk-tale and romance, simply to suggest that he was free to devise his own. The stark contrast that so many critics have disliked in *Measure for Measure* as 'realism' is succeeded by the bed-trick, I conclude, was entirely of his own choosing. The play was written when he was at the height of his powers, when he had fully mastered the art of mingling one episode with another, yet this bed-trick jars all expectation. Why did Shakespeare choose it, in this form, when there were other options open to him?

As I mentioned at the outset, drama in the later sixteenth century introduced many new kinds of 'mingling'. Some of the dramatists no doubt did so unconsciously. By the turn of the century, however, the mingled yarn of literature was a matter of public debate. Italian critics defended tragicomedy; Sidney moved with the times in defending pastoral, where some 'have mingled prose and verse . . . Some have mingled matters heroical and pastoral', though he was not happy about 'mingling kings and clowns'.¹ In *The Faerie Queene* Spenser aimed at variety, copying the artful confusion of Italian epic so that, as he put it, many things are 'intermedled' with one another—again, the mingling principle, artful combination. Metaphysical poetry, said Dr Johnson, experimented with the 'combination of dissimilar images . . . the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'.²

Similar experiments took place at the same time in the visual arts, and they also have a bearing on *Measure for Measure*. Mannerist painters of the later sixteenth century sought out new combinations, mingling realistic detail in a recognizably non-realistic ensemble, as in Arcimboldo's *Librarian*, a deplorably bookish gentleman, or his *Autumn*, a jolly old Bacchus made out of fruit and veg whose features are recognizably those of the Emperor Rudolph II. Sometimes the Mannerists even mingled different levels of realism: Pontormo's *Joseph in Egypt* in the National Gallery playfully distorts scale and perspective, and includes clothed figures standing on pedestals like statues, wholly fanciful architecture with stairways leading nowhere—an imagined world,

¹ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965), p. 116.

² Johnson's *Life of Abraham Cowley*.

consciously deviating from nature, in no sense intended as a copy of nature.

Whether such Mannerist experiments of the late sixteenth century were influential in England is difficult to determine. We do know, however, that illustrations in sixteenth-century English books often depicted mingled scenes: a single crude woodcut may combine the creation of Eve, the Temptation, and the Expulsion from Paradise. This is a tradition that goes back to medieval art; inevitably, it appealed to later book illustrators, and English readers would know it from Harington's *Orlando Furioso* of 1591, where the engravings are copied from an Italian edition. One unusual painting of the late Elizabethan age also belongs to this tradition—*The Life and Death of Sir Henry Unton* (it hangs in the National Portrait Gallery), an attempt to bring together many scenes from the life of one of Queen Elizabeth's ambassadors: his arrival at Oriel College, Oxford; his wedding-masque; his diplomatic missions; his funeral procession and burial. Although not strictly a Mannerist painting, it mingles different scales and different degrees of realism, and each scene mingles differently with its neighbours. The artist or artists may not have been of the highest quality (some of the detail is most delicately finished), but there can be no doubt that the 'mingling principle' is consciously employed. Remember, please, how the half-length figure of Sir Henry Unton holds the whole composition together. For there is a similar centre-piece in one of the greatest Mannerist compositions, El Greco's *View and Plan of Toledo*, which belongs to the same decade as *Measure for Measure* and deserves our closer attention. According to one admirer, El Greco here did his utmost

to prevent the actual view of Toledo from dominating the picture. He put the figure of the river god of the Tagus in the left foreground. He also removed the monastery, which lay outside the town and for which he presumably painted the view of the town, from reality by transferring it from *terra firma* to a bright airy cloud. Above it he painted the vision of Mary borne high over the town by angels. . . . The painter further distorted the view of Toledo . . . by the addition of the half-length figure of a boy holding out the plan of Toledo to the spectator.¹

Unlike the allegories of the High Renaissance, such as Botticelli's *Primavera*, El Greco's composition reassembles matter in jarringly new ways; his centre-piece, the monastery in the clouds, asserts the artist's right to make the most unexpected combinations, where heterogeneous ideas and images are yoked by violence together.

¹ F. Württemberg, *Mannerism* (1963), p. 239.

