

SHAKESPEARE AND THE REVENGE OF ART

by Cyrus Hoy

I

The world's cruelty may be viewed in a variety of aspects, and Shakespeare in Sonnet 66 gives us an impressive list of some of the familiar evils that make life burdensome.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honor shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill.
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die, I leave my love alone.

The world is bloody-minded, the world is unjust: these are the large, gross ways in which its cruelty is made evident, but there are other subtler, more insidious ways which make it evident too. The world disappoints expectations, it wears down human resolution, it lacks steadfastness; the world is subject to time, and as every reader of Shakespeare knows, time, with its attendant, change, is the great enemy; asserting its authority over all the world by bringing everything sooner or later to dust, and along the way leaving a sad trail of defaced beauty and collapsing strength of body, mind, and will. Again and again in the Sonnets, Shakespeare asserts the power of his poetry to triumph over time's destructive force, but except in the rare cases where the subject of time and the poet's power of transcending it is developed at a length sufficient to make it carry conviction (as in Sonnet 55: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments"), such challenges to time to do its worst have an empty clatter. They are so many rhetorical clichés into which even Shakespeare only rarely manages to breathe life, and among the most

dispiriting moments the Sonnets hold for a reader is to watch one of the great ones (No. 60, for example, beginning "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore") slide at its close into the routine formula by way of a final couplet. Poetry, and the imagination that produces it, can get its revenge on the world and time, but not like this.

I speak of the revenge the poet takes on the world for being the way it is, though I doubt that any Renaissance poet would have used quite that term. The nearest approximation to what I have in mind that I know of in Renaissance English literary theory is Sidney's famous statement concerning the poet's creative powers, and the manner in which these serve to body forth a reality superior to the reality of nature itself: the poet, says Sidney, "bringeth things forth far surpassing [nature's] doings"; they provide an image of perfection otherwise unavailable to fallen man, whose "erected wit," divinely inspired, makes him to know what perfection is, but whose "infected will" keeps him from reaching unto it.¹ Wit, the power of seeing in things as they are something more or something other than in fact is there, is crucial to the creative activity of the poet; it brings into being a world infinitely superior to our fallen one, where the lusts and the cruelties of man's infected will are regularly seen to do their worst.

I do not wish to impose upon Shakespeare a twentieth-century artistic sensibility, but I find it convenient—in discussing the impulse to artistic creativity that I am here seeking to define—to invoke the example of a dramatist from our own century, Pirandello. Both in his own personal statements, and through the speech of the characters in his plays, Pirandello has a good deal to say about the reconstruction of reality which the imagination accomplishes through art as a form of revenge on life. In one sense we are a long way from Sidney here, but not in another. The impulse to the imagination's work of creativity is very different in the two cases: in Sidney, the imagination reconstructs nature to make it more perfect; in Pirandello, reality is reconstructed to make it more tolerable. The effect, however, is much the same in both cases, the effect being designed as an improvement on things as they are in favor of things as they ought to be. A character in Pirandello's *As You Desire Me* speaks of the need—"because of a real torment, a real despair"—to take revenge on life: "on life as it is—as it has been made for you by other people and through circumstances; to avenge yourself by creating a better life, more beautiful—as it should have been, as you would have wished it to be."² To the extent that the work of art is a true creation—so argues a character in Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*—the life embodied in it is free of the destroying power of time and the thwarting effect of circumstance.³ It has managed—in Shakespearean phrase—to shackle accident and bolt up change. The reconstruction of reality through art is not unlike the reconstruction of reality through dreams, and there is an element of revenge in both. Pirandello writes (in a letter

dated from Berlin, 27 June 1929) of "the pleasure and the anguish of dreaming."

How wonderful it is to take one's revenge, while asleep, on the feelings of shame and on the sense of logic that plague one during the day! To turn all so-called undeniable truths upside down with the greatest tranquillity! To accept the most ridiculous contradictions of respectable truths with the deepest satisfaction! To multiply three by three and get eighteen, four by five and get sixty-nine, with the self-assurance of one who has achieved instinctively mastery over the most elementary and obvious notions and handles them with the utmost seriousness, without evoking mirth or laughter! If to dream is to be insane for a while, just think of insanity as a long dream and you will no longer question the happiness of the insane. . . . The insane, that is, who are not evil. For beware of the dream that turns into a nightmare!⁴

I think that Shakespeare, from the mid-1590s to just after the turn of the century, took a somewhat similar view of his creative powers, and of their ability to make free with all the forces that inhibit and distort and frustrate mankind's brightest fancies: fancies to which the world usually gives short shrift, but which the imagination of the poet brings into their own. If these creative powers sound specifically like comic powers, that is because the period of Shakespeare's career to which I make reference is precisely the period wherein his powers of comic artistry reach their maturity: a period wherein he is serenely capable—to employ the language of Pirandello again—of turning all so-called undeniable truths upside down with the greatest tranquility; of accepting the most ridiculous contradictions of respectable truths with the deepest satisfaction. The dream-like quality of Shakespearean comedy is a critical truism (and by now, a slightly old-fashioned one), but the quality is undeniably there, and there is no harm in recognizing it so long as one remembers what Pirandello reminds us of: that dream partakes of insanity, and that the happiness of one is the happiness of the other. Shakespearean comedy, with its fools and lovers, richly celebrates their commingled happiness until the dream turns into a nightmare, leaving only the insanity, and the Shakespearean comic style collapses into tragedy.

Character, says Aristotle, is revealed by what a man seeks and what he avoids, and the principle applies to Shakespeare no less than to the personages of his plays. What, in the practice of his comic art, he avoids throughout his career is satire, and the avoidance is conspicuous because just in the years when he was most actively engaged in his work in comedy, the new comic style—realistic in its manner and satiric in its import—was establishing itself on the London stage. Chapman and Jonson were the leaders in the new vogue of humours comedy, and the leading dramatists of the day—Marston, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher—were soon following where they led in the satiric depiction of London city life. To write an *Every Man in his Humour* or *An Humourous Day's Mirth* or a *Dutch Courtesan* or a *Michaelmas Term* held no charm for Shakespeare;

and his general distrust of the claims of the satirist are clear enough from Duke Senior's strictures on Jacques in *As You Like It*. He is as aware as any satirist that the contradiction between things as they are and things as they ought to be in this world is as blatant as the glare of noon, but in his comedy at least he seems to have felt no need to linger over this familiar condition. He is more concerned with bodying forth images of what ought to be, but not necessarily for the purpose of creating the images of perfection that a Sidney would decree as the proper end of poetic creation. Rather one detects in his work—and I am here alluding specifically to his mature comedies—a kind of Pirandellian urgency to create for himself a more esthetically satisfying shape of things than the world provides.

