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### The Plays as Allegory

**B**EFORE WE LEAVE *Measure for Measure*, there is one speculation about it that must be mentioned. Was it intended as an allegory of government by the Church in the seeming absence of Christ?

In the strict sense, it does not appear so; and yet there are compelling reasons for thinking that the idea was in Shakespeare's mind – and he possessed a bewildering ability of doing several things at once. If he so intended it, we may notice that he wrote a criticism, but not a satire. Critical reflections on the discrepancy between the practices of the Church and the precepts of the Gospels were widespread in his time. Thoughts so awakened, in some form, were a visitation he could not have avoided.

Shakespeare was well aware, to take a single example, that Sir Walter Raleigh's circle of friends and clients was dangerously outspoken on such matters, and that Marlowe, a member of the circle, had been accused of 'atheism'. The charge against Marlowe was absurd, by philosophical standards; but the Reformation had not, of itself, made unorthodoxy safe. The legal enquiry into Raleigh's own opinions, although it came to nothing, was for a while a *cause célèbre*. These were problems of the

period which all thoughtful men were compelled to ponder, and Raleigh expressed his own opinion bluntly:

Say to the Church it shows  
What's good, and doth no good.

Shakespeare was not of Raleigh's faction, but a man of his moral insight, especially in an age when Christendom was riven by religious war, could not have considered the conduct of the Churches to be Christlike. The trend of his own philosophy, as revealed in successive plays, was towards a syncretism of Classical reason and Christian grace: from the oracle of Apollo comes the whisper of redemption; and he lays emphasis increasingly on the ethics of the New Testament and repudiates those of the Old. It is on this last point – even if he had had no predecessors of the same opinion – that Shakespeare would have been critical of the Churches. He believed in the higher morality of the Gospels; and they, apparently, did not.

It is unlikely that he would have kept silence on this subject. But he had such an amazing gift of allegorical presentation that he could have said far more than Marlowe without falling foul of the law. Even apart from the dangers of prosecution, he preferred to express his deepest thoughts most subtly. He probably wrote for two publics: dramatically for the many, and philosophically for the few.

... we have with special soul  
Elected him our absence to supply;  
Lent him our terror, dress'd him with our love,  
And given his deputation all the organs  
Of our own power.

The duke is referring to Angelo; and in the next scene, he adds:

And to behold his sway  
I will, as 'twere a brother of your order,  
Visit both prince and people.

The passages may mean no more than they appear to say; but if Shakespeare had been intending to convey that the regency of the Church was under divine observation, he would have been likely to do so in just such a way. And as the duke, in his humble disguise, moves through the play, there are moments when the aura of a religious figure gathers round him. 'Of whence are you?' Escalus asks him as they stand before the prison, and the duke replies:

Not of this country, though my chance is now  
To use it for my time: I am a brother  
Of gracious order, late come from the See  
In special business from his Holiness.

In the England of Shakespeare's day, such reverence was not shown to Rome; and when Shakespeare writes passages of this kind, they are purposeful. The least we can infer is that the duke was specially conscious of performing the will of heaven; and if he was not intended to be a symbol of Christ, he was certainly engaged upon a Christ-like task. The lengthy prose speech\* which follows is a challenge to interpretation; and to attribute to it a religious significance is surely not, in the context, to force the meaning.

In this speech the duke makes some cryptic affirmations: goodness is so sick that it must die in order to be

\* See Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*.

cured, there is a course that it is dangerous to continue in, there is a kind of security that makes human fellowships accursed; and in contradistinction to these, there is a newness that is asked for but not accepted, an undertaking in which it is virtuous to be constant, and truth of which there is too little. The general sense is not in doubt: something old must go, and something new must come. And in view of the religious build-up that the duke has just been given, and of the philosophic matrix of the play contrasted with that of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare almost certainly meant that the ethics of the Old Testament must be repudiated before it is possible to live by those of the New.

The inference that would, then, be intended, is that the Churches do not do this. They do not rely on the higher morality of the Gospels; they do not believe in the practicability of turning the other cheek, of refraining from judgment, of overcoming evil by good alone, and of being perfect: like Angelo, they judge, imprison, excommunicate and reluctantly approve of hanging.

Shakespeare does not support a compromise between the old and the new. In opposing *Measure for Measure* to *Hamlet*, he presents a choice. And if Angelo and the Church were linked in his mind, he is saying that if the Church would give up the harsh judgments of the Old Testament, and trust in the creative mercy of the New, it would realise its spiritual power. For although the duke possesses temporal power, what is stressed as the play comes to its climax is the spiritual power that gathers round him; and this is not a fortuitous endowment, but a product of his way of life. There comes a moment, in the last act, when Angelo knows that the duke can see into his

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soul; and then he no longer tries to brazen out his conduct, but falls upon his knees:

O, my dread lord,  
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness,  
To think I can be undiscernible,  
When I perceive your Grace, like power divine,  
Hath look'd upon my passes.

Did Shakespeare mean this to be the Church revisited by Christ? The play is not a sustained allegory to that effect; and yet it seems inescapable that the idea was in his mind, and that here, and in some other scenes and speeches, it took partial shape. If so, his criticism is creative and his conclusion of good hope. Angelo repents, his false virtue is made true, he is set right and forgiven. So, too, are all those he had condemned. The only judgment done on them is that they are turned from the tragic course of Macbeth – leading to ‘O, horror! horror! horror!’ – to the way of regeneration and light.