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Taking the Measure of Manliness

In choosing a title for this essay I've taken the liberty of referring casually to *Measure for Measure*, by first name only, and I've suggested that manliness is the particular question that interests me as I read it.¹ To prevent false expectations, I should admit that I'm not proposing a feminist interpretation of the play, and I'll have little to say about the notoriously double standard which everyone in Shakespeare's Vienna seems to take for granted. I'm not offering a phenomenology of sexual experience in the play. Nor am I going to set out anything in the way of new evidence (from seldom-read letters, commonplace books still in manuscript, or plays of the period so obscure as to be neglected by everyone but the over-achievers of Elizabethan studies). All of these would be worthwhile objectives, but I've decided not to follow other beckonings in the interests of getting somewhere with one simple question: namely, what are the implicit standards for judging manliness of character or behaviour in *Measure for Measure*?

If the play had been written either by Marlowe or Jonson, the answer to this question wouldn't be what it is. Marlowe, I'm convinced, would have made Claudio into something altogether more splendid than Shakespeare did. Claudio earns his place in the plot by being sexually impetuous, and is then placed in the awkward position of having to define his attitude towards a system of authority that condemns him. What Marlowe could have done with such an opportunity for defiant rebellion can be suggested by remembering what he in fact did with Piers Gaveston or Doctor Faustus or Leander. Jonson, conversely, would have made something altogether more grotesque out of Angelo. Perhaps the closest analogue in Jonson's plays to Angelo's dilemma is the position of Zeal-of-the-land Busy as he confronts the pleasures of Bartholomew Fair. He knows that eating pig is an abomination, especially if you enter the tents of the wicked to do it, but this doesn't prevent him from washing down two-and-a-half of Ursula's dripping man-sized portions with a pailful of Mooncalf's ale.

For Jonson, Angelo's puritan hypocrisy would have been the signal for a satiric performance of uninhibited virtuosity.

In Marlowe's plays, manliness is an ideal that asserts itself by soaring above the ordinary; in Jonson, it's a position of stability from which the masquerades of the world can be seen for what they are. Shakespeare seems at times to share Marlowe's view of the matter (to judge by Cleopatra's requiem for Antony), at other times Jonson's (to judge by Hamlet's confidence in Horatio). But in Shakespeare as in life, it's easier to deduce the precise meaning of a standard from conspicuous failures than from celebrated successes. And for this purpose I'm going to comment briefly on two flagrant offenders: Romeo and Macbeth.

The streets of Shakespeare's Verona are bursting with young men who have something to prove. Tybalt's way of achieving manhood is to carve out a reputation as Prince of Cats—a title which stands in constant need of defence by swaggering once it has been established. Mercutio's method is to simulate the knowing weariness of the man of the world. Cassius Clay before he changed his name; Bob Dylan before whatever it was that happened to him. Romeo's experience looks blissfully normal by comparison: he's in the process of becoming a man by learning the difference between infatuation and love. And, even if love is what absorbs him, it doesn't detract from the respect he has earned from his peers. If Tybalt sends a challenge, Benvolio knows that "Romeo will answer it" (II.iv.9).² That's not quite what happens when the fighting begins, but I think it's clear that Romeo shows more courage in trying to stop the fight than either of the combatants. And when he does draw his weapon, the mighty Prince of Cats goes down.

But these acknowledged marks of manliness (bravery, self-restraint, physical daring) are in one sense less than what Romeo needs. After his banishment, while hiding in the Friar's cell, Romeo falls to the ground in a seizure of adolescent despair. The Nurse bustles in to find him in the same predicament as Juliet: "Blubbering and weeping, weeping and blubbering" (III.iii.86). While the Nurse and Friar Laurence are making practical arrangements to preserve his future, Romeo is threatening suicide. He deserves the rebukes both of his elders offer. "Stand, and you be a man," says the Nurse (III.iii.87). The Friar expands this shrewd advice into a moving sermon on manliness:

Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art.
 Thy tears are womanish, thy wild acts denote
 The unreasonable fury of a beast
 Thy noble shape is but a form of wax
 Digressing from the valour of a man. (III.iii.108-26)

The Romeo who needs these exhortations is still lovable, perhaps even understandable, but not admirable. In this scene he's a failure by the very standards he has earlier been able to uphold.