The urgency has its source in Shakespeare's own experience of life, and while we are notoriously lacking in factual details of a biographical kind, an extraordinarily full account of what he felt and what he suffered through these years is preserved for us in the sonnets. To consider the sonnets in the contexts of the plays has always been regarded as *infra dig* in certain quarters. In dealing with them, critics prefer at one extreme to address themselves to the identity of Mr. W. H. or to analyze the sonnets' syntax and sound patterns at the other. I do not wish to make light of either enterprise, but I wish to approach the sonnets with a different (though doubtless unfashionable) purpose. They contain the purest and most direct expression of Shakespeare's profoundest feelings on a variety of subjects, but chiefly concerning love, its exultation and its despair. The importance of love as a comic theme is traditional and to trace out the configurations of feeling—as critics are regularly tracing out the configurations of language—which plays and sonnets share, seems to me a critical labor of no small interest and importance. The sonnets are the direct expression of Shakespeare's most intimate feelings; the plays are the oblique expression of these, wherein feelings are objectified in the context of a dramatic fiction, and refracted through a host of dramatis personae assembled from classical story or chronicle history or Italian novelle and the like. The result is quite remarkable: real feeling consciously applied to an unreal object, as Count Harry Kessler says, comparing Shakespeare and Cervantes with his dead friend, Hofmannsthal. In his *Diary*, Kessler continues of Hofmannsthal: "to grasp at anything directly was offensive to him; it appeared disrespectful and ineffective. Hofmannsthal sought objects on which he could hang his feelings, and he did not find them in reality. So he created artificial objects, or sought them in art, in literature."⁵ I think that Kessler's comparison of Hofmannsthal to Shakespeare in this respect is quite just. Two examples will perhaps demonstrate what I am suggesting. Here is a direct expression of the poet's feeling as set forth in Sonnet 49:

Against that time, if ever that time come,
When I shall see thee frown on my defects,

Whenas thy love hath cast his utmost sum,
 Called to that audit by advised respects;
 Against that time when thou shalt strangely pass
 And scarcely greet me with that sun, thine eye,
 When love, converted from the thing it was,
 Shall reasons find of settled gravity:
 Against that time do I ensconce me here
 Within the knowledge of mine own desert,
 And this my hand against myself uprear
 To guard the lawful reasons on thy part.
 To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws,
 Since why to love I can allege no cause.

I find it impossible to consider this sonnet without also considering its dramatic redaction, in the final scene of *Henry IV*, part two; the very real feelings expressed in the sonnet as the poet contemplates his rejection by his friend which he suspects is bound to come some day are consciously applied in the closing scene of 2 *Henry IV* to an unreal object whom Shakespeare first called Sir John Oldcastle, and then when tiresome objections were made, renamed Sir John Falstaff. To refer to Falstaff as an unreal object to which Shakespeare consciously attaches his feelings is not of course to imply that he is an unreal character; he is an unreal object in the sense that he is nothing to Shakespeare but a name—or rather two names—in Holinshed until Shakespeare's feelings are infused into him; only then does he live.

Another example, Sonnet 105:

Let not my love be called idolatry,
 Nor my beloved as an idol show,
 Since all alike my songs and praises be
 To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
 Kind is my love to-day, to-morrow kind,
 Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
 Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
 One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
 'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument,
 'Fair, kind, and true,' varying to other words;
 And in this change is my invention spent,
 Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
 Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone,
 Which three till now never kept seat in one.

The dramatist's feeling, applied to a fat old knight in the previous example, is applied to a handsome young lover in this one, to Prince Troilus, specifically to Troilus as he and Cressida are parted in IV.iv. "My lord, will you be true?" she has asked, and he replies:

Who? I? Alas, it is my vice, my fault.
 Whiles others fish with craft for great opinion,
 I with great truth catch mere simplicity;

Whilst some with cunning gild their copper crownes,
 With truth and plainness I do wear mine bare.
 Fear not my truth; the moral of my wit
 Is 'plain and true'; there's all the reach of it.

(II.101-107)

In both these examples, sonnet and play share a common emotional basis in the poet's experience; the difference lies in what I will call their orchestration. One is scaled for the private, deeply personal solo voice of direct address; the other is but one voice in a vast assemblage of voices, addressed to the public by means of imaginatively conceived personages functioning in imaginatively conceived plots specially designed by the dramatist for the objective expression of his feelings. What exists in the sonnets as subjective feeling issues in the plays as objectified dramatic event. There is a sense in which Falstaff exists to be rejected, just as in another sense Troilus exists to be kind and true (and also rejected). Sonnets and plays are bound together by an emotional continuum, and to ignore it, or to treat one body of poetry in isolation from another, is to impose a discontinuity on the emotional and psychological experience from which Shakespeare's art takes its being and which is all very much of a piece. The artist's urge to create here issues in two ways: in feeling expressed in the sheer terms of image and allusion, and in feeling expressed through a complex of image and allusion projected onto imaginative personages, their doings and their sufferings. But the sonnet sequence has its personages too, however shadowy. Are they real or imaginative: the poetic persona, the friend, the dark woman? I suspect that they are real, but I do not know and it does not greatly matter so far as my discussion in what follows is concerned. They were real to the poet's imagination; also, one suspects, they were necessary to it; if friend and mistress did not exist in life, the poet would have had to invent them. In the sonnets they exist in a kind of imaginative limbo, as if frozen in a paralyzed relation one to another, and a relation that is clouded in ambiguities for the poet as well as for the reader. Just how true is the friend? Just how false is the mistress? Have they indeed betrayed the poet in the way that he suspects? And how many friends are there? Are all the poet's addresses to one intended for the same one? Finally, is the poet Shakespeare, or one more dramatic persona? The ambiguities are never resolved, and the personages of the sonnets present themselves to the reader—as they must in a sense have presented themselves to the poet—as so many characters in search of an author. If Shakespeare had left them in the sonnets, they would have shared the fate of Pirandello's famous six: creations of the imagination left stranded with no fully articulated imaginative world in which to move. But there was no question, it would seem, of Shakespeare's leaving them without a play to reside in. He provides them with half a dozen or more. His imaginative need for mistress and friend is

clear: also his fascination with that need, and the fact that he must satisfy it, no matter how humiliating the cost. It is the need, and the means that are available to him to fulfill it, that preoccupy him, and in play after play from *The Merchant of Venice* to *Measure for Measure* he runs and re-runs, shapes and re-shapes the sundry alternatives the imagination suggests to him by way of furnishing or making more satisfactory what life has either failed to supply, or has supplied in a form that fails to behave as one would have it do.