I have digressed in order to suggest that discussions of 'mingling' problems in tragicomedy and pastoral, of 'intermeddling' in Italian epic and its derivatives, the self-conscious mingling of heterogeneous ideas and images in metaphysical poetry, and the radical rethinking of compositional norms by the Mannerists, all reflect the spirit of the age, no less than Guarini's *Compendio* of 1602, which Shakespeare could scarcely have seen, and all point forward to *Measure for Measure*. While we cannot demonstrate Shakespeare's knowledge of Italian and Spanish Mannerists, there are signs of similar experiments in England, and we can claim that he was aware of the new trends in literature. Polonius announces the actors in Elsinore—the best actors in the world for 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited'. If even Polonius grasps that the dramatic poem no longer conforms to the traditional limits of genre, we may take it that Shakespeare and his public must have been interested in such technical developments as well.

In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare went one step beyond any he had previously taken, not merely mingling the play's ingredients surprisingly, as often before, but making an issue of it, challenging the audience to put the pieces together and to think critically about a 'poem unlimited'. The notorious bed-trick comes at the point of no return, when a spectator *must* ask himself, even if he has previously failed to do so, 'What kind of play is this?' Terms such as 'problem play' and 'dark comedy' had not yet been invented; 'tragi-comedy' was sometimes discussed, but there was no agreed definition—in England there had been no serious attempt at definition. Up to Act III it would be reasonable to see *Measure for Measure* as a tragedy that includes a good deal of low comedy (like *Romeo and Juliet*), or as a new-formula play such as the 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' of Polonius, or as tragi-comedy. Whichever one favours, the important thing is that one can't be certain—and, consequently, that one keeps returning to the question, 'What kind of play is it?' Even the modern spectator can't avoid this question, since he still has to fit all the bits and pieces together. 'Is Angelo's self-accusing honesty, or Isabella's torment, too life-like, placed beside a disguised duke and a comic constable, in *this kind of play*?' The question has already nagged us for a while when suddenly Shakespeare introduces the bed-trick, a twist so unexpected that now we can no longer escape our dilemma—'What kind of play?' Observe that the bed-trick, Shakespeare's addition to the story, whatever it may achieve in

simplifying Isabella's problems, notably complicates the play's genre problems and the spectator's genre expectations.

The bed-trick resembles the bear in *The Winter's Tale*, and the 'Cinna the poet' scene in *Julius Caesar*, and the porter-scene in *Macbeth*, in coming at the point where the play modulates from one mood into another. It is done differently in each one, of course, but nowhere more self-advertisingly than in *Measure for Measure*. For, just at this point, the play's style joltingly changes gear several times. The Duke soliloquises in rhyming tetrameters, a new voice for him—

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe,
Pattern in himself to know
Grace to stand, and virtue go;
More nor less to others paying
Than by self-offences weighing. . . .

Then follows the play's only song, and shortly thereafter the Duke switches in mid-speech from verse to prose—all warning signals that the play is about to change direction. Then follows the play's most arresting modulation, Isabella's speech about the proposed midnight meeting with Angelo, a speech that the dramatist could easily have left to the audience's imagination. Shakespeare chose to give Isabella this speech, I think, because it allows him to suggest, in passing, a unique mingling of realism and romance, and the unique nature of his play: the speech combines a romantic sense of mystery, as in Mariana's song, with an insistent factualness.

He hath a garden circummur'd with brick,
Whose western side is with a vineyard back'd;
And to that vineyard is a planched gate
That makes his opening with this bigger key;
This other doth command a little door
Which from the vineyard to the garden leads.
There have I made my promise
Upon the heavy middle of the night
To call upon him.

Despite its factualness (the garden, brick wall, vineyard on the western side, the gate, the smaller door, the two keys), this speech cannot be called 'realism'; a garden *circummured* with brick and a vineyard with a *planned* gate also carry overtones from another world, the world of Mariana of the *moated grange*, the world of *The Romance of the Rose*. The mingle, and the sense of a special creative pressure, is supported by out-of-the-way words (*circummured* and

planned, like *moated*, occur nowhere else in Shakespeare; *circum-mured* was his coinage); and it is all bonded together by a concealed image—the Freudian slip when Isabella's imagination dimly anticipates sexual contact ('Upon the heavy middle of the night', an unusual turn of phrase that stamps her personal feeling upon this special bed-trick).

