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Beatrice K. Nelson

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Articulating the Design: Moral Voices in Two of Shakespeare's Plays

by BEATRICE K. NELSON

IN THIS PAPER I focus on and articulate the moral voices of four characters in two of Shakespeare's plays, the mature voices of Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Vincentio, the Duke, in *Measure for Measure*, and the immature voices of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Isabella in *Measure for Measure*.¹

Methodologically, I draw on Martha Nussbaum's articulation of the role of poetry and drama (literature) in philosophy. Not only does Nussbaum defend the use of literary text as philosophical source, she also defends the methodology of evocative and committed writing as an appropriate philosophical method. It is commonplace in philosophy to use examples from literary sources as data for or exemplifications of one's position. Nussbaum goes further than that. Speaking about the Greek tragedies, which will be central to her reading of Greek ethics, she says:

If a philosopher were to use Antigone's story as a philosophical example, he or she would, in setting it out schematically, signal to the reader's attention everything that the reader ought to notice. He would point out only what is strictly relevant. A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active. Interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example; and even when the work has once been interpreted, it remains unexhausted, subject to reassessment, in a way that the example does not. To invite such material into the center of ethical inquiry concerning these problems of practical reason is, then, to add to its content a picture of reason's procedures and problems that could not readily be conveyed in some other form.²

In the two comedies which are the subject of this paper, we will hear its characters struggling to articulate a moral vision, or acting on incomplete or immature visions, and we will grapple with them to discover the potent articulation of a vision of human relationship and community consonant with our moral commitments.

Nussbaum characterizes the usual method of philosophical inquiry as "convers[ing] with the intellect alone" (p. 15). "Too many inquiries into the philosophical value of the literary get derailed at the start by working

1. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Measure for Measure* were both produced by Shakespeare & Company, Lenox, Mass., in their 1987 summer season. I will be drawing on these two productions, not solely on the printed plays, as my text. Some of what I say, and the initial inspiration for my insights, stems not from the printed editions of the plays but from these two productions.

2. Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 14.

exclusively, and without examination, in a conventionally philosophical style which strongly indicates that the inquirer knows ahead of time what rationality is and how to express it in writing" (p. 17). In this essay I hope that both author and reader will engage in the inquiry into the moral foundation of community rather than supposing that any of us — Shakespeare or his characters, you or I — have, or ultimately could have, the answer to the questions posed in these two comedies. A touchstone for my interpretation of these two works is the notion that "the very meaning of comic form as Shakespeare develops it over the years [is] comedy as a celebration of the possibility of human growth."³ Whatever celebrates the possibility of human growth cannot know ahead of time where it is headed.

If, as Nussbaum says of her writing, I "vary the way of writing so that it will be appropriate to the ethical conception to which it responds . . . ; [if I] show in my writing the full range of my responses to the texts and . . . evoke similar responses in the reader. . . . [If] the writing as a whole exemplifies certain virtues to which I am committed" (p. 17), then I will be satisfied that I am participating in a powerful new methodology whose aim it is to reopen philosophical and moral inquiry into the classical texts of our culture, an inquiry whose goal is "to advance the conversation . . . whose aims are ultimately defined in terms of a 'we,' of a people who wish to live together and share a conception of value" (p. 14).

The Moral Inquiry of the Two Plays

Measure for Measure opens as the Duke is handing over the government of Vienna to a deputy. To Escalus, described in the list of dramatis personae as "an ancient lord," he says

Of government the properties to unfold
Would seem in me to affect speech and discourse,
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds, in that, the lists of all advice
My strength can give you. (I, 1, 3-7)⁴

Escalus is charged by the Duke to execute his commission, which includes the naming of Angelo to take the Duke's place as governor of Vienna in the Duke's absence.

We gather from these lines that what is justice, or just government, is not at issue in the play. Escalus is expert; we assume that the Duke is also (I am not convinced that he holds his knowledge less than that of Escalus). The burden of the play will not be to explore justice, but rather to explore the actual ruling of the just community. "*Measure for Measure* is very

3. George Slover, "Second World in Shakespeare's Comedy," paper read at Univ. of Massachusetts, Boston, English Department Colloquium, September 1986, p. 32.

