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SHAKESPEARE'S "FANTASTICAL TRICK": A READER-RESPONSE
APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM COMEDIES

Middle Tennessee State University

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Shakespeare's "Fantastical Trick":
A Reader-Response Approach to
the Problem Comedies

Daphne Davis Dannreuther

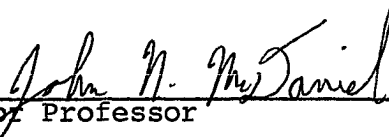
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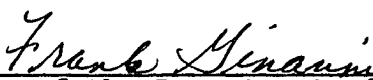
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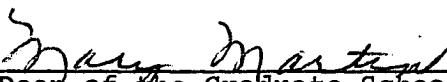
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Abstract

Shakespeare's "Fantastical Trick":

A Reader-Response Approach to
the Problem Comedies

by Daphne Davis Dannreuther

In Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure, Shakespeare has created an art that jars our sensibilities, wrenches us from safe judgments, and compels us to different interpretations. He presents the clashing worlds of comedy and reality where we are led to expect happy endings but where characters, portrayed with all their weaknesses, seem not to deserve their fates whether good or ill. In fact, the hope expressed in the plays' endings is very much at odds with the evidence developed in the plays' actions. Orchestrating our responses by subverting audience expectations through substitutions, Shakespeare examines the difficulties arising from the opposing elements of fairy tale and realism, of romance motivation and psychological probability. We expect Troilus and Cressida to be an epic and a love story, All's Well to be a romantic comedy with a fairy-tale ending, and

Measure for Measure to be a romantic comedy where the characters learn something about Christian mercy and justice; however, in each case Shakespeare substitutes something else in their place.

These problem comedies, then, present challenges to criticism because of their ambiguity and complexity. Certainly, traditional critical methods have been inadequate to communicate the experience of the plays. Exploring the plays as a dynamic interaction between artist and audience, as a process of involvement rather than as a repository for extractable meaning, reader-response criticism focuses on the effects the plays produce--tension, discomfort, surprise, and frustration--and on the artistic methods through which Shakespeare manipulates these responses.

Obviously self-conscious, the plays seem to question their own material and, ironically, the validity of comedy itself as an image of truth. Psychologically and dramatically, all three plays are difficult in ways that Shakespeare seems to have wanted to emphasize. Their exquisite blending of tenderness and pain, love and fear, expresses the rich duality of the human condition, and the best resolution for the plays' issues is one that provides a framework within which the plays' virtues, strengths, and power can be appreciated.

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Chapter I

"To Like, or Find Fault, As Your Pleasures Are": The Problem of Problem Plays

At the summit of his career, indeed, at the height of his poetic powers, from 1599 to 1608, William Shakespeare wrote eleven plays which span the dramatical canon. This period of versatility includes the wonderful comedy Twelfth Night as well as the great tragedies Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. Sandwiched in between these classics are three plays which at once look back to the earlier, festive comedies and forward to the tragedies and later romances: Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure. These plays have earned the label "problem comedies" or "problem plays," useful terms since they do not clearly fall into the category of tragedy and yet are too serious and analytic to be classified as comedy.

It is precisely because the problem plays are serious and analytic, because they force us to ask questions not associated with comedy, but with real life, that critics have difficulty categorizing them. These plays are realistic. The world of romance, genial comics, and harmless pranks are transformed into an image of the real

world with its grainy texture, frictions, and real pain inflicted on real people. This probing of reality, of lifelike problems, is often said to be Shakespeare's mature vision concerning the purpose of drama. Hamlet's advice to the actors about the nature of drama is that it should mirror real life:

the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.¹

Written during a time when Shakespeare was turning most of his attention to tragedy, these plays, then, are colored by the more somber elements that one finds in Hamlet or Lear as well as the romantic elements found in the earlier comedies. In the early comedies, Shakespeare treated serious matters, but these served humorous or sentimental purposes. In the problem plays, however, the serious events arouse deeper emotions which we associate with tragedy or with real life. For example, comedy exposes offenses against social decorum by rendering the offenders ludicrous, but the problem plays often expose such offenses by rendering their offenders repulsive. Thus, these serious events are of a far more complex nature than any Shakespeare had

¹ G. Blakemore Evans, ed., The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston: Houghton, 1974), Hamlet III.ii.20-24. All subsequent references are to this edition.

treated before Hamlet. In the problem plays, there is a sense of the tragedy of human existence and of the disparity between word and deed which comes to occupy an equal place with Shakespeare's former optimism. Thus the problem of interpretation can be seen as a direct reflection of the enormous challenge Shakespeare faced in representing complex material in a new mode of expression.

Deliberately confounding its audience, Troilus and Cressida sets the classical heroes of traditional romance against the coarseness of Thersites and Achilles, and contrasts our romantic ideal of Helen and her world with the crude reality of Pandarus and Cressida. In the end, Cressida, true to her name, is false as she finds another lover, and Troilus loses both Cressida and his horse. Thus, Shakespeare measures the epic grandeur of the love story and the war story against the unlovely reality of these events and people. The results are unsettling.

Using folk tale motifs and romance, All's Well That Ends Well offers a cold analysis of the problem of the battle of the sexes in relation to class. It is the story of the abandoned wife who must fulfill seemingly impossible tasks in order to regain her husband. Can Helena chase Bertram and remain virtuous? Can she chase him knowing he despises her, and remain virtuous? Even though she is technically married to him, can she substitute herself

in bed for her husband's mistress and remain virtuous? It seems she can and live happily ever after. But to accept this, we are asked to question the precepts on the nature of honesty in a woman that we previously held dear. And even though Helena gets her man, her victory may be a hollow one since Bertram appears to remain a callow and insensitive liar. Here the clashes between realism and romance remind us that the archetypal happy ending is ultimately not true. As in Troilus and Cressida, the ending leaves the major issues unresolved.

The central plot in Measure for Measure is the story of the corrupt governor, Angelo, who perverts justice to gratify his own lust. It is also the story of the chaste Isabella, who finds that she can save her brother Claudio from the death penalty only by selling herself, that is, sleeping with Angelo. J. L. Styan puts the play's dilemma succinctly: Shakespeare "compels us to weigh in one scale the meaning of life, as illuminated by death both tragic and comic, against, in the other, the meaning of 'honour,' as illuminated by lechery both tragic and comic" (22-23). After having posed the problem, moreover, Shakespeare then has everyone married off. However, as in the other two plays, we have no reason to sense that any new society has been formed, as expected in comedy, nor do the endings solve the problems raised in the plays. Instead, the denouements create as many problems as they solve.

The problem comedies have been called greasy, bitter, ironic, satiric, even nasty. Certainly these plays are difficult, inasmuch as they deal in complex style with complex characters confronting complex moral problems and issues in a complex way. The controlling spirit of these plays is realism. Their essential characteristic is a perplexing and disturbing complication in human life presented in a spirit of high seriousness. The problem plays probe the complicated interrelations of character and action in a situation admitting of different ethical interpretations. These plays suggest deeper evaluations of the attitudes and conduct of the characters, evaluations which, as David Lloyd Stevenson says in The Achievement of Measure for Measure, do not "conform to the warm, well-lighted world of institutionalized good and evil we all wish to inhabit" (61). It seems to me that Shakespeare is wrestling with inexplicable problems in human nature--problems for which romance or comedy cannot, at this point, provide satisfactory or conclusive answers. Indeed, most critics agree that these plays represent a radical departure from Shakespeare's art, although they disagree about just what it is that is problematical. Some critics point to the plays' shifting ambivalent point of view; their themes of lust and power; their problems with justice or rather the lack of justice; the seeming absence of any growth or growing awareness of self-knowledge in

the characters; their often bitterly cynical tone; their apparent lack of unity (Shakespeare's mixing of dramatic modes and genres, or his failing to unite the moral and satiric realism of his characterizations with the novella plots).

According to Robert Ornstein, what is unique about the controversy surrounding the problem plays is that it seems to challenge basic assumptions about the clarity, nobility, or even humanity of Shakespeare's ethical perceptions (Introduction vii). For example, though critics may disagree violently over Hamlet's makeup or motives, most agree about the essential beauty of his moral nature. But when we examine discussions about character in the problem plays, we find radically different moral identities. To some Troilus is the ideal romantic lover--faithful and cheated; to others he is an enthusiastic young fool who is lusting after Cressida rather than in love with her. Bertram is an ungrateful wretch, and few have been able to figure out why Helena wants him. However, while there are critics who consider Helena's goodness unquestionable, the ease with which she allows herself to become impregnated by Bertram, who despises her and believes he is taking another woman, shakes that opinion. To one critic, Isabella is an angel of light, but to another she is a pitiless revelation of frozen virtue. Vincentio appears, on the one hand, a

kind of earthly Providence, and, on the other, a meddling Duke of dark corners.

Some of the most basic difficulties lie in the nature of the plots and their themes. For example, the themes in all of the plays concern sex or lust rather than love, the usual subject of romance comedy. In Troilus and Cressida the themes of sex and war are interwoven. Another element which has caused much concern, indeed embarrassment, for some critics is the use of bawdy, of which the plays have a goodly share. We find a crude summary of them in Thersites' remark, "Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion" (v.ii.191-195). Here, in fact, there seem to be echoes of Lear's knowledge that there must come an end to this horrible world: "It will come; / Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep" (Lr. IV.ii.48-50). In All's Well, Bertram deserts his wife on their wedding night and later commits what he believes to be adultery. By using a bed trick, however, Helena, the heroine, has become pregnant by Bertram without his knowledge. The heroine in Measure for Measure is more concerned with preserving her honor (her chastity) than with saving her brother's life: Isabella refuses Angelo's offer to spare her brother if she will become his mistress. Yet she agrees to substitute another woman in the bed trick. In fact, sex and war become little more than methods for

using or exploiting people. Thersites and Pandarus harp on venereal disease. Bertram is a lecher, and some critics have been moved to call Helena a nymphomaniac who is solely concerned with losing her virginity to the man she chooses. Claudio in Measure for Measure is under the death sentence for adultery, while Lucio the pimp is free; in fact, the comic relief in this play is supplied by whores, pimps, and lechers. Angelo, who has sentenced Claudio to death, is himself guilty of lust as he plunges into depravity.

Along with problems with plot, theme, and character, the endings of these plays have also been known to leave readers and audiences perplexed, uneasy, dissatisfied. Nothing is concluded in Troilus and Cressida: Troilus promises to revenge Hector; and Pandarus bequeaths his venereal diseases to the audience, or those he calls "good traders in the flesh" (V.x.46). In All's Well That Ends Well, Helena finally gets her man, but we are doubtful that the play really ends well (although Helena and Bertram may deserve each other). And even though everyone is paired off at the end of Measure for Measure, including the Duke and Isabella, Lucio and a whore, these marriages are usually regarded as theatrical devices rather than marriages made in heaven--either way not what some wish to be true solutions.

In the prologue to Troilus and Cressida, we find an echo from an earlier play, As You Like It, where in its

epilogue spectators are urged "to like as much of this play as please you" (Epilogue 13-14). Here the audience is admonished "to like, or find fault, as your pleasures are." It seems that Shakespeare may have been aware that this play might cause some problems. In one of the best accounts of the problem plays, A. P. Rossiter refers to their peculiar quality of "shiftingness" and warns that "any critic who takes a firm line is cancelled out by another" (128). Undeterred, however, critics go on taking firm lines, and students continue to find much criticism that says, "I have found 'THE KEY'!" but in reality solves nothing. The problem plays, as more than one writer has noted, are much like problem children who resist being disciplined (by whatever method) into full obedience (whatever that may be).

Indeed, after studying much of the literature that has been written about these three plays, we find most critics to be of the mind that if we hunt hard enough we will find the one method that will yield the best results, or even better, reveal the truth. However, criticism about these plays has been more successful in defining critical issues than in solving them.

Traditionally, criticism concerning the problem plays has basically fallen into three approaches, all of which overlap: historical criticism calls for us to put ourselves

into the position of the original audience and may consider such matters as the author's intention and biography, as well as background; the thematic approach, which can also include mythic criticism, is more of a "new critical" method which calls for us to study the text by itself first; the third approach is genre criticism, which is, of course, a study of the genres of comedy, history and tragedy and of such subcategories within genres as problem comedies, satirical tragedies, Roman plays, romances, tragi-comedies, and ironic comedies. This last approach also delves into the question of development in Shakespeare's art. Within each of these approaches are critics who, though they use a similar method, come to drastically different conclusions (as has been noted earlier). For some critics, the plays are failures; for others, they are experiments or innovations.

Critics who have taken the historical approach to the problem plays include such early writers as F. S. Boas, W. W. Lawrence, and E. M. W. Tillyard. Boas is responsible for the application of the term "problem plays" to Troilus and Cressida, All's Well, and Measure for Measure (although he also includes Hamlet). He explains his borrowing of the "convenient phrase" from the theatre of Ibsen, Shaw, and Pinero because all the plays are concerned with "artificial" societies, rotten-ripe, in which "abnormal conditions of

mind and feeling are expected" and "intricate cases of conscience" demand "unprecedented methods" of solution (345). W. W. Lawrence is mainly responsible for the currency of the label "problem comedies" (he excludes Hamlet). He calls problem comedy a "bastard brother" of tragedy and says that the form was never congenial with Shakespeare's genius (13).

Lawrence's analysis is heavily dependent on probable sources and traditions--Shakespeare was only staging traditional stories. In All's Well, for example, Helena is meant to be noble and heroic, and Bertram undergoes a transformation that is quite conventional. The two movements of the play that Lawrence finds thoroughly traditional are the Healing of the King and the Fulfillment of the Tasks. Thus we have basically the story of a noble woman moving through terrible afflictions into happiness. Measure for Measure, too, is best understood in terms of earlier traditions and customs. The whole play is infused with sympathy for mankind's weaknesses. The basic issue in both plots of Troilus and Cressida is failure, and while Lawrence grants that the last act is strong psychologically, he concedes that it is weak dramatically. To best understand these plays, he tells us, we must "base our primary conclusions on definite and tangible evidence . . . discarding as far as possible the emotional and moral effects, which the plays produce on us today" (13). Dismissing the connection of these plays to

the disillusionment of the sonnets, Lawrence nevertheless points to three characteristic features of the problem comedies: their preoccupation with the darker sides of life; their serious and searching analysis of character and conduct; and their drastic realism. Speculating on why Shakespeare may have written these plays at this time, Lawrence says the most obvious explanation is Shakespeare's increasing maturity, his larger vision and broader philosophic insight, and the influence of prevailing literary and dramatic fashions (206). A main objection to the historical approach of Lawrence is voiced by Rossiter, who argues that it is too limiting (a warning that all critics might heed). According to Rossiter, we have no evidence about how the Elizabethan audience took any of these plays: "inasmuch as Shakespeare's plays have only 'lived' because his mind was not limited to that different world, the limiting terms of Lawrence are a great deal too limiting" (266).

Another critic who, like Lawrence, finds the plays undisturbing is Tillyard, whose approach is partly based on Lawrence's. Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida are problem plays because they deal with and display interesting problems; All's Well and Measure for Measure because they are problems. Explaining his use of the term, Tillyard says, "I use the term vaguely and equivocally as a matter

of convenience to achieve the necessary elasticity and inclusiveness" (3). Tillyard also sees a preoccupation with religious dogma and/or the abstract speculation that is present in the later tragedies, but he does not believe the problem plays absorb the dogma as successfully as the later dramas (3-4). Another characteristic Tillyard sees is Shakespeare's interest in observing and recording the details of human nature for its own sake in a way not found elsewhere:

It is as if at that time he was freshly struck by the fascination of the human spectacle as spectacle and that he was more content than at any other time merely to record his observation without subordinating it to a great overriding theme. (9-10)

Tillyard's analysis of Troilus and Cressida is mainly one of source-study. Of All's Well, he says that it has a defective poetic style. Measure for Measure has an inconsistent style. He also observes of All's Well and Measure for Measure that their themes of mercy and forgiveness look ahead to the final romances. Tillyard, then, sees the plays as failures because Shakespeare's poetic imagination failed at crucial points (86, 106, 123).

A second and newer critical approach to the problem plays centers on thematic and mythic criticism. A small and controversial group of critics has taken a "Christian" interpretation, and its views have been both various and contradictory. One area of such criticism, including

such diverse figures as G. Wilson Knight, R. W. Chambers, Muriel Bradbrook, and Roy Battenhouse, interprets Measure for Measure, in particular, as a religious or morality play, parabolic or allegorical in form. Knight compares Vicentio to the Divinity and to Christ as well as to the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke xv or the Lord of that unmerciful servant in Matthew xvii (91). Bradbrook points out affinities with morality plays (289-301), and Battenhouse goes even further to claim that the whole play is an allegory of the Atonement (1029-59). Chambers says that the play's theme is Christian forgiveness (277). However, even among this group, there are radically different interpretations.

Extending this interpretation to include Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, William B. Toole (basing his argument on Nevill Coghill's theory that some of Shakespeare's plays are similar in pattern to Dante's Divine Comedy) sees a pattern in the problem plays that comes through the mystery cycle and the morality play (19). In All's Well and Measure for Measure, Shakespeare makes explicit what is implicit in the morality play; these plays represent the medieval comic pattern in dramatic form; their protagonists move from what is, in effect, metaphysical adversity to metaphysical prosperity. The world of Troilus and Cressida is one of retribution, lacking the implication of redemp-

tion; thus, it remains a tragedy--quite different from the problem plays. Toole says that the Christian atmosphere is more important to an understanding of the construction than the element of narrative tradition (19). In fact, Shakespeare's comic structure directs us to the Beatific Vision of medieval comedy--one that does not stop at the Day of Judgment but offers mercy and forgiveness, a development that, according to Toole, makes Shakespeare's comic framework more comprehensive than that of Jonson (25-30).

Other critics do not offer such a specific interpretation but continue to find themes of repentance and forgiveness which lead to the formation of the new society or the growing awareness of an individual, which is, of course, the traditional way in which comedy is viewed. A problem for many writers, however, is not one of theme but of involvement of theme in the play, hence a "problem" occasioned by the application of the traditional way in which comedy is viewed. S. L. Bethell sees a conflict between the plays and their themes. He locates the problems of Troilus and Cressida in its "consciously philosophical" nature and in Shakespeare's failure to merge the story and the philosophy, making "the story . . . an excuse for thought rather than the embodiment of thought" (98-105). Also speaking of Troilus and Cressida, Robert Kimbrough argues that "the plot has no central drive,

no consistent argument" (205-206). He writes that Shakespeare has been too little willing to sacrifice the conventions which he has inherited from several traditions to achieve an intellectually coherent whole. The overall theme that war and lechery confound all has no general reverberation or universal ring so that not only does the play open in confusion but it merely moves through more confusion to less confusion (205-206). Thus the play is damned on one hand for the primacy of its theme and on the other for themelessness.

However, there are two critics, L. C. Knights and Una Ellis-Fermor, who achieve success with Troilus and Cressida by confronting the involvement of theme in the play and our reactions as participants. Making a direct connection between the theme of appearance and reality and the audience's mixed reaction, Knights says:

The ambiguity we are made to feel--and not merely analyze--springs from the shifting appearances of the characters as well as from the trickiness and dubiety of the formal exposition and argument. We, the spectators, in short, are involved in the play's confusions. (79)

And defending Shakespeare against our own failure of understanding as opposed to his artistic inconsistency or failure, Ellis-Fermor cites the play's organic completeness:

The form illumines and interprets the theme, is itself ordered by it . . . and so there is confirmed the impression that here is no failure, nor even partial success. For given discord as the central theme, it is hard to imagine how else

it should be formally reflected but in a deliberately intended discord of form also. (63)

While these two critics have focused on Troilus and Cressida, I suggest that their operating principle can also be applied to All's Well and Measure for Measure; that is, the very themes that leave the audience perplexed are those which give the plays their unity and form.

Another theme which supplies unity to the plays is explored by Marjorie Garber in her Coming of Age in Shakespeare. She sees as a central theme in all of Shakespeare's works the growing awareness of one's nature. She writes:

The central pattern of transition from childhood to adulthood . . . seems to encompass a series of related choices and confrontations, each of which serves to differentiate one character from another and to prepare him for his place in a world conscious of its own need for renewal . . . for each the choice is finally that of hard-won self-knowledge. (48-49)

In the problem plays, the need for "hard-won self-knowledge" is there--the choices and confrontation are there, but our expectations for the consequence of self-knowledge, a better world, are thwarted. The characters are put in circumstances which should produce the revelation, but the revelation does not produce the effect which we have come to expect. Self-knowledge is supposed to promote a change for the better, to prepare a character for his place in a renewed world. However, in the problem plays, even when characters' true natures are exposed and

they are forced to see themselves as they really are, there is no sense that this knowledge changes anything except on the most superficial level. Thus, the cathartic effect we need as an audience is missing.

As has been noted, the label "problem plays" has endured since 1896, though with much grumbling and changing on the part of critics. Boas has linked All's Well, Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida, and Hamlet because of their similar "general temper and atmosphere," thereby emphasizing their relation to the problem plays of Ibsen and Shaw. Since that time, the term has come under fire by some critics who questioned the sensibility of keeping a term that has been used in so many different ways. To review quickly, we observed that Lawrence scratched Hamlet from the group to emphasize genre as well as atmosphere, but Tillyard and Toole restored Hamlet. Peter Ure has also included Hamlet and added Timon of Athens (8). Ernest Schanzer has made the term indicate a clearly defined type of drama (as did Lawrence), but he includes only Measure for Measure in his designation (6). Richard Wheeler uses the term "problem comedies" to refer only to All's Well and Measure for Measure, explaining that these two plays occupy a transitional place in Shakespeare's development of comic form while the action of Troilus and Cressida does not have close formal affinities to the comic action of the other

two, nor does it share the close relation of those plays to the earlier comedies or the late romances, all of which move through some form of special reconciliation, however fragile or problematic the endings (2).

Use of the term "problem plays" to apply to Troilus and Cressida, All's Well, and Measure for Measure persists precisely, however, because of what Tillyard called a "necessary elasticity and inclusiveness" and "as a matter of convenience" (1). The problems associated with finding a term that provides the necessary elasticity, inclusiveness, and convenience are also the problems associated with the third critical approach to the plays, that of genre. Besides problem plays, they have been variously labeled as dark comedies, bitter comedies, tragi-comedies, tragical satires, and satires. Troilus and Cressida has presented more difficulty in this area than the other two, having been categorized as history and tragedy as well, but All's Well and Measure for Measure are also a departure from the traditional comic mode. Of their departures from Shakespeare's "usual" (and I use the term cautiously) art and their label "problem plays," Leo Salingar has observed, "One is sometimes left under the impression that the problem lies in the critics' difficulty of deciding what kind of plays they really are" (321), a note we have heard before.

Even the critics who have basically used other approaches to the plays are drawn into the problem of affixing a label or assigning a category to this group. While many critics, among them Lawrence, Tillyard, and Toole, have consented to define them as problem plays, others point to their experimental nature, an idea which is more fully developed by later critics. In his book Shakespearian Comedy, H. B. Charlton says that the problem is an artistic one, Shakespeare's search for the comic spirit. He calls them "dark" because "the seamier, indeed the nastiest, side of life obtrudes more persistently" (Shakespearian Comedy 210). But he goes on to say that any mood of bitter cynicism is a mistaken notion; on the contrary, there is "an intense impulse to discover the true sources of nobility in man, and of joy in life, an intuition so ardent that it frustrates its own artistic fecundity and calls in, as a substitute, the dramaturgical exploration of conscious enquiry and deliberate experiments" (Shakespearian Comedy 211). Calling the plays comical satires, O. J. Campbell dismisses "naive assumptions" and exaggerations that Troilus and Cressida, All's Well, and Measure for Measure were written because of Shakespeare's mood of gloom and dejection due to either personal problems or the prevailing spirit of his age. He writes that "each one of the plays had been constructed on a satiric model and subjected

to a strong infusion of the satiric spirit [where] Shakespeare extends his imitation and adaptation of the plays in which Ben Johnson effected a union between comedy and satire" (90-92).

According to Rossiter, the plays are tragi-comedies, and he calls for us to read without prejudice when we experience a certain uneasiness and a consequent uncertainty of interpretation. He warns that these plays throw opposed or contrary views into the mind, only to leave the resulting equations without any settled or soothing solutions: Troilus and Cressida gives us a "tragedy-of-love" pattern that is not tragic or love; All's Well a "happy ending" that makes us neither happy nor comfortable; Measure for Measure a "final solution" that simply does not answer the question raised (280). Rossiter, then, suggests a tragi-comic view of man because there is something equivocal in the nature of tragi-comedy. It is a kind of drama in which the contemplation of man is, on the one hand, held back from the "admiration" and "commiseration" of tragedy and, on the other, denied the wholehearted enjoyments of human irrationality and human sentiments of comedy (270-71). Thus, tragi-comedy, as Rossiter explains, is "an art of inversion, deflation, and paradox" and is marked by "telling generalizations" about the subject, man, and "of a seriousness which is unexpected in comedy and may seem incongruous with it" (271).

Defining his view of tragi-comedy, Cyrus Hoy argues that

in serious drama, comic or tragic, we are left with . . . a single truth about the human condition. Man is possessed of an ideal of human conduct, but circumstances together with his own inherent failings conspire to make the belief that the ideal can be fulfilled an illusory one. But man persists despite all the odds, and in his persistence he may appear nobly enduring, stubbornly unyielding, foolishly blind, or a combination of all three. The more forcibly and apparently these diverse qualities are linked in combination, the more surely sounds the note of tragi-comedy. (11)

In such plays as Troilus and Cressida, All's Well, and Measure for Measure (for Hoy especially Measure for Measure), the ironic disparity between the ideal and the reality is defined so emphatically as to suggest an appalling, outrageous, or merely absurd division in the nature of man and his world. Hoy notes that "plays such as these are too critical in spirit and tone to be tragic, and too intensely managed to be entirely comic" (7).

Also seeing Shakespeare as an innovator and experimenter seeking a reconciliation of comical satire with romantic comedy, R. A. Foakes views the plays as a new form which can simultaneously accommodate passion and detachment, a lightness of general tone with more than a hint of savagery (61). He says their effect is satiric since they display man as he is, "caught in that sharp comic perspective which emphasizes the discontinuities

between speech and action, between principle and practice, and between the ardours of romantic love and the arrangements for effective seduction" (60).

Calling the problem plays a new dimension to comedy, Salingar points to the growing complexity of Shakespeare's mind and experience to account for notes that he calls "strained, suggestive, explosive, perplexing" (323). He calls them both "novella comedies" and "problem plays," observing that they brought Shakespeare to the limit of what he was prepared to write in comic form: "Yet the new step they entailed was necessary and liberating, even though it meant breaking from or else warping the conventions of his stage" (323). Still another recent critic who sees Shakespeare extending the possibilities of comic form is Alexander Leggatt. He argues, in Shakespeare's Comedy of Love, that the "dark comedies" owe much of their darkness to the manner in which "skepticism about comic form, from being part of a piquant juxtaposition, becomes positively destructive" (256). Neat patterns of stories are imposed on "awkward, intractable material of an unromantic world, where people simply will not behave" (257). Although Shakespeare uses "satisfyingly neat plot devices," Leggatt argues that we cannot help feeling a "sudden contraction of vision as a largely technical solution is applied to problems that were originally conceived as more than technical" (257).

Since the comic structure seems to be seeking its own ends the formal pattern of comedy is therefore inadequate (258).

Epitomizing the difficulty critics have had in their efforts to pigeonhole these plays, Kenneth Muir treats all three plays as a group under the title problem comedies, noting, as have others, that Shakespeare "had come to have a more sombre, or at least a more realistic, view of human nature than he had done" (108). However, he calls Troilus and Cressida a tragical satire but does not place it with the banned satirists, or even the satirical plays of Marston and Jonson, but rather as "Shakespeare's excursion into the metaphysical mode" (123). As for All's Well and Measure for Measure, he notes that while there are villains in the earlier comedies and sinners in all of them, "it is only in the problem plays that he seems fully to have believed [that all men and women were sinners]. Hence, the stress . . . or the necessity of repentance and the concomitant necessity of forgiveness" (108).

