

# I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## Sources and parallels

Shakespeare usually borrowed the plots of his plays from models called *sources* in the language of literary criticism. Not all of them, however. Some of Shakespeare's most brilliant plots or under-plots were probably invented by him: the main plots in *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Tempest*; the under-plot in *Much Ado About Nothing*. He often took material from several sources, which is the case for *Measure for Measure*. Three different processes are at work:

**1/ The device called *contamination***, a practice which consists in making a play out of two or several plays or stories, sometimes dealing with subjects not thematically related. Then the art of the dramatist lies in the skill with which he weaves these different plots into one single work. The most brilliant example is certainly *The Merchant of Venice*: the pound-of-flesh story and the casket-story did not belong to the same material, but Shakespeare fused them intimately, so that one does not know really which of the two is to be called the main plot, and which the counter-plot. The case of *King Lear* is original in that Shakespeare made use of two different stories —which he treated first in parallel, then in close connection with each other— dealing with the same themes of paternal tyranny and filial ingratitude.

**2/ The type of preparatory work which would be called research work nowadays.**

When Shakespeare intended to write a history play (either English or Roman) he read as many chronicles, documents and history-books as he laid his hands on, and his retentive mind would store everything that could be really useful and illuminating. Even though he did not aim at factual accuracy or thoroughness, he sought after truth and profundity, both in the realms of character-drawing and historical significance.

Now in the case of *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare practised this type of research-work. He read several plays, stories and perhaps documents (documents can be mentioned indeed because the story may have been based on fact. Cf. the letter by one Joseph Macarius quoted page 151 of the Arden edition) dealing with the same subject and it is quite certain that he gathered material, down to verbal or onomastic details, from several of them. This does not mean that this comedy (or tragicomedy?) must be regarded as a history play. The Vienna in which the action takes place is fictitious, and so is the story (though it may have been based on fact originally, as was indicated above). There is about *Measure for Measure* a character of abstract and dovetailed demonstration which contrasts with the life-like unpredictability of History. But certainly he studied his sources very carefully. He was not a plagiarist, not a public entertainer either exploiting other people's invention to turn out a new play every month or every year. He was not short of invention himself. He was interested in the plot of his main source, Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* because he had something personal to say about it.

*Measure for Measure* is a difficult, intellectual play, which can be regarded as Shakespeare's meditation on a traditional theme. It is necessary to know the sources, not for the sake of literary erudition, or just to admire or criticize Shakespeare's way of adapting extraneous material to his own theatre, but in order to sort out what belongs to the tradition and what has been introduced by him.

It is customary nowadays to regard this play as a sort of didactic parable, a play with a thesis —though what the thesis consists in is not easy to assess. So it is of utmost importance to be aware of what is exclusively Shakespearian in the play, the more so as our author's contribution concerns the initial données of the story, not only the episodes and conclusion of it. But even though Shakespeare transformed the plot from beginning to end, the situation came first, the characters afterwards. In the process of dramatic creation, the characters were engendered by the situation, not the situation by the characters.

Further distinctions should be made concerning the sources. When critics and specialists mention the sources of *Measure for Measure* they usually mean *Promos and Cassandra* by Whetstone, Lupton's *Too Good To Be True*, Cinthio's story of *Epitia*, etc. But perhaps other sources should be first

taken into consideration, or rather, one should remember that the main themes on which the story is built are as old as story-telling, and are still popular nowadays.

The theme of the iniquitous judge, who misuses his power to blackmail and oppress innocent people for the sake of his personal interest and pleasure-seeking, has always been a powerful and spectacular stock-situation. The theme of the disguised and righteous ruler, whose sudden arrival turns the table against the corrupted or cruel satrap, provides suspense and a happy ending. Innumerable stories, in every country in the world, are based on this opposition between local tyrant and righteous monarch. This kind of story also reflects the pathetic belief, in feudal times, in the almighty beneficent legitimacy of the sovereign as opposed to the arbitrariness of local government. Cf. the end of *Tartuffe*, not an inappropriate comparison, for the eponymous villain is a kind of Angelo.

*Nous vivons sous un prince ennemi de la fraude...*

The existence of such a permanent theme in literature certainly testifies to a deep tendency in the collective imagination and aspirations of mankind: the theme deals with Power, judicial and political power, an object both of terror and fascination, distrust and hope. It is a topic providing emotion and speculation.

There is another theme which is present in almost every work of literature, love, or to bare the subject of all sentimentality, sex. Now, in *Measure for Measure*, power and sex are associated in a terrifying manner. Angelo, the iniquitous judge, uses his power as a means of sexual gratification. Yet beyond the triteness of this theme, some aspects of the situation contrived by Shakespeare are extremely original, and indeed unique in literature.