II

The great emotional impression which the sonnets make is of the poet's love for the friend which never ceases to be steadfast even as the evidence mounts that the friend is not what he appears to be, is not as the poet has believed him to be nor as he would have him be. The poet looks on in fascinated horror as it becomes clear beyond any denial that the beauty and the grace and the high birth of the friend are so many foils to set off in him not virtue, but vice. The poet's gaze never flinches from the truth, but neither does his love for the friend waver. At least not in the sonnets; the eventual view of the friend in the plays is another matter. The couplet that closes Sonnet 40 sets forth the dual response that is here: "Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows, / Kill me with spites; yet we must not be foes." "O, in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose!" the poet comments, wonderingly, in Sonnet 95; and he continues:

O, what a mansion have those vices got
Which for their habitation chose out thee,
Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot
And all things turns to fair that eyes can see!

In Sonnet 96 the poet is still exclaiming over the friend's capacity to make "faults graces" that resort to him, and he contemplates musingly over the scene of innocence betrayed that the friend has the power to bring about if ever he tried ("If thou wouldst use the strength of all thy state"). The friend is one of those who "have power to hurt and will do none," but his restraint (as Sonnet 94 makes clear) does him little credit, since it is occasioned rather by cold indifference than by any positive aversion to evil. Though the friend has inherited heaven's graces, and though these are richly manifest in his physical beauty, the "base infection" which he has suffered—or at any rate to which he is liable—is but the more offensive; moral corruption that exists side by side with all that beauty is but the more insufferable, as the poet notes in what is perhaps the most devastating pair of lines he ever permits himself to address to the friend throughout the whole of the sonnet sequence:

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

"Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud," the poet has told the friend in Sonnet 35, in what are apparently intended to be comforting words, though what comfort the friend could derive from them is questionable. The sonnet begins:

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

The loathsome canker appears again (it is indeed one of the recurrent images in the sequence) at the beginning of Sonnet 95, where once again it signifies the foulness that infects the friend's outward splendor, and bears witness to his disturbing capacity for making sin glamorous:

How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame
Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose,
Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name!
O, in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose!

The poet is painfully aware of just what a dubious endeavor he is engaged in as he casts about for excuses for the friend; as he puts it in Sonnet 35, he corrupts himself as he seeks to "salve" the friend's faults, and the "civil war" that goes forth in his love and hate—love for the friend, hate for the friend's faults—has the effect finally of making him untrue to himself. The poet, in a paradoxical situation that occurs more than once in the course of the sequence, becomes a traitor to his own best interests, an accessory to the sweet thief who sourly robs from him.

The sonnets are emphatic about the effect of the friend's heart-stopping beauty on the poet: the beautiful young man's supremely good looks are the key to all the sensations—especially the painful ones—which the poet undergoes and records. The handsome youth's vices give the lie, decisively, to all the Renaissance clichés about a beautiful body bearing witness to a beautiful soul. The poet would like to deceive himself on this point. Thus the opening of Sonnet 93:

So shall I live, supposing thou art true,
Like a deceived husband; so love's face
May still seem love to me though altered new,
Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place.

In the looks of some, "the false heart's history" makes itself apparent "in moods and frowns and wrinkles," but not so in the case of the friend, in whose creation heaven

did decree
That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be,
Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell.

But about the second "should" lurks a disquieting ambiguity. The looks of the friend "should" (i.e., ought to) tell of nothing but sweetness, but do they? And the ambiguity suggests the ominous possibility that is glimpsed in the final couplet:

How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow
If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show!

After his experience with his friend, Shakespeare—if he had not known it before—is now fully aware that physical grace has no necessary connection with an inner grace of spirit, which is as much as to say that appearance is no index to the reality within; and thus he is on to an important—and potentially tragic—truth about the nature of reality itself, namely, that there is a profound discontinuity between things as they are in their essential natures, and things as they appear to be under the guise of their external shows. Once the sense of this discontinuity was vivid to him, it is not too much to say that Shakespeare never altogether recovered from the shock it administered to the confidence and trust with which he had hitherto viewed the world. It is hard to avoid the impression that Shakespeare's preoccupation with the contradiction between appearance and reality is the whole impulse to his work in tragedy, and if to say as much at this late date sounds like a cliché, it is simply because the past seventy years of Shakespearean criticism have made it so.

But the combination of beauty and wantonness in the friend made impressions of a subtler and perhaps ultimately more sinister kind. Together, they go a long way toward explaining the particular nature of the erotic fascination the friend—or the idea of the friend—exerted upon the poet. The poet is explicit about the fact that the friend's beauty makes even his vices attractive; he is silent on the score of their attractiveness to him. Usually the tone he adopts in addressing the friend on this subject is monitory; the poet warns the young man against making himself common, soiling his name, and blunting his edge; but the fascinated contemplation of the glittering youth's periodic lapses into lasciviousness tells its own story. There is a fine poignancy in the poet's recognition that all that loveliness should not be exempt from the brutish sting of lust to which ordinary mortals are subject. Poignancy too in the realization that the youth has no particular concern with keeping himself inviolate: that he can indulge himself in his debauchery without apparently being much distressed at the falling off that is here. The poet looks on while what he loves is defiled at the hands of the loved one himself, and while what he looks on may be distressing, it is also undeniably exciting; it is not every day that one is privileged to see sin made glamorous; sin more usually is vulgar and dull. The spectacle of the beautiful young lord (assuming he *was* a lord) heedlessly trailing his beauty and his dignities in the dust must have exhibited a

scene of prodigality with which the poet can hardly have been familiar, and he clearly found the scene disturbing. It seems to have filled him with excitement of a quasi-sexual kind, not surprisingly since all the wanton acts of violation which the friend performed upon his beauty and his fair name were informed with that same sensuality which the poet responded to so strongly in the friend himself.

The relation of poet and friend—or of poet, mistress, and friend, or simply of poet and mistress—is the informing principle of play after play of Shakespeare's, from the mid-1590s through *Measure for Measure* in 1604, the play that writes a decisive *finis* to his work in comedy. The sonnets, as I have already suggested, are the repository of Shakespeare's most profound feelings during this period; they preserve for us the record of his most intimate passions as he approached the peak of his maturity as a man and as an artist. The record is, notoriously, full of dark and obscure places, and there is a myriad of details that are forever lost to us; but the general shape of his emotional life during these years is clear enough, and so are the psychic forces that drive him. The poet of the sonnets is a man outwardly satisfied in body and soul. The dark and sensuous mistress satisfies the body's appetite, and love for the friend administers to the higher needs of the soul. Yet, in a twist of paradox worthy of the fate of a Strindberg, his highest bliss becomes the source of his deepest misery. Love for the friend becomes a torment as the friend proves unworthy; and as if that were not enough, friend and mistress themselves become lovers. The situation, distressing as it is bound to be for the poet, is not devoid of humor, as he has the wit to see. What an odd, androgynous triangle they make, like something out of an Iris Murdoch novel: the friend, who is "the master-mistress" of the poet's passion (Sonnet 20) and who usurps the poet's place in his other mistress's bed; the poet himself, who though he may affirm (Sonnet 42) that he loved his mistress dearly, is more affected by the loss of the friend to her than by the loss of the woman herself; the mistress is something of an enigma, though not I suspect a profound one; she had a cuckolded husband somewhere in the background, and she must have hugely enjoyed her success in luring to her bed the beautiful and presumably noble young man over whom her aging lover was forever rhapsodizing. The friend probably got his share of malicious satisfaction out of this too; he seems to have wearied from time to time of the poet's attentions, or at any rate of the poet's manner of expressing these (as when the poet suspects that he is being ousted from the friend's regard by a rival poet); after all those admonishments to virtue that the poet was regularly visiting upon the friend, it is probably not surprising that the friend from time to time should be possessed by a demon of mischievousness (to give it no worse a name) and prompted to do something that would let his self-appointed admonisher see just how much effect all those moral injunctions had had upon him;