I have included Northrop Frye's criticism in the genre approach (even though it is usually considered thematic or mythic) because he considers what kinds of plays the problem plays are in relation to their myths or themes. In addition, his work seems to me to embody the essence of the difficulty students feel when they approach the plays and feel that they must make ultimate classifications of the

plays to show that they truly understand. Furthermore, Frye looks forward to the fourth approach--that of audience response. In the Preface of The Myth of Deliverance, Frye writes, "We begin with a notion of what the play might be reasonably assumed to mean, and end with realizing that what the play actually does mean is so far beyond this as to be in a different world of understanding altogether." In other words, if we keep studying the plays and learning about ourselves, we may be able to destroy the barriers, whether cultural or personal, that limit our response to them. Frye insists that we see all three plays as comedies rather than problems, even though they have a much larger infusion of irony than the earlier comedies; but he, too, distinguishes between "typical comedies" like All's Well and Measure for Measure and the "admittedly experimental" Troilus and Cressida that he classifies as ironic comedy. All's Well and Measure for Measure are "simply romantic comedies where the chief magical device used is the bed trick instead of enchanted forests or identical twins" (3). They are "fairly typical comedies in which redemptive forces are set to work that bring about the characteristic festive conclusion, the birth of a new society, that gives to the audience the feeling that 'everything's going to be all right after all'" (60). Of Troilus and Cressida, he says,

There are many comedies, especially in modern times, where the ironic emphasis is too strong for the drive toward deliverance, and where the play ends in frustration and blocked movement. In Shakespeare's canon the play that comes nearest to this is Troilus and Cressida, a play that, whatever else it may do, does not illustrate the myth of deliverance in comedy. It seems rather to be designed to show us human beings getting into the kind of mess that requires deliverance. (60-61)

Cautioning the reader about seeing problems where there are none, Frye says these plays are not media for issues or observations outside the conventions of comedy. Indeed, "nothing extra-dramatic to which the play points is outside it; whatever is not in the play, or is there in addition to the play, is in front of it, in the shared experience of the audience" (32-33). Those who want to learn about freedom and deliverance, according to Frye, need to be willing to follow three simple rules: "listen to the story; look at the action, and don't think, at least until you know what you're thinking about" (33).

If we follow Frye's suggestion with only some modification, we will arrive at the last area of criticism, one that is itself new and innovative and eclectic--that of audience response. An exciting and dynamic development since about 1964, reader/audience response theory is a kind of criticism that does not consider the question of Shakespeare's success or failure or innovation. Rather, this approach focuses attention on tracing the audience's response to the plays.

This last approach seems to me the most rewarding since it avoids taking any "firm lines" which may cancel each other about problems which may not be solvable. Many of the critics we have studied have alluded to the area of audience response. They have touched on what we, as readers or as an audience, think, feel, or know. To go a step further, we need to study and examine not only our responses but the artistry that provokes the responses. Taking this approach, we will not be focusing on finding answers that may not be there or finding solutions to explain away our perplexity, disquiet, unhappiness, or confusion. According to Norman Rabkin, "if the final effect is baffling or ambivalent, the reason is not that Shakespeare has failed to create a coherent play, for example, but rather that the meaning of the play can emerge only as we confront the complementary answers to the questions it raises" (33).

It seems to me, then, that this last approach may be eclectic and elastic enough to avoid the pitfalls of the others--that is, taking the false and misleading stance that there is one method that will yield the best results or even reveal the truth. By approaching the plays in terms of audience response, critics avoid the quicksand of biography, intention, history, or genre. In fact, Styan declares that it is time to call a halt to the Polonius-like

mobilization of genres and sub-genres: "We must recognize that a play may legitimately refuse to be a failed tragedy or a failed comedy because the response it wants may be of neither kind and the forms and conventions it uses may bear no relation to either" (2). Therefore, it becomes unnecessary to judge Shakespeare's success or failure. We need only to listen, to look, and, as Frye suggests, to think once we have studied so that we know what we are thinking about. As Styran notes, Shakespeare's problem plays "demonstrate as original a dramatic exploration of experience as anything in the canon. . . . Each, too, has a special interest as an experiment in controlling an audience's quality of attention" (20). Indeed, according to Salinger, Shakespeare does not invite his audience to escape from normal psychological conditions by forgetting what they are like, but he invites them to "contemplate special conditions, which are not represented as typical of life in general, but as contra-distinguished from everyday life outside the theatre by devices carried over from comic tradition" (256). Shakespeare, then, invites us to contemplate through the experience of the plays our own creative lives and traditions. Drama, or fantasy, is the means by which we are led to understand the truth about the actual lives we lead. According to Frye, the incorporating of the play into our lives will not make us immortal but will

"give our imaginations a depth, a perspective, that can take in other possibilities, chiefly the possibility of a more intense mode of living" (89-90).

Approaching the three plays Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure according to audience response, then, should prove very profitable. I think we will find the problem plays are deliberately and necessarily ambiguous because they deal with moral problems and issues in a complex way and because they deal with acts, motives, and dedications which are at once ideal and impure. As Joan Hartwig notes about the last plays, the disturbing factors are not completely exorcised, an idea supporting the view that Shakespeare did not want to create an idyllic world that could float free of actuality or escape from life's meaningful issues (31). The problem plays contain tragic action by recording not only what man has done (or is capable of) but also what he is trying to make of himself. Thus, while we are reading or watching these plays, what we are most aware of is a powerful force encountering still more powerful counterforces: and, according to Frye, it is the swirling and contending energies within the play that hold our attention while it is going on (38). To view these plays, then, as legitimate modes for impressing meanings which cannot finally be reduced to the forms of expressive art is a valuable way of discovering

what they are really about, and it avoids limiting the scope of Shakespeare's achievement because of individual taste.

It seems to me, then, that in approaching these problem plays, we should first identify the problems they have in common and, next, examine how Shakespeare has manipulated our responses to them. A major problem, as already noted, is the dissatisfaction we have with the denouements and endings. Many critics account for our uneasiness by noting Shakespeare's seeming disillusionment with the art form of comedy, which necessitates a simple plot and cannot allow for the horrifying complexities of character found in reality. This complication of comedy evokes pity and fear, but these emotions are not carried to the expected and fulfilling conclusion of the earlier comedies. In All's Well and Measure for Measure, there are contrived resolutions to the disorder; unpleasant situations are corrected, but the means by which these ends are accomplished leave us with a certain moral uneasiness. In Troilus and Cressida, we are left with the disorder. Rosalie Colie observes that in this play there is none of the redeeming hope of Shakespeare's darkest plays, "that from the brutal and calculating world some retreat is possible in a construction of love and faith--the 'little room' of personal love so long

sought by Anthony and Cleopatra, the prison of Lear and Cordelia" (Shakespeare's Living Art 322). In these problem plays, then, as in the tragedies, Shakespeare is more concerned with the loss of faith, the hell men create, and the "promised end" which threatens the human scene than with the Edenic dream of the earlier comedies.

As with the endings, there are serious and ironic themes which leave us shaken since they, too, remain unresolved. First, there is a strong disparity between word (motivation) and deed (action); what "seems" and what "is" are at extreme variance. Second, there is a preoccupation with sex as opposed to romantic love. Third, the characters are not brought to any new levels of self-knowledge that brings change; they may be exposed for what they are, but the knowledge is not redemptive. As a result, the justice that we expect is not forthcoming: some characters do not get what they deserve and others get more than they deserve. A sensible approach, then, needs to account not for why these elements are present but for how the audience is led to respond to these difficulties. In Troilus and Cressida, in particular, the audience is always being asked to look at the word, at the symbol, at the artifice, so that we can see how limited each reduction is. Shakespeare's self-conscious use of theatrical device achieves distance. The whole play checks and qualifies easy modes of response.

We are prevented from identifying totally with Troilus', Cressida's, or Thersites' point of view. Every element of the play is juxtaposed with the heroic and romantic expectations we bring to the legends of the Trojan War. Yet the play is not reduced simply to satire, since Thersites, who so reduced the characters and themes, is himself malicious and reductive. Thus Shakespeare encourages more than unmitigated identification. As Maynard Mack reminds us, "the playwright's task is not simply to create illusion: he must know how to control it too" (276); without this control of illusion, drama becomes an exercise in narcissism--a means not to self-knowledge, but to self-indulgence. In the problem plays, Shakespeare is assuredly controlling illusion and our emotions by challenging our conventional expectations and then by mutating to the point of suggesting, if not asserting, that these expectations are too simple for the complex world we live in. We are not allowed to keep the self-deception and reductive tendencies of the characters who would see life in either/or terms, and this strategy of qualifying simple responses is profoundly disquieting.

Chapter II

"Laboring for Destiny":

Troilus and Cressida

As noted in the Introduction, Troilus and Cressida has enjoyed a varied history. From the apparent puzzlement of Shakespeare's first editors as to the genre of the play right down to the present, critics still disagree about whether the play is a comical satire, a tragedy, a tragicomedy, or a problem play. Neither have critics come to any agreements about the play's meaning. Indeed, it has been called "a play of puzzles" (Ure 33). M. T. Jones-Davies stresses the theme of discord in this double story of love and war (33). John Cox sees as the pervasive pattern "failed vision, especially as it relates to the confusion of appearances and reality" ("The Error of Our Eye" 147). Albert Gerard says Troilus and Cressida tells us that the core of love is lust and that everything else is deception (156). Carolyn Asp writes that the play's central metaphysical question is one of value: "Is value a quality intrinsic in the object or is it a variable, fluctuating with significant appreciations and perspectives?" ("In Defense of Cressida" 407). Two earlier critics have also asserted the primacy of values in the play: M. T. Nowottany

maintains that in Troilus Shakespeare asks what attitude toward life will stand up in view of the discrepancy between appearance and reality. And the answer is the attitude of Troilus--"not Troilus' idealization of Cressida, for that is confuted by Cressida, but his refusal, even in the face of the misshapen fact of her treachery, to deny the reality of values by which he has lived" (291). Similarly, A. S. Knowland says that man's attempt to set up values which are eternal may be seen in the ideals of love, chivalry, and order in Troilus. But they fail to endure because of some principle of contradiction which resides in events and character: "The achievements themselves are transient, the impulse to erect them endures" (365).

In contrast to these interpretations, Kenneth Muir says we may agree about Shakespeare's artistic mastery in giving the theme of formlessness form, but not that Shakespeare was asserting that life was meaningless:

He was asserting something much more limited, something defined by the world of the play. He was saying that men engage in war in support of unworthy causes; that they are deluded by the sexual instinct to fix their affections on unworthy objects; that they sometimes act in defiance of what they know to be right; that they are usually motivated by self-interest. But he was not saying that absolute values are illusions or that all women are Cressids, for Troilus himself, at the very moment of disillusionment, dissociates himself from such a position. The violation of order and the betrayal of values does not imply that all values are illusions--quite the contrary indeed. (122)

William Toole's reading also suggests that disorder is a consequence of the frailty of men and not an inevitable result of a chaos at the center of creation (202).

Another problem associated with interpreting Troilus and Cressida involves point of view. In this play, we are continually made to change our point of view. Muir suggests it is this shifting of emphasis which makes the play so difficult to grasp as a unity:

In nearly all the other plays we look at the action through the eyes of one or two closely related characters. We see Hamlet through Hamlet's eyes, never through those of Claudius; King Lear through Lear's eyes--or Cordelia's, or Kent's--but never through the eyes of Goneril; The Tempest through Prospero's eyes. It is true that another point of view is often given, and a character such as Horatio or Enobarbus may sometimes act as a chorus. But in Troilus and Cressida the point of view is continually changing. At one moment we watch events through the eyes of Troilus, and the war seems futile. In a later scene we see the events through the eyes of Hector, and Troilus in advocating the retention of Helen seems to be a romantic young fool. In the Greek camp we see everything from Ulysses's point of view; and then, a little later, however much we despise and dislike Thersites, we become infected with his views on the situation:

Lechery, lechery; still wars and lechery;
nothing else holds fashion: a burning devil
take them! (V.ii.196-97) (122)

A note of caution is in order about this shifting of emphasis. We distort the play if we make any one character Shakespeare's mouthpiece. Ulysses' speech on degree in I.iii is often regarded as the cornerstone of the "Elizabethan World Picture," as evidence of Shakespeare's

conservatism. According to Anne Barton, however, looked at in context, "this speech reveals itself as an adroit stringing together of pious platitudes: a piece of rhetoric which is applauded by all but to which no one, least of all Ulysses himself, pays the smallest practical attention" (Introduction, Tro. 445). Even though Shakespeare may have shared some of Ulysses' views on order, the worldly standards of Ulysses are not Shakespeare's. Other critics have pointed to Hector as Shakespeare's real spokesman, but even he betrays the hopes invested in him at the first. Concerning Hector's position as heroic spokesman, Barton notes: "In the Trojan Council he perversely turns his back on the truth he sees, merely because he is besotted with a cozening idea of honor and glory to be won" (Introduction, Tro. 446). And it is while Hector is gloating over the splendid armor taken from a dead Greek, when he is defenseless, unarmed, and unprepared, that he is killed. Still other readers have argued that Shakespeare speaks through the mouthpiece of Thersites. Again we must exercise caution, for, as Barton says, Thersites is "an allowed fool of the most savage kind"; he is "a voice more than a person"; and his voice is "too obviously distorted, the imagination too foul, and his own position too ignominious" (Introduction, Tro. 446-47). Ultimately, of course, Thersites' reductivist, profoundly skeptical view is refuted by the very existence of Troilus and Cressida (Introduction, Tro. 447).

Closely related to the problems of a shifting point of view is another source of difficulty concerning Troilus and Cressida--the play's structure. Numerous critics have felt that the play fails to achieve a coherent structure. Van Doren observes with not a little disgust Shakespeare's apparent lack of control over his expression: the style is "loud, brassy, and abandoned." He also implies strongly that Shakespeare has momentarily lost his sense of proportion and modulation: "It is writing on the loose and when the tether is cut there is no glory" (207). W. W. Lawrence traces Troilus and Cressida's structural deficiencies to Shakespeare's inability to transcend the limitations imposed on the play by its various and disparate source materials (120). Other critics such as S. L. Bethell and Madelaine Doran discern a serious disjunction in the play between "philosophy" and "debate" and the necessities of minimal dramatic structure (Bethell 98-105; Doran 317). Even more outspoken, however, is Bertrand Evans, whose cogent sense of the play's "dramatic malformation" leads him to conclude that the "corruptive disease" informing the play's content is so contagious that it is "catching even to the bones of dramatic structure, leaving them too infirm to support the action" (167).

Certainly, these critics are outstanding in their fields and well-respected, and it would be irresponsible

to dismiss their comments on Troilus and Cressida's deficiencies. However, the more helpful criticism has been that which admitted certain shortcomings and then proceeded to explain why the play has such a peculiar style and form. L. C. Knights says that "the most powerful imaginative effect is of bewilderment and ambiguity, of being in the labyrinth" (Some Shakespearean Themes 98) and then associates this effect with the theme of appearance and reality which animates the play. Another critic, Norman Rabkin, also concedes that "the final effect of Troilus and Cressida is baffling and ambivalent"; however, he associates this effect not with theme but with the irreducible, eternally problematic nature of the "problem" of evaluation (Common Understanding 31).

While neither Knights nor Rabkin directly confronts the issue of structural incoherency, Una Ellis-Fermor answers the charges by saying that she finds the play a "vision of disjunction and disintegration of civilization"; and "given discord as the central theme," she reasons "it is hard to imagine how else it should be formally reflected but in a deliberately intended discord of form also" (56,76). Thus, her conclusion is that "the idea of chaos, of disjunction, of ultimate formlessness and negation, has by a supreme act of artistic mastery been given form. It has not been described in more or less abstract terms; it has been imagined" (71). More recently, Philip

Edwards has suggested that Troilus and Cressida is an experiment where Shakespeare was "trying to create a form of art which forbids all the more obvious compensations of order, meaning, and hope which inevitably seem implicit in the very structure and plot of more conventional plays" (14). The result of this experiment, he says, is a play "which seems somehow 'anti-art' or 'pre-art' in its refusal of a coherent form which might work against the picture of incoherence which is the matter of the play" (107). Following up on the work of Ellis-Fermor and Edwards is Richard Fly, who recognizes that Shakespeare is allowing technique itself to function as the vehicle of theme and vision: he hypothesizes that Troilus, like the "Prologue Armed" which introduces it, is "suited in like conditions as [its] argument." He argues that

. . . if the play is indeed constructed on this audacious extension of the concept decorum, it should be possible to encounter discontinuity, disjunction, and inconsistency informing Troilus' plot, scenario, characterization, language, spectacle--indeed, every element of dramatic structure from the smallest stylistic unit to the largest. But, most importantly, we should be able to relate such radical instability in the play's formal elements to the devastating and form-denying vision enforcing it. ("Suited in Like Conditions" 275)

By fusing vision and form into a complex unity and then relating it to the response of the audience, Ellis-Fermor, Edwards, and Fly are able, in Fly's words, "to effect the translation of Troilus and Cressida's apparent structural

deficiencies into esthetic and psychological successes, formlessness into transcendent form" ("Suited in Like Conditions'" 275).

Having considered various approaches to the play, which often raise more questions than they answer or, at the least, cancel each other out, I believe we need to examine the play by admitting at the outset that there are problems in interpretation that may never be settled-- a direct reflection of the enormous challenge Shakespeare had in representing complex material in a new mode of expression. Certainly we can see that an insistence on Shakespeare's observance of an established tradition imposes unnecessary limitations on his art and also neglects the possibility that Shakespeare may not have intended to write a certain "traditional" kind of play.

Turning to the play itself, I think we will find that Shakespeare is in complete control of his material, directing both our engagement and detachment. According to Anne Barton, this sense of artistic mastery and control over difficult subject matter "is why, for all its savagery and pessimism, the experience of Troilus and Cressida is finally exhilarating" (Introduction, Tro. 447). In fact, the play has had a special appeal for audiences of this century. Ellis-Fermor has said that our own generation's experience of disintegration and disruption is mirrored in the world of Troilus and Cressida (57). And it is with this view of

disintegration and discord, a view directly connected with the themes of appearance versus reality and the disparity between word and deed, that I will examine the play.

Though critical attitudes toward this play vary, everyone agrees with E. M. W. Tillyard that the subject is double, love and war (52). Shakespeare has given us a full war plot which is played off against a full love plot, from which the play's name is taken. In addition, he has provided a critical commentator, Thersites, who reminds us of the parallels again and again: "war for a placket"; "all the argument is a whore and a cuckold"; "lechery, lechery; still wars and lechery." As a result of this counterpointing, Shakespeare turns the Homeric values upside down as he degrades them to trivial hypocrisies designed to cover appetite. (The degradation of the Troy legend in the Middle Ages is an important part of the background of this play: see Robert Kimbrough, Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida' and Its Setting, chapter III and relevant references.) Shakespeare also strips Troilus, Cressida, and Pandarus of the rich complexity with which Chaucer had endowed them. The inconclusive end of the play also stresses the theme of discord in this double story of love and war.

The "arm'd" prologue sounds the note of discord that will resound throughout the play. To announce the cruel chance of war, the Prologue says that the Greeks have "sent their ships / Fraught with the ministers and instruments /

Of cruel war / . . . / To ransack Troy" (Prologue 3-8).
 Immediately we are given the pathetic cause for the war:
 "The ravish'd Helen, Menelaus' queen, / With wanton Paris
 sleeps--and that's the quarrel" (Prologue 9-10). The very
 next lines take us back to the scene of ships' disgorging
 "their warlike fraughtage" (Prologue 12-13) so that again
 we hear sounds that are loud with brass and the rattling
 of armor. Properly epic, the Prologue promises an epic
 construction to the upcoming story:

our play
 Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstling of
 these broils,
 Beginning in the middle--
 (Prologue 26-28)

Not only has the Prologue prepared us for the scene of
 the play, it has also subtly prepared us for the ironic and
 paradoxical treatment of the subject of love and war where
 things are undone. Rosalie Colie explains that in the
 course of the play:

The systematic barbarity of Hector's death brings
 down more than an exemplary champion and the
 reputation of the godlike Achilles: something
 fundamental to the heroic dream is murdered along
 with the unarmed hero; in spite of the rents in
 the heroic illusion which the play has already
 torn, from the Prologue's swollen rhetoric onward,
 we feel pain at its loss. However vulnerable to
 modern political and psychological analyses it may
 be,--the epic world offered a model for elevated
 behavior which, when reduced to these vulgar acts,
 leaves no alternative glory. (Shakespeare's
Living Art 321)

Beginning with the cause, then, we meet a Helen who has
 often been deified as one who "launched a thousand ships,"

but who is certainly not a goddess here. She is portrayed as an idle woman who is a source of destruction and debasement. As if to make sure we understand Troilus' statement concerning Helen ("Helen must needs be fair, / When with your blood you daily paint her thus" [I.i.89-90]), we see the lady herself in a scene with Paris and Pandarus. Here she is reduced to plain "Nell." She is bawdy, and her language underscores her trivial worldliness and sensuality. This portrait of her reduces the epic seven-year war fought over her to an incredible travesty. According to Colie, Helen provides us with one measure of the play's inadequate language and thus its inadequate value-system (Shakespeare's Living Art 326).

Robert Ornstein has noted about this decade of slaughter for the possession of a beautiful woman that the analytic intellect seeks a more realistic and complex motive for human sacrifice: "I cannot believe that men died for the sake of a faithless woman, especially after years of futile, senseless struggle. Logic insists that ultimately both sides must have despised Helen" (29). And so they do. Diomedes, speaking for the Greeks, calls her a "flat, tam'd piece" with "whorish loins" (IV.i.63-64):

She's bitter to her country. Hear me, Paris:
 For every false drop in her bawdy veins,
 A Grecian's life hath sunk, for every scruple
 Of her contaminated carrion weight,
 A Troyan hath been slain. Since she could speak,
 She hath not given so many good words breath
 As for her Greeks and Troyans suff' red death.
 (IV.i.69-75)

Hector, although more gracious, expresses the same idea when he pleads:

Let Helen go.
 Since the first sword was drawn about this
 question,
 Every tithe soul, 'mongst many thousand dismes,
 Hath been as dear as Helen; I mean, of ours.
 If we have lost so many tenths of ours,
 To guard a thing not ours nor worth to us
 (Had it our name) the value of one ten,
 What merit's in that reason which denies
 The yielding of her up? (II.ii.17-25)

Helen, then, is admittedly a source of debasement for both Greeks and Trojans. For both sides she is a "theme." But this theme turns out to be enough to destroy one civilization and brutalize another since all of those who fight to keep her or get her back are contaminated through a futile struggle and, yet, are unwilling to sacrifice what they come to regard as a principle of honor.

As we will see, Troilus, as T. McAlindon says, excels in "the poetry in impassioned folly" (39), and his linguistic discord as well as other characters' "grotesque excesses" (29) underscores the discrepancy between words and deeds, words and character, words and situation, which in turn adds to the deflation of character. In the Trojan council scene, Troilus argues that honor and reverence for beauty are involved in the possession and retention of Helen. But, as McAlindon shows, in the metaphorical development of this theme Troilus ironically gives the strongest argument against her:

. . . he associates Helen with soiled silks which the purchaser is tempted to bring back to the merchant (II.ii.69-70), and with leftover food which repels the sated palate and barely escapes the garbage basket (ll. 71-72). The mercantile imagery too leads Troilus into a figure from which the Trojan royal family emerge as "thieves unworthy of a thing [i.e., Helen] so stolen" (l. 94). To aristocratically biased Renaissance poets, Troilus' claim that Helen "turned crowned kings to merchants" (l. 83) might have seemed as indecorous. . . . Finally, Troilus' opening analogy of the husband who cleaves to his wife even when he has grown weary of her (ll. 61-67) combines bad taste and muddled reasoning. A marital analogy unhappily calls attention to the adulterous nature of the relationship which Troilus is extolling. Moreover, the logic of the analogy would require that Helen be sent back to her husband and the war discontinued, a policy which it is the whole purpose of the speech to denounce. . . . Flawed though it is in logic and style, the passionate language of Troilus persuades the Trojan council to make a decision which guarantees the fall of Troy. (39)

Because there is no real "cause" for battle, the dedication to honor of those who fight to get her back, according to Ornstein, is "in fact a dedication to personal vanity" (31). We can see then that Helen is not the only character who is debased and deflated. All of the heroes are held up to ridicule. Menelaus, the cuckold, is universally despised. Paris is a wanton. Agamemnon lacks the qualities of leadership. Ajax is merely stupid. Achilles lies in his tent, enamored of a Trojan woman, mocking his leaders. Ulysses, although he is astute, ruthless, and cunning, is also the ultimate characterization of a politician whose art is the manipulation of other men's ambitions and desires. Hector

is enamored with honor, and Troilus is, as Ornstein says, "Shakespeare's most subtle study of narcissistic infatuation" (31). No character is left untouched by this discrepancy between word and deed.

Turning again to the scene between Diomedes and Paris, we find a bitter and scathing contempt for both Paris and Menelaus. Paris has asked who deserves Helen more, himself or Menelaus. Diomedes replies:

Both alike.
 He merits well to have her that doth seek her,
 Not making any scruple of her soil,
 With such a hell of pain and world of change;
 And you as well to keep her that defend her,
 Not palating the taste of her dishonor,
 With such a costly loss of wealth and friends.
 He like a puling cuckold would drink up
 The lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece;
 You like a lecher out of whorish loins
 Are pleas'd to breed out your inheritors.
 Both merits pois'd each weighs nor less nor
 more,
 But he as he, the heavier for a whore.
(IV.i.55-66)

Lest we begin to think that Diomedes is above what he is criticizing, Thersites takes pains to remind us of the bitter end of Diomedes' pact with Cressida when he describes Diomedes as a

. . . false-hearted rogue, a most unjust knave
 . . . [who] will spend his mouth and promise,
 like Brabblers the hound, but when he performs,
 astronomers foretell it . . . the sun borrows
 of the moon when Diomed keeps his word. . . .
 They say he keeps a Trojan drab, and uses the
 traitor Calchas' tent . . . no thing but
 lechery! all incontinent varlots! (V.i.88-98)

This comic discrepancy between reputation and fact continues. Aeneas, who is bearing Hector's challenge to the Greeks, inquires elaborately how he may find "that god in office, guiding men . . . the high and mighty Agamemnon" (I.iii.231-232). Of course, as we know, Aeneas is already speaking to a human Agamemnon who is not sure if Aeneas is mocking him or if he is a "ceremonious courtier" given to bombastic speech. From our point of view, Aeneas is doing both; he is mocking the Greeks and he is given to bombastic speech. Ajax is called "blockish" and "dull brainless" by Ulysses (I.iii.374, 380) and Thersites says he is a "fool [who] knows not himself" (II.i.66). The great hero Achilles does not escape this belittling either. When Hector first meets Achilles in IV.v, he is invited to feast his eyes on Achilles' physique. But Hector finds that the briefest glance will suffice. Then later when Achilles engages Hector in battle, Achilles is forced to accept clemency from his enemy. Even though Achilles is credited with slaying Hector, we see that the deed is done by the Myrmidons who follow Achilles' instructions, and it is an unfair and treacherous fight since Hector is alone and unarmed. Besides these encounters with Hector, Achilles is also denigrated by his fellow Greeks, who show us Achilles as a "plaguey proud" (II.iii.177) hero who will not fight, either because he is in love with one

of Priam's daughters or because of his suspected homosexual relationship with Patroclus, a warrior with little stomach for the war. Thus we see an Achilles who is in danger of losing his heroic stature in the world of the play as well as in the world of the theater because he is not fighting. To maintain the status of hero, Ulysses assures Achilles that he must rely on an audience:

That no man is the lord of any thing,
 Though in and of him there be much consisting,
 Till he communicate his parts to others;
 Nor doth he of himself know them for aught,
 Till he behold them formed in th' applause
 Where th' are extended. . . .