4. All quotations from the plays are taken from *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1948).

largely concerned with the 'Prince's duty', particularly in regard to the administration of justice," writes Elizabeth Marie Pope in "The Renaissance Background of *Measure for Measure*."⁵ And in regard to the administration of justice, Pope sees the inquiry of *Measure for Measure* to be focused on the Renaissance debate over the relationship between justice and mercy. The Duke, for all his knowledge of the principles of justice, has been not merciful but lax in his administration. His deputy Angelo begins by governing in a way that is rule-bound with no hint of either laxity or mercy. The failure of these two ways of ruling—failures of moral and judicial logic as well as failures of character—opens the way for a governance in which the principles of justice might be tempered by the claims of mercy.

A Midsummer Night's Dream opens with Theseus, Duke of Athens, speaking with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. He alludes to his former cruel treatment of her ("I woo'd thee with my sword, / And won thy love, doing thee injuries"). But he is resolved to change that, to "wed thee in another key," and it is the striking of that key that is the frame of the play. The challenge of this play is the setting straight of the tangled love relationships between Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius so that their marriages, as well as the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, can conform to the ideal of marital constancy which supports and models the harmony needed for well-ordered communities.

The tasks of the two plays—to explore the relationship of justice and mercy in the governing of the state, in *Measure for Measure*, and to redesign the love relationships so that marriages may reflect the ideal of constancy, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—are carried out, ostensibly, by a playwright character who directs the course of the action in each of the plays. These two characters are Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Vincentio, the Duke, in *Measure for Measure*.

In this paper I shall explore the thesis that the action or inquiry of each play requires the voice of a female character to complete it. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare is not concerned to articulate justice; rather, he assumes that (see above), and will explore the relationship of justice and mercy in the just governance of the state. For this to emerge he needs the voice of Isabella. Much of the play is concerned with the difficulty Isabella has in having her voice heard in the corrupt society of Vienna; in the end, albeit briefly, she achieves a voice, one which is consistent with the characterization of women's moral voices by such authors as Gilligan, Janeway and Noddings, which brings to the rule of justice the voice of mercy and thus allows a comedic resolution of the play.⁶

5. *Shakespeare Survey*, II (1949), 70.

6. See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), Elizabeth Janeway, *Powers of the Weak* (New York: Knopf, 1980), and Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1984). Each of these authors identifies caring and relationship as the foundation of women's morality.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while Oberon is clearly the powerful actor, it is not Oberon but his consort Titania who speaks the moral vision which fosters our appreciation of constancy and which gives substance to the moral vision of the play's conclusion. While Oberon, with his henchman Puck, has the power to carry out his designs, the moral architecture of his design depends on the presence of another voice, one which is powerless to carry out the action on its own, but one which discerns and articulates a moral order without which the action and design of the playwright character would be capricious and arbitrary.

A key to listening to the moral discourse in the two plays is to separate the male and female (masculine and feminine) voices. Following our cultural prejudices which tip us toward identifying the male character as the potent or important one, and toward finding cause for action and resolution in power and action rather than in (mere) speaking and design, we tend to fail to separate the women's voices as qualitatively different from the men's voices, seeing them instead as woven into the action which is dominated by the men. These prejudices obscure to us a rich field of moral conversation and action.⁷

Another prejudice which obscures the voices of the women is our tendency to reduce the moral domain to moral reasoning. Nel Noddings tells us that "ethics, the philosophical study of morality, has concentrated for the most part on moral reasoning. . . . It has concentrated on the establishment of principles and that which can be logically derived from them." Noddings characterizes principled ethical thinking as "the language of the father." The mother's voice, which would speak of human caring, has been silent; we have paid attention instead to "principles and propositions, . . . [to] terms such as justification, fairness, justice" (p. 1).

Elizabeth Marie Pope speculates that the ending of *Measure for Measure* is Shakespeare's attempt to "do something" about the "special difficulties and defects of the Renaissance doctrine" concerning the relationship of justice and mercy (p. 79). The inquiry of the play is not into principles. Despite the harshness of the law, there is no dispute "among those in the play who think seriously about justice" as to its rightness as a principle, only as to its rightness in application.⁸ The exploration into governance is an exploration of the role of mercy, which we might identify as the voice of the mother. The struggle of Isabella to be heard as the

7. The power of mere speaking may have been more appreciated in Shakespeare's day than in our own, according to Stevie Davies, *The Feminine Reclaimed: The Idea of Woman in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), who tells us that, for Shakespeare's contemporaries, "the poet is Orphic in an obvious way. He sings creation. In singing it, he fulfills . . . a magus role as creator" (p. 4).

