

On *Puzzling Shakespeare* by Leah Marcus

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My remarks will focus only on the book's treatment of *Measure for Measure*, the Shakespeare play I know best, and on the limitations I find there in the book's critical method.

In *Measure for Measure*, Marcus concludes, Shakespeare accomplished "a theatrical event which could be taken as Stuart propaganda, or as the expression of a contemporary nightmare, or most likely as both together" (209). We are asked to regard the play's portrayal of the Duke and Isabella as "double written" (163 and 197), its meaning inextricable from the deeply divided political passions of its audience in 1604. Marcus would say that on the one hand the text could be easily understood (especially by auditors from the court) as a praising of King James by its mirroring of his most cherished ideas; while on the other hand it could have aroused (especially among Londoners of Protestant sympathies) a "dark fantasy of alien Catholic domination" (164). Meaning varies in accord with the partisanship of the reader.

Now I would not deny that a text can be diversely apprehended and that partisanship can give rise to constructs of its significance. But I do not believe that a Shakespeare text is a nose of wax asking for whatever bending a reader may wish to give it. A play of Shakespeare's, I would say, has a given shape which resists interpretations that distort its shape and design. It therefore seems to me that the double-barrelled topical interpretation of *Measure for Measure* hypothesized by Professor Marcus fails to come to grips with the play's actual design.

Is it accurate to regard Shakespeare's comedy as promulgating "a Jacobean line"? That supposition, Marcus should have noted, was voiced as early as 1779 by George Chalmers and has had recent support from D. L. Stevenson [*ELH*, 1959], who asserts that Shake-

speare intended a eulogy of Stuart Divine-right theory. However, critics such as E. T. Selrt and I have challenged this supposition. Selrt, in his *Vergebung und Gnade bei Shakespeare* (1952) argued that the Duke in *Measure for Measure* embodies a Christian understanding of grace and mercy that cannot be found in the *Basilikon Doron* of King James. And I more elaborately called attention (in *CLIO* 1978) to various significant differences between the two works, arguing that Shakespeare was offering through his Duke Vincentio a better model of the art of government than King James had been able to conceive. The most conspicuous difference, I pointed out, was in Vincentio's use of a Friar's disguise to implement a secret visiting of his people as a charitable watchman, a practice which analogizes the atonement story of Christ's visiting of mankind to save and redeem sinners, a program of social reform that is comprehensively educative. The attitude of King James toward friars had been wholly negative; a Proclamation of his in February 1604 had ordered all monks and friars to "depart out of this land at once." But for Shakespeare the genre of comedy, a poetic medium traditionally assigned the task of depicting "what might be" rather than what historically "is," offered an opportunity not only to model for James's contemplation a mysteriously wiser art of government than James was practicing but also to offer all theatre auditors a fictional model of ideal rulership surpassing that of Whetstone and other poets who had undertaken figurative depictions of the interrelationship of justice and mercy within the art of government.

One wonders why Marcus makes no mention of these considerations, why she bypasses any engagement with critics whose perspective on Shakespeare is other than her own. The explanation, probably, is simply her belief that a Shakespeare text has no unifying essence and her preference for seeking out "patches and glimmers of meaning" (216). These she finds by taking as central, rather than as marginal to the text's significance, various selected details of "local" history known to theatre auditors. For example, since King James had recently made a peace treaty with Spain, she reasons that Shakespeare's play could be understood on the one hand as a celebration of this political achievement and an appeal to Londoners to forgive Catholic enemies; but, on the other hand, since Londoners included many Protestants

uneasy about Jacobean policy and fearful of a return to the 'bloody' times of Philip and Mary (164), the play's setting in a Catholic Vienna could have caused them to see "their worst political fantasies spring . . . powerfully into life" (206).