(III.iii.115-120)

According to Carolyn Asp, performance in the world of complexities, like the temporal arts, exists only in the present ("Transcendence Denied" 272). When Achilles asks if his deeds are already forgotten, Ulysses replies that past deeds are "devour'd" and "hang / Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail / In monumental mock'ry" (III.iii.148,151-153). Neither beauty, wit, valor, love, friendship, nor even charity are intrinsic; they "are subjects all / To envious and calumniating Time" (III.iii.171-174). In other words, those qualities are, according to Asp, constant projections of the self toward an audience, an audience that can easily be deceived into praising deeds that a man might perform ("Transcendence Denied" 272). Achilles, who regards himself as the quintessential hero and who expects others to

react to him as such, is thoroughly shaken by Ulysses' argument and admits: "My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr'd; / And I myself see not the bottom of it" (III.iii. 308-309). Thus, we see an Achilles who is nothing without his role of hero, of which others seem able to deprive him (Asp, "Transcendence Denied" 273). Thersites also comments quite jeeringly at this Achilles and calls him "thou picture of what thou seemest, and idol of idiot-worshippers" (V.i.8). In an answer to Aeneas' question, "If not Achilles, sir / What is your name?" Achilles' response is significant in terms of this building theme: "If not Achilles, nothing" (IV.v.75-76). In consequence of such passages, we come to see Achilles, hero of the ancient world, as "nothing," sulking in his tent, playing with Patroclus, exchanging banter with Thersites, blustering with Ajax. But we will see him as far worse: ordering his thugs to murder the unarmed Hector and then taking the credit for slaying a great hero. Thus, this Achilles is not "Achilles" but the "nothing" of his own alternative, the "picture" of what he seems.

This consistent debasing of heroes and heroism continues. The wily Ulysses, who spent ten years outwitting his enemies--human, divine, monstrous, and natural--is reduced to mouthing unexamined platitudes of a doctrine of order which the play itself consistently subverts (see Kimbrough, chapter VII). Ulysses also has feet of clay.

The relativism of his arguments with Achilles contrasts sharply with his earlier statements concerning immutable hierarchical structures. As we have noted earlier, this speech, looked at in context, reveals itself as nothing more than a string of pious platitudes to which no one, least of all Ulysses himself, pays any practical attention. Certainly Ulysses' scheme to get Achilles back into the action by making him jealous of Ajax is a further violation of "degree, priority, and place." After all, Ulysses' main goal is to win the war, and it is to this goal that he dedicates his energies and supports any philosophy. Therefore, his apparent dedication to the principles of order is ironically subservient to the creation of that social and political chaos called war.

Asp gives a cogent description of his character:

Ulysses' intellectual position lacks a center, vacillates with the situation, and is essentially contradictory. . . . In spite of his elaborate arguments, Ulysses' policies, like Cressida's body, become the "spoils of opportunity": all of his skill as a machiavel comes to naught as the events of the battle overcome any attempts to control them. ("Transcendence Denied" 273).

And, as usual, Thersites makes a biting comment concerning Ulysses' character and efforts:

Ulysses is not proved worth a blackberry; they set me up, in policy, that mongrel cur, Ajax, against the dog of as bad a kind, Achilles: and now is the cur Ajax prouder than the cur

Achilles and will not arm today; whereupon
the Grecians began to proclaim barbarism.
(V.iv.15-20)

As we know, Achilles is finally moved to enter the war not because of Ulysses' scheming and policies but because of his desire to avenge Patroclus' death: "Achilles / Is arming, weeping, cursing, and vowing vengeance" (V.v.31-32). The Greek commanders are all driven by pride and appetite and the lust for power, precisely and ironically the motives that Ulysses names as dominant when order and degree are wanting. As Elias Schwartz says, "where all are equally without merit, there can be no order or degree" (308).

This deflation of heroic character also affects the Trojans. Even Hector betrays the hopes invested in him at the beginning. In the council scene, we see an apparently rational man. Hector must decide whether to end the bloody strife by returning Helen or whether to prolong an irrational conflict whose basic issue is, paradoxically, national honor. As Troilus puts the matter when addressing the issue of war itself: "Why keep we her [Helen]? The Grecians keep our aunt" (II.ii.80). To Troilus' argument--merely keeping what has been stolen--Hector opposes the ethical judgment that

Thus to persist
In doing wrong extenuates not wrong,
But makes it much more heavy.
(II.ii.187-189)

Hector judges Helen "not worth what she doth cost the holding" (II.ii.51). But Troilus, as noted earlier, with his idealizing language, transforms Helen, wife of Sparta's king, a realistic character, to a pearl "whose price hath launch'd above a thousand ships," a "worthy prize" of inestimable value (II.ii.81, 88), indeed a symbol of Trojan honor. Even if Helen is not worth the spilling of a single drop of blood, she is nevertheless, in Troilus's words,

A theme of honor and renown,
 A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
 Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
 And fame in time to come canonize us.
 (II.ii.199-202)

Unexpectedly, Hector does an about-face, succumbs to the image, and decides to keep her:

Hector's opinion
 Is this in way of truth; yet ne'er the less,
 My spritely brethren, I propend to you
 In resolution to keep Helen still,
 For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependence
 Upon our joint and several dignities.
 (II.ii.188-193)

Hector's decision in the council scene has always puzzled critics. O. J. Campbell considers the turnabout Machiavellian (110). Mark Sacharoff claims that although Hector's arguments are more valid logically, Troilus' spirit and pathos win him over. Hector's choice is a decision of tragic error brought about by rhetorical rather than ethical appeal (52). Jean Gazen argues that Hector's decision is perfectly acceptable according to Renaissance norms of honor and duelling codes (129). Barton says that Hector

"perverse" turns his back on the truth he sees, merely because he is besotted with a cozening idea of glory and honor to be won" (Introduction, Tro. 446). Carolyn Asp notes that he abandons "the complexity of impersonated character in order to play the anachronistic part of the chivalric hero" ("Transcendence Denied" 267). However we explain the turnabout, we have to agree first that if Hector had not capitulated, the play would have had to stop; second, we have to agree that it proves to be a grave error in judgment. And it is not the only error he makes. In the "maiden battle" (IV.v.86) with Ajax, the ritualized combat ends with "embracement" and allows Hector to act with valor, pride, and courtesy, according to Aeneas (III.v.78-82). But Ajax's estimation is quite different: his cousin is "too gentle and too free a man" (IV.v.138) to deal successfully with complex realities. Troilus later voices the same criticism, calling Hector's sense of fair play "Fool's play . . . Hector, then 'tis wars" (V.iii.43-49).

Hector's chivalry, as we have already seen, does not prevent his being tempted by the goodly armor of the Greek soldier. Having stripped the dead Greek and found within only a "putrified core," he removes his own armor and thus exposes himself to Achilles' savagery. Hector's last words, "I am unarm'd; forego this advantage, Greek" (V.ix.9), are a final appeal to what Asp calls an

inoperative ideal by whose norms he had tried to act out his part in the drama of the war. Hector is destroyed because he embraced a role that is doomed in a struggle marked by savagery and expediency; it has no relationship to the reality of war as waged by Achilles and the Myrmidons. ("Transcendence Denied" 269)

This sense of fair play and honor, then, is ultimately exposed as a delusion, at odds with the pragmatic necessities of war and the ideals of reason and justice. Douglas Cole explains Shakespeare's deliberate distortion of values as artistic choices which reveal a radical critique of human pretentiousness, "a critique ultimately leveled at man's characteristic habit of myth-making itself" (77):

Hector's code of honor, and by extension the myth of epic heroism itself, is thus called into question--and in a way even more disturbing than by the blackening of Hector's opposite number, Achilles. Shakespeare's Achilles delights in mockery and contempt. He relishes and even imitates the scabrous jesting and role-playing of Thersites (who in turn lends an intentionally nasty homosexual coloration to the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus). His envy-ridden advocacy of foul talk and foul play marks him as the antithesis of the chivalric warrior. Yet he is the one who wins out over Hector, thereby becoming the subject of Homer's song and posterity's admiration.

Shakespeare insists that the epic idols all have feet of clay, and the bitter revelation seems to have particular point for the idolaters--the audience whose literary tradition has hallowed the heroes of classical epic, and whose norms of personal and social order have been directly invoked. Man speaks of reason, truth, and justice, of order and degree; but man opts for pleasure, revenge, and envy, for a specious honor and a specious love. That the latter should swallow up the former in a context of epic pretention is, of course,

all the more ironic. And as a consequence, man's poetic myth-making is itself exposed as simultaneously self-celebrating and self-deluding. (81)

In this play, the great heroes of tradition are shown to be motivated by selfish appetites for sex and power, and yet, as Camille Slight's notes, they are men who also pride themselves on the beauty of their emotions and the subtlety of their wisdom (46). Thus, guided by their appetites, they destroy the value of their own lives. In the world of Troilus and Cressida, in both the love plot and the war plot,

. . . appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

(I.iii.121-124)

What Shakespeare reveals about the martial heroes--dramatizations of the failure of men to live up to their values--has its counterpart in the lovers of the play, Troilus and Cressida. Tradition demands a true Troilus and a false Cressida, but, as Douglas Cole points out, Shakespeare's tactics "conspire to subvert whatever associations of romantic idealism inhere in the myth as story. Both the courtly game of wooing and Cressida's betrayal are consummated with unprecedented celerity" (81). Just as the heroes have been deflated, so will the lovers be--suggesting the pervasive subjection of reason to lust. Colie says

that Shakespeare handles the comedic in this play just as he handles the heroic:

The love affair is denied its conventional resolution in union, since to a world in which values are so askew comedy offers no appropriate decorum, no therapeutic purgation for such widespread infection. . . . In spite of the fact of war, the deaths, and the personal failures of hero and heroine, this play denies its tragic component; in spite of its city-setting and the pimping citizen Pandarus who trades in his niece's flesh, the play offers no comic opportunity for resolution and reunion, no society with which a hero and heroine may be identified. (Shakespeare's Living Art 322)

So the play subverts not only the epic but also the comic, romantic, and tragic. The comical part suggests a festive form ending in reconciliation, while the satirical part suggests the anatomy of a world in fragments that can attain no redeeming end. It is a nightmare of incompleteness from which our heroes and heroines do not awaken through the discovery of relationships. And just as the audience is shielded from too much engagement with the heroes, so will we be distanced from Troilus and Cressida. There will be none of the lyricism of their romance as found in Chaucer. We know from tradition that Troilus must die and Cressida must be false and eventually cast out as a leper, but here Shakespeare shields us from the melodrama and mortality inherent in such endings. Indeed, Shakespeare forces us beyond sentimentality, or even amused disgust, toward emotional and intellectual understanding, demanding an

increasingly sophisticated response to the ravages of time and appetite.

In the love plot, then, both Troilus and Cressida are flawed. The discrepancy between word and deed extends here also to a discrepancy between word and word, according to Muir (110). We will see a Troilus who in the first scene refuses to fight but later goes off to the battlefield; he speaks bitterly of Helen as being painted with the blood of both Greeks and Trojans, but in Act II he passionately defends her retention because her "youth and freshness / Wrinkles Apollo's, and makes pale the morning" (ii.78-79). If Troilus is so constant, so true, we need to ask, true to what? If the answer is Cressida, then we have to ask why Troilus never mentions marriage to her or why he does not claim her as his mistress to keep her from being traded to the Greeks. However, we do not have to ask questions outside the play itself. As we will see, Troilus will continually make things into what they are not: Cressida more than Helen; the act of love more than that act; Helen into the sum of romantic significance; but, ironically, himself into less than he is. He explains himself: "I am true as truth's simplicity, / And simpler than the infancy of truth" (III.ii.169-170). And he is, indeed, infantile, just as he promised at the beginning:

But I am weaker than a woman's tear,
Tamer than sleep, fonder than ignorance,

Less valiant than the virgin in the night,
 And skillless as unpractis'd infancy.
 (I.i.9-12)

As for his constancy to the war, when we first see Troilus, he is unarming, proclaiming that "I cannot fight upon this argument; / It is too stain'd a subject for my sword" (I.i.92-93). Here he is denying the concept of chivalry which later he will force into decisive, collective action. In council with his brothers, he will argue passionately that Helen is worth the slaughter that decimates both Greek and Trojan forces. And as for Cressida, he proclaims his love for her to be constant and true in language where he promises plainness (IV.iv.102-108). Yet faced with separation and Cressida's betrayal, his own constancy is at once forgotten, according to Colie, as he "undeclares plainness in the fancification of his outcry against Cressida and Diomed" (Shakespeare's Living Art 332).

John D. Cox says that Troilus is merely "mad in Cressid's love"; his love is also a delusion:

The images of Troilus' fancy never grow to something of great constancy because this play assumes nothing constant for them to grow to-- either in Troilus' self-intoxicating passion ("give me swift transportance to those fields / Where I may wallow in the lily beds") or in its object. What his visions manifest is not faith but hopeful delusion, the destructive parody of faith. . . . Cressida is a faithless sweetheart and there can be no reawakening her lover's faith . . . since Troilus' faith was delusion to begin with. ("The Error of Our Eye" 159)

When the play opens, Troilus divests himself of the costume of the warrior to play the courtly lover. His initial speech mocks himself, invites us to laugh at his love-wounds, and prevents us from taking his passion at his estimate:

Why should I war without the walls of Troy,
That find such cruel battle here within?
Each Troyan that is master of his heart,
Let him to field, Troilus, alas, hath none.
(I.i.2-5)

In the dialogue with Pandarus that follows, we find more comic inanity, as Pandarus himself, the prototypal pimp, defines the real nature of Troilus' passion. When he cries out against Pandarus' insensitivity, Troilus uses brutal imagery to define his "love":

I tell thee I am mad
In Cressid's love; thou answer'st she is fair,
Pourest in the open ulcer of my heart
Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her
voice,
.....
But saying thus, instead of oil and balm,
Thou lay'st in every gash that love hath
given me
The knife that made it.
(I.i.51-54, 61-63)

His love, or rather his passion, is one that drives men mad, that ulcerates the heart, and gashes the flesh: it is lust. To his own question, "What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we" (I.i.99), he offers an answer in lines which are both conventional and unintentional, comparing himself to a merchant seeking Cressida's bed:

Her bed is India, there she lies, a pearl;
 Between our Ilium and where she resides,
 Let it be call'd the wild and wandering flood,
 Ourself the merchant, and this sailing Pandar
 Our doubtful hope, our convoy, and our bark.
 (I.i.100-104)

His very precise naming of her "bed" as his goal and himself as a "merchant," certainly suggests something other than idealistic protestations. T. McAlindon argues that from the beginning, Troilus' use of the language of love reveals more than anything else a distinct lack of judgment and experience. The whole style and tone of the scene suggests that in the use of the language of love, he is "skillless as unpracticed infancy" (51). From the beginning, then, Shakespeare establishes a discrepancy between Troilus' delusion and the reality that underlies and belies it, a condition we have already witnessed in the council scene.

This double image of Troilus, at once a self-deluded, lusty fool and also a naive, constant lover, continues in Act III. When his first assignation is about to take place, he unwittingly suggests that he is not so much a love destined (as he believes) for Elysian fields, as a lost soul moving toward his personal hell. He also identifies Pandarus with the demon porter of Hades:

I stalk about her door,
 Like to a strange soul upon the Stygian banks
 Staying for waftage. O, be thou my Charon,
 And give me swift transportation to these fields
 Where I may wallow in the lily-beds
 Propos'd for the deserver! (III.ii.8-13)

Although Tillyard says that Troilus here expresses a "noble devotion" (47), I think the satire is quite forceful, with Troilus' comparing his anticipation of being with Cressida with that of a damned soul awaiting transport to Hades. Elias Schwartz argues that "whatever Greek notions of the afterlife may have been, an Elizabethan would surely equate Hades with Hell. The sexual meaning of Hell is almost certainly operative here also, as in the last line of sonnet 129" (310). Just as his earlier speeches reveal a discrepancy between what he intends and the reality he expresses, so does this speech reveal a ludicrous and pathetic aspect of Troilus' character--self-delusion and self-deprecation in which so many of the characters seem to partake.

In the scene which follows these lines, for all that Troilus attempts to exalt his meeting his Cressida, the same kind of ironic deflation continues. Love is reduced to a matter of appetite. And it becomes even clearer that Troilus' desire is sensual. Again his language reveals more than he realizes: Troilus' poetry contains an unacknowledged sensual basis which refuses to be suppressed. The feeding imagery he uses to describe his desire shows us a Troilus who seeks sensual pleasure, and we cannot mistake the underlying coarseness in the poetry: "Wat'ry palates taste indeed / Love's thrice-repured nectar" (III.ii.21-22); "Praise us as we are tasted" (III.ii.90-91); and later in

V.ii these images give way to "fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics / Of her o'er-eaten faith" (159-60). Speaking of this kind of coarseness, Barton says: "The paradisaical banquet has given place to the disgusting remnants, the unlovely litter of the morning after. . . . Cressida is regarded by her lover principally as a matter of ingestion, an object to be devoured by the senses" (Introduction, Tro. 446). Although O. J. Campbell has called Troilus "an expert in sensuality" or a "sexual gourmet" (211-12), Troilus' own admissions of being "skillless as unpracticed infancy" (I.1.12), "simpler than the infancy of youth" (III.ii.170), and his use of the language which reveals his lack of judgment and experience (McAlindon 31) make it clear that he does not know the nature of his passion.

Scene ii of Act III is a kind of brothel scene, of which Cressida is aware, but Troilus is not. In their exchange, Troilus misses many of the implications Cressida makes, just as he misses the implications of his own speeches, but we can hardly miss the ironies in Troilus' reply when Cressida asks, "Is there nothing monstrous in love?"

Nothing but our undertakings, when we vow
to weep seas, live in fire, eat rocks, tame
tigers. . . . This [is] the monstrosity
in love, lady, that the will is infinite and
the execution confin'd, that the desire is
boundless and the act a slave to limit.

(III.ii.76-83)

Once again we are struck by the fatuity of lust-deluded lovers and at the impermanence of human love. In the world of Troilus and Cressida, love is only one of the illusory values (as we have seen) contingent on "envious and calumniating Time." For a mature Troilus, "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame" might have expressed a real insight; but our Troilus can never achieve such maturity.

Thus we see that Troilus yearns for sensual pleasure, but it becomes evident that Troilus never does. D. A. Traversi states that the "basis of Troilus' 'honour' is simply sensual impulse, and its weakness lies largely in his unwillingness to recognize this fact" (13). Ornstein accounts for Troilus' innocence, or rather self-deception, as romanticism carried to the extreme of philosophic anarchy: he says Troilus' "defense of a slut and the worship of a wanton suffice as mirrors to reflect his image as a courtly lover" (31). Agreeing with Ornstein, Asp writes, "Troilus desires to have Cressida play the role of courtly lady for his own ends: he uses her to reflect his own 'truth'" ("Transcendence Denied" 263). Creating an image of himself as the embodiment of truth, Troilus swears that "Troilus shall be such to Cressid as what envy can say worst shall be a mock for his truth, and what truth can speak truest not truer than Troilus" (III.ii.104-106). It seems at any rate that Troilus is unaware of the complexities both of his situation (political and personal)

and of his own deepest self. Consequently, he has idealized the roles into which he casts himself as courtly lover and warrior--and Cressida as a courtly lady.

As he has done with the characters, so does Shakespeare undermine and deflate literary themes and traditions. The war, as we have noted, is merely a metaphor for lechery; the tradition of passion of two immortal lovers is merely an argument of a whore and a cuckold. In keeping with the author's intention, we have a young Troilus, who, having gone to war, feels he must now take a mistress. According to Colie, "this mistress must be in the high style, a sonnet-mistress. [Troilus] stages himself as the high-minded lover whose Petrarchan language rings out in his first speech" (Shakespeare's Living Art 329). However, as we noticed, in Troilus' hands the language often misses the mark and degrades both himself and the lady, not to mention Pandarus. He does not realize what language (or a woman) can mean to a man. Thus he insists on more than Cressida can give and insists she expect more from him than mortal man can give.

If he is to retain his image of himself as "true Troilus," which is already suspect, Cressida's constancy is essential. Ironically, it is "true Troilus" who introduces the negative theme of distrust in the dialogue as he repeatedly urges her to "be true" in spite of the Greeks who are, as he enticingly describes them, "full of quality; /

Their loving, well composed with gift of nature, / Flowing
and swelling o'er with arts and exercise" (IV.iv.76-78).
As Cressida perceives, his insistence betrays his own lack
of faith: "O heavens! you love me not!" (IV.iv.83). His
insistence on being true also indicates his intuitive grasp
of the reality of their situation:

But something may be done that we will not
And sometimes we are devils to ourselves,
When we will tempt the frailty of our powers,
Presuming on their changeful potency.
(III.iv.94-97)

Again their meeting centers on vows and oaths, and we are
reminded of the verbal contracts they have made in III.ii--
"Let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cres-
sids, and all brokers-between Pandars" (202-204)--which have
now become extremely ironic. In fact, in the context of the
whole play, vows have become meaningless: at the
end of the love and war plots, Cressida's betrayal and the
ignominy of Achilles and Hector make a mockery not just of
the ideals of courtly love and chivalric honor but also of
men's postures and egos. Troilus, though he remains true
to his own self-born image of love, recognizes the empti-
ness of Cressida's vows: "Words, words, mere words, no
matter from the heart" (V.iii.107-108). Yet we continue to
recognize the absurdity of a man who in Act I asks Apollo
"What Cressid is" and in Act V, after ample evidence, still
cannot accept the truth and can only agonize, "This is, and

is not, Cressid" (ii.146). From one point of view, Troilus' behavior is ludicrous. But from his own point of view, his rationale is quite logical: the Cressida who betrays him is Diomedes' Cressida. Troilus' self-esteem demands that Cressida be true to him; therefore, she is not Troilus' Cressida. He still loves his Cressida. And so he continues to delude himself and to fight--this time not for a worthless Helen but for a worthless Cressida. He suffers, as Ornstein says, without illumination (33):

This she? no, this is Diomed's Cressida.
If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
If there be rule in unity itself,
This was not she. O madness of discourse,
That cause sets up with and against itself!
Bi-fold authority, where reason can revolt
Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
Without revolt. This is, and is not, Cressid!
Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth,
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifex for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.
Instance, O instance, strong as Pluto's gates,
Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven;
Instance, O instance, strong as heaven itself,
The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd,
and loos'd,
And with another knot, [five]-finger-tied,
The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
Of her o'er-eaten faith, are given to Diomed.
(V.ii.137-160)

Colie argues that "the paradoxes, psychologically true to [Troilus'] acceptance and refusal of his own sense-evidence, reduce to meaninglessness and nonsense, and deny

what is" (Shakespeare's Living Art 342). Troilus continues to reduce himself and others to one-dimensional proportions. Accepting Ulysses' view, he brands her "false Cressida" (V.ii.178). As a result of his failure to see beneath the roles he has created for himself and Cressida, he fails to see that his desire for Cressida may be like Diomedes' and that, according to Asp, Cressida herself "is not so much unworthy of him as motivated by a complexity that he cannot (or perhaps will not) understand" (Transcendence Denied 256). Ornstein remarks that if he were a more consistent philosopher,

. . . he would realize that he has no reason to complain, for if the individual mind sets the value of all things [as Troilus has stated, "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" (II.ii.52)], then Diomedes is entitled to his estimate of Cressida's worth and she to her estimate of Troilus' affection. (34)

At any rate, disillusioned and uncomprehending, Troilus resumes the role of warrior he cast off in Act I with much savagery, intending to kill Diomedes. Thus, Cressida becomes (Colie doubts that she was ever more, Shakespeare's Living Art 342) merely a reason for killing--just as earlier Troilus had used Helen to justify the commitment to hatred and carnage. Again, it is Thersites who keeps this duel between the two warriors in perspective as he watches them fight: "Hold thy whore, Grecian!--now for thy whore, Trojan! . . . What's become of the wenching rogues? I think they have swallow'd one another. I would laugh at that miracle--

yet in a sort lechery eats itself" (V.iv.24-25, 32-35). At one moment we are expected to laugh with Thersites and the next to feel with Troilus. At any rate, we are left, not with a heroic Troilus "whose will is infinite," but merely with one who is self-deluded and deflated, whose "execution [is] confined." The revenge Troilus intends eludes him since Diomedes refuses to oblige, and poor Troilus even loses his horse to Diomedes (V.v.1), who proclaims that he has "chastis'd the amorous Troyan" (V.v.4). Troilus gains no self-knowledge. At the end he is still unable to comprehend Hector's warning that "pleasure and revenge / Have ears more deaf than adders to the voice / Of any true decision" (II.ii.171-173), and exits swearing, "Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe" (V.x.31).

As we are kept from viewing Troilus as the ideal lover or the knight faithful in adversity and are made instead to see his pretensions and self-delusions, we are most certainly hindered from viewing Cressida as the idealized queen of courtly love--a role thrust on her by Troilus. The same satire that is directed toward Troilus' pretensions is directed toward Cressida's coquetry. Though we are tempted to invest Cressida with romantic attributes of other Cressidas, here we will find that just as men subject themselves to accident and contingency as if it were fate, so will women: Cressida submits to Troilus then to Diomedes. And just as every other character is

stripped of his epic and romantic personality, so is Cressida. Like Ulysses, Diomedes sees her as "a daughter of the game."

As we have noted, the play opens with a scene between Pandarus and a lovesick Troilus who extols Cressida's charms. In the very next scene, we meet "the pearl" of Troilus' eulogy, where she is certainly holding her own in a bawdy repartee with first her servant then Pandarus. Here, Cressida is bold, witty, courtly--not exactly what we have been led to believe by Troilus and Pandarus. Troilus has described her as "too stubborn-chaste against all suit" (I.i.97); yet here we see her willing to lie on her back to defend her belly (I.ii.260). She is quite capable, in the world of Troy, of defending herself. She tells Pandarus:

Upon my back, to defend my belly, upon my
wit, to defend my wiles, upon my
secrecy, to defend mine honesty, my mask,
to defend my beauty, and you, to defend
all these. . . . (I.ii.260-264)

We also notice in the exchange between Pandarus and Cressida that her consent to enter into an affair with Troilus is a foregone conclusion (which again makes an ironic jest of Troilus' agonies and frustrations). Once Pandarus leaves, Cressida tells us in what kind of world she finds herself, one in which she can maintain a dominant position only by withholding sexual favors:

Yet hold I off. Women are angels wooing:
Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing.
That she belov'd knows nought that knows not this:

Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is.
 That she was never yet that ever knew
 Love got so sweet as when desire did sue,
 Therefore this maxim out of love I teach:
 Achievement is command; ungain'd, beseech.
 (I.ii.286-293)

Cressida, who, like Helen, becomes a pawn in the war plot, has been deprived of a secure place in Troy because of her father's treachery. She becomes a ward of her uncle Pandarus, whom she calls a "bawd" and whom we see as licentious. Thus she attempts to find security in the only way she knows, the only way her culture allows: she uses her physical beauty to attract the praise of men and find a protector. Fearing that Troilus' attraction is limited to sexual fulfillment, she feels it necessary to mask her real affection for him, even though she says her "heart's content firm love doth bear" (I.ii.280).

In her article "In Defense of Cressida," Carolyn Asp argues that Cressida and Ulysses are the only characters who are aware that they are in "an ambiguous world in which value is elicited from or projected onto objects by observers" because the play reveals no fixed intrinsic value in objects (409). As noted earlier, Ulysses uses his position to manipulate events to his own political ends. Cressida, however, cannot manipulate; she is, however, subjected to the evaluation of others and assumes that her identity and value are defined in this way. According to Asp, "the pathos of her situation lies in this very assumption that

she has no intrinsic value apart from that reflected back to her by observers" ("In Defense" 410). The contradictory identities we have been studying thus far, then, can certainly include Cressida. We expect her to be false and faithless, and she will be. But we will be titillated by other possibilities before we concur with Ulysses and Thersites.