In this speech, neither realism nor romance, we are asked to give a willing suspension of disbelief to an experience as strange as the coming to life of the statue at the end of *The Winter's Tale*—a bed-trick as peculiar to this play as Hermione's statue is different from all the other statues that return to life in romances before Shakespeare. It is a far cry from Deloney's passionate Italian and his drugged sow, and from all other bed-tricks in literature, because Shakespeare (like El Greco in *The View and Plan of Toledo*) has reassembled and mingled his material in new ways. Instead of the 'clever wench' or 'clever wife' who wishes to reclaim her husband (as represented by Helena in *All's Well*) he gives us Mariana, a mere pawn in someone else's clever game; and he changed the man, a mere sex-object for the traditional 'clever wife', into the brooding, vulnerable Angelo. The bed of the 'bed-trick' disappears from view, and Shakespeare eliminates the snigger found in other plays (including *All's Well* and *The Changeling*) when one of the principals goes to or returns from copulation: instead we are asked to apply our imagination to a garden, a vineyard, a planned gate. The actors, the moral implications of the action, the feelings involved, our sense of place, our awareness of a containing society—all are changed for the specific needs of *Measure for Measure*.

Shakespeare's immense care in fitting the bed-trick into his story is also evident in his handling of Mariana. It may seem, to those who believe that the dramatist snatched the bed-trick out of the air to solve an unforeseen plot problem, that Mariana accepts it too readily. That is to presuppose that her character is reflected in the hauntingly romantic song sung for her when she first appears at the moated grange—'Take, O, take those lips away'. Producers usually cast her thus, as a dreamy romantic, for which we must partly blame Tennyson's poem *Mariana*.

She only said, 'My life is dreary,
He cometh not,' she said;
She said 'I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!'

Yet Shakespeare's pure and romantic maiden jumps without

hesitation at the offer of a place in Angelo's bed; the whole complicated story is explained to her by Isabella while the Duke speaks a short soliloquy, and Mariana is ready. Out of character? No: Tennyson misrepresented her. Shakespeare had previously stressed that, when Angelo rejected Mariana's love, this, 'like an impediment in the current, made it more violent and unruly' (III. i. 237 ff.). She suffers from an overmastering passion—easily conveyed to us if she has a picture or keepsake of her lover, kissing it passionately as the boy sings, 'But my kisses bring again, bring again'. Mariana's willingness to undertake the bed-trick is prepared for by what we are told about her 'violent and unruly' affection, and probably by her 'body-language' as she listens to the song; instead of being just a romantic dummy in the plot, she has character—sufficient character—to tone in with the near-realism of adjacent scenes. And she also tones in with all the other characters in the play who suffer from irresistible sexual impulses—Claudio and Juliet, Lucio, Mrs Overdone, Angelo.

To argue that Shakespeare by no means lost sight of the demands of realism, or near-realism, when he decided to introduce the bed-trick, may seem unwise. I would like to pursue this possibility for a moment, since the entire second half of the play appears to pull away from realism, and indeed to pull away from the first half, and this requires some explanation. The sense that the play modulates into a new mood, or changes direction, comes in Act III Scene 1, where the bed-trick is announced. Just before we hear of the bed-trick, it is important to notice, Shakespeare jolts our trust in the Duke, who proposes the bed-trick. How can the Duke say so confidently to Claudio, 'Son, I have overheard what hath pass'd between you and your sister. Angelo had never the purpose to corrupt her; only he hath made an assay of her virtue . . .'? We *know* this to be false, since we overheard Angelo's soliloquies, whereas the Duke didn't. He continues 'I am confessor to Angelo, and I know this to be true . . .'. Some critics have wondered whether the disguised Duke could be, or could ever have been, confessor to Angelo, and one has even expressed indignation that the secrets of the confessional should be revealed, contrary to the rules of the Church. The ordinary theatre-goer, however, is unlikely to encumber himself with such idle fancies: aware that the Duke's assertion, 'I know this to be true', is a fabrication, he is cued to regard 'I am confessor to Angelo' as another fabrication. Whatever his motives, the Duke appears to snatch arguments out of the air, and Shakespeare invites us to note his dexterity, and inventiveness. Then, within a few lines, the

conjurer-duke produces from his hat the bed-trick—snatches it out of nothing, another brilliant improvisation, again one that he has scarcely had time to think through, any more than his right to say 'I am confessor to Angelo'.

Just as Angelo tangles himself in one deception after another, and Lucio, the comic foil, in one lie after another, the disguised Duke finds himself obliged to improvise more and more desperately—inventing the future, as it were, and becoming more and more unable to control it. We already feel uneasy about his reading of the future, I think, when he explains to Friar Thomas that he needs a disguise because he wants Angelo to clean up Vienna, and immediately adds that he half-mistrusts Angelo—

Hence shall we see,
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.