8. See Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. of California Press, 1981), p. 104: "Despite much consternation that Claudio should die according to the law against fornication, there is little questioning of the assumptions upon which this law rests by those in the play who think seriously about justice."

voice of mercy is thematically central to the play and essential to its comedic resolution.

Similarly, Titania, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is speaking the voice of the mother, but here we have a fully developed maternal voice, one which bespeaks caring and relatedness. It is the voice which "begins with the moral attitude or longing for goodness."⁹ The theme of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be seen as the achieving of constancy through the taming of blind passion. The actual shape of constancy, however, would reduce to the logic of "Jack shall have Jill, naught shall go ill" were it not for Titania's voice, which evokes for the audience the deeper order of the seasons, generation and decay, birth and death, on which the virtue of constancy can be built.

In recognizing the insufficiency of the principled voice of the father, we let go of the principles which, if they have not always guided us to be moral, have at least helped us to argue that we are moral. When we reject the sufficiency of these rules and principles as the basis of our morality, we will have to develop in their stead a powerful vision of an ethical ideal that will guide us in moral action. "Everything depends upon the nature and strength of this ideal, for we shall not have absolute principles to guide us," says Noddings (p. 5). In turning to the moral voices of women in two of Shakespeare's plays, I hope to demonstrate the consequences of a lack of that voice in the moral design of relationship and community, and the real barriers to our hearing that voice. I hope also to re-orient us as audience to listen for the moral vision which is available, not as a set of rules and principles but as an evocation of our deepest longings for a moral order in nature, relationship, and community, and as individuals.

Oberon and Titania

In Act II of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Oberon and Titania enter, preceded by their fairy bands. Some of the most beautiful language in the play is given to Titania in her response to Oberon's churlish "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania." He commands her, "Tarry, rash wanton," and asks, "Am I not thy lord?" To which she replies, "Then I must be thy lady." But this is a mere deduction; her heart is not in it. She accuses him of dalliance, and he her; but her arrow ("These are the forgeries of jealousy") hits home. "Never," she says, "since the middle summer's spring, / Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead, / By paved fountain, or by rushy brook, / Or in the beached margin of the sea, / To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind, / But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport." In the Shakespeare & Company production, Titania's dignity and Oberon's posturing lead us to imagine Oberon, like a hurt child, spoiling the dignified pleasures of the household.

9. Noddings, *Caring*, p. 2.

This immortal brawling has upset the order of nature for mortals. Titania cites the flooding, failure of harvest, and the diseases which have been caused by the winds which, "piping to us in vain, / As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea / Contagious fogs." The seasons too are altered: "The human mortals want their winter here. . . . The spring, the summer, / The chiding autumn, angry winter, change / Their wonted liveries." "And this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension. / We are their parents and original."

Oberon lays all the burden, however, on Titania. It is not his fault, nor his the remedy. "Do you amend it then; it lies in you: / Why should Titania cross her Oberon?" Again we hear Oberon calling on the notion of possession ("Am I not thy lord?" / "Then I must be thy lady"), only this time he uses it to give himself to her in a (childish) giving away of responsibility. (Does Shakespeare & Company's Oberon pout just a little on this line? I think so.) "I do but beg a little changeling boy, / To be my henchman." Again, it is Titania's deep appreciation of the natural world of mortals that she bespeaks in answer to Oberon:

Set your heart at rest.
The fairyland buys not the child of me.
His mother was a votaress of my order.
And in the spiced Indian air, by night,
Full often hath she gossip'd by my side;
And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
Marking the embarked traders on the flood,
When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive
And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind,
Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
Following—her womb then rich with my young squire—
Would imitate, and sail upon the land,
To fetch me trifles, and return again
As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
But she, being mortal, of that boy did die,
And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
And for her sake I will not part with him. (II, 1, 121–37)

The disorder of the natural world is "caused by the dissension and debate between [Oberon] and Titania," and many critics see right order restored by "restoring proper sub- and superordination between them."¹⁰ However, in this brief scene we have learned of many sources of design, of natural order and of natural order transgressed. In addition to the relationship, or logical connection, between being someone's lord and being someone's lady, most of Titania's lines in the scene detail the natural order of the seasons, of birth and death, which are necessary for the well-being of mortals. Titania bespeaks a deep appreciation for that order and engenders that appreciation in us, the audience, as well.