When the lovers are finally brought together, Cressida is anything but the stock comic figure of a slut even though Pandarus has told Troilus that "she'll bereave you a' th' deeds, too, if she call your activity in question" (III.ii.56-57). She expresses her fears about love: "Blind fear that seeing reason leads finds safer footing than blind reason stumbling without fear. To fear the worst oft cures the worse" (III.ii.71-73). Soon, however, Cressida forgets her fears and her own advice, and confesses to Troilus, "I have lov'd you night and day / For many weary months" (III.ii.114-115). Immediately, she is ashamed to have spoken so foolishly and openly, and, fearing her vulnerability, she states, "If I confess much, you will play the tyrant" (III.ii.119). Yet once she has begun to respond, she cannot stop and self-consciously asks, "Who shall be true to us, / When we are so unsecret to ourselves?" (III.ii.124-125). In spite of the fact that Cressida wants to believe that Troilus loves her, she is afraid of the vulnerability to which that love will open her. She

uses the image of the divided self to explain her conflict of identities; and in this way she warns Troilus that she cannot be the ideal of constancy and courtly love that he longs for: "I have a kind of self resides with you; / But an unkind self, that itself will leave / To be another's fool" (III.ii.148-150). With much self-awareness, Cressida has explained her fear and unknowingly prophesied her betrayal. Nevertheless, she allows herself to be swept along in Troilus' rhetoric as his courtly lady. In what Asp calls the "self-consciously parodic betrothal" ("In Defense" 411) which concludes the scene, Shakespeare again reminds us of the traditional identities of these lovers, "true as Troilus," "false as Cressid." Colie argues that when Troilus and Cressida offer their names as stereotypes, they abdicate their claims on both individual personality and human stature, permitting themselves to become the "dross that Thersites thinks all men and women to be":

In this play, people flatten out to attributes, even to just one attribute--Pandar becomes only a bawd, Cressida only a whore, Ajax only a braggart soldier, Nestor only an "old chronicler"; or they are redefined, Hector as greedy brute, Achilles as gangster. And thus they become meaningless; it is not this Hector for whom one mourns but the idea of the other, the "real" Hector; we cannot sympathize with Troilus' loss of Cressida any more than we can pity, for more than a moment, a Cressida soon to be cast off by Diomed. (Shakespeare's Living Art 338-39)

However, Asp cautions that as observers of the entire action, we, the audience, will be asked to reevaluate the

epithets "true" and "false" as applied to each lover ("In Defense" 411).

Troilus and Cressida are allowed one night of bliss before their forced separation. But even before Aeneas arrives with the news that Cressida is to be traded to the Greeks, we see that all is not well in paradise. Cressida is still insecure and is reminded of her own advice when Troilus is ready to leave her. She berates herself, "O foolish Cressid! I might have still held off, / And then you would have tarried" (IV.ii.17-18). When she learns that she is to be traded to the Greeks for Antenor, she is genuinely sorry. She expresses with feeling the place Troilus occupies in her life: "No kin, no love, no blood, no soul so near me / As this sweet Troilus" (IV.iii.98-99). But, again, we are reminded of her fate as she speaks of her fidelity in terms of the "falsehood" she must come to exemplify: "O you gods divine, / Make Cressid's name as the very crown of falsehood, / If ever she leave Troilus!" (IV.ii.99-100). In their parting scene, however, Troilus directs her attention to those forces beyond her control which will coerce her into betraying him. By the time Troilus delivers her to Diomedes, she has become merely a possession, and Diomedes tells Troilus, "To her own worth / She shall be priz'd" (IV.iv.133-134).

The deflation of Cressida's character is at its worst once she is brought to the Greek camp. Although

she resumes the mask of the bold and witty lady, using her "wit to defend her wile" (I.ii.261), she is the one who is reduced now--just as she had earlier so scathingly deflated the roles of the Trojan heroes. She is passed from man to man to be kissed, observed, and commented on, and Ulysses' contemptuous remarks make her realize that she will have to find yet another role in order to survive here: "There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, / Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body" (IV.v.55-57). Only Diomedes has told her she can expect his protection: "The luster in your eye, heaven in your cheek, / Pleads your fair usage" (IV.iv.118-19). However, this "fair usage" will be little more than his demanding sexual favors since he is, in one critic's words, "a womanizer of the most brutal and threatening kind" (Jago 25). In dealing with Diomedes, she holds no advantage.

The seduction scene between Diomedes and Cressida, like a play-within-the-play, has several audiences and commentators, and we are given a variety of viewpoints. As we have mentioned earlier, Troilus' reactions are noted by Ulysses; and Thersites, as usual, provides a savage commentary that reduces the whole ensemble to a one-dimensional farce so that our emotional involvement is distanced. Cressida is torn in this scene between remaining true to Troilus and needing the support Diomedes offers. Asp argues:

She knows that if she betrays Troilus she simultaneously abandons her sense of intrinsic worth. Throughout her dialogue with Diomedes it is obvious that Cressida desires to extricate herself from the role of whore he expects her to play, but his appreciation, brutal as it is, is more than she can sacrifice to idealism. ("In Defense" 414).

She is haunted by this idealistic role, and remembering her vows to Troilus, she exclaims, "he lov'd me--O false wench!" (V.ii.70). But when Diomedes threatens to abandon her, she decides to play the part toward which she has been moving--that of "false Cressida"--and bids him "Come." Making her decision, Cressida again admits that she is divided. She sadly exclaims:

Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee,
But with my heart the other eye doth see.
Ah, poor our sex! this fault in us I find,
The error of our eye directs our mind.
What error leads must err; O then conclude,
Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude.
(V.ii.107-12)

She remembers her devotion to Troilus, but Diomedes' attention is here and now. Cressida shows an awareness of the hopelessness of her position, and her last remarks allude to the effect of living in a society that is obsessed with sexuality and yet denies it a place among its sanctities. She has come to terms with Ulysses' philosophy:

For time is like a fashionable host
That slightly shakes his parting guest by
th' hand,
And with his arms outstretch'd, as he would fly,
Grasps in the comer. The welcome ever smiles,
And farewell goes out sighing. Let not virtue
seek

Remuneration for the thing it was;

.....
 The present eye praises the present object.

(III.iii.165-70, 180)

Asp argues that the pathos of Cressida's situation arises because even though she is fully aware of the Greeks' contempt, she is incapable of extricating herself from the position that generates their scorn ("In Defense" 415). Troilus, in his effort to make Cressida more than she is, observes that the Cressida who responds to Diomedes' lust, joined to him by "another knot-five-finger-tied" (V.ii.158), seems to have little connection with the Cressida who responded to the courtly Troilus and was tied to him "with the bonds of heaven" (V.ii.154). We have seen, however, that his vision of Cressida has everything to do with his ego, with his own conception of himself as a lover, rather than with what Cressida really is. Basically, Diomedes and Troilus have the same goal--Cressida's bed. The difference between the two, according to Asp, is that Troilus projects an image of courtly romantic love onto the relationship and Diomedes does not. At the end of her speech, we hear Thersites saying she could not offer stronger proof of her conclusion unless she had said, "My mind is now turn'd whore" (V.ii.114). Perhaps it is true that Cressida gives up her social qualities for a single function--that of a whore. Her action is certainly judged that way by the three onlookers. She makes herself pliable to the

standards and desires of both Trojans and Greeks, and she allows herself to capitulate to the forces Troilus warned were beyond her control. We are sent back to Pandarus' comment, "Let her be as she is" (I.i.66), and her own assessments of her nature in I.ii and V.ii. Frye says that "she may be faithless, but fidelity would be impossibly quixotic in the world she is in, a world where heroism degenerates into brutality and love itself is reduced to another kind of mechanical stimulus" (85). She sees herself more clearly than anyone else, including Ulysses and Thersites, as a "woeful Cressid 'mongst the merry Greeks!" (IV.iv.56).

The world of this play is, as we have said, a world turned upside down. Frye has said that it seems designed to show us a world where human beings get "into the kind of mess that requires deliverance" (62). But he also observes "a final irony of language that we call the portrayal of such a world 'disillusioned,' and associate the term pejoratively with weary pessimism. Being disillusioned with a world like that is the starting point of any genuine myth of deliverance" (85). We are left with a vision of a world where all purpose seems perverted and where all ideals are given only "mouth honor." The values that men say they live by--honor, love, prowess, order, and degree--are contradicted by their behavior, which in most cases is founded on pleasure, envy, lust,

revenge, and self-delusion. The contrast between these values and actual behavior, the discrepancy between word and deed, and finally even between word and word, is deliberately heightened by the rhetoric and ethos that Shakespeare presents. The council scenes, which are packed with concepts such as authority, hierarchy, order, respect, reason, justice, honor, are juxtaposed with the slander and railing of Thersites, which is often close to the facts: some of the Greek leaders are stupid, and the war really is being fought for a whore and a cuckold. Shakespeare has shown us the forces which leave Troilus the employer of a pandar and Cressida a strumpet. As Camille Slights has shown, the parallel structure, the pattern of counterpointed double-plotting, reinforces the theme and tone of disillusionment and frustration (42-51). These aspects are reinforced by several passages that consistently point to a unifying thematic center, a bitter comment on human beings whose aspirations outweigh their capacity for self-knowledge and whose failure is due to their underestimation of the internal appetite:

The ample proposition that hope makes
 In all designs begun on earth below
 Facts in the promised largeness.
 (I.iii.3-5)

All of the play's characters are presented as failures.

All of them "would be" what they are not. Their actions

belie their hopes and ideals. They see only through their own biases:

. . . every action that hath gone before,
Whereof we have record, trial did draw
Bias and thwart, not answering the aim
And that unbodied figure of the thought
That gav't surmised shape.

(I.iii.13-17)

They become "monsters" of their own unrecognized passion:

They have the voice of lions and the act
of hares, are they not monsters?

(III.ii.88-89)

As Troilus tells Cressida, it is this substitution of word for deed that is grotesque:

This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that
the will is infinite and the execution confined,
that the desire is boundless and the act a slave
to limit.

(III.ii.81-83)

Consequently, these deflated, self-divided characters betray themselves and others as they fail to know who they are and are not:

And sometimes we are devils to ourselves
When we will tempt the frailty of our powers.

(IV.iv.95-96)

We and the characters are frustrated by the action, the failure of hope, the limitations. Shakespeare creates the expectation of self-discovery then undermines that possibility by the structural irony he builds into the theatrical situation. Like Troilus, we want the action to reveal "What Cressida is, what Pandar, and what we" (I.i.99). Troilus, Cressida, and company have become our creations. But by the same token we are theirs. On Shakespeare's stage the

self is a reflected entity which reciprocally reflects the identity of others who give it identity. What we see at the end of the play, then, must be ourselves.

In Troilus and Cressida Shakespeare has exposed sin and folly in a world of fools and knaves, a world where human action is doomed to imperfection and disappointment. As Barton says, men may talk like gods, but they often end up acting like those beasts to which Thersites so persistently compares them (Introduction, Tro. 447). Douglas Cole argues that these themes might have touched an elegiac note, but "Shakespeare's deliberately indecorous handling of myth accents instead the broader, more grotesque contrasts possible in such a world--a world where the human image can neither pride itself nor console itself in any self-flattering light" (83). Shakespeare has exposed our real life.

Troilus and Cressida flies in the face of our normal expectations for a unified beginning, middle, and end, for causal probability and character developments, even for a clear demarcation between audience and play or between creating author and created play. Shakespeare achieves an ironic distance by permitting Thersites' and Pandarus' words to survive the action. As Margaret Arnold observes, "In an orderly universe, Thersites would observe his lowly rank, and Pandarus would not wander onto a battlefield to speak the epilogue. In a world in which appetite has

killed Hector, disillusioned Troilus, and devalued Cressida, raiers and panders survive unscathed" (51).

At the beginning of the play, we are invited to like or find fault as our pleasures are. At the end, Pandarus steps forward to release us from the action, asking for applause. But even this conventional device has a peculiar twist: the appeal for applause is shocking as Pandarus also addresses us as "traders in the flesh," and "brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade" to whom he bequeaths his venereal diseases (V.x.45-56). We are forced to realize that we have participated in the degradation of our most cherished values even as we become conscious that this is a play in which the fraudulent quality being exposed is our own idealism: we want a happy ending to a story whose major premise is the destruction of one civilization and the brutalizing of another--all for lechery. According to Douglas Cole, Shakespeare exposes our real-life tendency to idealize our errors of judgment and self-serving passions under the guise of chivalric myth (83). Colie suggests that "by forcing the technical achievements of his craft to their bottom limit of expressiveness, he offered a paradigm of life (like Ajax) 'languageless, a very monster'" (Shakespeare's Living Art 351). After such knowledge, what forgiveness? We are left gazing in a mirror that reveals our own delusion and folly, with neither tragic resolution nor romantic redemption in sight. Only in art do we have the

benefit of the whole picture; in life we see "through a glass darkly" even though we may try to separate what is illusory in our perception. Literature communicates a superior reality, if you will, that cannot exclude the illusory, which Frye says is the kernel of what Wallace Stevens calls supreme fiction, a structure that has been made in the full knowledge that it is fiction (84-85). Once again, then, Shakespeare's artistic mastery is evident in giving order to a world of chaos since the very order of the play itself contradicts the nihilism of the action. As Barton asserts, "Ultimately, Thersites' reductivist view of man is refuted by the simple fact that Troilus and Cressida exists" (Introduction, Tro. 447).

The problem plays, then, present us with worlds very much like our own--rich in ambiguity and in complexity. In All's Well That Ends Well, Shakespeare deliberately examines the difficulties arising from the opposing elements of fairy tale and realism, of romance motivation and psychological probability. In this play, as in Troilus and Cressida, there are characters who "tempt the frailty of [their] powers" and fail the test. And we the audience may again "like or find fault" as our pleasures are. Certainly, as we have been in Troilus and Cressida, we will be led to an increasingly sophisticated response to the ambiguities and complexities represented in All's Well.

Chapter III

"Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live":

All's Well That Ends Well

Turning from an examination of Troilus and Cressida to All's Well That Ends Well is to be struck afresh at the range of criticism surrounding these problem plays. As with Troilus and Cressida or Measure for Measure, there is no lack of disparagement or disparity among the studies. Joseph Price, in The Unfortunate Comedy, outlines six categories for the way All's Well has been read and staged since the eighteenth century: farcical comedy, sentimental romance, serious drama, romantic fable, comical satire, and thematic symbolic dramatization (133). After presenting these capsule summaries, Price concludes:

Such constricted interpretations of All's Well have achieved at times a unity of form, but only at the expense of Shakespeare's intention, only by distortion of his play. For the very recurrence of six major approaches throughout its history suggests a complexity which cannot legitimately be reduced to a single focus. . . . Criticism generally has insisted that these elements jar, that only by the elimination of several can an artistic unity be imposed. But the very essence of Shakespearean comedy is variety, a blending of seemingly jarring worlds. (136)

Unable to determine its genre or intended results and unable to accept these jarring notes, most critics have declared the play a failure. E. M. W. Tillyard opens his discussion of the play with the sentence, "It is agreed that All's Well is in some sort a failure" (89). Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch considers the play "one of Shakespeare's worst" (Introduction, AWW xxxv). Words such as shocking, revolting, corrupt, nauseous, and disgusting crop up regularly, especially in the vocabularies of the play's early critics. Certainly, there is evidence enough in the play to provoke such attacks; and most critics, whether of not they approve of the play, agree with Alexander Leggatt, who in his article "The Testing of Romance," maintains that it is a world of "fistulas, venereal disease, and bed-wetting" (22). Indeed, even among the lovers of All's Well, there is a consensus that the play never quite seems to work (Brooke 73).

As with Troilus and Cressida, critics perceive the problems of the play to be quite varied, and there has been little agreement as to why Shakespeare "failed" with the play. Not only genre, but themes, characterization, plot, and source have also presented difficulty. The themes of All's Well have been examined by G. K. Hunter in his Arden edition of the play. These include the contrast between youth and age, the "moral frailty" of the young, and the moral stability of the old as exemplified in Bertram's dead

father, the King, the Countess, and Lafew. Another contrast is that between the inherited rank of Bertram and the innate virtue of the more humbly born Helena, two different kinds of honor which the King discusses in his ex cathedra speech:

Good alone
 Is good, without a name; vileness is so:
 The property by what it is should go
 Not by the title.

 Honors thrive,
 When rather from our acts we then derive
 Than our foregoers. The mere word's a slave.
 (II.iii.128-31, 135-37)

This theme can also be defined as the distinction between a man's nature and the way he appears to his fellows. G. Wilson Knight suggests that the play is built on a conflict between the masculine concept of honor as prowess on the battlefield and the feminine concept of honor as chastity in love (The Sovereign Flower 93-160). Closely connected with the distinction between outward appearance and inward reality, according to Knight, is the question of feminine honor--or virginity--and the honorable state of matrimony consummated by the loss of virginity, a paradox examined in the dialogue between Helena and Parolles in the first scene (The Sovereign Flower 106-08). G. K. Hunter says, "The final use of [Helena's] virginity is the purchase of honour not only for herself but also, as a ransom, for her husband" (xlili). These conflicts and contrasts in themes are reinforced by the idea that human beings are

neither completely good nor bad but "of a mingled yarn, good and ill together" (IV.iii.71-72).

Besides the question of theme, the moral ambiguity of the characters themselves has provoked much critical debate. Almost all of the major characters have been attacked. Coleridge may have thought Helena to be "Shakespeare's loveliest character" (102), but others have not been so kind, seeing her as "a thief of lust" (Andrew Lang 222) or a "nymphomaniac" (Charlton, Dark Comedies 11). About Helena's reputation, Howard Cole has quipped that she now "approaches divinity (or nymphomania), trailing clouds of footnotes" (1). W. W. Lawrence considers Lavache "unsavory" (64), while R. A. Foakes sees him as representative of an "earthly realism" (17). Bertram has been defined as everything from disagreeable to perfectly ordinary. These two attitudes, the one denouncing him as "weak, cowardly, mean-spirited" (Rossiter 88), the other defending him as "a high-bred, brave and spirited lad" (Quiller-Couch, Introduction AWW xxiv), recur throughout the play's critical history. Parolles is almost unanimously declared a villain, although lately he has acquired a few defenders. He is, as his name suggests, a man of "words" rather than "deeds." Some critics have dismissed him as "about the inanest of all Shakespeare's inventions" (Quiller-Couch, Introduction AWW xxiv). To Knight, he is

licentious (The Sovereign Flower 159). He is accused of being an "evil genius" by Tillyard (89) and "a corrupting influence" by Wilson (230). Vindicating Parolles, however, Jules Rothman asserts that he is "the prime source of humor in All's Well" (184). And J. Dennis Huston argues that he possesses "an immense amount of energy, which periodically infuses his world with dramatic life . . . [he is] a bright blot of color against a sombre background" ("Some Stain of Soldier" 431). Most critics agree that these conflicting interpretations of the major characters have arisen largely as the result of the fullness and depth with which Shakespeare created them (Wells 104). But even though the characters' inconsistencies can be attributed to mirroring reality, to showing that "our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together," many audiences still complain that the characters are incompatible with the actions they are made to perform, that the life-like characters and fictional plot fail to cohere.

Many problems, including ones concerning character, begin with accounts of Shakespeare's source, generally recognized as the ninth story of the Decameron's Third Day. The story, as Howard Cole describes its history in Shakespearean criticism, is always essentially "a folk-tale by a master of rapid narrative with the simplicity and emphasis upon action to the disregard of motivation

or psychological probability that is characteristic of the kind" (13). Tillyard's answer to "how Boccaccio coped with his inherited fairytale material" is simple:

All he aimed at was a diverting story that would not overtax the powers of a lively and critical audience to suspend willingly their disbelief. So he contented himself with keeping the characters simple, with inserting a few realistic touches . . . and with taking the fabulous lightly. (95)

Lawrence has tried to account for the lack of coherence between plot and character in Shakespeare's version of the tale through a detailed and influential historical criticism of All's Well. The different ethical interpretations which he saw as characteristic of this problem comedy were, he argued, the result of an inconsistency between Boccaccio's opinion of the characters and the judgments Shakespeare imposed on them in the process of adaptation, and a further inconsistency between Shakespeare's moral assumption and our own. The first inconsistency could be removed by historical scholarship (as Cole later elaborates); the second is ineradicable. Lawrence treats Helena as a medieval stereotype of the Clever Wench and relates the play's main plot to two conventional folk motifs, "The Fulfillment of the Tasks" and "The Healing of the King" (32), which in their original form illustrate the devotion, skill, and assiduity of the heroine:

It is clear that, from the point of view of narrative traditions still accepted in Shakespeare's

day, the conduct of Helena in fulfilling the conditions set by Bertram for their union was admirable . . . and that the "happy ending" was accepted as a convention of drama because it was also a convention of story-telling. (54)

Thus, the psychology in the folk tales in Boccaccio's story is simple and does not raise disturbing moral questions such as the worthiness of the hero as the recipient of the heroine's love or the responsibility of the heroine herself. Herbert G. Wright, in his study Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson, also excuses Helena's bed trick as "merely part of the machinery derived from . . . the incredible world of romance" (215). However, Shakespeare has endowed his characters, as we have noted, with the complex psychology of real life, and in making them lifelike characters has raised uncomfortable doubts about Helena's motives in pursuing Bertram, the reasonableness of Bertram's rejection of Helena, and the genuineness of their reconciliation. Thus, as Lawrence points out, Shakespeare has set before us real men and women and has made them act in strangely irrational fashion (74). Furthermore, a modern audience, unfamiliar with folk legend, tends to judge the behavior of the characters by the standards of twentieth-century society. Hence we regard Bertram as a cad and villain, Helena as a social climber, the bed trick as either offensive or absurd, and the conclusion as casual or arbitrary.

Taking a different approach, many critics see the play in terms of Christian symbolism or moral allegory. G. Wilson Knight finds coherence in the play's symbolic structure and is not much concerned about its verisimilitude. For Knight, the world of the play is "well-saturated with religious thought and language" (The Sovereign Flower 144-46). Following this vein, Carl Dennis argues that in All's Well Shakespeare set out deliberately to explore the meaning of agape and that "Helena is presented figuratively not only as the saintly intermediary for her husband but as the Divine Intercessor for all men, Christ" (78-82). Lawrence has also proposed a form of moral allegory along the theme, "Merit goes before Rank" (37). In "Virtue is the True Nobility," Muriel Bradbrook also sees the play as moral allegory. Maintaining that he is not making All's Well a Christian allegory, Robert G. Hunter says that the theatrical conventions Shakespeare uses, such as the bed trick and Bertram's sudden about-face, are not arbitrary or formal:

They succeed because they refer to and draw upon the shared beliefs of audience. The final scene of All's Well draws upon and refers to a belief in the reality of the descent of grace upon a sinning human. The Elizabethan audience believed in such an occurrence not as a theological abstraction, but as an everyday psychological possibility. . . . A Renaissance audience would not, I think, have considered even Bertram incapable of that alteration. (131)

More recent critics have argued that Shakespeare was writing anything but a conventional play, noting that the more analogues Lawrence advances to document the play's conventionality, the more apparent the playwright's innovations become. Robert Ornstein writes that the direct, simple, one-dimensional Virtue Story makes even clearer "the moral, intellectual and psychological depths which Shakespeare lent to his source materials" (viii). Howard Cole says of both the religious approach and Lawrence's that they are oversimplifications (2). He argues that there is a need to set Shakespeare's sources, as well as his intellectual milieu, right: "It is hoped that, after surveying all the evidence, [we] will agree that the All's Well story is far more complex than hitherto imagined, that Geoffrey Bullough is wrong on both counts when he claims that 'Shakespeare has taken a fairy tale and made of it a morality'" (x). Another criticism of the moral structure of All's Well is made by Jonas Barish, who says that "too much of it remains blueprint, Bertram's progress is diagrammed rather than demonstrated" (366). G. K. Hunter concludes,

Lawrence's basic interpretation of the play in terms of plot material is just and cannot be ignored, but other elements . . . complicate it out of recognition. Critical realism accompanies fairy-tale, satire shadows spirituality, complex moral perceptions deny us a simplicity of approach, complex intellectual interests demand analytical and detached attitude to the characters. (xliii).

It seems we are hearing that All's Well is a complicated failure in which Shakespeare attempted too many things to make all end well, that imagination flagged, leaving the effect blurred and the fusion incomplete.

Certainly All's Well presents unsolved problems to modern audiences, and the variety of interpretations, as noted with Troilus and Cressida, seems to suggest that Shakespeare's intention is not now understood. Just as some writers have proposed that the "failure" of Troilus and Cressida may lie not with Shakespeare but with the critics, so have commentators begun to assert the same idea about All's Well. In fact, G. K. Hunter shrewdly observes that "criticism of All's Well has failed, for it has failed to provide a context within which the genuine virtues of the play can be appreciated" (xxix). Noting the play's lack of popularity, Joseph Water Bennett explains in her article "New Techniques of Comedy in All's Well That Ends Well" that the "mass of unfavorable criticism arises largely from mistaken preconceptions about what the author was trying to do, or what he should have done" (338). Consequently, the more perceptive essays of the last few years agree with G. K. Hunter that these "tangles, perplexities, and perversities of treatment" (xxiii), the very disunity of the play, are evidence of Shakespeare's integrity. For example, Philip Edwards is very impressed by the "honesty"

of a craftsman who "tries to bring the deep hopes of the soul into the images of art and finds them countered by even deeper doubts" (115). Many critics see All's Well not as a failure to do something simple and traditional but as an innovation in which Shakespeare was exploiting new sources of comic effect. Bennett, for instance, proceeds on the assumption that Shakespeare knew his business and therefore that the play was a success in its time ("New Techniques" 362). R. A. Foakes says that both All's Well and Measure for Measure are experiments in which Shakespeare was seeking a reconciliation of comical satire with romantic comedy--a new form that could simultaneously accommodate passion and detachment, a lightness of tone with more than a hint of savagery (61).

As in Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare uses a traditional story that is familiar to his audience, and he thwarts our expectations of the romance as he juxtaposes the fully human world of opportunism and weak, selfish wills with traditional mythology. Thus we, the audience, are made participants in the characters' psychic struggles; we are made aware that Shakespeare is manipulating our responses just as he is manipulating the characters'. Shakespeare, then, continues the process, begun in Troilus and Cressida, of character deflation and theme devaluation, continuing to test the validity of comedy as an image of

truth. In All's Well, Leggatt says, "the values of romance are tested in a world of down to earth and often unpleasant realism" ("The Testing of Romance" 22). Therefore, to read the play simply as romantic comedy gone wrong can lead to disappointment and frustration. In All's Well, as in Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare takes familiar material and looks at it in an unfamiliar way, but, as Nicholas Brooke cautions, "it is a narrow criticism which understands All's Well as a mere negation of romance" (83). Consequently, we need to examine how Shakespeare manipulates our emotions, to determine what techniques he has used to make us feel disturbed, and how he has denied our expectations, rather than to try to explain away the play's tensions. Many of the same techniques observed in Troilus and Cressida are used here: paradox, irony, manipulation of viewpoint and language, discrepancy between word and deed, ambiguity in the management of awareness, dislocation of character from role, and satiric detachment. And the most obvious structural and thematic device in All's Well is the device of substitution. Thus, Shakespeare controls our responses, our engagement and detachment, and the conflicts and uncertainty of the play are given shape and authority through his artistic control.

These conflicts and uncertainties are immediately evident. The realities of life in All's Well, as in Troilus

and Cressida, are quite harsh. When the play opens, four of the leading characters are in mourning. We learn that Count Rossillion, a true courtier and honest gentleman, has died, as has Gerard de Narbon, a physician known for his honor and skill. We also discover that the King is gravely ill and despairing, suffering from a fistula which has robbed him of strength and power. Old and weak, the King is aware that his court is not the place it once was. The court which surrounds him is skeptical, hard-headed, and rational.