anyway, the poet had been urging him through seventeen sonnets to propagate his kind. Shakespeare, in Sonnet 143, gives us a wryly amusing description of the situation that had come to pass involving himself, his mistress and his friend:

Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
 One of her feathered creatures broke away,
 Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch
 In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;
 Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
 Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
 To follow that which flies before her face,
 Not prizing her poor infant's discontent:
 So run'st thou after that which flies from thee,
 Whilst I, thy babe, chase thee afar behind. . .

The last two quoted lines are a fine summary of one of the most familiar of comic plot conventions: the one that features a chain of lovers linked together in a one-way current of frustrated passions: A loves B who loves C who loves D and so on. Shakespeare employs it in *As You Like It*, where Silvius loves Phebe, who loves the disguised Rosalind, who loves Orlando; and in *Twelfth Night*, where the Duke loves Olivia who loves the disguised Viola who in turn loves the Duke, thereby making a circle of the chain. In the triangular relationship that forms the experiential basis of the sonnets, the poet loves the mistress who loves the friend, but this is only part of the story, which is in fact more complicated than anything in Sonnet 143 or in the conventional comic plot-line adumbrated there would suggest. The poet loves the mistress who loves the friend, but the poet also loves the friend, and the friend may even love the poet in his fashion. Traditional conventions of comic plotting pale beside the complexities (both situational and emotional) of this. So Shakespeare sets about the work of making the conventions of comic plotting that are available to him accommodate the psychological and emotional complexities to which he wishes to give dramatic expression. What these complexities are, the sonnets make abundantly clear: tormented ambiguities of love and hate, of hope and despair, of trust and doubt, of triumph and shame.

The sonnets bear witness to the reality of these feelings; there the poet— notwithstanding his superb verbal mastery—is still very much at the mercy of them. If he is to get free of them he must assert his power over them, and thus he must proceed from the subjectivity of lyric utterance—eloquent though that may be—to the measured and very objective calculation of dramatic creation. There the poet is the master of his affections, not the victim of them; he decrees who feels what for whom, and when; and he is in the happy position of seeing to it that affections issue according to the shape of one's most cherished desires. This at any rate is what the poet who is now a dramatist is capable of decreeing when the feelings he has experi-

enced seem still to permit a harmonious fulfillment, if not in this world then in an imaginative one which it is the dramatist's job to create. Which is what Shakespeare does in comedies like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. The trio of Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* are everything that the real-life trio of poet, friend, and mistress were not in Shakespeare's own experience. Antonio is rich where Shakespeare the poet is poor, and he who in life can give nothing to his friend, in the play can give all; now it is for the friend, Bassanio, to be on the receiving end, to be put in the possession of his happiness by the selfless generosity of the older man. And the woman who constitutes his happiness is not a sultry adulteress of no reputation but a golden beauty of matchless virtue and wealth. The poet of the sonnets who grieved to think of his friend in the arms of the dark woman gives place to the merchant of the play, risking his very flesh that his friend may be lord of the lady of Belmont. But Antonio sends Bassanio on his wooing mission with a sadness that commentators on the play have never missed; the play's opening lines sufficiently attest to the prominence Shakespeare is giving to Antonio's nameless melancholy; and the sadness Antonio feels at the virtual loss of his friend who is now turned lover represents the great area of feeling carried over direct and unchanged from life into the play. Antonio's sadness is the sadness of the poet in the sonnets when he contemplates the loss of the friend, but with the poet's grief and distress at the friend's unworthiness and the unworthiness of his chosen mistress refined away.

One may measure this idealization of reality against the thing itself in the highly metaphorical language of Sonnet 134. There the poet, mortgaged to the will of the mistress, has caused the friend to fall into the mistress's power as well, for the friend underwrote, as surety, the poet's bond of indebtedness to her. The poet will make himself forfeit to her if only she will release the friend, but even as he makes the proposal he recognizes its futility: "But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free, / For thou art covetous, and he is kind." The mistress will take the full forfeiture (both poet and friend) provided for by the bond which commits both to her and which consists both in her beauty and their lust to enjoy it, for she is a usurer who puts forth nothing of hers in the way of favor except at interest. The poet has been deceived by her, and in his deception (his "unkind abuse"), not recognizing her cruelty until it is too late, has delivered the friend into her power, where both now are, though it is the friend who has the full obligation imposed on him; the payment is made, presumably, in bed. It is interesting to note the manner in which the terms of this elaborate conceit have been rearranged in the plot design of *The Merchant of Venice*. The bond into which Antonio has so rashly entered is with a real usurer, not a metaphorical one, and his friend is exposed to no risks by standing surety for

him, though the bond has been entered upon for his sake. In the metaphorical terms of the sonnet, the poet has been the innocent means of delivering the friend into the hands of a wanton creditor, in whose hands, as it turns out, the friend is all too happy to be; the shame the poet feels at his own enslavement to her is enhanced by the realization that he has been the cause of his friend's enslavement to her as well, and the suspicion that the friend enjoys the servitude. In the play, the roles played by the trio involved in this amorous and financial tangle are a good deal more creditable: Antonio alone exposes himself to the risk of forfeiting the bond entered upon with the usurer; the usurer is not the unprincipled mistress but a new figure summoned from the bogey-land of Elizabethan prejudice, Shylock the Jew, on whose outcast head all the discreditable motives tending to cruelty and covetousness that the situation affords can be accumulated; the friend, Bassanio, through the generous offices of Antonio, is able to pay court to a virtuous mistress; and he finds one worthy of him in the splendid figure of Portia, who embodies all that is most desirable in the way of the world's beauty, honor, and riches.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* the roles of poet, friend, and mistress are recast in ways that provide another set of variations on the dual themes of friendship and love. If, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the poet (in the character of Antonio) permitted himself the liberty of being the friend's social equal, the emphasis that was placed on the difference in age between the elder man and his young friend preserved a discreet distance between the two. In *Much Ado*, the friends, Benedick and Claudio, are not only social equals; the gulf of years that has separated the friends in the earlier play is now bridged. What marks them off one from another is Benedick's tendency to weigh the actions of Claudio in a moral balance and to find them lacking. Gone is the uncritical adulation of an Antonio for a Bassanio; for the moment at least, the poet is in no mood to conceal his friend's flaws, to excuse his sins. Claudio, in two words, is a heartless snob, and his treatment of Hero is designed to prove it; so is his behavior after her apparent death: his contemptuous behavior to her father and uncle, and the witless jests he is heard breaking with the prince, create within the compass of a single scene (V.i) an impression of a character as unpleasant as he is shallow. Benedick, coming upon him with his challenge, has clearly outgrown him, and gives every evidence of being profoundly bored by him and by the fashionable company (the prince Don Pedro) that he keeps. Benedick's mind is elsewhere, with his mistress, the estimable Beatrice, whose physical good looks and whose wit and cleverness must represent—in however sublimated a degree—the qualities the poet first found in the dark woman of the sonnets. For once, regard for the friend is subordinate to regard for the mistress in the re-creation of Shakespeare's emotional life, its needs and its satisfactions, which these mature comedies provide.