So we have two sources of design: one, the natural harmonies of

10. See, for instance, Slover, p. 18.

seasons, generation, and decay, which is important for mortals (although not for the fairies); second, the (nonnatural) relationship of lord and lady, which is declared to be necessary even for the fairy world, and on which the order of (mortal) nature itself may depend. We have also two orderers: Titania, who would speak for and guard the natural order, and Oberon, who is not concerned for the natural order and whose concern for the lord/lady order seems motivated chiefly by his own desires and ego.

Titania states that the fairies are responsible for watching over and maintaining the natural order ("We are their parents and originals"). Oberon, however, is concerned only to get his way, to claim the boy, which claim he seems justified in making only because (1) he is Titania's lord and (2) he wants him (note that Titania's claim is grounded in her loyalty and devotion to the boy's mother). He does not accept blame for the disordered state of affairs; he seems quite content with the idea that it is his displeasure which is causing the problems for the mortals, and further that it is Titania's responsibility to redress this problem, not his.

The primary target of Oberon's magical interventions will be Titania herself, from whom we will scarcely hear again except when she is under Oberon's spell. Oberon's expressed motive for casting a spell on Titania, however, is not the restoring of order but revenge: "Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove, / Till I torment thee for this injury."

Oberon calls on Puck to help him turn the tables on Titania. The relationship of Oberon and Puck, which has been interpreted as the playwright and his stage manager, is composed mostly of play—the play of children who have no heed for order, the play of prankish boys who delight in misrule. One of Titania's fairies, seeing Puck for the first time, exclaims:

Are not you he
That frights the maidens of the villagery;
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn?
(II, 1, 34-37)

Against Puck's prank (skimming milk so that the housewife's churning will not yield butter) compare Titania's lament that "the ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain," i.e., because the fairies' dissension keeps everything from growing. From Puck and Oberon we cannot expect more than pranks and jokes, causing mischief to no end, or causing mischief to the end only of satisfying their pleasures, their egos, their sense of humor.

Oberon sends Puck to get "a little western flower" which had been pierced by Cupid's arrow, and now, "purple with love's wound, . . . The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid / Will make or man or woman madly dote / Upon the next live creature that it sees." He sends away the fairies who are keeping guard over Titania, waving them aside as easily as he does their song which they have sung to protect her sleep ("You spotted

snakes with double tongue, / Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen, / Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong; / Come not near our fairy Queen; / . . . Never harm, / Nor spell, nor charm, / Come our lovely lady nigh"). Squeezing the flower in Titania's eyes, he gives another charm:

What thou seest, when thou dost wake,
Do it for thy truelove take,
Love and languish for his sake.
Be it ounce, or cat, or bear,
Pard, or boar with bristled hair,
In thy eye that shall appear
When thou wakest, it is thy dear.
Wake when some vile thing is near. (II, 2, 27-34)

Oberon is malicious, and he is more powerful than Titania. We do not expect that she could as easily penetrate his defenses. In his actions so far we have no hint of his seeking to design, to rectify, to bring order or constancy. Rather, he seeks to avenge himself, to hurt Titania. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy: we are never fearful for Titania, never worried that the male fairies' pranks will do harm. We as audience share the convention of comedy as a play in which no irreparable harm will befall the characters who have our sympathy. Further, the pranks take place in the "second world," the fairy world of the woods. "The construction of second worlds . . . must allay the sense of danger engendered by worlds free to fantasy—if only to free the audience for laughter."¹¹

That we do not fear for Titania may generally cause the audience to overlook the baseness of Oberon's motives, but I think there is also at work the prejudice of identifying the active and powerful character (in this case, as in most cases, a male character) as sufficient source of both action and design. Thus Slover tells us that "Oberon is an obvious example [of a playwright character]. He is . . . concerned to restore the right order of the natural world caused by the dissension and debate between himself and Titania by restoring proper sub- and superordination between them" (p. 18).