Lafew summarizes their lack of imagination:

They say miracles are past, and we have our
philosophical persons, to make modern and
familiar, things supernatural and causeless.
Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors,
ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge,
when we should submit ourselves to an unknown
fear. (II.iii.1-6)

We would do well to listen to Lafew's criticism, as it may well apply to us. Certainly, the world of All's Well seems to be past believing in miracles. Noting the young courtiers who surround him, the King sees them as frivolous, overly given to "jest," lacking in honor and preoccupied with their "garments" and "fashions" (I.ii.31-35; 62-63). Bertram's entrance serves to remind the King of how inferior these young men are to a true courtier like Count Rossillion. The King says of Bertram's father,

Such a man
Might be a copy to these younger times,
Which, followed well, would demonstrate them now
But goers backward. (I.ii.45-48)

The King is also anxious about their conduct in the field of battle and urges them "not to woo honor, but to wed it" (I.ii.15), and gives them some common sense advice (which he might do well to apply to himself):

Those girls of Italy, take heed of them.
They say our French lack language to deny
If they demand. (II.i.19-21)

We see, then, a world characterized by sickness, despair, death, nostalgia, and skepticism. The older generation, the Countess, Lafew, and the King, are aware that they are living in a fallen world. Consequently, they look to the past for their ideals, and it is this looking back which Helena will exploit and against which Bertram will rebel. According to R. B. Parker, this framework of death-haunted and nostalgic elders also places the lovers' struggle in a perspective of succeeding generations, so that the young have to work out their relationships against their elders' fears and expectations for them (99). Thus, we constantly see the actions of Bertram and Helena through the affection and tolerance, exasperation, hope, and need of their elders; however, this focus also has its own ironies and cannot be accepted uncritically. Here, as in Troilus and Cressida, we cannot take any viewpoint as the ultimate truth, for each character is undermined. At first, it appears that we are meant to see the older generation as reliable, generous, and wise. Consequently, we are tempted

to take their words at face value. After all, they constantly stress, as Anne Barton notes in her introduction to All's Well, "the rightful primacy of facts and intrinsic qualities over misleading verbal descriptions" (501). They all seem to know what the King tries to tell Bertram, that

Good alone
Is good, without a name; vileness is so:
The property by which it is should go,
Not by the title. (II.ii.128-31)

However, though they may remember a now-vanished world where words were subordinate to facts, they are also a part of a present world where language has become an empty and often lying substitute for deeds. The King remembers Bertram's father as one whose "tongue obey'd his hand" (I.ii.41), who understood the proper subservience of word to deed. The world in which they presently find themselves, on the other hand, often observes no connection at all between what people say and what they think or do. The stress, here, is that they--the King, the Countess, and Lafew--are a part of this world, or at the least, a part of its shallowness.

In the opening scene, both the Countess and Lafew are cautioning Helena about having or showing an excessive grief. They sound startlingly like Gertrude and Claudius, who give similar advice to the grieving Hamlet. The Countess first tells Helena that she may be suspected of making too much of an outward show: "No more of this, Helena; go to, no more, lest it be rather thought you

affect a sorrow than to have" (I.i.51-53). Lafew adds his platitude: "Moderate lamentation is the right of the dead, excessive grief the enemy to the living" (I.i.55-56). And the Countess continues: "If the living be enemy to the grief, the excess makes it soon mortal" (I.i.57-58). What neither of them realizes is that Helena is not grieving for her father. And her response to them does not correct the mistaken impression. She acknowledges, like Hamlet, that she does make outward show of sorrow but asserts that the show is not in excess of what she feels: "I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too" (I.i.54). Not until line 79 do we learn that the sorrow is not for her father but for Bertram as he is leaving for the French court:

I think not on my father,
And these great tears grace his remembrance
 more
Than those I shed for him. What was he like?
I have forgot him. My imagination
Carries no favor in't but Bertram's.
I am undone, there is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. (I.i.79-85)

Helena begins the play, then, deceiving those around her and manipulating them through what they believe to be true about her.

Turning from Helena, the Countess recites a list of abstract lessons to Bertram, which are truisms of the sort for which Polonius is famous:

Love all, trust a few,
Do wrong to none. Be able for thine enemy
Rather in power than use, and keep thy friend

Under thy own life's key. Be check'd for silence,
But never tax'd for speech. (I.i.64-68)

Later in the play, the Countess' point of view is further undermined when she (though she is not alone in this thought) believes that Parolles is responsible for Bertram's misconduct. She says of Parolles that he is "a very tainted fellow and full of wickedness. / My son corrupts a well-derived nature / With his inducement" (III.ii.87-89).

Later she and Lafew argue that Bertram's deeds were "done i' th' blade of youth" (V.iii.6) and are ready to give him a chance to prove himself wiser and more virtuous; however, their belief in him is short-lived and misplaced. We have seen that Bertram needs no prompting from Parolles to corrupt himself. Besides misplaced blame and confidence and homespun wisdom, the Countess' point of view is open to suspicion because she is too quick to judge. For example, when Bertram runs away from an arranged marriage with Helena, his mother disowns him: "He was my son, / But I do wash his name out of my blood" (III.ii.66-67). But later, when she believes Helena dead, she is happy for Bertram to marry Lafew's daughter (another arranged marriage). Her final words also betray her quick judgments as first she believes Bertram guilty of murdering Helena, as do the King and Lafew, and then believes he has married Diana.

Rather than directing the affairs of the young people, the Countess is manipulated by Helena and ignored by Bertram

(but, then, she also apparently ignores Bertram's wishes and feelings). She may be sharp. We see that she is able to hold her own in verbal exchanges with other characters, but I do not think she is very perceptive. Helena is able to manipulate the Countess as well as Lafew, the King, and the Widow because of their romantic preconceptions of her. When the Countess learns of Helena's love for Bertram, she is moved to pity remembering her own youth: "Even so it was with me when I was young" (I.iii.128). Aware of the love and empathy which the Countess has for her, Helena carefully orchestrates the scene, eventually eliciting from the Countess not only her approval but also her aid. John Edward Price argues that the Countess is an unwitting dupe to Helena's cleverness: "although the Countess asserts her moral force at the opening of the dialogue, she eventually finds herself aiding Helena exactly the way Helena wishes to be aided" (98). And Richard Levin asserts that Helena, having wonderfully calculated the image she projects, "enters prepared to take advantage of her sympathetic interrogator" ("All's Well" 133). On the surface, and especially to the Countess, it appears that Helena is forced to confess first her love for Bertram and then her intent to go to Paris. However, she is careful to mask her ambition:

I follow him not
 By any token of presumptuous suit,
 Nor would I have him till I do deserve him,
 Yet never know how that desert should be.
 (I.iii.197-200)

Her first statement, as we find out, is simply false; the second is, as Brooke notes, "quibbling, if not meaningless" (76). Eventually, the Countess even gets her to admit that she intends to go to Paris, ostensibly to cure the King. But the Countess does not extract the whole plan. Helena still does not tell the whole truth--that she plans to use the cure as a trap for Bertram. At the end of the scene, having become a sounding board for Helena's plan, the Countess not only accepts Helena as a prospective daughter-in-law but also sends her off to Paris with blessings and letters of introduction to the court. As early as the end of Act I, Helena is "the architect of the action" (Dennis 77) rather than the helpless orphaned girl who asks only "pity" from the Countess. Thus, we see the Countess, not as an objective observer whose point of view we can trust, but as an affectionate, sentimental old woman who is manipulated and whose opinion vacillates. She certainly fails to deal with Helena.

She is not the only older character taken in by Helena. Lafew, the Widow, and the King also trust her, and many critics point to their belief in Helena as evidence of her superior virtue and wisdom. However, as with the Countess, the viewpoints of these characters are also open to suspicion. Just as Helena has played on the Countess' romantic preconceptions and youthful memories, so will she manipulate

Lafew's conceptions of her, using his own sexual desires to persuade him to help her. Lafew is said to be perceptive because he can see through Parolles. He tells Bertram that "there can be no kernel in this light nut; the soul of this man is his clothes. Trust him not in matters of heavy consequence" (II.v.43-45). However, Bertram is the only character in the play who does not see Parolles as the parasite and coward he is. We have also noted Lafew's penchant for platitudes. In addition, he discredits his own position as a worthy gentleman and objective observer when he refers to himself as a pander. Helena persuades Lafew to introduce her to the King and argue for her ability to cure him. He assures the King of her curative powers in language which has sexual overtones:

I have seen a medicine
That's able to breathe life into stone,
Quicken a rock, and make you dance canary
With spritely fire and motion, whose simple touch
Is powerful to arise King Pippen, nay,
To give great Charlemain a pen in's hand
And write to her a love-line. (II.i.72-78)

Leaving Helena, who is herself the medicine, alone with the King, he calls himself Pandarus: "I am Cressid's uncle, / That dare leave two together" (II.i.97-98). Robert G. Hunter also finds that Lafew "imitates the encomium of a pander" (115). And Levin says that even though Lafew may be joking, for the King is as old as he is, and neither will have an explicit sexual encounter with Helena, he

"comprehends the sublimated pleasure both men experience in Helena's presence" ("All's Well" 135). Perceiving the nature and effect of the cure, Lafew the pander says of the restored King, "he's able to lead [Helena] a coranto," a lively dance step (II.iii.43). He also suggests that the same medicine would be good for his own old age as he laughs, "I'll like a maid the better whilst I have a tooth in my head" (II.iii.41-42). Levin argues that if we do not "at least suspect the irony in Lafew's description of the cure, we shall miss a great deal of what follows" ("All's Well" 136). Not only does Lafew become a pander for Helena, later he also offers his daughter in marriage to Bertram, even though he is aware of how shamefully Bertram has treated Helena. Surely, Lafew should at least be suspicious of how Bertram might treat his daughter in yet another arranged marriage. But it is only when he suspects Bertram of murdering Helena and marrying Diana that Lafew decides he can find a better husband for his daughter: "I will buy me a son-in-law in a fair, and toll for this. I'll none of him" (V.iii.147-48). A few lines later, he tells Bertram, "Your reputation comes too short for my daughter, you are no husband for her" (V.iii.176-77).

Like Lafew and the Countess, the Widow, too, is manipulated by Helena. The Widow's viewpoint, however, is even more severely undermined, for she consents to have her

daughter participate in the bed trick, thus damaging her reputation, for a price. Helena promises her a "purse of gold . . . which I will over-pay and pay again" (III.vii.14-16), for her friendly help in a "deceit so lawful" (III.vii.38), that is, the substitution of Helena for Diana in the bed with Bertram. The plot smacks of Lafew's earlier pandering.

Neither can we completely trust the King's point of view. He, too, is manipulated, uses platitudes rather than demonstrating true virtue, jumps to conclusions, and--having apparently learned nothing--commits the same mistake at the end of the play with Diana that he did at the first with Helena. When Helena first introduces herself and her medicine which she says has been designed specifically for the King's illness, he refuses her proffered aid. However, when she describes herself as God's agent and argues that the King should trust in heaven's power to perform miracles (II.i.148-58), he is at last interested and asks the length of the cure. In answering, Helena employs elaborate periphrasis to say "two days," language in which Levin finds "only the jargon of a monte bank" ("All's Well" 135). Even the King responds by asking for firmer evidence of her sincerity: "What dar'st thou venture?" (II.i.170). But he examines as poorly as the Countess. He swallows Helena's ready answer--delivered in exaggerated language--hook, line, and

sinker: "Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak" (II.i.175). And when Helena asks him how he will reward her, he replies, "Make thy demand" (II.i.191), which we know is to grant Helena a husband of her choosing. Later, in the presence of the court, the King lets it be known that Helena has the power to choose and the man no power to refuse: "Make choice and see, / Who shuns thy love shuns all his love for me" (II.iii.72-73). Any opposition to Helena's choice is opposition to the King's power, and the King will brook no such opposition, finding that his "honor's at the stake, which to defeat, / I must produce my power" (II.iii.149-50). Thus he forces Bertram to marry Helena, which is exactly Helena's plan. Later, when the King believes Helena dead, he forgives Bertram and agrees to marry him to Lafew's daughter. Then, on the basis of circumstantial evidence, Bertram's having the ring the King had given Helena (all of which we know Helena has arranged), he jumps to the wrong conclusion that Bertram has murdered Helena and is ready to have him executed. Once Helena appears on stage, of course, the King realizes that Bertram is innocent of at least the murder charge. But far from having learned that he cannot dictate successful marriages, the King turns to Diana and begins all over again: "Choose thou thy husband, and I'll pay thy dower" (V.iii.328).

Closing the play, the King expresses the spirit of the audience's ambivalence when he remarks, "All yet seems well"

(V.iii.333). The Countess, reliving her youth through Helena, has betrayed her son. Lafew and the King have enjoyed an indirect romantic involvement with Helena, and history, as we see, starts to repeat itself. Thus, far from having us sympathize with Helena because we see her through the eyes of experienced, sympathetic, yet wiser maturity, we become increasingly skeptical that Shakespeare has given us a reliable point of view from which to gauge the actions of any character. Indeed, he seems to be manipulating our point of view as he distorts and exploits the angle of vision. Consistently, we have been teased through veiled suggestions, false expectations, and misleading innuendoes.

Besides controlling our response by manipulation of point of view, Shakespeare also keeps us detached by juxtaposing scenes concerning the lovers with scenes of parody involving Lavache and Parolles. In All's Well the parody is comic preparation for the more serious scenes which follow. The parody scenes provide comic relief and commentary, preventing us from taking either Helena's or Bertram's role too seriously. We have shown how the older generation's preconceptions and consequent judgments are open to suspicion. We, too, as an audience, can become preoccupied with the heroine and experience a sentimental over-sympathy with her distresses if we fail to see her as Shakespeare has drawn her.

From the beginning, Helena is presented in a notably ambiguous way. At times she seems quite serious and grave and at others seems equally free and lively. Helena's first soliloquy (which we have examined in part) concerning her unrequited love for Bertram is interrupted by the entrance of Parolles, whom she says she loves for Bertram's sake (I.i.99). Barton points out that Parolles is "an embodiment of that discrepancy between words and deeds which plays so important a part in the play as a whole" (Introduction, AWW 501). Ironically, it is in Helena's banter with this "notorious liar . . . fool . . . coward" (I.i.100-01), as Helena calls him, that her true thoughts are exposed. Changing her earlier tone, she exchanges fooleries with Parolles on the subject of virginity. Her willingness to discuss such a subject with one she considers a fool is startling. Even more startling is that, as Levin notes, both she and Parolles seem to regard virginity as a commodity that a woman markets ("All's Well" 132). They differ only about the value Helena should attach to her maidenhead. We are reminded here of the debate scenes in Troilus and Cressida wherein accepted ideas of degree and rule, personal honor, reputation and love have no intrinsic worth but are only valued according to fluctuating market prices which are subject to laws of supply and demand. Helena perceives her virginity as a weapon, as a way to trap

Bertram. She asks Parolles, "Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?" (I.i.121-22). She then determines that she will "lose it to her own liking" (I.i.150-51). Thus, she will use her honor, or virginity, together with "the dearest issue of [her father's] practice" (II.i.106), that is, her ability to cure the King, to trap Bertram into marriage. Parolles' parting advice to "get thee a good husband, and use him as he uses thee" (I.ii.214-15) seems to me to be prophetic. For certainly Helena single-mindedly pursues Bertram without any consideration for whether he wants her, and he will just as selfishly and relentlessly avoid her, regardless of the consequences.

Another scene which reduces our emotional involvement with Helena involves the clown Lavache, who comes to beg the Countess' leave to marry Isabel. His request parodies and anticipates the more serious scene which follows, wherein Helena is questioned by the Countess about her emotions and intents concerning Bertram. In fact, Lavache calls himself a "prophet" (I.iii.58). The clown's coarse comments that he seeks marriage to relieve the needs of the flesh also echo Helena's earlier conversation about the value of chastity and remind us that she, too, is seeking to lose her virginity to her own liking. Put simply, our virtuous heroine also is "driven on by the flesh" (I.iii.29) just as surely as Bertram is later. Another parallel between Lavatch and

Helena is their use of religious language. Lavatch tells the Countess that he has other "holy reasons" for wanting to marry. In fact, he wants to marry to make his sexual activity lawful: "I have been, madam, a wicked creature, as you and all flesh and blood are, and indeed I do marry that I may repent" (I.iii.35-37). Helena, too, will couch the terms of her trap for Bertram, curing the King, in religious language, calling herself heaven's "weakest minister" (II.i.137), and telling the King that if he avails himself of her curative powers, he makes "of heaven . . . an experiment" (II.i.154).

The conversation between the Countess and her Clown is also tied to Helena's situation by the Clown's song when he is commanded to summon her. The Clown sings:

"Was this fair face the cause," quoth she,
 "Why the Grecians sacked Troy?
 Fond done, done fond,
 Was this king Priam's joy?" (I.iii.70-74)

As Bennett has pointed out, we cannot miss the allusion of the song's opening lines to Marlowe's famous lines, "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?": the Clown is playing on Shakespeare's choice of names for this heroine, a choice which is ironic, since Helena's story is the antithesis of the Grecian Helen's. Both are beautiful, but one pursues where the other is pursued" ("New Techniques" 340).

I think we are also invited to consider Shakespeare's

anti-mythic treatment of Helen, who causes a war which is an expense of spirit in a waste of shame. As he draws her in Troilus and Cressida, written during the same period as All's Well, Helen is a vain and light-minded flirt--a source of destruction and debasement. She is reduced from a near goddess to merchandise: "Why, she is a pearl, / Whose price hath launch'd above a thousand ships, / And turn'd crowned kings to merchants" (II.ii.81-83). But she is valueless in herself. This allusion should further alert us to the notion that Helena may not be the romantic heroine we expect. She, too, may be subject to the same kind of reduction in character and expectation that Shakespeare employed in characterizing Helen of Troy. Indeed, she may be guilty of engaging in an expense of spirit in a waste of shame in her relentless pursuit of Bertram.

The Clown's final lines in the scene may also shed further light on our heroine's assumption of roles. He says that "honesty" will conceal its proud spirit under an appearance of meek obedience:

That man should be at woman's command, and yet no
hurt done! Though honesty be no puritan, yet
it will do no hurt; it will wear the surplice
of humility over the black gown of a big heart.
(I.iii.92-95)

As we know, Bertram will be at Helena's command. He runs away from her to war but returns unscathed physically. But in the final scene, as Helena orchestrates it, Bertram will

suffer acute embarrassment. As the play unfolds, we will observe Helena assume a very pious and humble role as she, too, conceals a proud spirit under an appearance of meek obedience.

Helena, then, is far from being the self-effacing suppliant she would like people to believe. Recognizing the signs of romance, the audience expects to identify with Helena, but the complexity of Shakespeare's design frustrates that expectation. We try to like her, to admire her honesty, her perseverance, her humility; but on close examination we realize that she simply is not what she appears to be. Throughout the play and especially at the end we are aware that she has known more than she lets us know; she plots more than we are allowed to see. In short, she manipulates people for her own selfish designs--getting Bertram. And that in itself is unsettling--why she should want him.

When Helena is granted the power to choose her husband, she comments, "I am a simple maid, and therein wealthiest / That I protest I simply am a maid" (II.iii.66-67). However, I think Helena has already shown us that she is anything but "a simple maid." Parolles is not the only character who embodies the debate between words and deeds with which the play is concerned--only perhaps the most obvious. While Parolles pretends to be more than he is, Helena pretends

to be less than she is, like Troilus. Approaching the man she has pursued and won, she tells him, "I dare not say I take you, but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live, / Into your guiding power" (II.iii.102-04). Confident that the King will argue her case for her when Bertram refuses to marry "a poor physician's daughter" (II.iii.115), one that he "cannot love . . . nor will strive to do't" (II.iii.145), Helena humbly tells the King, "That you are well restor'd, my lord, I'm glad. Let the rest go" (II.iii.147-48). As Levin argues, "We should not imagine that she is actually giving up. She has always known that Bertram would never choose her of his own free will" ("All's Well" 136). As we have already observed, the King has sworn that Helena has the power to choose and, therefore, his "honor's at the stake." As expected, he forces Bertram into marriage with Helena. Later, when Bertram had decided to go through with the marriage but also to depart for the wars in Italy without consummating the union, Helena infuriates him by calling herself his "obedient servant" (II.v.72). In asking for a parting kiss, she compares herself to a "timorous thief" who "fain would steal / What law does vouch mine own" (II.v.81-82). John Price argues that Helena projects an assumed humility "in a way that punishes the recalcitrant Bertram" (102). Her submissiveness embarrasses him. This confrontation prefigures the last scene in which Bertram is

again punished and embarrassed through Helena's manipulations. Although he does not yield to her subservience any more than he has yielded to the King's bullying, Helena still acts as if she can force Bertram's love.

Helena's next plan of action involves as much "indirection" as her earlier methods. She has every intention of fulfilling Bertram's demands while continuing to play a pious role. She follows Bertram's instructions to return to Rossillion where she receives a message from him swearing that he will not live with her until she has a ring from his finger and is pregnant with his child. Otherwise, he will return to France only when she has left. Here we see Helena accepting the blame for Bertram's flight: she has chased him from his home and exposed his "tender limbs" to "the none-sparing war" (III.ii.104-05). In her characteristic paradoxical style, she also accepts the responsibility for his possible death: "though I kill him not, I am the cause / His death was so effected" (III.ii.115-16). Once again, however, she returns to her earlier position that "our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" (I.i.216), and we must remember her vow: "my intents are fix'd and will not leave me" (I.i.229). Consequently, when Helena writes that she is "Saint Jacques' pilgrim, thither gone" and that Bertram "is too good and fair for death and me, / Whom I myself embrace to set him free" (III.iv.4;16-17), we should not

be surprised that she turns up in Florence, disguised as a pilgrim, and has the rumor spread that she is dead. From taking responsibility, Helena turns to action, now to seek ways to fulfill Bertram's demands. J. M. Silverman writes that Helena "embarks on a course of perfecting 'intents' which Bertram's inadequate behavior has proved insufficient when openly offered" (31). And John E. Price points out that "although words no longer suffice, Helena keeps to the principle that retreat, intentional submission, prepares the way for victory" (104). Levin also argues that Helena

sings to the old tune; she is patient and even prepared to die for love. The heightened, or (one might say) exaggerated moral tone makes us ask: is Helena pious or a pious fraud? To put the question another way: does she cross paths with Bertram in Florence by chance or design? . . . Certainly Helena acknowledges no project, nor do other characters detect one. But because the meeting in Florence would be an astonishing coincidence, we should wonder whether this journey, like her previous one to Paris, is contrived. . . . Helena never dreams of letting her hard-won husband escape. ("All's Well" 137-38)

Regardless of whether the meeting is planned or not, Helena certainly wastes no time in availing herself of the opportunities it affords.

Once in Florence, Helena approaches the Widow, Diana, and Mariana cautiously, She indicates that she knows the wife Bertram has forsaken when she indirectly praises her, saying that she is of "mean" station, with only "honesty" to her credit (IV.v.60, 62). Again she is echoing an

assumed humility. When the Widow indicates that Diana might do this wife "a shrewd turn" (III.v.68), Helena quickly asks, "May be the amorous count solicits her / In the unlawful purpose?" (III.v.69-70). This question points directly to Helena's plan of the bed trick, which she sets up with no difficulty. Our misgivings about the bed trick are, I believe, enhanced by the language Helena and the Widow use to describe it. The Widow calls it a "deceit so lawful" (III.vii.38). Helena says that the plot is "wicked meaning in a lawful act, / Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact" (III.vii.45-47). Once the bed trick has taken place, Helena herself seems ambivalent and disillusioned:

But O, strange men,
That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts
Defiles the pitchy night; so lust doth play
With what it loathes for that which is away.
(IV.iv.21-25)

Here Helena is aware that Bertram's sexual advances were made to one he thought to be Diana. There is present in this speech an unmistakable sense of disillusion. This is certainly a contrast to Helena's earlier idolatry of Bertram and to the typical romantic meeting of lovers.

Helena's language continues to be a key to understanding her character. As far as she is concerned, the end product is important--not the means by which she attains it. Later, Helena, again using religious language, tells the Widow, "Doubt not but heaven / Hath brought me up to

be your daughter's dower" (IV.iv.18-19). I agree with Levin that the holier Helena's language becomes, the less we should believe her ("All's Well" 139). At any rate, Helena's last words before the painful exposure of Bertram reiterate what her position has been throughout the play, "the end crowns all," a sentiment we have also heard in Troilus and Cressida (IV.v.224). She tells Diana that suffering can lead to a time of fulfillment:

But with the word the time will bring on summer,
When briars shall have leaves as well as thorns,
And be as sweet as sharp. . . .
All's well that ends well! still the fine's the
crown;
What e'er the course, the end is in the renown.
(IV.iv.31-33; 35-36)

And again in Act V, Helena tells the Widow, "All's well that ends well yet" (V.i.25). Never losing her faith that she will succeed, she says only a few lines later, "Our means will make us means" (V.i.35). Helena's end, of course, is gaining Bertram's love--not just his name. If she succeeds in gaining his love, then her cheating and tricking will have been justified. At the end, Helena enters not jubilant but somber. Her opening words, spoken to the King, are:

No, my good lord,
'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see,
The name, and not the thing.
(V.iii.306-08)

Michael Shapiro describes her as being:

humble and contrite, and . . . [she] has good
reason to be so. She may be living answer to

Diana's riddles, but in her answer to the King (V.iii.306-08) she admits her failure to solve her most urgent human problem--and her squalid efforts to solve this problem are in part responsible for the suffering of others. (522)

I believe Helena suggests that she will never quite attain the ideal of love she has sought so earnestly, that her love is now but a shadow of what it once was. Her words to Bertram, "O my good lord, when I was like this maid, / I found you wondrous kind" (V.ii.309-10), also imply that she no longer finds him "wondrous kind." Helena has fulfilled the conditions of the task, ostensibly has reached her goal--

There is your ring,
And look you, here's your letter. This it says:
"When from my finger you can get this ring,
And are by me with child, etc." This is done.
(V.ii.310-13)

But missing is the sense of victory we may have been led to expect from Helena's earlier words, "the fine's the crown . . . the end is the renown." Gerard Gross summarizes Helena's mood: "One senses a hint of weariness at so long and arduous a chase after an object of ever-diminishing brightness and value" (270).

One of the most problematical questions of All's Well has been how Bertram can be what he is--a childish, egotistical, impetuous snob--and still be attractive to Helena. One point made by critics who support him is that there must be something more to him than meets the eye, because he is so beloved by Helena. However, since Helena is not the

honest, simple maid she claims to be, I do not think it follows that her love either redeems Bertram or points to any hidden virtue in him. At any rate, we know that one of the reasons Helena is attracted to him is purely physical. She calls her love an "idolatrourous fancy" and tells us she has often contemplated "his arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls . . . his sweet favor" (I.ii.94-97). Helena is not alone in thinking that Bertram is quite gallant and handsome. Diana also remarks on his good looks (III.v.78; 80). But even Diana is able to see what Helena, at first, either does not see or refuses to acknowledge: that Bertram is, in Parolles's words, "a foolish idle boy but for all that very ruttish" (IV.iii.215-16). Only after Helena has fulfilled the tasks do we sense that she may have finally seen Bertram as he really is rather than as her "bright particular star" (I.i.86). Then she refers to the delusiveness of lust and to the possibility that her love is only a shadow of what it once was.