That the dramatist's emotional longings, focused in the character of Benedick, should find fulfillment in an unequivocal mistress is enough to give *Much Ado About Nothing* a unique place in the great trio of comedies which Shakespeare wrote at the century's end. Things are very much more ambiguous in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. For the needs and the satisfactions which these plays register are those of a lover who is in love with a member of his own sex, but who is unable—either by reason of his own disinclination or the disinclination of the beloved—to satisfy his longings by the agency of the flesh, and so satisfies them by the agency of the imagination instead; and the imagination in this case, far from rendering its subject prurient, renders it virtually chaste by setting forth the beloved in an aspect so calculatedly androgynous as to endow it with a serene neutrality. The fact that women's roles were played by boy actors on the Elizabethan stage was bound to give to any female characterization a hint of equivocation; when a boy actor who has disguised himself to play a girl is called upon—in the course of the play—to take on boy's disguise, equivocation is compounded. One disguise cancels out another, and the gender of the actor, denied on one level of artistic pretense, is confirmed on another. Characters such as Rosalind and Viola are extremely clever creations; in their physical presences, they are the embodiment of the beautiful youth whom the poet loves, but the beautiful youth here made acceptable to the poet's imagination by virtue of the female identity with which—however tentatively—he is endowed. Rosalind and Viola are art's revenge on nature for the offense so wittily described in Sonnet 20: the beloved youth who is "the master-mistress" of the poet's passion is possessed of "a woman's face," painted with Nature's own hand; Nature, indeed, intended him originally for a woman, but "fell a-doting" over her own handiwork and endowed her creation with a masculine gender that must defeat the poet of his enjoyment. Rosalind and Viola are the poet's improvement on nature's work: the feminine beauties of personality and mind summoned into being with a radiance that has never failed to charm audiences, but with the feminine graces ever capable (as their disguises as boys show) of being subsumed under youthful masculine ones. Orlando, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, is the poet who is saved from despair at his lot in the world by the power of love. Rosalind is very much the master-mistress of the poet's passion; she both arouses Orlando's love, and (in her disguise as Ganymede) instructs him in it; and Orlando, with his poetic tributes to his beloved, is a pleasant bit of self-parody on the part of the dramatist. When Orlando, in the verses that Celia reads in III.ii, declares how "Rosalinde of many parts / By heavenly synod was devised" (lines 143-144), his poetic style may not have much to do with the sonnets, but his subject matter does. Into Rosalind, according to Orlando, Nature distilled "Helen's cheek," "Cleopatra's majesty," in short, all the "dearest

prized" faces, eyes, and hearts. It is a conceit often developed in the sonnets. "What is your substance, whereof are you made," the poet asks of the beloved at the beginning of Sonnet 53; and he continues:

Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you.
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.

And in Sonnet 106, the beloved is described as having been prefigured in "the blazon of sweet beauty's best, / Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow," that the pens of antiquity have sought to express. The subject is treated as well in Sonnet 31. *As You Like It* is an unclouded celebration of the poet's delight in the idea of the youth, who, through the powers of imagination and art, is here rendered (as he is not in life) both acceptable and accessible. The mistress is nowhere in sight.

But she is firmly established in the center of the scene of *Twelfth Night*, splendidly done up as the Countess Olivia, to whom everyone willingly or not pays court. The poet has done himself up rather splendidly too, in the person of the Duke Orsino, addressing his love-stricken appeals to the cold-hearted lady in sweetly languid accents that suggest something of what contemporary youth was so enthusiastic about in Shakespeare's sugared sonnets. Into the scene comes the handsome youth (Viola in boy's disguise), and—oh sweet revenge—for once the older man arouses affection in another instead of merely experiencing affection himself for another. Viola-Caesarion falls in love with the Duke, and when, not suspecting anything of the sort, he sends her to plead his case before his cruel mistress, she finds herself ensnared in the sort of delicious paradox—where to be true to her love means to be false to herself, and where success in his behalf spells failure in her own—that the sonnets delight in defining and developing. In real life, was the poet himself the means of introducing his young friend into the presence of the mistress, perhaps to plead his case? Sonnet 134 (to which attention has already been directed in connection with *The Merchant of Venice*) has seemed to some commentators to suggest something of the sort ("He learned but surety-like to write for me / Under that bond that him as fast doth bind," the poet says to the mistress, of his friend). Be this as it may, in real life the youth and the mistress seem to have made no scruple, once they had made acquaintance, about betraying their older friend and lover and becoming lovers themselves. Viola, on the other hand, is as steadfast in the presence of her beloved's mistress as the friend of the sonnets seems to have been false, and this in despite of Olivia's bold advances. But of course the witty and slightly ironic point of these scenes consists precisely in the fact that Olivia's advances pose no temptation to Viola, she being herself a woman. If there is a question of the dramatist's personal experience and emotion entering into the comic texture of *Twelfth*

Night here, then it is as if he were saying that, even in an imaginative reconstruction of reality, it is well not to depend overmuch on human constancy, and that where affections are concerned, the only sure way of preserving them for one love is to impose sexual barriers to their enjoyment with another. The moment in V.i, when the Duke is brought face to face with what seems insurmountable evidence that Caesario has betrayed him not only by winning Olivia's affections but by becoming her husband as well, is a superb instance of the power of art in general, and of Shakespeare's comic art in particular, to take the sting out of life: to seize upon the painful moment of experience and to play it over and over again in different keys, to set it forth in varying degrees of light and shade, to the end that its elements may be rearranged into patterns that ameliorate the pain by replacing what is, or what was, with what ought to be, or what ought to have been. For now the miracle happens, and just in time to save everybody's dreams: the Duke's, that the lovely youth Caesario is truly faithful to him; Antonio the sea captain's, that the lovely youth Sebastian is as honorable as he had seemed; Olivia's, that somewhere there is a lovely youth who is indeed her husband. The miracle is managed by the simple expedient of producing another Caesario, and one of course is at hand in the twin brother Sebastian; he can be husband to Olivia, thereby releasing Viola to be wife to the Duke.