I would reply that, on both sides, the readings Marcus is stipulating are wide of the mark. The subject of Shakespeare's play is not England's peace with Spain, but rather the reform of a fictional Vienna; and the forgiveness I see the play depicting is toward *all sinners* but especially toward the *Puritan-like* Angelo. The Duke's action of forgiveness, moreover, provides no basis for fearing him as a 'bloody' oppressor. On the contrary, he ends by releasing culprits into marriages instead of death sentences. Since Marcus herself acknowledges that the Protestant-sided reading she offers is a "paranoid" one (197), we can infer she is not advocating it as a fair-minded reading. Why, then, does she so busy herself to "generate" it through "topical" research? She is relying, it seems, on a skeptical premise that fair-minded reading is never possible, and hence that what we call Shakespeare is simply whatever readings various viewers may choose to construct as prompted by their partisan passions. This premise frees her to speculate along lines congenial with her own aesthetic and political tastes, which she describes as gravitating toward "anti-totalizing interpretation" (217).

It becomes evident that Marcus prefers interpretations of *Measure for Measure* that call in question the integrity of its Duke. Let me cite in illustration the following passage, so that I can then comment on what seem to me its distortions:

The "bed trick" by which Mariana is substituted for Isabella to satisfy Angelo's lust was *not* lawful according to the church's new definition of marriage. The precipitous wedding ordered by the Duke between Mariana and Angelo was also uncanonical unless, by some chance, they happened to be married in the parish church of one of them, or unless the Duke's verbal "licence" is taken to cancel out the usual rites. These are small details, perhaps; topicality thrives on what is almost too insignificant to notice. But they suggest that the Duke, insofar as he is identified with James I, can be trusted to respect his beloved canon law no more than Angelo does the statute. That perception unleashes a potential for contemporary deconstruction of *Measure for Measure's* Jacobean line. Like King James, the Duke acts above the law, freely overriding even his own preferred code when it suits his

purpose to do so. Contemporary viewers could surmount the seeming contradiction in the Duke's position by making a "leap of faith" from the law to Christian mercy, by which all legal codes are confounded But to regard the Duke as transcending all law would undermine the play's appeal to the ruler as an alternative and superior source of law. In *Measure for Measure* the rule of law is overthrown by something that may be divine transcendence, but can also look like royal whim, unruly "license," a mere recapitulation of the abuse it purports to rectify. (182)

This argument, I would say, rests on a network of not-small inaccuracies. Chief of these is the notion that "the rule of law is overthrown" by the Duke's licensing of the bed trick. (This contention is not shared by William Bowden, who in *Shakespeare Studies* 5 [1969] surveyed many Jacobean plays that include a bedtrick and judged that audiences were expected to approve the trick whenever it was used for a good end.) What is licensed by the Duke is the law of charity, which seasons justice with mercy and thereby makes possible the good toward which all written codes aim. The Duke, on his first appearance as Friar declares himself "bound by charity" and "blest order." The bedmate substitution he arranges does not recapitulate Angelo's abuse of law but remedies it. To claim that it recapitulates it is simply to fail to see the distinction between Angelo's immoral intention and the Duke's beneficent purpose. Abetting this mistake is the "suggestion" by Marcus that the Duke can no more be trusted than Angelo. He does not respect, she says, his "beloved canon law." But this assertion rests on her supposition that the English canon law of 1604 was beloved by Shakespeare's fictional Duke of Vienna. The play, however, provides no evidence for this supposition. Its Duke simply assures Mariana that Angelo is her husband by a pre-contract which entitles her to accept his sexual embrace without incurring on her part any sin. Such action accords with the marriage law in England in the late sixteenth century (and presumably on the continent too) as described in a well-known treatise on *Spousals* by Henry Swinburne, to which almost all critics have turned for understanding Shakespeare's premises. We know, moreover, from the Duke's giving Angelo scope to "enforce or qualify" laws in accord with conscience, that a principle of equity is implied. It is unfair of Marcus to accuse him of "overriding his own preferred code" when he brings equity to his enforcement of codes. And finally let me comment that Christian mercy does not

involve a leap into unruly whim, even though it may 'look' so to a twentieth-century critic who has preferred to leap into positing the central importance of "local" politics when interpreting a work of great art. Universals may after all really exist and be discoverable by anyone who will consent to some honest digging into the materials and mysteries of traditional theology.