Just as Helena's opinion of Bertram changes, so does ours. At first we are inclined to be sympathetic to Bertram because he is trapped into marriage with Helena. When Bertram pleads with the King to "give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes" (II.iii.107-08) in choosing his wife, we do not find that a ridiculous request. Most of us are strongly attracted to the notion, in fairy tale and reality,

that people should marry for love. Bertram clearly does not love Helena; therefore, his being forced to marry her upsets our sensibilities. To the King's argument that Bertram should be willing to marry Helena because she has cured the King, Bertram makes the reasonable reply: "But follows it, my lord, to bring me down / Must answer for your raising?" (II.iii.112-13). But Bertram's arguments are not effective because he is not entirely reasonable. In fact, even while our sympathies are engaged, Bertram makes comments which we find degrading. He displays a class consciousness that ignores intrinsic honor and virtue, as the King tells him. When he refuses to marry Helena, he gives as his first reason her lack of "breeding": she is after all only a "poor physician's daughter" (II.iii.114-15). He is shocked that the King would ask him to marry a commoner and says he would rather have his fortune spoiled forever than marry Helena: "Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (II.ii.115-16). Later, when he is accused of having seduced Diana, Bertram simply dismisses her as nothing more than a "fond and desp'rate creature" with whom he has "laugh'd" (V.iii.178-79). And again he implores the King not to "debase" his honor by forcing him to marry Diana. Brooke says that "he exposes his vulgarity in the unguarded snobbery of his resentment" (77). He talks like a willful adolescent, and after the marriage, he exclaims melodramatically, "O my Parolles,

they have married me! / I'll to the Tuscan wars and never bed her" (II.iii.272-73). Bennett describes this outburst of feeling as "boyish dismay," which is tragi-comic ("New Techniques" 351).

As we have seen, Bertram will refuse to consummate the marriage, thus asserting his independence. He tells Parolles that "before the solemn priest I have sworn, / I will not bed her" (II.iii.269-70). Determined to be his own man, Bertram gives his plan of action in clear, direct expression. He will send Helena home,

Acquaint my mother with my hate to [Helena]
And wherefore I am fled; write to the King
That which I durst not speak. (II.iii.286-89)

He much prefers war to marriage: "War is no strife / To the dark house and the detested wife" (II.iii.291-92). If he cannot love, he will fight. If he cannot choose his wife, he will choose his mistress.

Once Bertram goes off to the war, we are led to believe he is maturing. He is appointed to the responsible position of "general of our horse" by the Duke of Florence, and we learn that he has proven himself in battle. Diana says, "They say the French count has done most honorable service." Her mother adds, "It is reported that he has taken their great'st commander, and that with his own hand he slew the Duke's brother" (III.v.3-7). And we hear from two French lords that he has acquired "a great dignity" (IV.iii.68-69).

However, this maturity in soldiership does not apparently extend to Bertram's moral growth, for we learn at the same time that he is attempting to seduce Diana. Just as he is trapped by Helena into marriage, he will be trapped by Diana (under Helena's guiding force) into giving her his family ring. We have seen Helena as a sexual manipulator playing on the people's romantic preconceptions of her; now we see Diana under Helena's expert tutelage playing the same role:

Diana. Give me that ring.
 Bertram. I'll lend it thee, my dear, but have
 no power
 To give it from me.
 Diana. Will you not, my lord?
 Bertram. It is an honor 'longing to our house,
 Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
 Which were the greatest obloquy
 i'th'world
 In me to lose.
 Diana. Mine honor's such a ring;
 My chastity's the jewel of our house,
 Bequeathed down from many ancestors,
 Which were the greatest obloquy
 i'th'world
 In me to lose. Thus your own proper
 wisdom
 Brings in the champion Honor on my part
 Against your vain assault.
 Bertram. Here, take my ring
 Diana. When midnight comes, knock at my chamber
 window. (IV.ii.39-54)

Thus he is caught here by his own lust and her skill.

Diana, of course, is using sexually charged language (as did Helena earlier) to manipulate the lustful Bertram, with the "ring" as the traditional symbol of chastity and maidenhead. If Bertram will give her his ring, she will give him hers: "My chastity's the jewel of our house . . . knock at my

chamber window"--no vain "assault" now! Again we must see the theme of substitution as a central device in the plays. Substitution (maidenhead for ring, sex for honor, Diana for Helena) is, in fact, central to the (bed) trickery in this play. As Shakespeare manipulates his audience, he "promises" a fairy-tale comedy complete with a traditional device, and he delivers instead something else.

Immediately following this exchange is the most extended of the trap scenes, the exposure of Parolles. This shaming of Parolles runs counterpoint, in carefully matched scenes, to Bertram's attempt to seduce Diana and Bertram's own deception by the bed trick. For example, both Bertram and Parolles lose an object which is identified with the loss of their honor: Parolles, his drum; Bertram, his ring. During the period in which Bertram is witnessing the exposure of Parolles, he is exposing his own moral defects to the lords. They have criticized him for his callousness to Helena and his attempt to seduce Diana (IV.iii.6-7; 14-18). This criticism leads them to state that mankind proves a traitor to itself:

- 1 Lord. As we are ourselves,
What things are we!
- 2 Lord. Merely our own traitors. And as in
the common course of all treasons,
we still see them reveal themselves,
till they attain their abhorr'd ends;
so he that in this action contrives
against his own nobility in his
proper stream o'erflows himself.
(IV.iii.19-25)

Parolles's exposure also disabuses the notion that Parolles is Bertram's evil angel or vice figure. As we have noted, though the Countess, Lafew, Mariana, and Diana all alibi for Bertram by blaming Parolles, Bertram in fact makes his own mistakes; Parolles merely supports them, and, according to Parker, acts as a parodic reflection, not a cause, of Bertram's evils (104). The plan that the lords devise is to show Bertram the true nature of Parolles, to test his mettle, and to reveal how utterly weak he is by convincing him that he is taken by the Muskos regiment and force him, on apparent danger of his life, to talk freely. In the process, however, we also see Parolles as a truly comic figure. Indeed, the French lords devise the plan also "for the love of laughter" (III.vi.34). The fantastic gibberish with which the captors bewilder Parolles and his own extravagant lies keep the scene from being too painful.

But the line between comedy and satire is fine here, and it may be that Shakespeare is pointing out our own propensity to having fun at someone else's expense. In any event, the second lord exclaims, "I begin to love him for this" and "He hath out-villain'd villainy so far that the rarity redeems him" (IV.iii.261, 273-74). Parolles does not only offer a comic reflection of Bertram; as the first lord comments at the beginning of Parolles's exposure (more truly

than he realizes), "'A will betray us all unto ourselves" (IV.i.92). When his blindfold is removed and he is greeted by Bertram and the lords, all of whom he has criticized for sexual corruption, he simply asks, "Who cannot be crush'd with a plot?" (IV.iii.325). Left alone, he contemplates his undoing:

If my heart were great,
'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more,
But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft
As captain shall. Simply the thing I am
Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,
Let him fear this; for it will come to pass
That every braggart shall be found an ass.
Rust sword, cool blushes, and, Parolles, live
Safest in shame! Being fool'd, by foolery thrive!
There's place and means for every man alive.
(IV.iii.330-39)

Parolles, exposed as a fool, becomes a self-acknowledged fool, like Thersites in Troilus and Cressida, though his is a disillusioned level of self-knowledge since it changes nothing; he merely accepts what he is. Disillusioned or not, however, he is wiser than Bertram, perhaps wiser than any other character in the play. Parker observes that

Man is not the ideal, invulnerable creature he pretends to be, and, as the first lord wonders about Parolles, it is indeed "possible he should know what he is, and be that he is" (IV.i.44-45) --or as Lavache says cynically about cuckoldry, "If men could be contented to be what they are, there were no fear in marriage" (I.iii.50-51).
(105)

And so it is on this level of self-awareness that Parolles is accepted by Lafew: "though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat" (V.i.53-54).

Parolles's lies and treachery also prefigure Bertram's contortions and distortions in the final trial scene, where he will reveal his propensity to falsehood just as rapidly and completely as does Parolles in Florence. At first, Bertram's disclaimer that his ring was ever Helena's is true--so far as he knows. But when he is pressed, Bertram fabricates a romantic story which shows him in a good light but actually contrasts vividly with his actual behavior:

In Florence was it from a casement thrown me,
Wrapp'd in a paper, which contain'd the name
Of her that threw it. Noble she was, and thought
I stood engag'd; but when I had subscrib'd
To mine own fortune, and inform'd her fully
I could not answer in that course of honor
As she had made the overture, she ceas'd
In heavy satisfaction, and would never
Receive the ring again. (V.iii.93-101)

Then, confronted with Diana's claims about his seduction and vows, his tone changes even more, and he is driven to an even less honorable lie:

My lord, this is a fond and desp'rate creature,
Whom sometime I have laugh'd with. Let your
Highness
Lay a more noble thought upon mine honor
Than for to think that I would sink it here.
(V.iii.178-81)

Further pressed, he becomes even nastier and calls Diana a "common gamester" (V.iii.187). When Diana produces his family ring to witness that he did make a vow, he is gradually forced to yield the truth:

Certain it is I lik'd her,
And boarded her i'th'wanton way of youth.
She knew her distance, and did angle for me,

Maddening my eagerness with her restraint,
 As all impediments in fancy's course
 Are motives of more fancy, and in fine,
 Her inf'nite cunning, with her modern grace,
 Subdu'd me to her rate. She got the ring,
 And I had that which any inferior might
 At market-price have bought. (V.iii.210-19)

Like Parolles, Bertram tries every way to preserve himself. His explanation is still untrue, although in his arrogance he may believe it true. The fact remains that in his overwhelming desire to sleep with Diana, he willingly gives away the symbol of his family honor. Brought to a test, he tries in vain to hide behind a facade of lies, and only when he is forced does he confess that "the ring was hers" (V.iii.231). Bertram is exposed, but he does not reach the level of self-awareness which gives Parolles a kind of inverted dignity and engages our sympathy. With Helena's entrance, Bertram, too, is finally crushed with a plot and forced to concede--although not gracefully or convincingly.

In fact, following his series of public lies, Bertram's repentance is certainly suspect. To Helena's comment that as a wife she is only the name and not the thing, his reply, "Both, both, O, pardon!" (V.iii.308), is ambiguous. According to Parker, the reply "seems as much relief at having escaped from the avalanche of social disapproval that has fallen on him as true love or repentance" (106). In any case, Bertram says nothing about a change of heart or an acceptance of his nature. And his last lines inspire even less confidence that he has learned anything. After Helena

informs him that she has fulfilled the requirements of the task, he tells the King, "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (V.iii.315-16). Of this last couplet Bennett notes the "mingled motive which substitutes irony for pathos in its appeal in the audience's emotions" ("New Techniques" 355). And Brooke argues that it focuses on the double nature of the scene:

Helena's reappearance is in one dimension the fairy tale miracle which it appears to the King; but it does not at all so appear to us who know precisely the trick by which it has been devised; hence, in its other dimension it is severely naturalistic, the springing of the final trap. (79)

As Barton comments,

Bertram refuses to accommodate himself to the archetypal story pattern, to recognize any return to the Golden Age. A struggle develops between the demands of romance, or comic form, and the stubborn resistance set up by a realistic, everyday world in which merit is not always rewarded, or even recognized for what it is. (Introduction, AWW 500).

Once again, our expectations are denied because something has been "substituted"! We have been "bed-tricked." As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the most interesting thematic and structural device in this play--indeed in all of the problem comedies--is the device of substitution.

Helena is not the typical romantic heroine, and Bertram is no Prince Charming. As a practitioner of deceit, Helena wins a deceitful mate; she gets what she deserves; Bertram

gets what he deserves, and we are invited to surmise what the outcome of their union will be. The irony of the scene is underlined by Lafew, who does not weep but says, "Mine eyes smell onion, I shall weep anon" (V.ii.320) and requests a handkerchief from the filthy and foul-smelling Parolles. The heavy emphasis on "if" and "seems" at the end extends to the epilogue where the King becomes a beggar for applause and approval: "All is well ended, if this suit be won, / That you express content" (2-3). Certainly the repetition of "if" and "seems" is intentional, and the reaction produced is one of ambivalence, reflecting a generalization made earlier in the play by the first lord:

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, of good
and ill together; our virtues would be proud if
our faults whipp'd them not, and our crimes would
despair if they were not cherish'd by our virtues.
(IV.iii.71-74)

Again, as in Troilus and Cressida, the failure that we all sense is that there is no consolation. Our expectation, our need, for a pattern that will explain and console the wounds of life are thwarted. It is as if the play itself, as well as its title, mocks our understandable but reductive desire for the archetypal happy ending which includes easy judgments and complacent responses. After all, what is is, and we must find a way to accommodate ourselves to the unheroic, disappointing, but fully human world of opportunism and weak wills.

The epilogues of both Troilus and Cressida and All's Well become a metaphoric trade-off involving the unavoidable creative presence of the audience. What we see at the end of these plays may be ourselves. Pandarus calls us "brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade," and the King in All's Well suggests to us, "Ours be your patience then, and yours our parts; / Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts" (5-6). Again, as in Troilus and Cressida, there is no clear demarcation between audience and actors or between creating author and created play. We have participated in a play rife with trade-offs, substitutions, manipulative sleight-of-"hands," "heart-thefts," and "bed tricks." And if we are disturbed or shocked, certainly Shakespeare has prepared us for such feelings.

Chapter IV

"A Mad Fantastical Trick": Shakespeare's Last Comedy

Perhaps the most problematic of the problem plays, if not of all Shakespeare's plays, is Measure for Measure. Like Troilus and Cressida and All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure has elicited critical interpretations of an infinite variety. But none of these interpretations, which sometimes conflict violently, have come to the magic conclusion that answers all the questions. It is this elusive quality of the play, its refusal to solve the problems it has raised, that intrigues modern commentators. What is ironic about our response to this intensely ironic comedy is our insistence on imposing thematic, formalist, or theological solutions on the enduring problems posed within it. As Joseph Price says about All's Well, the endurance of so many critical approaches suggests a complexity that cannot be reduced to a single focus--"the very essence of Shakespearean comedy is variety, a blending of seemingly jarring worlds" (136). We, as critics, have set ourselves the task of solving problems that Shakespeare himself refused to solve.

Like Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, Measure for Measure produces complex, varied, uncertain, divided, and ambiguous responses. At the end of the play, we realize that we have not been given a pattern that explains or consoles. Indeed, we are unsure of our bearings. Because Shakespeare alternately engages and alienates our affection for Isabella, we question her decision to sacrifice her brother rather than her virginity. Shakespeare makes us question her motives without forcing an answer on us. We also question the ulterior motives of Angelo, who has promised to judge strictly "measure for measure." Like our questions about Bertram, we must at least wonder whether Angelo's repentance at the end of the play is sincere or whether his fear of the Duke's omniscience produces the reform. We are also puzzled about the Duke. He is at once both a character in the play and a sort of stage director. Whether we can accept this double function is also subject to question. Is he merely a deus ex machina, or is he a liar, weakling, and hypocrite? Is he a teacher whose supposed deviousness and hypocrisy are explained by his modesty and empiricism? Besides questions concerning character, we are faced with difficulties in the plot. As in All's Well, there are many substitutions. There is the bed trick, the substitution of a pirate's head for Claudio's head, the substitution of Angelo for the Duke

as ruler, and others. As for the romantic ending where everyone is paired off, even that balance is precarious. It has recently been argued that we cannot even be sure that the marriage of the Duke to Isabella will take place, since she never actually accepts his proposal. As in Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, we have been led to expect one thing, and Shakespeare has substituted something else. Again, we must look to his methods to determine how our expectations have been manipulated, then thwarted.

The critical commentary that has engulfed Measure for Measure in recent years is basically split into two camps: those who accept the ending, thus finding the play a success, and those who cannot accept the ending, thus finding the play a failure. Generally speaking, those critics who accept the ending and find an aesthetic integrity in the play would have us believe that the play is a parable whose characters embody and whose plot illustrates central concepts of Christianity. Roy Battenhouse maintains that Measure for Measure "can be made ultimately intelligible" by its "mysterious way of mirroring by analogy the cosmic drama of the Atonement" (1031-32; 1053-54). He argues that the "holy Isabella," caught by the demands of Angelo as well as those of Claudio, is "like Christ in the wilderness" (1046). In The Wheel of Fire, G. Wilson Knight also argues that the play is a parable. He compares the Duke to Christ,

both as "prophet of a new order of ethics" and as one who "moves among men suffering grief at their sins and deriving joy from an unexpected flower of simple goodness." The play contains a "lesson driven home": that human justice is impossible because "man, himself a sinner, cannot presume to judge." Thus, Knight decrees that Measure for Measure "must be read not as a picture of normal human affairs, but as a parable like the parables of Jesus" (96). Nevill Coghill, also pursuing Christian themes, argues that "the subject matter [of Measure for Measure] is sin" and that since "we live in a fallen world and yet have hope of salvation," Measure for Measure "is the comedy of Adam" (25-26). Reconstructing hypothetical "Christian" reactions of an early Jacobean audience to Isabella's chastity, Elizabeth M. Pope, in her article "The Renaissance Background of Measure for Measure," cites the key passage from Christ's Sermon on the Mount about rendering judgment and mercy: "for with what measure ye mete, with the same shall men mete to you again." She concludes that the very restrictions set by Jacobean theological commentators on the possibility of Christian mercy in daily life suggests that they, and therefore Shakespeare's audience, would have approved Isabella's excoriations of Claudio:

When . . . we remember the limitations which Renaissance doctrine set on both charity and forbearance, we have no right to assume that Shakespeare is deliberately and cynically implying

that his heroine is, in her own way, as narrow and cold as his villain. He seems rather to be trying to emphasize and illustrate the familiar tenet that neither charity nor forbearance must be carried to the point of permitting or condoning outrage. (77-78)

Madeleine Doran, in her Endeavors of Art, has also asserted that our failure to look at Isabella from a Jacobean point of view toward chastity in women means that we have "simply lost the key [to Measure for Measure], an easy thing to do in comedy" (362). Following a number of the Christian interpreters, William B. Toole suggests that "the dark, fantastical actions of the Duke have a frame of reference that reflects the wisdom of God," that "the substitution of Mariana is analogous to the sacrifice of Christ, and that the deception of Angelo is analogous to the deception of the devil" (192). He also sees the Atonement analogy as being split into two parts because of the exigencies of the action on the realistic level of the play:

Angelo is in jeopardy of committing two sins: (1) ravaging the pure Isabella and (2) executing a man who is no more a forfeit to the law than he is. He is saved from these sins by two acts of substitution, both of which are arranged by the Duke. These substitutions, which save Angelo from sins that would compel an inexorable earthly judgment, are obliquely analogous to the Atonement of Christ. (192)

More recently, and more emphatically, Arthur C. Kirsch sees a fundamentally Christian play:

The action is dominated by religious images-- for most of the play the Duke appears in the habit of a friar, and Isabella appears throughout in the habit of a novice--and the language

is suffused with allusions to the Gospels, often to parables, like those of the talents and of the unmerciful servant, which were common currency. At certain points, notably in Isabella's speech on the Atonement, both the language and action are explicitly and deeply concerned with central truths of Christian experience. (89-90)

There is truth in the interpretation, but it is also an over-simplification.

One of the most logical arguments against reading Measure for Measure as a mirror of ethical standards of the Gospels involves Isabella's plea that "thoughts are no subjects, / Intents but merely thoughts" (V.i.453-54). Certainly this argument contradicts Christ's sermon when he said, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." In Angelo's soliloquy after his interview with Isabella, he says,

Heaven hath my empty words,
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel; heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name,
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception. (II.iv.2-7)

Surely Angelo has lusted after Isabella and fully intends to bed her. If his intents remain intents, it is certainly through no fault of his. In "Mode and Character in Measure for Measure," Lucy Owen also rejects explicitly divine or allegorical dimensions when she argues that in the play we have a real exploration of the human meanings of repentance and forgiveness:

Such criticism fails to see that the notion of the gracelessness of man, so strongly conveyed by the failings of Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio, as well as by the low moral tone of the minor characters, is paralleled throughout the play by the notions of divine redemption and human mercy and that the thrust of the whole play from its beginning is away from punishment for its own sake and toward forgiveness and self-knowledge. Forgiveness is central to the play; the "problems" which it seems to present are related to the dramatic problem of representing forgiveness on the stage. (17)

Something of a middle ground is proposed by M. C. Bradbrook in her article, "Authority, Truth, and Justice in Measure for Measure." Without giving a strict Christian interpretation but noting the play's affinities to an earlier dramatic tradition, Bradbrook points out that the play resembles "the late medieval Morality. It might be named *The Contention between Justice and Mercy, or False Authority unmasked by Truth and Humility*" (385). R. G. Hunter has also treated the play as a "comedy of forgiveness" and sees medieval drama as an illuminating background to the play (204-26). Allowing Shakespeare a mind of his own and maintaining that Shakespeare is never "enslaved" by the pronouncements of the theologians, Darryl Gless's interpretation, Measure for Measure, the Law, and the Convent, shows that Shakespeare adopts the

most benign implications of his play's scriptural source . . . and at times he employs these implications in ways that closely parallel the published ideas of contemporary religious authorities . . . but he is not

at all averse to adapting and elaborating them. As often happens in great art, Shakespeare's use of linguistic and theological conventions engenders meanings that refuse to be altogether circumscribed by the conventional. . . . Shakespeare's play reflects the best thoughts of the best religious minds of his era. (xv)

Following up on these arguments for the play's affinities with medieval dramatic tradition, John Cox, in "The Medieval Background of Measure for Measure," traces the medieval analogues that deal, as Measure for Measure does, with sexual misconduct and the nature of true sovereignty and concludes that Shakespeare's play owes much dramaturgically to the medieval convergence of the sublime and the humble (1-13). Although he does not take a religious view of the play, W. W. Lawrence postulates that a Jacobean taste for the improbabilities of traditional dramatic stories helps to explain the play's present-day limited success:

The true interpretation of the whole play, indeed, depends upon constant realization that while it seems real through the brilliancy and veracity of the portraiture of most of its characters, and through the intensely human struggle of the basic plot, it nevertheless exhibits improbabilities and archaisms which must be judged in the light of early traditions and social usages. (121)

We can see from this final critical view that Measure for Measure is unsuccessful only to those who do not understand Shakespeare's original intention. If we take into account the historical shifts in attitude, and correct our muddled twentieth-century response to Isabella, for example,

then the play can be demonstrated to be an artistic whole in its own time. The failure of many critics to make such allowances has often distorted what F. R. Leavis has described as one of the "most consummate and convincing of Shakespeare's achievements" (150) into an historical-theological document. Responding to some critical failure to treat Measure for Measure as comic art, E. M. W. Tillyard says:

There is much thought and much orthodox piety in Measure for Measure, and during the time when Shakespeare was writing the Problem Plays he had the Morality form rather prominently in his mind. That in some sort of relation of justice and mercy is treated, that Angelo may stand at one time for the letter of the law or for the old law before Christian liberty and at another for a Morality figure of False Seeming, that the Duke contains hints of Heavenly Grace and that he embodies a higher justice than mere legality, that Isabella is Mercy as well as Chastity--all these matters may very likely be concluded from the text and they may help us to understand the play. But they are conclusions which are ineffective . . . they have little to do with the total play, however justified they may appear by these and those words or passages in abstraction. (128)

David L. Stevenson also argues that this insistence has produced "luxuriant thickets of exegesis in our learned journals by tempting critics to treat Measure for Measure as a small island of Jacobean thought and sensibility, penetrable only by the expert historian" (3). The demand that Measure for Measure be understandable only in proportion to our awareness of one or another of its historically

recoverable elements has kept it, unlike Shakespeare's other works, isolated and inaccessible to full aesthetic appraisal (Stevenson 3). Far from being a museum piece, Measure for Measure, Stevenson maintains, is a living entity, a work of art in our time.

The play's more hostile critics, who generally discount the relevance of Christian doctrine, focus mainly on inconsistencies of characterization or on a disparity between the ending of the play and the rest of its action. The nature of the failure may also be attributed to peculiarities of early seventeenth-century story materials or to a flaw in the dramatic structure. Focusing on the problem very succinctly, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch asks, "What is wrong with this play?" Defending his question, he asserts that the criticism concerning the play is so tangled, confused, and contradictory that there must be something wrong somewhere. He points finally to the inconsistency in Isabella as an exemplar of chastity (xiii). Quiller-Couch is not alone. As noted of the characters in Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, inconsistency of character abounds, at least in the critics' opinions. To some, Isabella is a saint; to others, her chastity is rancid. The Duke, as we have said, may be compared to Jesus or Divine Providence, or he may be as flawed as Angelo. No character comes away from the play unscathed or untouched by the ambivalence

and irony that is so much a part of the universe of Measure for Measure.

Causing as much or more debate is the play's subject-- the conflicting needs of law and freedom, order and libido, community justice and its sanctions concerning individual will. William Hazlitt finds the nature of the play's subject to be original sin, which prevents us from taking a cordial interest in it (345). To Coleridge, the play is "a hateful work" (100). A. C. Bradley says of Shakespeare's marrying of Isabella to the Duke that it is a "scandalous proceeding" (78). E. K. Chambers sees a "nascent pessimism" which anticipates Shakespeare's writing of King Lear. He says the play

just perplexes and offends, with its deliberate painting of the seamy side of things through which intolerable personages pass to an end that is certainly determined by no principles of poetic justice. We are in unwholesome company. (208)

Ellis-Fermor also sees in Measure for Measure a "world order ineradicably corrupted and given over to evil" which staggers the imagination; there is a pervading cynicism implicit in the orientation of the material:

It is a world in whose fetid air nothing wholesome can grow. It is in Shakespeare's thought, the very nadir of disgust and cynicism, a world where "nothing is but what is not," where such order as there is is evil, where all passion and all enterprise is only "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame." (262-63)

L. C. Knights, in "The Ambiguity of Measure for Measure," accepts as self-evident an "admitted unsatisfactoriness" (149) at the core of the play. T. S. Eliot sees its lack of success as due to "intractable material" (99).

Even among the critics who profess to love the play, there is the assumption that "something is wrong with it" because it is complex and because it produces ambiguous responses. Eileen Mackay writes: "It is acknowledged, even by those who most admire it, that Measure for Measure is a difficult play" (109). Lawrence S. Hall also refers to the play's "intractable material [which] . . . may have been due in large measure to [Shakespeare's] philosophical ambivalence" (158). Mary Lascelles, in the introduction to her book on the play, insists that no one "has ever read or seen Measure for Measure without experiencing some bewilderment" (1).

Some critics find fault with the play's dramatic structure. Tillyard argues that the play is unsatisfactory because it fails to cohere; it divides into two incompatible parts (129-43). Rossiter says that "nearly all critics are agreed that there is a break in the play" and quotes L. C. Knights' observation that "the last two acts, showing signs of haste, are little more than a drawing out and resolution of the plot" (164). "It is quite evident," according to Rossiter, "that the texture of the writing--the tenseness

of the image and evocative quality--undergoes an abrupt change when the Duke begins talking prose in III.i; and that this change applies more or less to all the serious matter thereafter" (164). More recent critics have also complained about the play's lack of unity. Herbert Weil, Jr., in "Form and Context in Measure for Measure," argues that the play falls apart in the middle, when the Duke steps out from one of his dark corners to save Isabella from the cruel dilemma of having to sacrifice either her brother's life or her virtue:

The transformation of mood and control proves so complete after the Duke reduces Isabella's dilemmas to such devices as substituting heads or virgins that we must recognize that ethical choices are no longer vital to work out the story. (69)

Responding to the disparity between the end of the play and the rest of the action, Hal Gelb expresses dissatisfaction with the infamous bed trick by pointing out that although the trick "may resolve the action," it "does not arise from the action it resolves" (32-33). Harriet Hawkins, one of Tillyard's followers, indicts the play for its lack of coherence. According to her article "'The Devil's Party': Virtues and Vices in Measure for Measure," the point of view, the tone, and the very mood of the play alter drastically and for the worse in Act III. Once Shakespeare abruptly drops his consideration of the psychological and sexual reverberations resulting from

the confrontation between a fairy saint and a fallen angel, he then resorts to a series of elaborate intrigues in order to keep from remembering the extraordinary earlier scenes.