In commenting on *Much Ado About Nothing*, I noted Benedick's tendency to pass what are often rather severe moral judgments on his friend Claudio's actions. The friend of the sonnets is censured even more severely under another dramatic surrogate, Bertram in *All's Well that Ends Well*. The play has never been accorded a high place in the Shakespearean canon; critics have usually found it among the least satisfactory of Shakespeare's plays; and while I am not concerned here with challenging the general critical estimate, I would maintain that it is a far more interesting play than is usually recognized, and that it is perhaps the most intensely personal play that Shakespeare ever wrote. Its connection with the sonnets is unmistakable.⁶ The story that it tells—of a commoner's selfless adoration for a handsome young nobleman, and of the indifference and the humiliation with which the beloved youth treats his adorer—is the story of the sonnets, and in making drama of it Shakespeare was handling material which not only was of a highly intimate nature, but must have been of a highly painful nature as well. Helena's love for Bertram is of a kind with which we are familiar from the sonnets, most notably from Sonnet 57 (beginning "Being your slave, what should I do but tend / Upon the hours and times of your desire?") and the companion Sonnet 58 (beginning "That god forbid that made me first your slave / I should in thought control your times of pleasure" and ending with one of the most moving couplets in the sequence: "I am to wait, though waiting so be hell, / Not blame your pleasure, be it

ill or well"). Here the memory of love brings with it a whole train of painful associations: of the rebuffs which the beloved visits upon his socially inferior lover, of the beloved's ingratitude and downright treachery, of his seemingly incorrigible tendency to scorn virtue and seek out vice; but most painful of all would be the lover's own recognition that no matter how hopeless his love may be, or how unworthily it may be placed, he cannot leave off loving. Shakespeare's sonnets are the great monument to a love which begins with overwhelming reverence for the beloved, which proceeds to the knowledge that the beloved is not as he has seemed to be or as the lover would have him be, but which endures anyway. It is precisely love of this kind that *All's Well* celebrates, and in affirming as much I am affirming as well just how dangerously involved the play is with all the uncovered roots and exposed nerve ends of the poet's most intimate feelings. It is hardly to be wondered at, then, if in transforming this intensely subjective material into the objective shape of drama, his touch may seem to falter. So far as the task of incarnating his feelings as lover was concerned, he was brilliantly successful. Helena is one of Shakespeare's great creations, and the fact that her prototype is a man need be greeted with no more disbelief or wonder than the fact that the prototype for Proust's Albertine is a man too. In this regard, it is interesting to find the critics commenting on Helena's man-like qualities. Van Doren speaks of her mind's "masculine fertility," and Tillyard finds "a formidable tautness in [her] passion, which allies her with Spenser's Britomart."⁷ Helena is a triumph of dramatic portraiture, but no one has ever said as much for Bertram, and here is where the dramatist's art has always seemed to most critics to falter, though I suspect the dramatist's art may not have faltered so much as it rebelled. Bertram is the young nobleman of the sonnets in his most unattractive aspects; the dramatist seems to have declined to give him any qualities that would modify Parolles's description of him (at IV.iii.206) as "a dangerous and lascivious boy."

The dramatist of *All's Well* is strenuously divided between his conviction of the nobility of his love for his friend, which is Helena's love for Bertram, and the utter worthlessness of the friend. He is still sufficiently in command of his material to make it do his imaginative bidding, and what his imagination bids is that the materials of life, when subjected to the shaping powers of art, should present a more satisfactory—a more respectable—face to the world than they typically do in their raw, existential condition. To this end it is appropriate that justice be done and Helena be rewarded with her man. "All's Well that Ends Well," so the play's title runs, and it could, I suppose, be paraphrased: "nothing succeeds like success." If it ends well, then it is well, and the dramatist—or rather, the dramatist's surrogate, Helena—has seen to it that the shape of events at the close answers to the image of her fondest desire. The end may justify the means, but does it compensate for

the expenditure of energy and passion that has generated the means? Since the end gained is Bertram, most critics of the play have been inclined to say no, and the evidence is strong that Shakespeare too was inclined to say no. He is there to defend the selfless splendor of his love, but he has no illusions about the worthiness of its object. One evidence of this is the manner in which the means whereby, in the sonnets, the poet kept his love alive, are reduced to parody in *All's Well*. Admittedly, the means were often specious, but in the sonnets they were entertained with passion; in *All's Well*, they are jokes. Take, for example, the elaborately specious argument (which the poet knows to be "sweet flattery") of Sonnet 42, wherein he proves to his own bemused satisfaction that his mistress and his friend are not really deceiving him:

Thou dost love her because thou know'st I love her,
And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
Suff'ring my friend for my sake to approve her.

The clincher comes in the couplet: "my friend and I are one"; therefore in loving the friend, the mistress is loving the poet in the friend, and this feat of logic makes way for the cold comfort of the close: "Sweet flattery! then she loves but me alone." It is not really surprising to find this sort of thing ending on the lips of Lavatch the clown in *All's Well* (I.iii.43 ff.): "He that comforts my wife is the cherisher of my flesh and blood; he that cherishes my flesh and blood loves my flesh and blood; he that loves my flesh and blood is my friend: ergo, he that kisses my wife is my friend."

The speeches of Helena, on the other hand, span the extremes of love's hopefulness and love's bewilderment just as the sonnets do. Helena, in her soliloquy in I.i, confesses how she has sat and drawn all the details of Bertram's beauty in her heart's table, just as the poet, in Sonnet 24, tells the friend how his "eye hath played the painter and hath stelled / Thy beauty's form in table of my heart." When, after her marriage to Bertram, it seems for a moment as if she has been delivered from the outcast state to which her lowly fortunes had destined her, she dedicates herself to her husband as his "most obedient servant," and vows that she "ever shall / With true observance seek to eke out that / Wherein toward me my homely stars have failed / To equal my great fortune" (II.v.71, 72-75). Sonnet 25 voices the same wonder and delight that such high-placed love should countenance one whom fortune has placed so low:

Let those who are in favor with their stars
Of public honor and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
Unlooked for joy in that I honor most.