Macbeth's failure happens for the opposite reasons: he loses not the ability to stand up but the willingness to bend. At the outset Macbeth is winning all of the rewards that fall to models of manliness: victory in battle, admiration from his best friend, congratulations and caresses from his wife, promotion, trust, adulation. But he has not lost either the gentleness of spirit that marks him out as a real hero, or the ability to stop the crescendo of applause for the purpose of asking moral questions. Lady Macbeth knows that his nature "is too full o'th'milk of human kindness" (I.v.17) to allow him to kill in cold blood. So with ferocious determination she goads and challenges and manipulates him, using a variety of rhetorical pitches all of which lead to her most provoking question, "Are you a man?" (III.iv.57). He tries to silence her by affirming his moral position: "Pr'ythee, peace. / I dare do all that may become a man" (I.vii.45-6). But she won't hear his answers. She dazzles him with histrionics, torments him with the thought of cowardice, threatens him with sexual deprivation. He can move ahead only after he's accepted her shallow interpretation of manliness, which he does in the form of an equivocal compliment:

Bring forth men-children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (I.vii.73-5)

To accept this view amounts to killing or excluding everything else; dominance at any cost means that Macbeth can't keep the things he really wants: "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (V.iii.25-6). But by the time he says these words it is too late. The arbitrary code of manliness which Macbeth learned from his wife has become habit, and he sees no alternative but to keep on butchering until someone butchers him.

The hollowness of the code Macbeth adopts is beautifully counterpointed by the case of Macduff. Here too is a man of action and courage. When Macduff leaves for England without so much as a farewell note, Lady Macduff complains (understandably) that "He wants the natural touch" (IV.ii.9). But this is precisely untrue. Just as Macbeth loses his gentleness at the prompting of his woman, so Macduff reveals his own fully developed humanity in relation to his family. While the revolutionary forces are assembling in England, Macduff receives the news of his great loss. Malcolm wants to turn private grief at once into a battle cry: "Dispute it like a man," he urges (IV.iii.220). Macduff is still absorbing the horror and the hurt and the

unspeakable sense of loss. He falters, repeats himself, disbelieves, curses. And he does accept Malcolm's challenge, with a qualification:

I shall do so;
But I must also feel it as a man. (IV.iii.220-21)

Here if anywhere in the play is the distinction between the rampantly destructive machine nicknamed "manliness" and the deeply coherent sense of courage which deserves the name. Lady Macbeth's question ("Are you a man?") gets its complete answer only here. Yes, if I can also feel it as a man.

To return to the comparison I suggested earlier, it would appear that the assumptions Shakespeare makes about manliness are neither as idealistic as Marlowe's nor as tough as Jonson's. If you prefer an assessment more flattering to Shakespeare, you might say that Shakespeare's manliness is more flexible than Marlowe's, more chivalrous than Jonson's, more generous than both. In the closing scene of *Measure for Measure*, just after Mariana has become a bride, she's told that she'll soon be a widow. Judged by his own system of pure precision, Angelo will have to die. As Angelo's widow, Mariana will be entitled to his property and this, the Duke assures her, ought to be enough "To buy you a better husband" (V.i.423). But Mariana won't be satisfied with anything less than a real man. "O my dear lord," she says to the Duke, "I crave no other, nor no better man" (V.i.423-4). She kneels, begs, argues, persists:

They say best men are moulded out of faults,
And, for the most, become much more the better
For being a little bad. So may my husband. (V.i.436-8)

On the face of it, this looks like dubious moral theory and a recipe for a disastrous marriage. Only by laundering a great deal of the evidence against Angelo can you come up with the notion that he's been "a little bad." But Mariana's plea is based on something deeper than a clear-sighted review of the evidence. She's desperately in love with Angelo, and the years of waiting have intensified her need. As the Duke explains, the betrayal by Angelo "that in all reason should have quenched her love, hath, like an impediment in the current, made it more violent and unruly" (III.i.241-4). Now that she's slept with Angelo at last (and married him too, as luck would have it), she feels for the first time the blessedness of having the man she wants. Not the perfect man, just the man she wants. And, convicted of demonstrable sensuality, Angelo somehow seems a lot more manly than he did when his reputation for icy correctness was intact. I'm going to return to the question of Angelo's manliness before long, but since his is a difficult

case, I want to deal first with the other sexual offenders in *Measure for Measure*. They are—in the order of ascending complexity—Pompey, Lucio, and Claudio.