He drags in the tepid Mariana to play the bed trick, thus assuring that Angelo is securely fettered to another woman by the bonds of holy wedlock, and then--ever widening the safety zone between his incendiary pair--he has the Duke claim Isabella for his own. Thus, officially at least, Shakespeare precludes further speculation about a sexual moment-of-truth between Isabella and Angelo. In short, the subsequent action of the play, like many scholarly discussions of it, would seem designed to encourage us to efface from the memory the extraordinary psychological and sexual reverberations of the earlier scenes. Assuming (only assuming) that Shakespeare himself wants us to disregard that dramatic evidence which he himself introduced previously, is it, in the last analysis, possible to do so? (110)

Other critics, however, have no trouble in seeing a unity in the play and do not see an effort on the dramatist's part to "efface" anything from the memory.

Agreeing that there is a different direction in the second half of Measure for Measure, Lawrence Hyman still finds a "hitherto undiscerned unity" (4) and claims that the "second half is integrally related to the first" (20). Approaching the play's thematic development, Hyman sees "sexuality as the source of life," evidenced by Juliet's pregnancy and by the child of Lucio and Kate Deepdown, "whereas its absence, chastity, leads to death" (4). Northrop Frye has also observed the diptych construction in Measure for Measure and, in a different way,

its creativity: "the first part is a tragic and ironic action apparently heading for unmitigated disaster, and the second part an elaborate comic intrigue which ends by avoiding all disaster" (25). He asks two questions: what the significance of such a construction is, and what light the structure throws on the play's meaning. His answer is that Measure for Measure is a "comedy about comedy" (25), and the two halves of the action illustrate

a dialectic between life and art, in which the elaborate dramaturgy of the disguised Duke reverses and redeems the direction of life for all the characters. The implication is that art redeems the past by separating what is creative in it from the general death-wish frenzy of ordinary history. (55-56)

In her Likenesses of Truth, Harriet Hawkins says that just before Shakespeare alters the course of the action in the direction of comedy, he passes a dramatic point of no return: "For he creates in his audience a very simple and passionate appetite to watch these characters enact their tragic choices" (55). Although Hawkins raises the issue only intermittently, she is right to call attention to our expectations. In her book, Measure for Measure as Royal Entertainment, Josephine Waters Bennett points out that the difference between a comic and tragic plot is surely that in comedy the threatened catastrophe can always be averted by explanation or human intervention: "Shakespeare's recognition of this distinction is patent in his fondness for

disguises and mistaken identity in comic plot" (25). In this play, the Duke, present in disguise throughout, prevents any injustice: no harm is done, neither rape nor execution. Another plot device which engages our sympathies is the absurdity of the "law of Vienna," whose injustice is repeatedly indicated by almost every character except Angelo. In stressing these points while recognizing a serious core of meaning, Bennett may argue that the play "is excellent theater, expertly contrived, full of poetry, yet of poetry kept within the confines of rhetoric, never allowed to soar into tragic intensity" (25).

I believe that Shakespeare establishes key themes, certain characters, and sets the dominant tone in the play's opening scenes, scenes which function especially to evoke certain comic expectations. And certainly Measure for Measure ends in a conventional comic manner so that in one sense we have to admit that our comic expectations, established at the beginning, are met. However, these expectations have been subtly changed throughout the play so that the fairy tale ending is not at all satisfactory.

The surface events of Measure for Measure occur in a conventional chronological order; but they keep leading to events which are opposite to what we expect. Similarly, the characters, who are involved in these events and their unintended results, violate our expectations of how they ought

to, or will, respond. We expect correct, perhaps stereotyped, responses from them. For example, when we realize that Angelo is guilty of the same sin as Claudio, we expect him to release Claudio. Because we have been told he is virtuous, we do not expect him to act like a hypocrite. But he does not release Claudio, and he is a hypocrite. When we see Isabella plead for mercy for Claudio with Angelo, we expect her to treat her brother with tenderness, understanding, and mercy. Because she is supposed to be virtuous (after all, she is a novice), we expect her to act with kindness and humility. But she fails us. When we see Lucio playing the witty friend to Claudio and advising Isabella, we expect him to continue in this role. But we see him refuse to help his friend Pompey and engage in unmotivated (even if delightful and bawdy) slander against the Duke and Friar Lodowick. When we see the Duke seeking self-knowledge and trying to find a balance of justice and mercy so that he can be a better ruler, we are disappointed when he does not find that blend and when he engages in a final, intemperate vendetta against Lucio. In short, our expectations are violated. However, we are also persuaded that the violations are appropriate, indeed, exciting and satisfying. The play, despite its conventional comic resolution, does not invite conventional responses. And it is up to us to determine whether we really want to

experience the conventional or whether we dare to experience the assault on our conventional moral certitude. We may be invited to see something of Angelo, Isabella, Lucio, or the Duke in ourselves.

Ernest Schanzer defines the "problem" of a problem play as one that creates uncertain responses, a "play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses are possible or even probable" (6). Given that we do experience uncertain and divided responses as reactions to Measure for Measure, the task we set for ourselves should be to examine how Shakespeare has demanded such responses rather than trying to find narrow messages or attempting to solve the problems Shakespeare chose not to resolve. Stevenson argues that Measure for Measure "really attempts no solution of moral problems." If anything, the

ironies and paradoxes of the play . . . give us a sharper recognition of the complex nature of problems of moral decisions. They give us a renewed sense that such problems are interesting because they have permanent existence, not just in Shakespeare's Vienna, but also in the world outside. (109-10)

At this point, I would like to suggest, as I have with Troilus and Cressida and All's Well That Ends Well, that the "failure" we have been describing is the failure of criticism to provide a framework within which the play's

virtues, strengths, and power can be appreciated. Stanley Fish has said that the business of criticism is not to determine a correct way of reading but to determine from which of a number of possible perspectives reading will proceed (16) and that we need to think of language as an "experience" rather than a "repository of extractable meanings" (67). We need to bring to Measure for Measure an attitude of questioning attentiveness, for Shakespeare will engage us in direct intellectual participation. The play is highly sophisticated, full of irony, paradox, suspense, and theatricality. Manipulating the point of view, undermining characters, juxtaposing scenes for parodic effect, using discrepant awareness, divorcing the word from the deed--Shakespeare uses all of these techniques to produce in his audience, as the Duke produces in Isabella, a "satisfaction" and a "benefit" (III.i.154-55) even as the play probes into the nature of human limitations and weakness.

We have examined a paradox in All's Well that is quite pertinent to the plot in Measure to Measure. Parolles tells Helena that "it is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is rational increase" (I.i.126-28); and Lavatch tells the Countess, "The danger is in standing to't; that's the loss of men, though it be the getting of children" (III.ii.41-42). Both of

these statements have significance in Vienna as well: the product of Claudio and Juliet's love is her pregnancy and the prospect that he may lose his life for his part in it. This state of affairs is also a twisting of what is usual. The woman is traditionally the one who is put to death for adultery. Interestingly, our sympathies are with Claudio, the victim, as he is dragged through the streets as a public example of Angelo's new authority-in-action. His reaction to Angelo's law is twofold: he accepts his affair with Juliet as an impropriety. But he is more embarrassed over being the victim of what he considers an arbitrary statute. After all, he loves Juliet; he says she is "fast my wife," and they only lack the "outward order" of marriage (I.ii. 147; 149). According to Stevenson, the epitome of Claudio's mood is the "bone-dry wit" of his comment to Lucio concerning the human predicament:

Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane
A thirsty evil, and when we drink we die.
(I.ii.128-30)

On the other hand, Claudio's reaction to Angelo himself is outrage because even though Claudio is not wholly innocent, his punishment is far more severe than his crime. Claudio calls Angelo a "demigod" who punishes him to make a name for himself. As we will see, Claudio suggests his sister "make friends / To the strict deputy" (I.ii.180-81). It is his assumption that Angelo, too, may be subject to the

"thirsty evils" of mankind, and he may be liable to Isabella's attractions as a woman, as Claudio has been to Juliet's, and thus she may save his life. Stevenson says:

Claudio's uncalculated recognition of the natural, unconditioned woman in Isabella (and the unconditioned male in Angelo) prepares us for the less publicly advertised element in both their characters. It is Claudio's view, of course, which finally prevails. (38-39)

In addition to Claudio's recognition that Angelo the saint may be attracted to Isabella, Shakespeare has emphasized other paradoxes. Claudio's sister, Isabella, is a novice, dedicated to chastity; but she pleads for mercy for his sin of unchastity (II.ii.27-36). Then, again ironically, it is her purity which tempts Angelo, "a man whose blood / Is very snow broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense" (I.iv.57-59). Angelo himself acknowledges this paradox, saying:

Can it be
That modesty may more betray our sense
Than woman's lightness? Having waste ground
 enough,
Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary
And pitch our evils there? . . .

Dost thou desire her foully for those things
That make her good? . . .

O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint,
With saints doth bait thy hook! Most dangerous
Is that temptation that doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue. (II.ii.167-82)

Another significant paradox is that while Angelo's law is punishing Claudio and Juliet, who are betrothed and in love,

it has allowed a truly licentious man like Lucio to remain free.

Besides paradoxes in the plot, there are also paradoxes in the characterization. As R. A. Foakes remarks, "It is important to distinguish between the way the characters see themselves, and the pattern of expectations set up from the start of the action, with its promise of a comic resolution" (21). Like many of the characters in Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, the characters in Measure for Measure are self-deluded, believing themselves to be one thing yet betraying that image in their language and action. Angelo is the most obvious example of this divided self. At the beginning of the play, the Duke has elected Angelo "to enforce or qualify the laws" (I.i.65) of Vienna in his absence. Twice, however, within twenty-one lines, the Duke has asked Escalus his opinion on how well Angelo will represent the Duke as his deputy: "What figure of us think you he will bear," and "What think you of it?" (I.i.16, 21). Even Angelo, perceiving this deputation as a test of sorts, asks for more time: "Let there be some more test made of my mettle / Before so noble and so great a figure / Be stamp'd upon it" (I.i.48-50). However, the Duke calls this request an "evasion" and insists that Angelo will be "mortality and mercy in Vienna" (I.i.44). That Angelo will enforce the "mortality" of the law but not the "mercy" quickly becomes

evident. As we have noted, Claudio, imprisoned because of "too much liberty" (I.ii.125), tells Lucio that Angelo, "whether it be the fault and glimpse of newness" or "whether the tyranny be in his place, / Or in his eminence that fills it up" (I.ii.158; 163-64), has decided to enforce the "drowsy and neglected act / Freshly on me--'tis surely for a name" (I.ii.170-71).

Angelo insists on punishment for disobedience and sees little conflict between justice and mercy. In response to Escalus's plea for mercy for Claudio, since the judges may be as bad as the judged, Angelo casually replies:

what's open made to justice,
That justice seizes. What knows the laws
That thieves do pass on thieves? 'Tis very
pregnant,
The jewel that we find, we stoop and take't,
Because we see it; but what we do not see
We tread upon, and never think of it.
(II.i.21-26)

Mercy requires empathy, and Angelo has none. He tells Escalus that Claudio's sin is one that he has never been tempted to commit:

You may not so extenuate his faults; but rather
tell me,
When I, that censure him, do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death,
And nothing come in partial. Sir, he must die.
(II.i.27-31)

And he tells Isabella that "it is law, not I, condemn your brother . . . he must die tomorrow" (II.ii.80). As far as Angelo is concerned, he is the law. So we are immediately

suspicious of Angelo's virtuous superiority, and as we will see, he has prophesied his own crime and sentence.

Later, we become assured that testing Angelo's mettle is at least part of the Duke's purpose in appearing to leave Vienna. He tells Friar Thomas:

Lord Angelo is precise;
 Stands at a guard with envy; scarce confesses
 That his blood flows; or that his appetite
 Is more to bread than stone; hence shall we see
 If power change purpose: what our seemers be.
 (I.iii.50-54)

G. Blakemore Evans, editor of The Riverside Shakespeare, explains "precise" as being "punctiliously correct in manner and morals; in Shakespeare's day, often applied to Puritans" (555). Angelo is, in fact, known for this very quality, as we have seen. Angelo's seeming virtuousness is already quite suspect. In trying to be absolute, to live in icy self-control by rigid, unexamined ideals of conduct, Angelo denies his humanity. Lucio tells the disguised Duke that it is rumored Angelo "was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation":

Some report a sea-maid spawn'd him; some that he
 was begot between two stock-fishes. But it is
 certain that when he makes water his urine is
 congeal'd ice, that I know to be true; and he
 is a motion generative, that's infallible.
 (III.ii.108-112)

Later, in the same exchange with the Duke, Lucio describes Angelo as an "ungenitur'd agent" who "will unpeuple the province with continence" (III.ii.174-75).

However others may perceive Angelo or however he perceives himself, we readers are aware that he is human and, consequently, to use a line from All's Well, he is "good and ill together." The idea Angelo has of himself as a saint is thoroughly shaken in his interview with Isabella, where, ironically, he is tempted by a kindred spirit, an equally chaste Isabella. In his first soliloquy, he acknowledges that he is "going to temptation," and that he may not be what he has thought. He agonizes, "What dost thou? or what art thou, Angelo? . . . What is't I dream on?" (II.ii.172; 178). He reveals his attitude about himself, his belief in his moral superiority, when he refers to himself as a saint: "O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint, / With saints dost bait thy hook!" (II.ii.179-80). And, a little later, he acknowledges that under his external trappings lie the basic passions common to all men: "Blood, thou art blood!" (II.iv.15). These lines carry a strong allusion to sex as a temptation, and the "hook" image is also used by both Pompey and Isabella to convey the same sense. Pompey, explaining the nature of Claudio's offense, says he is guilty of "groping in a peculiar river" (I.ii.90); and, paralleling Angelo's earlier remark, Isabella also analyzes the situation in such terms:

O perilous mouths,
That bear in them one and the self-same tongue,
Either of condemnation or aproof,

Bidding the law make curtsy to their will,
 Hooking both right and wrong to th' appetite,
 To follow as it draws! (II.iv.172-77)

In his "Language and Structure in Measure for Measure," Ralph Berry calls attention to Angelo's language, which at once expresses his inclination to the sexual act and his lack of self-knowledge:

Angelo's thoughts and actions are specifically directed towards the sexual act, and as such they require little commentary. Even so, it is striking that the language in which he expresses his inclination is so often veiled, allusive, suggestive. It is as though he finds a difficulty in admitting the extent of his propensity, even to himself; and in this sense his language is indeed an amplification of the wondering "What art thou, Angelo?" (157)

This propensity toward the physical is revealed in several passages. For instance, "and in my heart the strong and swelling evil / Of my conception" (II.iv.6-7) projects the physical implications of conceive, meaning "pregnancy," while holding nominally to the mental sense (Berry, "Language and Structure" 157). The same physicality looms in:

This deed unshapes me quite, makes me unpregnant
 And dull to all proceedings. A deflow'ed maid!
 And by an eminent body that enforc'd
 The law against it! (IV.iv.20-23)

Angelo is describing his depressed mental state here, but we cannot miss the sexual implications of detumescence. As Berry further notes, it is a plain case of "post coitum omne animal riste est" ("Language and Structure" 157). Once he has told Isabella of his passion, Angelo's speech is overtly physical:

I have begun,
 And now I give my sensual race the rein.
 Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite,
 Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
 That banish what they sue for. Redeem thy
 brother
 By yielding up thy body to my will.
 (II.iv.159-65)

Not surprisingly, Angelo's speech also evokes the images of being and seeming which abound in the play. And, as his evil purposes manifest themselves, the images increase in intensity. As the distance between form and reality becomes more significant, the emphasis on falsehood and seeming increases:

Heaven hath my empty words
 Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
 Anchors on Isabel. . . . (II.iv.2-4)

O place, O form,
 How oft dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
 Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls
 To thy false seeming! (II.iv.12-15)

Say what you can: my false o'erweighs your true.
 (II.iv.170)

Angelo is explicit in his understanding that his public mask of preciseness or austerity (or "gravity" as he puts it) springs from personal vanity and pride, not from a deep-seated, private virtue. And Isabella uses the same thematic words in her recoil from his proposition. She cries out, "Seeming, seeming! / I will proclaim thee, Angelo" (II.iv. 150-51). Like Troilus, who believes himself true and simple, thus one-dimensional, Angelo, too, is capable of believing himself to be either totally virtuous and pure

or totally villainous and false. When he cannot eradicate the lust he feels for Isabella, he becomes false in his own eyes and, as a result, determines to give his "sensual lust rein." Certainly, this perception is a self-revelation and Angelo is growing in self-knowledge. But the awareness of his humanness does not allow him any peaceful resolution.

When we see Angelo again in Act V, we know that he is to be exposed (and we hope judged accordingly). Here the Duke mockingly reminds the audience of his original charge to Angelo to take his private virtue into the open market and verify it in action. He exclaims that he has heard "such goodness" of Angelo's justice that he must give Angelo "public thanks":

it deserves with characters of brass
A fortified residence 'gainst the tooth of time
And rasure of oblivion. (V.i.6-7; 11-13)

But, as Stevenson maintains, the dramatic moment of heaviest retaliatory mocking of the Angelo of Act I is reached when he is forced to judge the veracity of Isabella's and Mariana's charges against him (19). In this scene, he squirms and lies like Bertram in All's Well, until he is forced to tell the truth. And, in pronouncing judgment on himself, Angelo reveals that he has still learned nothing of mercy. He continues to want virtue and justice more than life:

Then, good Prince,
No longer session hold upon my shame,

But let my trial be mine own confession.
 Immediate sentence, then, and sequent death
 Is all the grace I beg. (V.i.370-74)

Perhaps Angelo cannot face life with the general public aware of his sins, aware that he is part of humanity. Perhaps, too, he fears that the Duke will judge as harshly, as mercilessly, as he has, and so he pleads for death first. Perhaps, like Faustus, his pride is so great that he cannot believe his sins can be forgiven or he cannot forgive himself. At any rate, when Escalus voices his surprise that Angelo "should slip so grossly, both in the heat of blood / And lack of temper'd judgment afterward" (V.i.472-73), Angelo still asks for death:

I am sorry that such sorrow I procure,
 And so deep it sticks in my penitent heart
 That I crave death more willingly than mercy:
 'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it.
 (V.i.474-77)

The last we hear of Angelo is from the Duke, who, having produced a live Claudio, says, "By this Lord Angelo perceives he's safe; / Methinks I see a quick'ning in his eye" (V.i.494-95), that is, a renewal of life.

If we see Angelo as a comic villain who does or does not get his just desserts, I think we are guilty of the same either/or confusion he suffers. For whatever reasons, Angelo is pardoned by Mariana, Isabella, and the Duke, emphasizing an ultimately necessary "measure" of moderation in human affairs. Leavis has noted that the "point of the play

depends upon Angelo's not being a certified criminal type, capable of a wickedness that marks him off from you and me" (161). And rather than calling for an eye for an eye, perhaps we are being asked to remember that it is possible for Angelo to "become much more the better / For being a little bad," as Mariana pleads (V.i.440-41).

Angelo is not the only character who is a seemer, whose language belies his image of himself, who is, in fact, ambiguous, or who is presented paradoxically and ironically. Isabella, who becomes the temptation for Angelo, is introduced as convent novice, chaste and spirited, ready to enter a restricted order that will isolate her from men. In fact, once she has taken her vows, she is told,

You must not speak with men
 But in the presence of the prioress;
 Then if you speak, you must not show your face,
 Or if you show your face, you must not speak.
 (I.iv.10-13)

The Duke also proclaims himself a reserved, philosophic recluse. Their ambiguities will cunningly parallel the ambiguities of the action.

As we have seen, the Duke plans to leave Vienna to see "if power change purpose: what our seemers be." Ostensibly, we think the seemer to be exposed is Angelo; however, he is not the only seemer, and he is not the only one who is exposed. The Duke is the first seemer, and Isabella is also one. Closely tied to this seeming context, of course,

is the language the characters use as well as the language other characters use to describe them. Whether we call this "substratum meaning" (Stevenson 33), "subtextual undercurrent" (Rosenberg 52), or "comic subtlety" (Martz 32), it is a method Shakespeare uses to give the audience a clear and consistent point of view. In other words, through inconsistency, irony, and contradiction, we get a definitive point of view. For Isabella, Shakespeare is explicit: Claudio describes her in terms which are strikingly like those Ulysses uses to describe Cressida: "There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, / Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body" (IV.v.55-57). Claudio says that in Isabella,

There is a prone and speechless dialect,
Such as move men; beside, she hath a prosperous
art
When she will play with reason and discourse,
And well she can persuade. (I.ii.183-86)

As we will see, Isabella's argumentative power is nothing to brag about. Thus, when we examine Claudio's words (indeed if we do not sense them at first), we find that he means men only have to look at her and get a "speechless," or subverbal message from her face and body. Certainly men are moved by Isabella's presence--Angelo to want within moments to seduce her, the Duke to plan marriage, Lucio, before he realizes that he's talking to her, to address her admiringly--"Hail, virgin, if you be, as those

cheek-roses / Proclaim you no less!" (I.iv.16-17). At any rate, Lucio ignores Claudio's representation of her as a rhetorician and relies on her femininity to persuade Angelo when he encourages her:

Go to Lord Angelo,
 And let him learn to know when maidens sue,
 Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel
 All their petitions are as freely theirs
 As they themselves would owe them.
 (I.iv.80-84)

Just as we are alerted to a gross reversal of character in Angelo, so are we alerted to discrepancies between the narrow, dogmatic virtues which Isabella identifies with and clings to and her practices as a human being. Isabella herself doubts her powers of rhetoric. She tells Lucio, "Alas, what poor ability's in me / To do him good" and "My power? Alas I doubt--" (I.iv.75-77). But she has a good idea of the speaking message of her body; when she finally intercedes with the Duke for Angelo, she says,

I partly think
 A due sincerity governed his deeds,
 Till he did look on me. (V.i.445-47)

The layers of seeming in Isabella, as well as in the Duke and Angelo, and their subsequent unmasking are surely a part of Measure for Measure's brilliant comic spirit, for while there is a seeming morality in the play, it is consistently undermined by an emphasis on the frailty and follies of men. And, as we have noted, it is one of the chief ironies of the play that Isabella, whose physical

presence moves men so powerfully, is planning to become a nun. But Shakespeare is on the side of life, and just as he restores the abbess to her family in Comedy of Errors, he will contrive to free Isabella from the convent. When we first see Isabella, we see her as she wants to be seen, as a legendary saint, but we also see a woman in love with playing the role of a legendary saint. She asks the nun Francisca: "And have you nuns no further privileges?" The nun detects a note of worldliness and responds, "Are not these large enough?" She attempts to persuade the nun, and perhaps herself too, that she desires more restraint: "Yes truly; I speak not as desiring more, / But rather wishing a more strict restraint / Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare" (I.iv.1-3). This is the last--the only time--we hear of her asserted devotion to this kind of restraint. She wears the habit of a sister until the end, for she will be a seemer to the end; but, as Marvin Rosenberg notes, her dress only continues "the visual irony of enclosing a passionate, sensual maiden better fit for a different life" (54).

When Isabella pleads with Angelo, he pays no attention at all to her reason and discourse even though she speaks eloquently and movingly. What he eventually does listen to, however, is her "speechless dialect." Although Angelo asks several times for her to leave, Isabella's pleas

become more impassioned as she is directed by Lucio. She moves closer, again at Lucio's direction, and tells Angelo (in language which says more than one thing), "I would to heaven I had your potency" (II.ii.67). Lucio lets us know that Angelo is moved when he says, "Ay touch him; there's the vein" (II.ii.69-70). We also know Isabella is affecting Angelo when he begins to call her "fair maid." Isabella, coached by Lucio and the Provost, speaks on for several more lines while Angelo is silent. She tells him,

Go to your bosom;
 Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
 That's like my brother's fault. (II.ii.136-39)

And Angelo's next lines, in an aside, are a revealing metaphor for Isabella's art of persuasion: "She speaks, and 'tis / Such sense that my sense breeds with it" (II.ii.141-42). G. B. Evans notes that "sense," as used here, means that Angelo's sensual desires are multiplying (The Riverside 561). And, as we know, Isabella's effect on Angelo has been frightening for him, because it is sexual.

It is very interesting that nowhere in this scene is there any overt reference to Isabella's own feelings, her own bond to frail humanity. In fact, in her interview with Angelo, she does not even speak of the "vice" of procreation, and she never once identifies Claudio or specifies what his crime is. When she says at the beginning of the interview, "There is a vice that most I do abhor, / And

most desire should meet the blow of justice" (II.ii.29-30), her speech identifies her to be as "precise" as Angelo; both of them speak as they ought to, not as they feel. Nevertheless, we respond to Isabella with sympathy because she is helpless, and then, too, a sympathetic response is indicated since no character has anything but good to say about her.

In her second interview with Angelo, when he declares his lust and love for her, we sense an even stronger undercurrent of her own passion. Even as she denies him, she asserts her chastity and denies herself the frailty she ascribes to all women. She tells Angelo she would choose death before she would submit to his proposal:

Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death, as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (II.iv.101-04)

Surely these images of flagellation and of longing to couple naked in bed with death are not accidental. Rosenberg argues that these images "are stipulations of character; they are a link between Vienna's two worlds; and they reflect the opposition and reciprocation between sexuality and death that support the rhythm of the play" (59).

As we have noted, critics express either admiration for Isabella's superior strength and nobility of character (Doran 221) or suspicion of her motives. I think an either/or decision here regarding Angelo is misleading.

Certainly the Isabella Shakespeare has created is too strong-willed to submit to Angelo, to agree to his rape, but she is not "moral"--dramatically exciting, perhaps. Stevenson says that Angelo's challenge to Isabella--that she is as cruel as the sentence she has slandered so-- "really touches her moral vanity and sets in motion her own (and our) buried apprehension" (44). These nuances produce a sense of restlessness in the audience. It is significant that, although Isabella puts her refusal in religious terms--that she will imperil her soul--she does not use this kind of language to describe the effect on Claudio's soul of getting Juliet with child, nor will Mariana's soul concern her later when she consents to the bed trick. Stevenson argues that "there is no proselytizing instinct in Isabella. She exists to maintain her own personal chastity, not to entice others to follow her example" (45). As audience, we feel it is her vanity, her picture of herself as a saint, that she is defending when she cries out, "More than our brother's life is our chastity" (II.iv.185).

As we have said before, Shakespeare often directs our response to a character by how other characters respond to him. Claudio's reactions to Isabella show that Shakespeare means for us to respond to her with sympathy, but sympathy is not always the response elicited. The scene also

presents us with an incongruity. Isabella passes sentence on Claudio as cruelly as Angelo does as she engages in a merciless tirade against her brother. To Claudio's dread of death, to his plea for life, her response--again rich in sexual imagery--makes her question even her mother's virtue:

O you beast!
 O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch! . . .
 Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
 From thine own sister's shame? What should
 I think?
 Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair!
 For such a warped slip of wilderness
 N'er issued from his blood. (II.i.135-42)

Surely Isabella is no allegorical figure of Truth or Holiness here. She continues to berate Claudio:

Die, perish! Might but my bending down
 Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
 I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
 No word to save thee. (III.i.143-46)

When Claudio tries to interrupt the tirade, she is adamant:

O fie, fie, fie!
 Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade.
 Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd,
 'Tis best that thou diest quickly.
 (III.i.147-50)

To have compassion for his frailty would be to act Mistress Overdone, again evoking Vienna's underworld of bawds and pimps and juxtaposing that world with her role as a "sister." But she is much, much more than a holy sister. Here she is raging, passionate, malicious. She is not one-dimensional in this scene, for Shakespeare has made her exciting, stimulating, a character with the ambiguity and

contradictions of a woman. Perhaps Angelo's challenge to her moral vanity is paralleled here since Claudio has, like Angelo, challenged her arrogant dream of exemption from normal human involvement.