But much later in the play, after she has tricked Bertram into spending the night with her, she wonders at the perversity of lovers: "O strange men! /

That can such sweet use make of what they hate, . . . so lust doth play / With what it loathes" (IV.iv.21 ff.). These are the accents of Sonnet 40, where the poet muses over the perversity of the friend, who can take his pleasure with a woman whom he ought to loathe:

I cannot blame thee for my love thou usest;
But yet be blamed if thou this self deceivest
By willful taste of what thyself refuseth.

The precise meaning of these lines has been much debated ("this self" is often—appropriately, I believe—emended to "thy self"); viewed in the context of Helena's already quoted words from *All's Well*, their meaning I think is clear enough; and if her words do not shed sufficient light on them, the point she is making is stated even more explicitly in the dialogue of the two lords in IV.iii. The first lord reports that Bertram "this night . . . fleshes his will in the spoil" of the honor of a young gentlewoman of Florence. "He hath given her his monumental ring, and thinks himself made in the unchaste composition." To which the second lord replies: "Now God delay our rebellion! As we are ourselves, what things are we!" And the first lord answers: "Merely our own traitors. And as in the common course of all treasons, we still see them reveal themselves till they attain to their abhorred ends, so he that in this action contrives against his own nobility, in his proper stream o'erflows himself" (ll. 14-24). The only thing it seems possible to say in Bertram's defense is that he is young. Thus his mother the Countess appeals to the King (in V.iii) to regard her son's wrong to Helena as "Natural rebellion, done i'th' blade of youth," and Bertram himself takes the same line when he is trying to explain away the circumstances that brought Diana into possession of his ring: "Certain it is I liked her, / And boarded her i'th' wanton way of youth" (V.iii.210-211). So the poet, in Sonnet 96, states the alternative views that are taken of the friend's behavior: "Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness; / Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport." But the friend has the disturbing power of making graces of the faults that resort to him, a power that has deserted Bertram, in whom faults are merely faults.

The judgment of the friend is completed in *Measure for Measure*. Bertram and Angelo have more in common than might at first appear. For one thing, they are both lechers. They speak the same language of seduction. Bertram says to Diana (IV.ii.5-6): "If the quick fire of youth light not your mind, / You are no maiden, but a monument." And Angelo urges Isabella (II.iv.134-135): "Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none." For another thing, Bertram and Angelo seem stocked with a fund of potential virtues which they never manage to infuse into their actual deeds. At the beginning of *Measure for Measure*, Angelo is being urged not to keep his virtues buried within him, in much the same

way as the friend in the first seventeen sonnets is being urged not to let his beauty die without an heir. The Duke says to Angelo:

Thyself and thy belongings
Are not thine own so proper, as to waste
Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.
 . . . Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues, nor Nature never lends
The smallest scruple of her excellence
But like a thrifty goddess she determines
Herself the glory of a creditor,
Both thanks and use.

(I.i.29-40)

“Nature’s bequest gives nothing but doth lend, / And, being frank, she lends to those are free,” the poet tells the friend in Sonnet 4, and the theme is picked up again in Sonnet 11:

Let those whom Nature hath not made for store,
Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish:
Look whom she best endowed, she gave the more,
Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish.
 She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
 Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.

Angelo is the portrait of the beautiful young man as counselor of state. He has a past about which the Duke Vincentio seems to be fully informed; in III.i, the Duke gives Isabella a detailed account of Angelo’s dealings with Mariana; the poet of the sonnets must have had an equally circumstantial knowledge of his young friend’s indiscretions. But at the stage in the relationship of poet and friend which *Measure for Measure* records, it must have seemed to the poet that the time had come to stop indulging his friend in his vices, to stop finding them attractive, and to start viewing him and them quite clearly for what they were. In point of fact, the friend, with all his social advantages, was infinitely beyond the poet’s powers of judgment so far as any direct pronouncement on his personal morality was concerned; all the poet of the sonnets could do in this regard was to cajole, the usual line taken being that the friend was so compact of superior virtues that he owed it to himself not to be guilty of the faults into which he sometimes allowed himself to slip. But in the realm of the imagination, the friend could not indefinitely avoid a confrontation with the poet’s moral outrage which—like the Duke’s long-suffering indulgence of the erring citizens of Vienna—has been tolerant too long: whose very tolerance, indeed, may have helped bring matters to their present intolerable state. The Duke confesses to the Friar (I.iii) that it was his “fault to give the people scope”; and we remember how in Sonnet 35 the poet acknowledges his own fault in finding excuses for the faults of his friend, corrupting himself in the process. The imagination has its revenge in *Measure for*

Measure, where it seems to have decreed an end to pretense, as least where the friend is concerned; it is time to discover "what our seemers be." Angelo, put to the test, is found to be—finds himself to be—not an angel but a devil, and the great scene in which he has his moment of truth (II.iv) is a dramatic recapitulation, with the uncertainty gone, of Sonnet 144. There the poet has been in an agony of suspense lest his female evil have seduced his "better angel," the "man right fair" who is his "comfortable" love as the "woman colored ill" is his desperate one.

To win me soon to hell, my female evil
 Tempteth my better angel from my side,
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And whether that my angel be turned fiend
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
 But being both from me, both to each friend,
 I guess one angel in another's hell.

There is no doubt about whither Angelo is tending at the comparable moment in *Measure for Measure*. "Blood, thou art blood," he says as he is about to give his sensual race the rein in making his demand on Isabella; "Let's write 'good Angel' on the devil's horn, / 'Tis now the devil's crest."⁸ Earlier, he has seen himself as a saint whom his cunning enemy (Satan) catches by means of a hook baited with a saint. For Angelo turns fiend, not because he is tempted by a wanton mistress, but because the chaste Isabella inspires in him a lust which no strumpet could ever have stirred him to. She is the innocent means—as the dark woman of Sonnet 144 is the corrupt means—of tempting the angelic-seeming friend to be a devil. The corrupter and the victim of the sonnet have changed places in the dramatic recapitulation; the poet's better angel, the man right fair, proves a devil, and his female evil is translated into the enskied and sainted Isabella. In both cases the poet looks on from outside, but not with the same attitude toward them. In Sonnet 144, he can do nothing but contemplate his grim surmise that his two loves of comfort and despair have gotten together. In *Measure for Measure*, under the guise of his dramatic persona, the Duke Vincentio, he is busy almost to a fault about the business of keeping them apart, and with triumphant success. If, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, the dramatist permitted himself the fancy of gaining admittance to his friend's bed, in *Measure for Measure* it pleases him to frustrate the friend's amorous designs on the mistress, and he allows himself the further fancy of envisioning a mistress so virtuous as to aid in the frustration of these. Isabella is the beginning of Shakespeare's tendency to idealize feminine virtue: a tendency that continues to the portrait of Cordelia, and eventually produces the heroines of the last plays. Angelo, on the other hand, is the culminating representation of the friend as traitor to himself.