In a world where people are willing to mortify themselves and execute others in the name of abstractions, it's reassuring to meet somebody like Pompey. He has the kind of authority that comes from knowing who he is: "Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live" (II.i.220). It's this willingness to live at the level of the flesh that gives Pompey his greatness, expressed largely in terms of the comic advantage he holds in the confrontations with Escalus and Elbow. When Escalus tells him that the law isn't going to tolerate promiscuity, Pompey answers with a question that implicitly defends the body against the tyranny of the soul: "Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the city?" (II.i.228-9). This isn't the only question that might be asked of the law in Vienna, but it's an honest one. In a good production, Pompey will get a chorus of approving laughter on this line—laughter in which the spectators are congratulating him, in effect, for cutting through all the sanctimonious twaddle about the dangers of too much liberty and the dignity of the great legal symbols. To put it another way, Pompey gets his authority from direct contact with experience. Escalus gets his from Angelo, who gets it from a Duke who's nowhere to be found, who gets it from a statute on sexual behaviour which has been asleep for either fourteen or nineteen years (nobody seems quite sure which). Even if the statute were a holograph in God's handwriting, the transmission of the manuscript is (as usual) a history of early neglect and subsequent corruption. Against these dubious claims, Pompey has every right to defend himself as a poor fellow who wants to live.

Pompey enters the play under the accusation of sexual misconduct. Elbow's dignity as a husband has been offended because Pompey has done something to his wife (the judicial inquiry makes the nature of the deed progressively less clear). As the constable of his parish, Elbow thinks he can get legal redress for Pompey's action. While the absurdity of the case is unfolding, like the gigantic silk banner which used to be the handkerchief in the clown's pocket, Angelo leaves. Absurdity is among the things he can't abide. So Escalus is left in charge, and he sees through both the accuser and the accused. When he learns that Elbow has held seven consecutive terms as constable, he's disturbed: "Are there not men in your ward sufficient to serve it?" he asks (II.i.263-4). Despite his naive charm, Elbow isn't a sufficient man by any standards. Despite his record as a pimp and his habitual irreverence, Pompey (on his own terms) is. He escapes with a warning which he intends to follow "as the flesh and fortune shall better determine"

(II.i.250-51). To be at the mercy of the flesh and fortune is not what the complete man might aspire to, but it's the best a poor fellow who wants to live can afford.

Lucio manages to put together a plausible semblance of manliness. If Pompey follows the promptings of the flesh out of habit, Lucio does the same out of allegiance to a theory. He's a libertine. A very likeable one, in fact, who can say clever things like, "thy head stands so tickle on thy shoulders, that a milkmaid, if she be in love, may sigh it off" (I.ii.161-3), or "'tis my familiar sin,/ With maids to seem the lapwing, and to jest/ Tongue far from heart" (I.iv.31-3). Among the women who owe their happiness to this praiser of his own potency is Kate Keep-down, once the recipient of Lucio's promise to marry her, now the mother of his one-year-old. At the end of the play Lucio is forced into facing responsibility just as Angelo is. First, he'll have to marry the woman whose child he fathered. "The nuptial finished," says the Duke, "Let him be whipp'd and hang'd" (V.i.510-11). The threat of hanging doesn't seem to bother Lucio, or at least it's upstaged by the larger insult of being married "to a whore," as he puts it; "good my lord," he begs, "do not recompense me in making me a cuckold" (V.i.511-15). I think the threat of hanging is only a threat (as it is in Angelo's punishment), because the Duke continues to insist that marriage is Lucio's inescapable penance, while adding: "Thy slanders I forgive, and therewithal/ Remit thy other forfeits" (V.i.517-18). So, when Lucio is led off to prison, it's to await the execution of nothing more serious than his long-overdue reunion with Kate Keep-down and family. For Lucio, that's a serious blow nonetheless; it hurts him where he's most vulnerable. It's a blow to the unfettered manhood he's been proclaiming as his only principle.

The other man who fathers a child out of wedlock is Claudio. Morally, Claudio's sex-life begins on the pattern set for him by Lucio: with a promise of marriage to Juliet. It's pregnancy that forces the distinction, best expressed in the domesticated chivalry of Victorian language, between the man of character and the cad. Claudio does the decent thing in standing by Juliet, whom he describes as "fast my wife" (I.ii.136), and whom he would gladly marry if her tiresome relatives could settle their bickering about the dowry. It may be the integrity of his response to Juliet's pregnancy that wins Claudio his reputation for special worth. Mistress Overdone, whose views shouldn't be taken lightly where the point at issue is manliness, gives Claudio her loudest praise: "There's one yonder arrested and carried to prison, was worth five thousand of you all" (I.ii.56-7). And the Provost, after dutifully making the arrest, describes his prisoner as "a young man/ More fit to do another such offence,/ Than to die for this" (II.iii.13-15).

