'God Delay Our Rebellion!': Sexuality and Theology in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*

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Yet within ourselves we are somehow double creatures.
—Montaigne

I

All's Well That Ends Well and *Measure for Measure* have been strongly associated since F.S. Boas grouped them together as 'problem plays' at the end of the nineteenth century; indeed, the two plays share a particularly deep affiliation in the ethical and aesthetic problems that they present. Susan Snyder is among those who infer that they were both written in 1604–5, noting that *Measure for Measure*, 'in its plot and situation, its admixture of gritty realism, and its elaborately staged revelations at the close, shows a close relationship to *All's Well*'.[1] Thematically, the morality of sexual (mis)conduct is central to both and it is not surprising, therefore, that both plots pivot around Shakespeare's intriguing use of the bed-trick device. N.W. Bawcutt, separating Shakespeare's treatment of the popular folk story that provides the basic source material for *Measure* from other versions by Cinthio and Whetstone – in which the Isabella-figure is not able to safeguard her chastity – claims that 'this use of the "bed-trick" makes *Measure for Measure* unique compared to its predecessors'.[2]

[1] Susan Snyder (introd.), *All's Well That Ends Well*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 24. This edition is used for all references to *AWW*. See also F.S. Boas, *Shakspeare and his Predecessors* (1896; rpt New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 345.

[2] N.W. Bawcutt (introd.), *Measure for Measure*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 23. This edition is used for all references to *MM*.

Although sexual substitution is found in Bocaccio's *Decameron*, the source for *All's Well* (more likely the earlier play), the shift from literary motif to theatrical episode is significant. As Marliss Desens has shown, whilst sexual deception was not uncommon in classical mythology, ancient theatre, medieval narratives and folk tales, and was recorded in the Bible, it did not have a place on the English stage until introduced at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Shakespeare was one of the first to do so, and his audience would probably have been no less ambivalent about the bed-trick as a dramatic device than modern audiences are. To Desens, the increased use of the bed-trick represents the changing interests of Jacobean playwrights: it is symptomatic of their efforts to 'explor[e] love and desire from a less idealised perspective'.[3] In this context, the bed-trick addressed issues of legality and marriage at a time when civil law was still being formulated.

Furthermore, the prevalence of the bed-trick in non-dramatic literature and its growth as a stage phenomenon had the potential to collapse (temporarily) established class hierarchies – for sexual deceit was common to all social strata. In *All's Well*, Helena's bed-trick overcomes the obstacle of Bertram's class prejudice; as Kiernan Ryan notes,

> In no other play by Shakespeare does such a wide social gulf yawn between heroine and hero, a gulf that early modern men and women would have found formidably difficult to cross. The breadth and depth of that class divide are brought painfully home to Helen in Bertram's response to her choice of him as her prize for curing the King: 'But follows it, my lord, to bring me down / Must answer for your raising?' (II.iii.108–09).

Ryan links this subversion of social stability and the fixed categories of class to the play's 'reversal of patriarchal roles' – one that, likewise, 'has no

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[3] Marliss Desens, *The Bed-trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality and Power* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), p. 35.

parallel in Shakespearean comedy'.[4] One might go so far as to say that it has no parallel in works by Shakespeare's contemporaries: Desens suggests that the bed-trick was typically used to maintain patriarchal domination. Contriving a bed-trick is a violent and violating act – it is, essentially, a form of rape – and this is true whether the victim is male or female. Desens argues, however, that in most English Renaissance drama the bed-tricks arranged by male characters were not necessarily viewed as destructive because they preserved patriarchy. Women who plotted bed-tricks, on the other hand, were generally played as malicious manipulators, posing an insidious threat to society: 'Female fantasies of sexual satisfaction, power over men, or control over their own lives' were considered 'too disturbing' by both audiences and dramatists to allow such fantasies to be condoned.[5]

For this reason it is interesting that the bed-tricks in both *Measure for Measure* (arranged by a man, the Duke) and *All's Well* (arranged by a woman, Helena) are equally and repeatedly described as virtuous endeavours. The Duke assures Isabella, who has duped the villainous Angelo into sleeping with Mariana (to whom he was betrothed), that 'the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof' (*MM*, III.i.258–9); while Diana is persuaded by Helena that luring the reluctant Bertram to her bed under false pretences is justified because it is 'no sin / To cozen him that would unjustly win' (*AWW*, IV.ii.75–6). This linguistic play, quibbling on the semantics of virtue and vice through a chiastic opposition, is a feature of both plays; it echoes the character doubling of the bed-trick and serves an important thematic function by insisting that, when it comes to that curious entity dubbed 'human nature', these opposites are mutually inclusive.