Hitherto "Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow," Angelo has met with the "base infection" warned against in Sonnet 94; the consequence is stated in that sonnet's famous couplet:

For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Angelo is one who has power to hurt, and far from restraining his power, uses it to the full to satisfy his will. The Duke, who is very much the dramatist's surrogate, must exert to the utmost his ingenuity and his ability to improvise in order to keep one step ahead of his iniquitous ways and render them harmless. Isabella's chastity alone can save her brother from Angelo's justice, so the Duke produces the bed-trick, confident that though Angelo has revealed himself to be a villain in his infamous proposition to Isabella, he will nonetheless be a man of his word and release Claudio. When in IV.ii the Duke, who has been awaiting in prison the arrival of Claudio's pardon, learns from the Provost that the letter which has just arrived carries not Claudio's pardon but the order for his immediate execution, we are in the presence of a master-plotter whose talents are being sorely pressed, whose material is getting out of control. It is an image of the dramatist whose comic purpose threatens to turn tragic.

The last half of *Measure for Measure* is filled with some bravura feats of plotting and counter-plotting, both on the part of the Duke and of the dramatist. After the second act, Angelo's role is, in effect, finished. What remains is to counter the intended results of his evil designs. The dramatist is finished with him, in more ways than one: his claims to virtue can no longer be taken seriously, his outward dignity no longer commands respect; his strenuous inner division between the will to chastity and the will to lust is no longer interesting once he has given in so totally to the will to lust. The energies of the Duke—and of the dramatist—in the last half of the play are directed to undoing what Angelo has done, or would do, and Angelo himself at the end exists only as a figure to be pardoned and dismissed. But the dramatist has reached the limits of his powers to contain, to control imaginatively, the evil—for now one must call it by its own name—which the Angelos of the world conceal beneath their saintly appearances. Shakespeare's awareness of this was, of course, a very much more gradual, more subtle process than can be suggested in any account of its effect on the art of his comedy alone. The sense of evil which is made vivid in the exposure of Angelo had already made itself felt in two plays which must almost immediately have preceded *Measure for Measure*: *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. The long finale which closes *Measure for Measure* is distinctly comic in design; amid much virtuosity, fact after fact is disclosed to the end of making known what has been hidden, or disguised, that all may be well; but here what is made known is not the identities of parents and children, or of disguised young ladies, as in more

confident comic denouements, but a sordid degree of moral turpitude. The note of judgment qualifies the comic close, and there is a sense in which the spirit of *Measure for Measure's* elaborate final scene is in conflict with its formal design. One is tempted to say that with the exposure of Angelo the sense of evil—pending for some time in Shakespearean drama—is now fully loosed, no longer confined to a particular kind of personal treachery, and no longer endowed with the specious glitter that disarmed the observer because vice was so confusingly embodied in an angelic shape. The imagination of the dramatist—for the time at least—gives over its efforts to control the evil through the re-creating powers of its art, and sets itself to contemplating the thing itself.

The tragedies which follow, however, do not constitute Shakespeare's last word on the imagination's power to shape another, grander world from the materials of this one. "My desolation does begin to make / A better life," says Cleopatra by way of prologue to that transformation of the vulgar into something strange and high which closes her tragedy and transfigures it (V.ii.1-2). She is stating in effect the motive that underlies the esthetic design of Shakespeare's final plays. Beginning with *Antony and Cleopatra*, one can see the limits of Shakespeare's art becoming more and more capacious. It can acknowledge everything—loyalty and treachery, love and lust, giddy caprice and grave dedication—without bitterness at the human contradictions that are here. *Antony and Cleopatra* bids a long, last, and highly bemused farewell to the emotional stresses and strains that marked the poet's experience with mistress and friend. The mistress, to judge from Sonnet 150, seems to have had something of the friend's ability to make vice beautiful, and Cleopatra is the apotheosis of that talent; everything is becoming to her. Antony addresses her in the old accents the poet has used following one of his periodic betrayals by the friend and a display of contrition from that wayward beloved. "Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheeds, / And they are rich and ransom all ill deeds," the poet has declared at the end of Sonnet 34. Antony, after the battle of Actium, says to Cleopatra: "Fall not a tear, I say: one of them rates / All that is won and lost" (III.xi.69-70).

The last plays—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*—mark the dramatist's return to an explicitly comedic form, and their concern with the shaping power of art is emphatic, as has been much observed. They have often been compared to the last plays of other great dramatists—of Sophocles, Racine, Ibsen—for the note of reconciliation and peace after long suffering which sounds in them all. I like to compare them to the last novels of Henry James. *Pericles*, *Imogen*, *Hermione*, *Prospero*—all experience the shock of finding evil seated all at its ease where they have expected only good, just as Maggie Verver does in *The Golden Bowl*. The betrayal suffered by the heroine of that novel or of *The Wings of the*

Dove—or by Imogen or Hermione or Prospero—is countered by an act of imagination that is overpowering in its magnanimity. The guilty are a pitiful lot: Posthumus humbled before Imogen; Leontes, his remorse renewed, in the presence of Hermione's statue; the shipwrecked party, struck dumb before the reality of Prospero's mercy; Charlotte Stant with the metaphorical silk cord round her neck, a slave to the forgiving powers of those she has wronged, in *The Golden Bowl*; Densher and Kate, shadowed forever by the dead Milly Theale's munificence, in *The Wings of the Dove*. Everything is terrible in the heart of man, as the Prince says to Maggie at the end of *The Golden Bowl*, but what is chiefly impressive in James's last novels and Shakespeare's last plays is the manner in which the imaginative powers under the artists' control show themselves capable of boldly ordering life to desist in its course of destruction and treachery, and reverse itself. The limits of Shakespeare's artistry in his last plays are—as James would say—so grand and high as to permit a vision of human nature risen beyond itself in the rare tolerance and mercy which, for a miracle, it there exhibits.

NOTES

All quotations from Shakespeare are based on the Pelican text of the *Complete Works*, General Editor, Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, 1969).

1. *The Defense of Poesie*, in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan Gilbert (New York, 1940), pp. 413-414.

2. *As You Desire Me*, translated by Marta Abba (New York, 1948), p. 81.

3. *Tonight We Improvise*, translated by Marta Abba (New York, 1960), p. 14.

4. Quoted in Marta Abba's Introduction to *The Mountain Giants and Other Plays* (New York, 1958), p. 17.

5. *In the Twenties: The Diaries of Harry Kessler*, translated by Charles Kessler (New York, 1971), p. 366.

6. See the very interesting essay by Roger Warren, "Why Does it End Well? Helena, Bertram and the Sonnets," in *Shakespeare Survey* 22 (1969), pp. 79-92.

7. *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London, 1951), p. 111, where the quotation from Van Doren is also given.

8. II.iv.15-17; it seems necessary to emend the Folio reading "not" (retained in the Pelican text) to "now."