Stevenson says that this scene is also a crucial turning point of Measure for Measure because:

It is a successful, wholly convincing exposure . . . of Isabella's fierce fever on goodness, or her moral arrogance. . . . She has refused, even more vehemently than Angelo, her own liability to the needs of the human condition.
(45-46)

Surely our sympathies for Isabella here are sorely tried. She has successfully reduced Claudio to a bundle of nerves who is "so out of love with life that [he] will sue to be rid of it" (III.i.171-72). Furthermore, Isabella's vituperative rhetoric disturbs the Duke, who, as well as the audience, has been listening in. We must join the Duke in wondering how Isabella can hope for mercy when she renders none. Her "goodness" must be directed outward, must be tempered, no less than Angelo's. Where Angelo's sin is one of commission, Isabella's sin is one of omission. And it is the Duke who will seek to give that virtue a cause and a direction.

Whether the Duke ultimately reaches his stated goal to unite justice, that is, strict punishment, with mercy has evoked as much critical comment as the means by which he sets out to accomplish it. Because Measure for Measure

opens with such an explicit statement of its ideal, it is not surprising that we are disappointed when that ideal is not reached. The same holds true for the agent of this goal, the Duke, who immediately draws us into the play: our secret knowledge of the Duke's objective, to which we are privy from the beginning, engages us in solving the problems along with him. But just as Angelo and Isabella do quite contradictory things, so the Duke also seems to embody serious opposites. Because of our involvement with him, we are sensitive to any suggestion of weakness in him. He guides us through the play; and if our trust in him is shaken (as it is at times), then we are inclined to feel disturbed or betrayed. However, we are not to worry: Shakespeare is in control. According to Cynthia Lewis in her article "'Dark Deeds Darkly Answered': Duke Vincentio and Judgment in Measure for Measure," Shakespeare deliberately evokes these feelings because Measure for Measure involves not only the regeneration of Vienna's citizens but also the inner growth of Vienna's ruler (273).

We first see the Duke as a Renaissance Prince, the ruler of Vienna, delegating his authority to Angelo. Liberty, it seems, has outstripped the limits of decency: as the Duke says, "liberty plucks justice by the nose; / The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart / Goes all decorum" (I.iii.29-31). The Duke explains why he cannot enforce the law concerning fornication:

Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,
 'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them
 For what I bid them do; for we bid this be done,
 When evil deeds have their permissive pass,
 And not the punishment. (I.iii.35-39)

The Duke has both forbade and condoned sexual license. Now by appointing Angelo, he must seem not to forbid it, but not to condone it either. The Duke seems to reveal his motives for giving Angelo the rule in his conversation with Friar Thomas:

I have deliver'd to Lord Angelo
 (A man of stricture and firm abstinence)
 My absolute power and place here in Vienna
 And he supposes me travell'd to Poland.
 (I.iii.11-14)

But the Duke has another reason for absenting himself from Vienna:

Duke. Why I desire thee
 To give me secret harbor, hath a purpose
 More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends
 of burning youth.

Fri. T. May your Grace speak of it?

Duke. My holy sir, none better than knows you
 How I have ever lov'd the life removed,
 And held in idle price to haunt assemblies
 Where youth, and cost, witless bravery keeps.
 (I.iii.3-10)

The Duke apparently gives a self-centered reason for turning over his authority--his desire to live in contemplation. The Duke here resembles a potential Prospero who also neglects his government to pursue his "art" in contemplation; Prospero, too, seems to undergo a kind of spiritual education during The Tempest, learning that "the rarer action

is / In virtue than in vengeance" (V.i.27-28). He also learns that he cannot abdicate his political responsibilities. Another way in which the Duke prefigures Prospero is the role he takes up as teacher and comic dramatist. However, he, unlike Prospero, is no magician and is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, since he is sometimes mistaken. Like Prospero, he manipulates the other characters and resolves the difficulties, holding the extremist behavior in check and teaching Angelo and Isabella to do better. The Duke also learns to be a better ruler.

Duke Vincentio is also like Isabella, who at first wants to live a cloistered life, professing that he prefers to be shut away from people:

I love the people,
 But do not like to stage me to their eyes;
 Though it do well, I do not relish well
 Their loud applause and aves vehement;
 Nor do I think the man of safe discretion
 That does affect it. (I.i.67-71)

Our sympathies, I think, are strained as we witness the Duke's desire to abdicate his political responsibilities and use Angelo to enforce harsher rules on his people. But he will play his part as a man, vain, proud, passionate, deceptive, self-deceptive. In effect, the Duke also becomes a seemer who will hide in the disguise of a friar. He justifies his intriguing by saying that he will apply "craft against vice" and "so disguise shall by th' disguised / Pay with falsehood false exacting" (III.ii.277, 280-81).

Isabella, in her interview with Angelo, has given a fitting description of the Duke, a proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, who

Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens
Would all themselves laugh mortal.

(II.ii.121-23)

Lucio also says that the Duke is fantastical, or rather plays fantastical tricks: "It was a mad fantastical trick of him to steal from the state" (III.ii.92-93). The Duke as friar brings with him, in short, the air of mystery he has generated from the outset.

Like Stevenson, Lewis agrees that Act III is the crucial point of transition--for the Duke as well as for the entire play: "The action here implies that the Duke learns as much from his subjects about life as he teaches Claudio about death" (282). At the beginning of Act III, the Duke as friar has been giving spiritual counsel to Claudio, and we are not given his motive for preparing Claudio only for death. But his philosophy's effect leaves Claudio at least nominally prepared for that fate: "To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And seeking death, find life" (III.i. 42-43). Of course, as we have seen, this comfort does not last long, since Claudio is soon pleading with Isabella to let him live. We also know the Duke is eavesdropping on the conversation, and at the height of Isabella's fury, interrupts, checking her with a request: "Vouchsafe a word,

young sister, but one word" (III.i.151). At the sight of the friar, Isabella does check her passion and agrees to listen, and so the Duke sets out to temper her absolutism, which has emerged to a lesser degree in his own attitude toward vice. At the crucial moment, then, Isabella bends herself to the Duke's will, mitigating the inhumanity of "goodness" in the only way open to her. He advises her of a remedy in which she may "do a wrong'd lady a merited benefit; redeem your brother from the angry law; do no stain to your own gracious person; and much please the absent Duke" (III.i.198-203). She tells him, "I have spirit to do anything that appears not foul in the truth of my spirit" (III.i.205-07). He proposes the bed trick to Isabella. She will make arrangements with Angelo for an assignation, but Mariana will be her substitute. Thus Mariana's and Angelo's union will be consummated.

Like so many aspects of Measure for Measure, the morality of the bed trick has invited much debate. Hawkins (Likeness of Truth 73) and Leech ("Shakespeare's Comic Dukes" 112-13) respond in an extremely negative fashion. The Duke himself uses language that is reminiscent of Helena's in All's Well to describe the ploy. He tells Isabella that what she "cures" as a result of the trick will keep her from "dishonor in doing it" (III.i. 236-37), and the "doubleness of the benefit defends the

deceit from reproof" (III.i.257-58). Stevenson notes, however, that we feel Isabella has abandoned a corrodingly false innocence (52), and her participation in the bed trick is "the intended and dramatically effective beginning of the dissolution of her over-weening 'goodness'" (30). Seen in this light, the substitution of Mariana for Isabella is not the first step in a descending action, as Weil argues (58), but "the climax of a series of actions that remind us with increasing force that life in this play not only can but must come out of vice and shame," as Hyman maintains (14). Lewis says that in this scene the Duke admits to his own sexuality for the first time in the play; the bed trick also forces Isabella, through fantasy, to see herself in sexual terms (284). And Rosenberg suggests that while these two scenes in Act III ostensibly develop the Mariana plot, the "subtextual interplay" prepares us for the moment when the Duke, with some expectation of success, proposes that Isabella join him in his marriage bed: "these, then, are scenes of courtship" (65). Whether we view these scenes as "courtship" scenes or not, we must admit that Shakespeare is setting up our expectations for a union between the Duke and Isabella.

After his interviews with Claudio and Isabella, the Duke continues in his purpose to reform licentiousness, confronting more severe forms of the crime. As he meets and

deals with these, the remaining vestiges of his idealism continue to recede. He meets Pompey and condemns his vice: "Can'st thou believe thy living is a life, / So strikingly depending? Go mend, go mend" (III.ii.26-27). Forgetting his role as the friar momentarily, he orders Pompey to prison with the admonition that "correction and instruction must both work" for profit (III.ii.32-33); the Duke still retains a faith in the possibility of reforming sinners. He is also learning about his own limitations as a ruler. And, ironically, it is Lucio who is, at least in part, responsible for this knowledge. Lucio complains to the friar about the Duke's "mad fantastical trick" of putting the reins of government into Angelo's hands. Lucio also suggests sexual inclinations on the Duke's part, which the friar denies. However, Lucio's comments trouble the Duke about his own motives and intentions since he seems to respond to this experience with Lucio by reevaluating his political responsibilities. According to Stevenson, Lucio emerges from this comic interlude as a foil to the Duke (53). And Berry argues that "malicious or not, Lucio's function is to set up doubts in the audience which the Duke's rebuttal cannot entirely dismiss" ("Language and Structure" 154). As a foil to the Duke, Lucio provides necessary dramatic counterpoint. And we must wonder why the one character the Duke cannot forgive is Lucio.

Perhaps Lucio's comments are the truth the Duke cannot face. Although the Duke first laments his inability to "tie up the gall in the slanderous tongue" (III.ii.188), he soon after describes the ideal ruler as one who should not only measure the guilt of others in an awareness of his own culpability but one who should also present himself as a model of the character he demands in others:

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe;
Pattern in himself to know,
Grace to stand, and virtue to go;
More nor less to others paying
Than by self-offenses weighing;
Shame to him whose cruel striking
Kills for faults of his own liking.
(III.ii.261-68)

The Duke's staging of the resolution is grand spectacle and great theater; perhaps it is cruel as well. That we are still to consider the Duke mysterious and strange is pointed out by Escalus' and Angelo's puzzlement over his fantastic messages to them:

Escal. Every letter he hath writ hath disvouch'd
other.

Ang. In most uneven and distracted manner. His
actions show much like to madness, pray heaven
his wisdom be not tainted! (IV.iv.1-5)

Unlike Prospero, who wields a majestic magic, the Duke must rely on disguises, mistaken identities, ironies, and secrets to effect his purposes. He continues his use of disguises practically to the end. As the Duke, he begins on a heavy note of irony, congratulating Angelo for a job well done.

Then, as Isabella comes forward for "justice, justice, justice, justice!" (V.i.25), he pretends to doubt her story, defends Angelo, accuses her of madness (ironically as Angelo has earlier accused him), and has her arrested for "scandalous" remarks. Continuing to weave his "idle spider's strings" (III.ii.275), he mimics his own former detachment from his subjects, and, ironically, he invites Angelo to sit in judgment: "Do you not smile at this, Lord Angelo? / O heaven, the vanity of wretched fools!" (V.i.163-64). After listening to testimony from Mariana and Friar Peter, he condemns them as he has Isabella, bidding Angelo to "punish them to your height of pleasure" (V.i.240). Then he disappears only to return in his disguise as the friar, accusing the Duke of injustice and giving a diatribe against Vienna's vice:

I have seen corruption boil and bubble,
Till it o'errun the stew; laws for all faults,
But faults so countenanc'd, that the strong
statutes
Stand like the forfeits in a barber's shop,
As much in mock as mark. (V.i.318-21)

A few lines later, however, he says, tongue in cheek, "I love the Duke as I love myself" (V.i.341). Neither Angelo nor Escalus are moved by any of the speeches of Isabella, Mariana, Friar Peter, or Friar Lodowick (the Duke). In fact, even Escalus, who up until now has always urged mercy, cries out for punishment.

Surely our suspense has been built up, since even we have not been privy to these last manipulations of the Duke, and we are wondering when he will drop his disguise and what he hopes to accomplish by these last-minute tricks. But we are not overwhelmed since Shakespeare has maintained sufficient distance between us and the characters by our superior knowledge. For example, we know that Friar Lodowick is the Duke, we know that Claudio is alive and well, we know the Duke is in control. At the same time, however, we may be disturbed because we recognize that in the real world there may not be a deus ex machina to resolve all difficulties. In our world, judges are often taken in by the appearance of virtue in an Angelo and are sometimes blind to the truth.

When Lucio literally unmasks the Friar, he provides the mechanism by which the Duke is forced to take justice into his own hands and bring the play to an end. And our suspense is released in the final moments of complete and happy revelation. Claudio is shown to be alive, and the Duke orders Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, and even Lucio and Kate Keepdown to be married. He then asks Isabella to "give me your hand, and say you'll be mine . . . what's mine is yours, and yours is mine" (V.i.492; 537). Suspense again. Will Isabella say yes? Isabella does not answer, nor does she give her hand (though her body, her "speechless dialect," may be saying more than

we know) even though the Duke asks her twice with several lines in between each request. Many critics believe that Isabella accepts his proposal in a love-conquers-all climax. William Martz, in a truly untraditional reading, sees an Act VI where Isabella and Angelo marry (7-8). Rosenberg allows for the possibility that Isabella may remain consistent to her spiritual character and reject the Duke (71). All that is certain is that her answer is uncertain.

At any rate, we are sure that these marriages have not in any way curbed the sexual license which has plagued Vienna, and we are not sure that we even want to see that license curbed. Stevenson says that one of the sources of our discomfort with the play is that it invites us to recognize both "the elemental instinctual nature of sexual desire" and at the same time to recognize that it both mocks and is mocked by "the private disguises of love and morality which individuals impose on themselves and which are imposed on them by society" (131-32). It is Lucio who keeps alive and vibrant to the end a "sturdy view of human passion as the sheer act of sex":

This view constantly and rudely mitigates the serious element in Angelo's perfidy by reminding us of the neutral, mechanical common denominator to all love-making by which we have all arrived on the scene, and by which we are united in each other's transgressions in love. (Stevenson 59)

Like his counterpart, Parolles in All's Well, Lucio might also be prompted to say, "Simply the thing I am / Shall make

me live." Despite its recognition of common sexuality, the ending is, of course, not realistic. Nor is it promising in the sense that we can expect the formation of a new society such as is found in the earlier comedies (Barton 548).

As for the theme concerning "mortality and mercy" in Vienna, there is nothing in Act V to suggest that Angelo or the Duke has found the ideal balance between justice and mercy. When the Duke temporarily turns his power over to Angelo at the beginning of the play, he has two motives for doing so: one is to test Angelo and the other is to bring about a stricter enforcement of the laws in Vienna. At the end, it would seem that the Duke has certainly tested Angelo, with negative results. But his second aim has been put aside, and apparently we are not supposed to remember it. If, however, we take seriously the Duke's earlier comments about a ruler embodying personal justice, then the Duke must also recognize that the law cannot be enforced with severity if the man who is enforcing it is himself corrupt. Admirable, we think. However, this attitude can lead to extreme injustices as dangerous as Angelo's hypocrisy. As N. W. Bawcutt points out, "If you are convicted of a particular offence, the sentence you receive will not depend exclusively on the gravity of your crime, but also on the extent to which the judge has weaknesses of the kind for which you have been convicted" (94-95). The

alternatives at the end of Act V do not fulfill the ideal we have looked for--that justice should be tempered with mercy. We do not see the Duke administering light punishment versus heavy punishment but rather punishment as opposed to mercy and forgiveness. Thus the play does not offer a solution to the two extremes we are left with--death or forgiveness. Shakespeare leave us wondering about whether Angelo is truly repentant and whether he will be a good husband. We also wonder about the Duke's "mercy" regarding Lucio. Lucio's closing remark is hardly that of an eager husband: "Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping and hanging" (V.i.522-23). Perhaps most unsettling is the Duke's pardon of Barnadine, the recalcitrant murderer. He is given over to Friar Peter, who is to "advise" him. We have to wonder how successful Friar Peter will be. We also wonder if pardoning Barnardine is truly either justice or mercy.

I do not think that it is realistic to explain away these doubts or concerns. Measure for Measure, like Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, carefully exploits our own eagerness for easy, comfortable responses by forcing us to probe beyond the surface meaning for motives for human action which lie far deeper than we are usually willing to go. The play does not move us by showing the obvious. As we have seen, the play's major artistic devices are those of irony, paradox, and substitution, which serve to create

at once emotional distance and emotional dissonance. As we study these ironies and paradoxes, our perspectives are broadened and we find a multiplicity of identifications. As an audience, we have been bombarded and pushed by these ironies--of event and expectation. And in the process of working these out, of looking beyond the surface, we have come to a more profound awareness of the intractable evil, the capacity for destruction, within man.

Shakespeare chooses not to make projections about Vienna's future. However, in closing the play with three, possibly four, marriages, he shows us a society that is ready to accept that life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together. But rather than condemning, as we have seen the characters do and as we have been tempted to do, I suggest that we follow Shakespeare's lead and accept the ambiguity of the play, as well as of life itself, and the complexity of the characters, as well as of human nature. Since we are not angels who must weep, let us laugh, or at least be amused, at Shakespeare's fantastic trick.

Chapter V

"Seeming Knowledge," "Unknown Fear," and Understanding: A Conclusion

Having examined the critical history of Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, All's Well that Ends Well, and Measure for Measure, we can see the futility of attempts to explain away our perturbations, to unravel the "mingled yarn," or to find the definitive solution to the ambiguity of the problem plays. Indeed, we have noted several times that the endurance of so many critical approaches to these plays is evidence of a complexity that cannot be reduced to a single focus. To reduce to a scheme or a meaning that which is ultimately irreducible is to negate the very essence of Shakespeare's art. Too often the "failure" that critics have observed in the problem plays has been our own failure to find an approach that does not constrict the experience of the plays: the criticism has been inadequate to communicate the experience of the plays. We need to find concepts other than "meaning" to account for our experience, which has been a total and complex involvement of our intellect and our moral sensibility. Seeking a formula that helps one to suppress the disquiet he inevitably feels is a

natural reaction. But what if it is this very reaction that Shakespeare seeks to question? In fact, our need to complete incomplete patterns and to answer all questions, our longing to judge--all have been called to account, for we have been asked to revise our judgment, not simply of people, but of a convention--comedy. The many "problems" we have observed in the problem plays are the effects Shakespeare's art has produced: we have been made to feel tension, discomfort, surprise, and frustration. And that is disturbing.

Certainly, Shakespeare's problem plays present challenges to criticism. Lately, many critics have responded by rejecting those narrow conclusions that pin the plays down to interpretations constricting the range of meanings in them. Audience-oriented criticism, a method which processes its own user, depends on the realization that various dimensions of analysis or interpretation are possible and that a combination of approaches is not a negative eclecticism but a positive necessity. As Umberto Eco observes in The Role of the Reader, some art deliberately refrains from making an unequivocal statement, instead presenting a number of possibilities for the audience to arrange or distill. For example, in musical works, he says, this "open" technique consists in the composer's allowing the performer to choose tempo, duration, or pitch, sometimes even the sequence of passages, so that the performer is involved in

constructing the work, which nevertheless remains identifiable. In fiction or drama, this technique consists in creating sufficient complexity and ambiguity to permit a variety of interpretations--interpretations which do not exclude but complement and inform each other, so that every reader may give a somewhat different "performance" of the text without violating its integrity. Shakespeare's problem plays are certainly complex and ambiguous enough to allow for more than one reading or response. We have examined how we read, how Shakespeare has manipulated our perspectives, and we have become self-conscious about our own performance as the audience. We have explored the plays as a dynamic interaction between artist and audience, as a process of our involvement rather than as a considered view after the aesthetic event or as a repository for extractable meaning. During this process, we have become active participants as we have realized that we are shaped by the skill of the artist and made malleable by his control. To this end, we have focused on the effects these plays produce and on how Shakespeare has manipulated these responses.

In Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure, Shakespeare has created an art that jars our sensibilities, sets our teeth on edge, wrenches us from safe judgments, and compels us to different interpretations. He has presented the clashing worlds of comedy,

which demand happy endings, and of reality, where characters, portrayed with all their weaknesses, seem not to deserve their fates, whether good or ill. In fact, the hope expressed in the plays' endings is very much at odds with the evidence developed in the plays' actions. Through each of these plays, Shakespeare orchestrates our responses by playing on our expectations, then subverting or denying them through substitutions of one kind or another. In all three plays, he deliberately examines the difficulties arising from the opposing elements of fairy tale and realism, of romance motivation and psychological probability. All three plays are obviously self-conscious: they often seem to be questioning their own material and ironically questioning the validity of comedy as an image of truth. After all, what is a play if not a kind of "substitution" for life itself, a little illusive, elusive, allusive world that "stands" in some oblique, tangential way for the "real" thing? Psychologically and dramatically, all three plays are difficult in ways that Shakespeare seems to have wanted to emphasize rather than conceal. We expect Troilus and Cressida to be an epic and a love story, and it is neither: the playwright has substituted something else in its place. We expect All's Well to be a romantic comedy with a fairy-tale ending, and it is not: the playwright has substituted something else in its place. Complexity in plotting and

contradictions in tone are seen again and again to be reproducing the sensations of life with its complexities and contradictions. In the worlds of all three plays, Shakespeare is concerned with the problem of societies where words are not subordinate to fact, where the language is empty and often a lying substitute for deeds.

Troilus and Cressida is, for all its savagery and pessimism, finally exhilarating, as evidenced by our own generation's revival of interest in it. We have observed how carefully Shakespeare orchestrates our responses to heroes and themes that have been deflated. Taking characters from the worlds of epic and romance, characters who embody ideals such as reason, justice, honor, chivalry, love, Shakespeare substitutes in their place men and women who contradict these ideals, showing them to be self-deluded and motivated by pleasure, envy, lust, or revenge. Heightening this discrepancy between word and deed, between appearance and reality, is the slander and railing of Thersites, who reminds us that both Greek and Trojan are fools and knaves and that all men are motivated by appetite, a "universal wolf." Our heroic expectations are consistently thwarted as we witness Achilles' savagery, Ulysses' hypocrisy and plotting, and Hector's greed. These are certainly not the characters we have idealized through the ages. Our romantic

expectations are also thwarted, for Troilus is not the constant and true courtly lover we expect. And Cressida is not the innocent, modest, virtuous, romantic heroine we expect. Instead, Shakespeare has substituted a Troilus who is infantile and inconstant and a Cressida who is faithless and worthless. In the world of Troilus and Cressida the war is a metaphor for lechery, and the romance is an argument of a whore and a cuckold. Thus, far from being overly sympathetic or engaged with this world or its characters, we are detached; our emotions are distanced as we are forced beyond sentimentality or even disgust toward an emotional and intellectual understanding that the play is about us. We have witnessed and experienced the exposure of our own delusion and folly. In fact, in the epilogue Pandarus addresses the audience as "brethren and sisters in the hold-door trade." If we are disappointed, shaken, or frustrated, it is not that Shakespeare has failed; rather, he has presented, through counterpointed double-plotting, a world where humorous action is doomed to imperfection and disappointment. And, at the same time, through the mastery of his illusion, he has given order to this world of chaos so that the play's very existence contradicts the nihilism of the action.

All's Well That Ends Well also resists being reduced to a single interpretation. In this play, Shakespeare again

creates characters who do not conform to our expectations. Because Helena, Bertram, and Parolles are endowed with the complex psychology of real life, their actions often seem suspicious and unreasonable. And because their motives are not simple, we are forced to reevaluate our need, our expectations to have them act in a romantic, simplistic manner. As in Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare uses paradox, irony, and substitution to manipulate our point of view as he again exposes a world, much like our own, of opportunism and weak, selfish wills. Helena is presented in a notably ambiguous way. At times she appears to be as worldly as Cressida and as manipulative as Helen of Troy; at others she assumes a pious and humble role. In short, Helena is not what she appears to be on the surface or what we have been led to believe she is, and we must reexamine our first responses as we move from engagement and sympathy with her to a deeper understanding of her nature and a consequent detachment from her plight. So too with Bertram. At first we sympathize with his being forced to marry someone he does not love. But as the snobbish, foolish, selfish side of his nature is exposed, we find that we cannot respond that simply. Our expectations are denied even further with their marriage, for we are given no assurance that either of them has learned anything. Neither are we allowed to become too engaged with the plight of Parolles

since he rebounds so quickly from his discomfort, remarking, "Simply the thing I am shall make me live" (IV.iii.333-34). Again, as in Troilus and Cressida, it is as if the play itself mocks our desire for romance, for definitive happy endings, for easy or complacent judgments in an unheroic and disappointing world.

Measure for Measure, like All's Well That Ends Well, ends with marriages which do not--as marriages do in the earlier comedies--hold out the promise of a new society based on tolerance and self-knowledge. Like Troilus and Cressida and All's Well, Measure for Measure concludes with the problem of how to deal with an intractable, irremovable evil. Until the last scene, Measure for Measure deals realistically with the problem a man, or a society, faces in recognizing the presence of evil. Angelo, in enforcing an inhuman law, places himself above ordinary people, believing that he can withstand temptations others cannot. But when he is tried and tested, he fails. His self-knowledge is so severely shaken (for he has thought of himself as a saint) that he ultimately asks himself, "What dost thou? or What art thou, Angelo?" (II.ii.173). We then expect him to release Claudio because we have been told Angelo is virtuous. His own questioning of his nature and motives leads us to believe he will do what is right. However, he does not release Claudio, and he is thus a hypocrite. The Duke and Isabella are also forced to recognize

that they too share in man's sinful nature. But we see in their actions the same inconstancy that we have seen in Angelo. Because we have been led to believe in Isabella's virtue, we are shocked by her castigation of her brother. We expect her to act with charity and humility but are disappointed. As for the Duke, we are witnesses of his efforts to become a better ruler as he seeks self-knowledge as well as a balance between justice and mercy. Consequently, we do not expect the highly personal vendetta against Lucio, and we question the wisdom of the innocuous "punishment" of such an incorrigible as Barnardine. We, the audience, are again forced to recognize that we have been mistakenly expecting simple solutions to complex problems. We want a happy ending where everyone lives happily ever after. Yet, when Shakespeare pairs everyone off at the end and gives us the expected conclusion, we are discomfited because these marriages and pardons do not solve the questions the play has raised.

None of these plays, then, concludes in the conventional or traditional sense. And any one definitive conclusion will distort the true complexity of their visions. Their exquisite blending of tenderness and pain, love and fear, expresses the rich duality of a human condition which persists. Because of such a critical perspective, a double awareness of being both involved and removed, the best

resolution is multiple. Shakespeare has created plays which allow us to observe ourselves at the same time we are undergoing an imaginative and emotional experience. These plays force us to look beyond the limitations we normally impose on art as an imitation of life. In Joan Hartwig's words, we are forced "to look at the transparencies of the artifice as legitimate containers for meaning that cannot finally be reduced to the forms of expressive art" (7). Commenting on this imaginative and emotional experience, Peter Ure, in Shakespeare: The Problem Plays, says that "energy and meaning in the theatre may spring from the attempt to embody in its forms the vary resistance which life offers to being translated into the expressive modes of art" (7). It is energy and meaning, this very complexity which is, I believe, ultimately more satisfying and suggestive than simplicity or the obvious. We are not directed to a particular conclusion or judgment, and I do not think that it is realistic or desirable to explain away the doubts or concerns which the plays raise.

Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida, and All's Well That Ends Well carefully exploit our own eagerness for easy, comfortable responses by forcing us to probe beyond the surface for motives for human action which lie far deeper than we are usually willing to go. The plays do not move us by showing us the obvious. As we have seen,

the plays' major artistic and structural devices of irony, paradox, and substitution serve to create at once emotional distances and emotional dissonance. As we study these ironies, paradoxes, and substitutions, our perspectives are broadened, and we find a multiplicity of identifications. As an audience, we have been bombarded and pushed by these ironies and substitutions--of event and expectation. And in the process of working these out, of looking beyond the surface, we have come to a more profound awareness of the intractable evil, the capacity for destruction, within man. Our imaginations have been touched and revitalized. Shakespeare has placed before us a sample of that which he himself savors, the challenge of one wonderer to another. And I believe it is the problem plays' very complexity and ambiguity, their refusal to conform to any one definitive meaning, that has made their marvel echo through the minds of men.

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