C. L. Barber, drawing the connection between the festivities of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the May games, quotes the Puritan Phillip Stubbes: "There is a great Lord present among [the young men and maids who 'run gadding over night to the woods'], as superintendent and Lord over their pastimes and sports, namely, Satan, prince of hell."¹² Stubbes' warning reflects the moral quandary of Shakespeare's England, in which a new morality suited to "a world of busy individuals, each prudently deciding how to make the best use of his [!] time" (p. 23) was struggling to emerge from the traditional morality of communal, agricultural life.

11. Slover, p. 17.

12. C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959). The quote from Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses* appears on pages 21 and 119.

Barber tells us that Stubbes' attempt to warn us against "these cursed pastimes" misfires because of Stubbes' prose:

It is remarkable how pleasantly the holiday comes through in spite of Stubbes' railing on the sidelines. Partly this appeal comes from shrewd journalism. . . . Partly it is the result of the fact that . . . he writes in the language of Merry England and so is betrayed into phrases like "sweet nosegays." And his Elizabethan eye is too much on the object to leave out tangible details, so that, astonishingly, he describes "this stinking idol" as "covered all over with flowers and herbs." (p. 22)

The communal morality emerges in Stubbes' emphasis that not only young men and maids but " 'old men and wives' also 'run gadding to the woods,' that 'men, women and children' follow the Maypole home. The consequence of this emphasis," notes Barber, "is to bring out how completely all groups who lived together within the agricultural calendar shared in the response to the season" (p. 22). It is the communal morality, tied to seasons, work, birth and death, that Titania bespeaks, and it is this morality which forms the festive, and moral, frame of the play.

Puck's relationship to this moral order is brought out by Barber: Puck exhibits "a festive confidence that things will ultimately go right," in fact "that it is sure to come out right, since nature will have its way" (p. 131). (That Puck knows this, while the mortals do not, occasions his line "what fools these mortals be," suggests Barber.) I have described Puck and Oberon as immature moral voices; we may trace this immaturity to the attitude that things will turn out, that (mother) "nature will have its way."

Titania, the mature moral voice, does not regard the ills of mortals with such sanguine detachment. She holds herself — the dissension between her and Oberon — as cause of their problems. Barber does not recognize this, instead reading Titania's words as "facetious" (p. 146) and her concern as "poised between sympathy and amusement" (p. 147). He reads Titania's quick exit ("Fairies away! / We shall chide downright if I longer stay") as a breaking of dramatic tension revealing that these passages are not driven by "compelling interest in passion or plot" (p. 147). I propose instead that Titania's words are central to the (moral) architecture of the play, that they evoke the world within which "things will ultimately go right," much as Stubbes' words, willy nilly, evoke the traditional communal moral order. If she were to shift from a discourse which evokes, which is central to the design of the play, to a discourse of argument (chiding), she would betray both her intentions and the intentions of the playwright in this scene.¹³

Titania's two speeches are not, as Barber suggests, "autonomous bravura passages" (p. 148); they are essential to the moral, and therefore to the dramatic, design of the play. In Titania's eloquence are built the vi-

13. Barber changes Titania's line to "the human mortals want their winter *cheer*" without explanation, though most editions read "*here*." Barber's emendation supports both his suggestion that Titania's concern is sympathetic and amused, and that she "can speak of 'the human mortals' as very far off indeed" (p. 147).

sion of a moral order and the responsibility for that order that allow the immature Puck and Oberon to play, heedless of the consequences of their actions. A careful reading of these early scenes must leave us with the impression that, though powerful, Oberon is not a character with a moral vision; for that we depend on the voice, though not the agency, of Titania. In the Shakespeare & Company production, Titania's fairies are all women, Oberon's all men, and there is a vast moral difference between the fairy world of the women and the fairy world of the men.

One aspect of second worlds in comedies, according to Slover, is that they be co-created, the playwright and the characters acting in partnership. Titania is not in partnership either with the playwright or with the dramatist within the play, Oberon. Rather, she is being acted on by forces of which she is entirely unaware. She has been charmed to love the first thing she sees when she awakes, which is the weaver Bottom, on whom Puck has placed an ass's head. Looking at the ludicrous Bottom and hearing him sing his rough and ridiculous song, the Queen of the Fairies calls out: "I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again. / Mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note, / So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape. / And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me / On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee." With her blind adoration of Bottom/ass, we seem to lose her voice as a voice of design and order in the play.