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[4] Kiernan Ryan, '"Where hope is coldest": *All's Well That Ends Well*', in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London: Routledge, 2005), 28–49, pp. 38–9. There are parallel conventions observed in naming the heroine of *All's Well*; Ryan refers to 'Helen', but in this article I have chosen 'Helena'.

[5] Desens, *The Bed-trick in English Renaissance Drama*, p. 115.

If Montaigne observed that we are 'double creatures',[6] Shakespeare shows his audience – as Helena's experience bears out – that, like briars with 'leaves as well as thorns', people are 'as sweet as sharp' (*AWW*, IV.v.33). Bertram scorns Parolles for being a 'damnable both-sides rogue!' (IV.iii.225), and yet the appellation is equally appropriate to the speaker, in light of his sexual duplicity. Notwithstanding Bertram's honourable conduct on the battlefield, as one of the lords points out, 'The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together. Our virtues would be proud if our faults whipped them not, and our crimes would despair if they were not cherished by our virtues' (IV.iii.71–4).

II

> Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some, having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. (1 Tim. 1: 5–7, KJV)

The formulation quoted at the end of the previous section hints at a disjunction (made explicit during the course of both *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*) between, on the one hand, sinful 'faults' and, on the other, 'crimes' against the law: that is, it indicates the problematic relationship between human laws and the metaphysical 'right' or 'wrong' supposedly comprehended by those laws.

This is, of course, the terrain of exegesis – simultaneously the most important and the most contentious occupation of the Church (in this article, I refer to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the interpretation of sacred texts is central to all major world religions) and, in the partial theocracies of early modern Europe, also a concern of the State. Frank Kermode's essay, 'The Bible As It Was' – taking its title from a book by James Kugel – offers a particularly useful starting point from which to

[6] Michel de Montaigne, 'On Glory', in *The Complete Essays*, ed. M.A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 704.

approach the potential for conflict between divine and secular law. Following Kugel, Kermode traces the process of human interpretation and interpolation that moulded the form in which the Hebrew scriptures (and therefore also the Christian Bible) became established and understood. The central influence on this process was and, to an extent, still is the rabbinical practice of Midrash: an 'imaginative [way] of updating, enhancing, augmenting, explaining and justifying the sacred text'. The task of explanation and justification is made difficult by the need to corroborate apparent contradictions and elements of dissonance within the scriptures – a necessity based on the presupposed unity and continuity of the texts as the expressed words of God. Midrashists take up the challenge with a combination of irony and ingenuity, creatively manipulating the semantics and punctuation of passages of scripture in order to modify their meaning. This freedom, in turn, is based on the assumption 'that Scripture speaks, or can speak, cryptically'.[7]

Jonathan Dollimore, discussing the growth of Renaissance secularism, writes:

> Christianity, like any ideology, is characterised by contradictions, points at which it falters and the dogma(tic) is specially and crucially reinforced by faith; in effect, the contradiction is dissolved in and by the paradox of faith. The Elizabethan period was one in which that shift from contradiction to faithful resolution became, for many, too difficult.

Yet Dollimore also affirms that there 'was not, and could not have been, a simple, unilinear transition whereby scientific secularism replaced religion'; while Bacon, Raleigh and Montaigne, for instance, each represented the growing separation of religious and secular affairs in an era of geographical exploration and scientific discovery, they were not part of 'an optimistic rush for the empirical'. For most of Shakespeare's

[7] Frank Kermode, *Pleasing Myself* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 153, 159, referring to James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997).

contemporaries, 'the paradox of faith' still 'dissolved' the ostensible 'contradictions' of Christianity.[8]