Under the shadow of a death sentence, especially in his confrontation with Isabella, Claudio faces the hardest test of his manliness. For Isabella the solution is clear enough, as she indicates in the one line from the play that has found a life of its own as an ironic proverb: "More than our brother is our chastity" (II.iv.184). Armed with such fierce conviction, she's horrified when Claudio doesn't simply applaud her decision. "Death is a fearful thing," he says (III.i.115), and, realizing that it's within her power to rescue him, he begs her to change her mind:

Sweet sister, let me live.
 What sin you do to save a brother's life,
 Nature dispenses with the deed so far
 That it becomes a virtue. (III.i.132-5)

This argument provokes a retort from Isabella more scathing than anything she's said to Angelo. Her speech begins with "O, you beast!" and ends with "No word to save you" (III.i.135-46). Between these unrelenting extremes is a withering assessment of his valour: "Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?" What Marlowe's Faustus referred to as "manly fortitude" should, on Isabella's terms, be enough to ensure that her brother be willing to give his life to the cause of absolute purity.

I'm not going to concern myself with Isabella's motives, or the arguments for and against her choice. Whatever they are, she's being unfair to Claudio. He's not a coward. In conversation with the supposed Friar Lodowick (really the Duke, of course), he resigns himself to the universal human fate: "Let it come on" (III.i.43). And to Isabella, before she's explained the terms of Angelo's proposal, he's equally brave:

If I must die,
 I will encounter darkness as a bride
 And hug it in mine arms. (III.i.82-4)

But there's an understandable impatience in these lines. The "If" is haunting Claudio's mind like the flickering trunk of a palm tree between vertical bars of desert heat. Yes, yes, I'll die bravely if I have to, but please don't prolong this test of my courage if there's anything else to report. Manliness doesn't prevent Claudio from sharing a bottom-line instinct with Barnardine, who announces quite sensibly that he drank too much last night to face the ordeal of execution today, or with Pompey, who knows that he's a poor fellow who wants to live.

Angelo stands over the rest of society, "Dressed in a little brief authority" (II.ii.119), brittle rather than tough, self-absorbed rather

than self-assured, a caricature of genuine manliness. "I would to heaven I had your potency," Isabella says to him during their first interview (II.ii.67). But almost as soon as she's said the word, she limits its meaning to the official one: the power to judge. Angelo's professionalism is impeccable. He has the kind of perfect record that makes you wonder if he's not hiding something. And once he's in control, it's obvious that his reputation has been won at the expense of everything that matters more. When the Provost asks him what's to be done "with the groaning Juliet" (II.ii.15), for example, Angelo's reply—"See you the fornicatress be remov'd" (II.ii.22)—is a desecration of woman in her sacred state. Anyone as obsessed with power as Angelo is will have little patience with the chivalry of sexual behaviour. That's why his rejection of Mariana, though legally clean, has more in common with Lucio's treatment of Kate Keep-down than with Claudio's treatment of Juliet.

Morally, Angelo is the perfect example of Jonson's view, as recorded in *Discoveries*, that "Too much pickedenesse is not manly." It's obvious from the plot that his fastidious legalism hurts and threatens to hurt other people. What it does to him is equally damaging. "It is certain," says Lucio, "that when he makes water, his urine is congealed ice; that I know to be true. And he is a motion ungenerative; that's infallible" (III.ii.105-8). This would be vulgar instead of funny if it didn't ring true. Angelo has bruised the body to pleasure the soul. In doing so, he's come perilously close to losing his manliness. His dealings with Claudio, Elbow, Pompey, Juliet, and Mariana show him up as little more than the "ungenitured agent" that Lucio imagines him to be (III.ii.167-8).

It's the habit of renunciation that has made Angelo what he is. That's why he feels threatened as soon as he knows that he's responding to Isabella's presence not with professional severity but with lust. "O fie, fie, fie, fie!" he says shortly after she's left him; "What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?" (II.ii.172-3). And as he waits for her to return, he knows he'd pawn his "gravity" for the "idle plume" he now desires (II.iv.9-11). The rest of Angelo's part in *Measure for Measure* is a painful education in the rudiments of manly behaviour. He thinks he can have a night's indulgence—secretly—and then return to the austerity of his professional routine. But he finds that "This deed unshapes me quite" (IV.iv.18). He's made himself vulnerable in ways that he won't understand completely until the Duke reveals all at the close.