With the loss of Titania's responsible voice, Oberon begins to use his powers more responsibly. He chides Puck for mistaking Lysander for Demetrius and causing confusion among the mortal lovers. Puck, for his part, announces himself "glad it so did sort, / As this their jangling I esteem a sport." Puck takes all the spaces and events of the fairy world simply as his playground. In this scene it is Oberon who rises to the task of master designer. He will have Puck anoint Lysander's eyes with the magic juice, thus restoring his sight to its proper love of Hermia.

When they next wake, all this derision
Shall seem a dream, and fruitless vision,
And back to Athens shall the lovers wend,
With league whose date till death shall never end.
(III, 2, 370-73)

Oberon himself will "To my queen, and beg her Indian boy; / And then I will her charmed eye release / From monster's view, and all things shall be peace."

This accomplished, Titania restored to love of Oberon, the four Athenian lovers sorted and united and to be married with Theseus' consent, Bottom, now free again of his ass's head, appears to be the chorus of what has occurred:

I have had a dream, — past the wit of man to say what dream it was. — Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was — there is no man can tell what. Methought I was — and methought I had. — But man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen,

man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.

And we in the audience are moved by Bottom's dream speech and led therein to wonder at the validity and accuracy of our attempts to "say what methought I had." Perhaps in the fairy world our ear would do as well as our eye to see, our tongue as well as our mind to conceive—which is to say, not very well.

"Past the wit of man," says Bottom, and "Man is but an ass." "There is no man can tell. . . . — But man is but a patched fool." Bottom's speech underscores the distinction between the understanding of the mortal world and the understanding of the fairy world, a distinction which will be evoked again in Puck's curtain speech. Mortals are not expected to understand what goes on in the fairy world; it is sufficient if the actions of the fairies restore order, harmony and constancy to their relationships and communities. When we listen separately not only for mortal and immortal voices but also for the voice of man and for the voice of woman, we hear a voice committed to a moral order in the voice of Titania which can give shape to Oberon's otherwise powerful but arbitrary and capricious interventions.

Vincentio and Isabella: Justice and Mercy

"The comedies," says Stevie Davies, "are set apart as an exploration of the feminine world. . . . The comedies search out . . . ways for man to come back into fruitful relationship with the green world of his origins" (p. 110). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is such a comedy, in which "individual fulfillment, marital intimacy, and communal renewal are celebrated together in the festive ending."¹⁴ *Measure for Measure*, in contrast, is a "problem comedy," a play in which the "possibilities for comic expression that were alive in the festive comedies seem to have been at least partially closed off; new ways of making comic sense of experience that go with the late romances have not yet been fully discovered. The marriages that conclude . . . *Measure for Measure* seem only superficially to resolve antagonisms that have developed between degraded sexual desire and the moralized social order of the . . . play."¹⁵

Measure for Measure takes place in Vienna, a Vienna whose chief mark of distinction is its sexual corruption. The play at Shakespeare & Company's Oxford Court Theatre begins with a prescene in which punks and pimps and prostitutes dance sensuous dances on the central platforms and recline on a luxurious satin bed. The presence of uniformed officers who join in the dance indicates that the law is not above the license of the city.

In the opening scene of the play the Duke hands over his authority to

14. Wheeler, p. 3

15. Wheeler, pp. 3 and 4.

Angelo and announces his intention to retire from the governance of the city. Angelo's first public action is to condemn Claudio to death for fornication. Claudio's sister Isabella, a novice about to take her vows, pleads to Angelo for her brother's life, coldly at first, and with great care to keep her logic clear and herself separate from Claudio's deed:

There is a vice that most I do abhor,
And most desire should meet the blow of justice,
For which I would not plead, but that I must,
For which I must not plead, but that I am
At war 'twixt will and will not. (II, 2, 29-33)

She argues that Angelo can condemn the fault, but let her brother live. The Provost cheers her on from the sidelines ("Heaven give thee moving graces!"), but Isabella begins to leave after Angelo's refutation of her argument ("Condemn the fault, but not the actor of it?"), crying, "Oh just but severe law!" Isabella is not for moving Angelo but for making a reasoned argument which will convince him to reverse his word. It is the urging of Lucio, a frequenter of Vienna's houses of prostitution and friend of Claudio, which keeps her in the lists, and the course of her argument begins to alter.