At this stage the Duke sees his own future role as that of an observer:

And to behold his sway
I will, as 'twere a brother of your order,
Visit both prince and people.

When he reappears, however, the observer feels impelled to throw himself fully into his new role as a friar, interrogates Juliet ('Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry?'), and then improvises impressively as he lectures Claudio on death. Has an observer the right to impose thus on another human being, merely by virtue of his disguise? The moral authority of his speech, 'Be absolute for death', is undercut by our awareness that he is playing a part—a growing uncertainty about him, corresponding to our uncertainty about the nature of the play. More unmistakably disturbing is the Duke's sudden expedient that Barnardine's head should be substituted for Claudio's; the Provost's amazement, and reluctance to comply, inform the audience, if ordinary human instincts fail to do so, that to play with life in this way is presumptuous. What, we ask ourselves, is he up to?

Everything said and done by the Duke, from his initial decision to appoint Angelo as his deputy and to look on as a 'friar', can be read as improvisation, usually as hurried improvisation. We are therefore prompted to think of the bed-trick not as an 'archaic device' placed in uncomfortable proximity to psychological realism by a fatigued dramatist, but as the Duke's device, just as much an expression of his character as his disguise-trick, and his other surprising and whimsical expedients. As the second half of the play pulls away from realism, and the question 'what *kind* of

play?' grows more urgent, we look to the Duke to solve our problems, while at the same time we half suspect that the dithering Duke merely improvises irresponsibly. His awareness of Angelo's intentions, and of all that happens, serves as a hint to the audience that a tragic outcome may be prevented; yet the Duke's sheer inefficiency, highlighted by his failure to control Lucio, by no means guarantees a happy ending. Our uncertainty about the nature of this mingled yarn therefore continues—augmented, I think, by our uncertainty about the Duke's double image (as duke and friar), and about his motives and his control.

In the second half of *Measure for Measure*, as we wonder whether the Duke and the dramatist know where they are going, we are teased with several possibilities. The shape of the play begins to resemble a familiar Elizabethan stereotype—the story of the clever man who overreaches himself, who initiates a dangerous action, and has to improvise more and more frantically to hold off disaster (Marlowe's *Barabas*, Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Iago*). But, if we sense this kinship, Shakespeare refuses to conform to his model, for in this version of 'the sorcerer's apprentice' the fumbling friar reassumes control at the end, as the Duke, and the stereotype is shattered.

Another possibility is that the ending will be like that of *The Malcontent*, where a disguised duke resumes his ducal authority, forgives his enemies, and only one, the wicked Mendoza, is punished by being ceremonially kicked out of court. Yet Shakespeare also includes intimations of a tragic outcome—a possibility that remains open, even though neither of Angelo's intended crimes (the rape of Isabella, and the judicial murder of her brother) has been committed. The deputy's abuse of power deserves to be punished with death, as he himself recognizes:

When I, that censure him, do so offend
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death . . .

And later:

let my trial be mine own confession;
Immediate sentence then, and sequent death,
Is all the grace I beg.

Angelo's death, or tragic humiliation, must be what Isabella intends when she denounces the 'pernicious caitiff deputy' and clamours to the Duke for 'justice, justice, justice, justice!' This echo of *The Spanish Tragedy*, of Hieronimo's cry to his king—

Justice, O justice, justice, gentle king! . . .
Justice, O justice! (III. xii. 63, 65)

—brings to *Measure for Measure* a similar tragic intensity. There are even moments when we are reminded of a play performed by the King's Men shortly before *Measure for Measure*, another play in which a ruler withdraws from his responsibilities, leaving, in effect, a deputy, whom he has raised but distrusts, a man whose abuses are closely watched by the ruler's spies, who is at last trapped and exposed as theatrically as Angelo. And in the case of *Sejanus* the outcome is tragedy.

It appears to have been Shakespeare's strategy to leave open his play's outcome and genre to the very end. We recognize several possible models, including *The Malcontent* and *Sejanus*, but not one that really answers our question, 'What kind of play is it?' Until the very last minutes the execution of Angelo remains a possibility—all the more so since some spectators would know that in some versions of this widely dispersed story Angelo did lose his head. Then, just as we think we know where we are, Shakespeare springs two more surprises. The play seems to turn into a comedy of forgiveness—until the Duke remembers Lucio, and hacks at him with unforgiving vindictiveness. In addition, we have the Duke's proposal to Isabella, which invariably comes as a surprise, despite all the efforts of producers to prepare us for it—and surely was meant to be one, the 'happy ending' of another kind of comedy grafted on here with the same careful tissue matching as we found in the bed-trick. Is a disturbing proposal not appropriate at the end of a deeply disturbing play?