And as his own brittleness begins to soften, Angelo starts to wonder about the feelings of others. He has "A deflower'd maid" on his hands now (IV.iv.19). What will "her tender shame" (IV.iv.21) prompt her to do or prevent her from doing? Angelo's answers aren't yet the ones a

manly lover might give. But at least he's asking the questions. And he's come a long way from the days when a woman who slept with a man could be dismissed as a "fornicatress." As for Claudio, "He should have lived," Angelo now admits (IV.iv.26), though he fights this admission as soon as he makes it with as much legal jargon as he can remember. Still, "Would yet he had lived" (IV.iv.30). What Angelo is going through is the kind of education in manliness described by Mariana in her plea at the end of the play. He's beginning to understand the sense in which all men, including himself, are "moulded out of faults."

If I can risk a few premature conclusions, I'd say that the standard of manliness in *Measure for Measure* is like the pattern in Marlowe's plays in that it celebrates personal desire. If Claudio gets "possession of Julietta's bed," as he puts it (I.ii.135), that's because he's bold enough to go after what it is he wants. But desire in Shakespeare has its social as well as personal character, partly because it promises (or threatens) fertility. If Claudio sleeps with Juliet, that's a private matter of course, until everyone in Vienna starts making it into a public matter. In *Edward II*, society punishes desire in just the way that Angelo would like to but can't. I'd also say that Shakespeare's manliness is like the Jonsonian pattern in the sense that it places value on the kind of integrity that comes from self-knowledge, and scorns the rigidity of merely mechanical behaviour. The most Jonsonian image in the play is the "angry ape" (II.ii.121) which Isabella holds up to Angelo as a mirror of his false manliness. But the suggestion that manliness itself is "moulded out of faults"—this is a more tolerant and less exacting view than either Marlowe or Jonson would allow.

I'm aware that *Measure for Measure* includes a major icon of manliness whom I've mentioned only in passing. The Duke, in my scheme, remains an unsolved problem. I shall invoke only one production of *Measure for Measure*—the one directed by John Barton for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1970—and I'd like to introduce the Duke's problem by recalling what happened in the final moments of this interpretation. The Duke approached Isabella with outstretched arms on the words, "Dear Isabel" (V.i.531), and looked invitations at her during the next few lines, ending with, "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (V.i.534). Then he waited, and waited, and waited. At last Isabella slowly turned away from him and, without looking back, made her exit at stage left. The Duke spoke the final couplet—about referring to "our palace" (V.i.535)—with understandable sadness. Then, slowly, he made his exit stage right.

I don't think for a moment that anything comparable to this happened at the Globe in 1604. But I think the unconventional ending

chosen by the RSC does point up a serious difficulty, namely, that the Duke has done nothing, dramatically, to deserve Isabella's hand in marriage. While he's busy testing everyone else's manliness, his own remains untried. Lucio claims that, despite the Duke's previous record as a womanizer, "He's now past it" (III.ii.176). I'd like to be able to dismiss this as the most cutting of Lucio's "slanders" against the Duke, but I can't be satisfied quite so easily because Lucio is demonstrably perceptive about the sexual behaviour of just about everyone else. I'm aware that one can invent various symbolic marriages for this pair, perhaps embellishing them with stage directions borrowed from the tradition of the morality play: "*Here Courtly Liberty, being now past it, taketh Chaste Vigilance by the hand, and leadeth her in a sprightly measure to the music of Sellinger's Round.*" Still, it doesn't feel like a real courtship. And it's infuriatingly true that, in response to the Duke's proposal, Isabella says nothing. It's Angelo who says that the Duke has been omnipresent, "like power divine" (III.i.367). Perhaps. But in theatrical terms, he has spent most of the play fulfilling Lucio's description of him as "the old fantastical duke of dark corners" (IV.iii.156).

I suppose it's an egalitarian perversity that prompts me to suppose that dukes, like other men, should have to prove themselves. If so, I think it's an attitude encouraged by a play in which the man who judges turns out to be moulded out of the very faults he won't admit to himself or allow to his fellow men.

NOTES

1. I first wrote this paper as a contribution to the meetings of the Shakespeare Association of America held at Ashland, Oregon, in April of 1983. Since then I have done some rethinking (mostly as a result of teaching Shakespeare in English 214) and some rewriting (with the present occasion in mind). I am grateful for each of these opportunities to experiment, explore, and explain. For help that goes well beyond the ordinary I'm especially grateful to Richard A. Levin of the University of California, Davis.
2. In quoting from Shakespeare's plays I have used the appropriate volumes of the new Arden Shakespeare, namely: *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Methuen, 1980); *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, revised ed. (London: Methuen, 1976); and *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Methuen, 1965).