The basic plot is very commonplace, especially the situation is reduced to its central and fundamental aspect: sexual tyranny exerted by a dominant male. Cf. Racine's *Andromaque* (inspired by Euripides), Richardson's *Pamela*, the numerous tales in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic literatures, founded on the same topic. Among the distant and peripheral influences on Shakespeare, one can mention one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, "The Physician's Tale", which narrates the well-known story of Virginius and his daughter Virginia: a Roman gentleman whose daughter was raped by

a judge. That magistrate, named Appius, lusted after Virginia. With the complicity of false witnesses he set up a fake case alleging that Virginia was a slave belonging to one of the plaintiffs and abducted by Virginius. He was ignominiously condemned, his young daughter taken away from him to be restored to the bogus owner, and in fact delivered to Appius. After being raped, Virginia returned to her father's, but, considering that she could not survive her shame, Virginius killed her with his own hands (There is a similar episode in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*). A scandal was roused. The judge was judged in his turn, with his accomplices. The famous tragedy of Lucretia, which was related by many poets, including Shakespeare in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), bears some relation to the same theme. Lucretia, after being raped by the King's son (note the relationship between sexual violence and abuse of power) stabs herself, unable morally to survive her shame.

The fact that these two stories, which used to be regarded as venerable exempla, are taken from Titus Livius, and trace back their origins to Ancient Rome, shows that the chastity-taboo existed before the advent of Christianity, and that the sacrosanct reprobation attached to woman-raping has not been invented by modern feminists.

In most of the stories built upon the central theme in *Measure for Measure*, the woman submitted to sexual blackmail has a lover, or a fiancé, or a husband, or a brother to save from death. The dilemma is intensely cruel: if she accepts the bargain proposed by the villainous magistrate, she commits adultery or unfaithfulness towards the very man for whose sake she would run to extremities of self-sacrifice. If she does not, she will hold herself responsible for the beloved man's death. This man, who is usually imprisoned for honorable motives, and built on the heroic scale, would prefer death to dishonour. So that the woman must save him without his knowing by what shameful ransom his life has been redeemed.

Sometimes she invents a complicated stratagem to rescue her lover or husband without committing any actual breach of honour. One of the most popular operas in the repertory, Puccini's *Tosca* (1900) composed after a melodrama by Victorien Sardou, is based on a plot similar to that of *Measure for Measure*, but without the moral and religious implications and debating present in Shakespeare's play: Mario Cavaradossi, an artist and revolutionist fighting for liberty, is imprisoned, tortured, and condemned to death by Scarpia, the chief of the political Police.

Cavaradossi's mistress, Floria Tosca, gets admittance to Scarpia's office and pleads for his life. Scarpia promises to release him in exchange for her favours. Tosca pretends to accept the bargain, but after Scarpia has given order that the prisoner will be shot with blank cartridges, kills him with a table-knife. Yet the devilish Scarpia gets a posthumous revenge: like Angelo, he never intended to save his enemy, who is shot on the next morning with real bullets. Tosca kills herself.

Another of the most popular operas exploits the same theme, in its climactic scene at the end: Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (from a romantic drama by the Spanish author Antonio García Gutiérrez). The hero, Manrico, falls into the hands of his enemy and rival, the Conte di Luna, who submits the heroine (Leonora, in love with Manrico) to the usual blackmail. Leonora pretends to accept, but kills herself by absorbing poison, hoping that Manrico will be freed in the meanwhile. But Manrico, suspecting that he has been betrayed (i.e. dishonoured) bursts out indignantly against Leonora, which provokes his immediate execution, while Leonora dies.

Of course these operas cannot be regarded as sources, but they were mentioned in order to show that the theme treated by Shakespeare is of permanent interest. Another example is found in Voltaire's *L'Ingénu* in which Mademoiselle de Saint-Yves beseeches one of the King's ministers to release her lover, imprisoned in the Bastille:

Elle se jeta à genoux, elle demanda avec des sanglots la liberté du brave homme qui l'adorait. Ses charmes dans cet état parurent dans leur plus grand avantage. Elle était si belle que le St Pouange, perdant toute honte, lui insinua qu'elle réussirait si elle commençait par lui donner les prémices de ce qu'elle réservait à son amant. La Ste Yves, épouvantée et confuse, feignit longtemps de ne le pas entendre ; il fallut s'expliquer plus clairement... (chap. 15)

Among the various sources that Shakespeare probably knew about, the incident related by Joseph Macarius and the story told by Lupton, we find the essential features of the theme, the heroine being the prisoner's wife. But the immediate and direct sources used by Shakespeare had already transformed and developed the theme.

### **3/ The direct sources, and their treatment by Shakespeare.**

In Cinthio and Whetstone, the following features are present:

– The girl submitted to the blackmail is an unmarried and unbetrothed virgin. Her chastity is an asset in itself, unrelated to the duty of marital faithfulness.

Shakespeare developed this theme by making Isabella a novice in a convent, so that she is a militant of chastity, whereas conversely Angelo appears as a desecrator of a religious votaress.

– The person that she has to redeem at the price of her chastity is her brother, imprisoned and condemned to death for a sexual offence. In Cinthio he has committed a rape, in Whetstone “adultery” and “incontinency”.

– The judge is reputed for his learning and virtue. He has been chosen as a magistrate by the King or Emperor himself. He is at first an austere perfectionist, intending to enforce rigorous justice and moral purity, till he suddenly loses his self-control in being inflamed by the innocent and pathetic beauty of the heroine.