It is particularly in the second half of the play that its genre is brought into question—and here Shakespeare protects himself, and teases the audience, by making it more emphatically the Duke's play. The Duke, of course, was given the role of inventor of the plot, and stage-manager, from the beginning. In the second half of the play he has to interfere more and more decisively, to resume the active responsibility that he had found so irksome, and becomes more completely the play's dramatist. After the bed-trick—*his* bed-trick, as I have said—there follows a little scene of comic misunderstanding, modelled on *The Spanish Tragedy*, that demonstrates exactly how far he may be trusted as a dramatist. Angelo's messenger arrives with a strict order that Claudio is to be executed punctually, and the Duke, all at sea, declares, preposterously, 'here comes Claudio's pardon', and again

This is his pardon, purchas'd by such sin
For which the pardoner himself is in.

He's wrong, and Shakespeare wants us to notice it. The dramatist-duke has lost control of his play—and as he hurriedly attempts to reorganize his plot, he, almost as much as Shakespeare, becomes responsible for its genre, and for our genre expectations. Knowing him as we do, we cannot expect artistic tidiness. He, the Duke of dark corners, is the inventor of almost all the improbable, 'non-realistic' twists of the story that make *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare's most challengingly mingled yarn before *The Winter's Tale*—his disguise as a friar; the bed-trick; the substitution of another head for Claudio's; the concealment of Claudio's escape from Isabella; the unexpected proposal of marriage. All these improbabilities, dreamed up by one man, are therefore rooted in psychological realism, being all expressions of the Duke's imagination, which is as individual as Hamlet's or Prospero's. Duke Vincentio's imagination, like that of a Mannerist painter, delighting in unexpected combinations, makes his bed-trick as necessary a centre-piece to the play's design as El Greco's monastery, which sits so solidly and improbably in a cloud of cotton wool. The Duke, in short, with his love of mystification and ingenious twists and turns, forever revising his options, was the ideal dramatist to put into this mingled yarn—the distinctive feature of which is that it mystifies and keeps changing direction, both at the level of story and of seriousness, insisting on our revising our expectations to the very last.

And what have the Duke and the bed-trick to do with all my other examples—the bear and the statue in *The Winter's Tale*; 'To be or not to be'; the cry 'my husband!' in *Othello* and *Macbeth*; the grave-diggers in *Hamlet*, the porter in *Macbeth*, and Cleopatra's clown? Only this: they demonstrate, together, how variously the 'mingling principle' works. Each example connects with its immediate context and with the present continuous of its play, but no two are the same. Isolated examples illustrate Shakespeare's habitual 'mingling' under the microscope, as it were, but of course each play consists of an infinite number of examples—reaching out in all directions, interpenetrating one another, enriching one another. *Measure for Measure* affords a different kind of example, in so far as Shakespeare also asks us to observe a violently 'mingling' dramatist, in the person of the Duke, and also a more efficient dramatist who tidies up, so to say, behind the Duke and ensures that all of the play's bits and pieces combine plausibly together.

My argument draws to its conclusion, and a scandalous conclusion it is. I have argued that in *Measure for Measure*, one of his most puzzling plays, Shakespeare wants the audience to take an

interest not merely in the story but also in the nature of the play—an idea that we have all encountered before, in studies of other plays and of the novel. Having bowed politely to Mannerism and Structuralism and all things fashionable, the besotted lecturer drags in Metadrama as well. Is it really necessary? If I am told that a packed Bankside audience of prentices and prostitutes would be less alert to such questions than their distinguished descendants, whose haunt is Piccadilly, I need only remind you that *The Old Wive's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also required the audience to ponder the nature of the play, and that the same challenge is built into the early plays of Marston and Jonson. In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare addressed an audience already trained to query genre boundaries, and to expect the forms of things unknown.

And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.
 Such tricks hath strong imagination.

The time has come for me to sum up, and I can do it in a single line from Shakespeare, slightly improved:

Such *bed-tricks* hath strong imagination.

Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works* (1951), ed. Peter Alexander. I have changed some other quotations from Elizabethan to modern spelling.