Lucio. Give't not o'er so. To him again, entreat him,
Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown.
You are too cold. (II, 2, 43-45)

Isabella begins to advise Angelo from her own moral authority ("I do think that you might pardon him, / And neither heaven nor man grieve at the mercy"), but Angelo again declines, and Lucio again tells her that she is too cold. With more passion, Isabella urges the logic of performatives ("I, that do speak a word, / May call it back again") and the virtue of mercy. When indeed she offers to take on Angelo's role, no longer protecting or distancing herself from the act of pardoning her brother ("I would to heaven I had your potency, / And you were Isabel!"), Lucio says, "Ay, touch him; there's the vein." Angelo will not be moved within the logic of the argument as long as Isabella remains outside as an observer, trusting to the logic of her words; what begins to work on him is her expression of her passion for her brother and her willingness to risk, to act, to request and declare. And the upshot of Angelo's being touched is that he is seduced by her—the corruption of Vienna is so great that the moral weight of Isabella's words have an inverse effect on him; he is moved and, therefore, given the moral logic of corrupt Vienna, tempted and corrupted.¹⁶

Angelo. What's this, what's this? Is this her fault or mine?
The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?

16. See Wheeler for an account of the logic of Isabella's undermining of Angelo's position: "The passion with which Isabella throws herself into her appeal can arouse Angelo's desire in part because her argument undermines the meaning he has found in the elevation of authority beyond sensuality" (p. 95).

Ha!
 Not she, nor doth she tempt. But it is I
 That, lying by the violet in the sun,
 Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,
 Corrupt with virtuous season. Can it be
 That modesty may more betray our sense
 Than women's lightness? Having waste ground enough,
 Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary,
 And pitch our evils there? O, fie, fie, fie!
 What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?
 Dost thou desire her foully for those things
 That make her good? (II, 2, 162-75)

In her book *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* Marilyn French suggests that the Duke is hardly a single character, and perhaps hardly a character at all. "It is, I think, impossible to make psychological sense out of him. He is less a character than a force—an active mind."¹⁷ The Duke's commitment to inquiry and experiment in the domains of corruption and justice sets in motion forces and actions which would, were we not watching a comedy, wreak havoc on many lives. French's gloss of the ending as, in fact, three endings followed by two more variations, only some of which end as comedy, i.e., without loss of life, seems faithful to the dominant mood of the play.

Central to the play is an inquiry into sex and sexual vice, into justice and the corruption of virtue. The effort of Isabella to articulate her morality is at the center of the play, and her capitulation to the feminine virtue of mercy permits its denouement. Like Oberon, the Duke has the power to work his will, and unlike Oberon he is not capricious. Nonetheless, the ending of the play cannot be achieved by what is available to him, i.e., a knowledge of government and the principles of justice. Without her prayer for mercy, Angelo's death sentence would have to stand.

Within this interpretation of *Measure for Measure* as an inquiry, we can see better Isabella's struggle to find her voice. We first see her entering a convent in which she will not be able to see or speak to men (except in the presence of the Mother Superior, and then she can only speak with her face covered, or see but not speak). Her plea to Angelo is fraught with doubt, trial, attempt to say what she can say that will move him and not forswear what she holds dear, and in the end we find that any success to move him will fail to preserve her honor. Lucio's urging of her reminds us that woman's voice is weak in this world, and further that woman's voice is needed, must be heard.

Even after Angelo's attempted seduction of her, he mocks her voice as powerless:

17. New York: Summit Books, 1981, p. 192. See also Wheeler: "Shakespeare strands Vincentio in a kind of allegorical no-man's land, a shadowy figure of justice tempered with mercy, but a lover without plausible desire, a father with no children, a renouncer with nothing in him to renounce, an empty center precariously holding at a distance, rather than holding together, the teeming life that threatens to overwhelm it" (p. 139).