– The heroine refuses at first to comply with the magistrate’s demand. But she accepts to do so after being passionately implored by her own brother. The judge breaks his promise and orders the brother to be executed. In Cinthio the brother is actually executed, but in Whetstone another man is substituted for him by the governor of the prison.

– The judge is found out and sentenced by the King to marry the girl (so as to restore her honour, according to the mores of the time) and be executed afterwards. But after she is married, the bride beseeches the King to pardon her husband.

The pardon is granted, the wicked judge repents, ... “so that she lived with him in great happiness for the rest of her life.” (Cinthio)

From this brief summary Shakespeare appears fairly faithful to his sources, having developed some of the details that he found in them, either in the same direction (as in the case of Isabella’s character) or in directions quite new and paradoxical. The factual transformations and alterations that he brought to the story are mainly these:

– The constant presence of the Duke, who pulls the strings, observes everything, draws lessons, makes him the most important character in the play.

– The deputation given by the Duke to Angelo acquires from the start the character of a test. The Duke is making an experiment in judicial and political management.

– The unreality of the factual details (the Duke's disguise, which belongs to the theatrical convention, the substitutions of Mariana for Isabella, Ragozine for Claudio) contributes to this experimental quality of the play.

– The dénouement of the comedy, founded on what is called "the bed-trick" by the critical tradition, was entirely contrived by Shakespeare, though he took some hints from his predecessors.

This use of the notorious bed-trick requires a few remarks and explanations: Shakespeare probably borrowed the device from himself, and from Boccaccio as well: A similar episode is found in his comedy *All's Well That Ends Well* (an admirable and neglected masterpiece) founded on a story by Boccaccio (*Decameron* III-9). He certainly hit upon this conventional device as an ingenious way of solving the difficult problem that he had set to himself in tackling that intricate subject. There is another famous example in the medieval legend of Tristan and Iseult, when Brangaine substitutes herself for her deflowered mistress in King Mark's bed, on what is supposed to be their wedding-night.

Though the bed-trick belongs to the stock-in-trade of narrative and theatrical convention, it is not so absurdly impossible as it may seem to the present-day public. The custom of having sexual intercourse in complete darkness was frequent, especially in cases of illicit love-affairs, perhaps as a compensatory tribute to feminine modesty. (Cf. the meetings between Fabrice and Clélia in *La Chartreuse de Parme*). Maybe it has something to do with the mystique of sex in our civilisation. Casanova relates in his *Memoirs* how he was once the victim of a similar substitution: he had given an amorous appointment to a lady and it was another one (an oldish and ugly one) who came in her place and ridiculed him afterwards. In *Arabella*, the opera composed by Richard Strauss in 1929 on a libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the same device produces a melodramatic misunderstanding followed by a happy denouement.

The invention of Mariana and the subsequent bed-trick appear as remarkable devices for Shakespeare to disentangle the difficult situation in which not only Isabella, but he himself was locked in by the end of Act III.

Shakespeare probably intended his play as a comedy, but a comedy with a profound and moral purpose, with a happy ending, yet not a frivolous one. If Isabella had refused to yield to Angelo, the play would have remained stuck in a deadlock at the end of the third act. No further development

of any dramatic interest would have been possible. If on the contrary Isabella had actually yielded to Angelo, the end of the play would have been bitter and almost tragic. Cinthio and Whetstone provided a happy ending by making the heroine marry her violator. But Shakespeare certainly felt in his heart of hearts that such a conclusion was ridiculous, morally unacceptable and very detrimental to feminine dignity. So he invented a heroine to whom it was psychologically impossible to accept the terms proposed by the oppressor, and he contrived a set of circumstances that made a solution possible, while providing dramatic development.

In respect to Angelo the bed-trick conveys a subtle significance: through it Angelo unwittingly commits the very sin for which he sentenced Claudio to death, fornication with his own betrothed. Mariana *was* indeed his betrothed. Yet it is obvious to everyone that this so-called fault is far less grievous than that which he intended to commit. Thus Angelo is both saved and punished by the Duke's stratagem, saved in being punished: he is saved because he cannot be punished for a venial fault, and punished because he is brought to recognize that the fault for which he sentenced Claudio was venial. This means the collapse of his ethical system. It is always difficult and humiliating for a fanatic to admit that his tenets were false. Even the fact of being pardoned contains a bitter lesson to him. He has to admit that he is an ordinary man, neither a saint nor a devil.

These remarks seem to anticipate the lesson on the characters, but it is necessary to insist on the idea that in *Measure for Measure* character-drawing and psychology derive from the plot, not the plot from the characters' psychology.

### ***Measure for Measure* as Shakespeare's Utopia**

The play can be regarded as a theatrical parable, in its very form and in the material that it is made of. There is nothing historically or geographically accurate in the Vienna where the action takes place. Vienna was not a duchy, but the seat of a large empire. The choice of this town was perhaps motivated by the sources, which situated the story somewhere in central Europe. The names chosen by Shakespeare are not Viennese at all, except Lodowick. They are Latin, Italian or English. Some of them contain descriptive significances, a device which is not frequent in Shakespeare, and belongs to Jonsonian comedy. Elbow, the constable, is the secular