An ignorance of theology, it seems to me, underlies the complaining by Marcus elsewhere (178-79) that Shakespeare's Duke abrogates a local statute when at the play's end "the Viennese statute punishing fornication with death is forgotten." Has she herself forgotten St. Paul's teaching that old law is a "schoolmaster" for leading us to the new law behind it? A rigorous statute serves to condemn sin and name its punishment; but repentance is a *metaphorical death* by which one can pay sin's debt and be released into serving the law of love. Claudio has been guilty of fornication only in the sense that his "true contract" with Juliet has been tarnished by a sinful greed for worldly pleasure (which theologians consider a spiritual fornication, even when it occurs within a marriage bond). When he repents of this greed, as he does after Isabella denounces it as "a kind of incest" and the Friar has sermonized on the miserable benefits of worldly goods, Claudio is ready for release into freedom. The local statute against fornication is not then abrogated, but rather no longer applicable to Claudio's case (and its application to Juliet has been removed by her repentance as supervised by the Friar.) Their pre-contract needs now only the Duke's admonition: "She, Claudio, that you wrong'd, look you restore / Joy to you." No requirement of a bishop's license. True love fulfils the law.

Some performances of *Measure for Measure* in recent years have staged Isabella's silence at the end as signaling a rejection of the Duke's marriage proposal. Professor Marcus thinks that in Shakespeare's times this interpretation could easily have been suggested by having her hold back in her exit to give evidence that she was being conquered against her wishes. But on *what in the play* could such an interpretation be based? Marcus would base it on a context outside the play—namely, that in 1604 the citizens of London who cherished local rights were hesitant about the project of King James for political "Union." At a time when his coronation pageant, Marcus

explains, had called on the city to open its gates to become the submissive "bride" of the monarch, Isabella's "equivocal silence in the face of imperial conquest" could parallel a silence on the part of the city when faced with an incipient "forced marriage" to King James (184). Thus stated, the conjecture may seem plausible. Yet since Marcus has earlier told us that James began his reign by granting to London the privilege of choosing its own Lord Mayor (170), an action which does not suggest imperialistic conquest, I think it doubtful that many Londoners felt like victims of an enforced marriage. And whatever one may surmise regarding the play's historical context, is it not implausible that Protestant Londoners would regard as a symbol of *their* situation an Isabella who has been thinking of entering a Franciscan nunnery?

If we read Isabella simply on the basis of the facts given in Shakespeare's play, I can see no evidence that the Duke's marriage proposal would be resented by her as an imposition. When earlier he has unveiled his identity as a friar-prince "attorneyed" to her service, she humbly asked his pardon for having "pained" his unknown sovereignty (5.1.386-92). When later she prays for Angelo on Mariana's behalf, she is given the wayside reward of a restored brother, along with the Duke's declaring Claudio "my brother too" and asking her to give him her hand and "say you will be mine." His added "But fitter time for that" gives her opportunity to absorb her surprise. Her silence is appropriate to the wonder she must feel while awaiting his follow-up offer. When then his "Dear Isabel, . . . if you'll a willing ear incline" offers a mutual sharing of goods, I detect no nuance of domination. His words invite simply an acquiescent joy and require no verbal answer. His language has echoed Psalm 45, verse 10, "O daughter, consider and incline your ear," a Psalm which tells us (in verse 15) that "With joy and gladness . . . they enter the palace of the king." Any scholar interested in "local" digging can discover that this Psalm was known to Shakespeare's auditors as a "marriage" psalm in the liturgy of the church. Its phrasings are devoid of partisan politics.

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