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Isabella. I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for't.
Sign me a present pardon for my brother,
Or with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world aloud
What man thou art.

Angelo. Who will believe thee, Isabel? . . .
Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true. (II, 4, 151–55, 170)

Yet, in the end, it is Isabella's voice, joined to the prayers of Mariana for Angelo's life, that reverses the wasteful, tragic direction in which the play is headed (the moral *reductio* that will leave the stage littered with corpses, unborn babies orphaned, unwed wives widowed).

The Duke remonstrates with Mariana: "Against all sense do you importune her." Isabella believes Claudio to be dead, and Angelo, says the Duke, "dies for Claudio's death." Measure for measure—the *reductio* of principled justice. But Isabella does kneel, yielding to Mariana's plea for her condemned husband. Her action, not her logic, is persuasive and sets the stage for the Duke's unravelling of the play's ending.

Shakespeare & Company's production casts a woman as the Provost, a woman who appears in the prescene in pink lingerie, which in later scenes peeks out from behind her austere blue Provost's uniform. Indeed, once or twice in the play we get more than a glimpse (as when she greets the tapster Pompey at the jail), and her feminine greeting of other female characters (including the leather-clad mini-skirted executioner) is honest and jarring in this world of corrupt male sexual fantasy. She is, throughout, a presence of some other, uncrazed way of living, being hurt at the needless sentencing, yet practical about what can be done. At the end, the Duke informs her that he "shall employ thee in a worthier place" and he motions her to mount the stairs to the ducal throne. A bit of fancy, but somehow in that moment the cruel experiment is resolved, we feel that the right answer has been found, that the heart that beats under the pink lingerie will sort well with all the vagaries of the city, and we appreciate the Provost's ongoing pragmatism as she chooses Escalus to ascend the steps of government with her.

The Two Plays Reconsidered

"For many years editors and critics have customarily praised *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for its artistic fusion of seemingly disparate elements," R. W. Dent tells us in his essay "Imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." But, he adds in a footnote, "the frequency of such praise provoked R. A. Law's denial that the play had any organic unity whatever."¹⁸

Unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which we might call a darling of the critics, *Measure for Measure* has stirred dissension among the critics. As George Slover sees it,

18. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 15 (1964), 1, 1n.

Unlike *Measure for Measure*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not breed enemies among critics and commentators; there are wide areas of agreement, and even the disagreements are friendly. . . . *Measure for Measure*, on the contrary, is considered a "problem comedy" by several generations of critics and interpreters, many of whom regard the play as an artistic experiment that failed. (p. 4)

The artistic coherence of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the lack of coherence of *Measure for Measure*, can be attributed to the presence of a deep moral voice in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the absence of that voice in *Measure for Measure*. Although Isabella at the end does find her voice, for the most part she is "the voice of the daughter," trying to find her voice in a corrupt world, not seeing the alternative of speaking in a radically distinct voice until the very end of the play. Titania's voice, on the other hand, reveals the ground and point of the action of the play to the audience at the very beginning, and that ground and point carry through to support us at the end of the play to suppose that there has indeed been a transformation in the love relationships of the characters. We find, at the end of the play, "in the release and fulfillment of sexual communion the token of a new life in community."¹⁹

Only by separating the voices of the men and women, and equally the mature and the immature voices, will we discover the moral patterns which underlie the action in these two comedies. Shakespeare gives us the mature voice of the mother as the moral architect in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the mature voice of the father as the voice of justice which cannot ground community in *Measure for Measure*. The moral failure of that play, or at least the moral queasiness that it tends to induce in its audiences, is due, I submit, to the last-minute and ungrounded appearance of the mature voice of the mother; but when we can see it in this way we can be alerted to the general failure to hear women's voices in the moral dialogue, and the tragedy of such failure.

At the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck invites us to suppose that all we have seen is "no more yielding but a dream." The transformation of passion and the establishment of order has been achieved without the lovers' knowledge, and presumably we in the audience can also forget what we have seen or fail to understand it. At the end of *Measure for Measure*, in contrast, our moral queasiness should go with us from the play and guide us to a deeper moral inquiry than is possible in the play itself. In this later, darker play there is no mature mother's voice which will set things aright whether we are responsible for the design or no.

19. Slover, p. 29.