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In *All's Well*, the complex history of love-swapping causes great confusion; Diana declares equivocally that Bertram is both 'guilty and . . . not guilty' (V.iii.289). Is it possible to legislate for this kind of ambiguity? The law is supposed to be founded on reason, but human behaviour (especially as it arises from love and lust) is not always rational: the Countess excuses her son's behaviour because it is the product of 'natural rebellion done i'th' blade of youth', whose 'oil and fire' are 'too strong for reason's force' (V.iii.6–7). In *Measure for Measure*, Claudio exhorts his sister to save him by sleeping with the villain-cum-puritan Angelo because

> What sin you do to save a brother's life,
> Nature dispenses with the deed so far
> That it becomes a virtue.
> (III.i.137–9)

Although 'Nature' may 'dispense with the [natural] deed', however, the law is not so forgiving. Even worse, when Angelo intimates that he may be lenient on Claudio if Isabella submits to his desires by speaking of 'a charity in sin' (II.iv.63), it is only a symptom of corruption and hypocrisy in the authority that enforces the law – an authority claiming moral and religious (or, in the case of a monarch, divine) right and therefore presiding over the decision of what constitutes 'sin' or transgression. By presenting this double-bind, Shakespeare is engaging in what Stephen Greenblatt has called the 'intense and sustained struggle in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England to redefine the central values of society', at the heart of which was

[8] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2nd edn (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 19–20.

> the definition of the sacred . . . a definition that directly involved secular as well as religious institutions, since the legitimacy of the state rested explicitly on its claim to a measure of sacredness. What is the sacred? Who defines and polices its boundaries?[9]

The matter of defining 'the sacred' (including the hermeneutic process described by Kermode – foregrounding the potential rupture between sin, repentance and forgiveness in God's vision, and transgression, trial and punishment as carried out by secular law) is central to both *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. It is significant, therefore, that sexuality presents an ethical touchstone in both plays. Angelo's puritanism crumbles when it confronts his sexual desire: his hypocrisy stems precisely from a definition of the sacred that excludes sex. Arguably, that dangerous – perhaps even malevolent – puritanical streak has been sustained in certain corners of the Christian church during the four hundred years that have elapsed since Shakespeare wrote the plays under discussion. If the desire to comprehend and implement 'divine will' as transcribed and collated into the Bible (despite the difficulties presented by ambiguous or contradictory passages) finds various focal points across different Christian denominations today, sex is probably the most prominent in current debates: consider the accusations made against the Catholic Church regarding its role in the proliferation of the AIDS pandemic,[10] the schism in the Anglican Church/Church of England over the question of female bishops, or the deep ecumenical rift caused by the twin issues of gay marriage and homosexuality in the ministry .

The relationship between hermeneutics and sexuality surfaces in another essay by Kermode from the same collection as 'The Bible As It

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[9] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearian Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 95–6.

[10] See, for instance, Steve Bradshaw's report on the BBC Panorama programme, *Sex and the Holy City*: 'The Catholic Church is telling people in countries stricken by AIDS not to use condoms because they have tiny holes in them through which HIV can pass – potentially exposing thousands of people to risk. The church is making the claims across four continents despite a widespread scientific consensus that condoms are impermeable to HIV. . . . The WHO [World Health Organisation] has condemned the Vatican's views' (*The Guardian* 9 October 2003). The accuracy of Bradshaw's claim is debatable but it is cited as an example of a widely held perception.

Was': the suggestively titled 2001 volume, *Pleasing Myself.* 'The Sexuality of Christ' outlines the research of Leo Steinberg into the occurrence of genital display in Renaissance paintings of Christ. This phenomenon – which is, after all, a visual form of exegesis – has largely been considered taboo over the last three centuries, just as it was repressed in early Medieval art, but there is certainly nothing impious in the theology underlying it. Genital display in these works evinces a reverence for the paradox of Incarnation. If Christ was fully human, the artists' rendering of human anatomy had to reflect this; if he was without sin, his genitals did not represent the corruption passed down through (generative) sex. Indeed, there are even instances where the penis is shown as erect, rejoicing in the coming resurrection without any coyness. In addition, Steinberg argues, the exposed circumcision of the Christ-child both emphasises his humility in submitting to human weakness and anticipates the blood shed by the spear-wound at the crucifixion. This unabashed celebration of Christ's humanity, which exposes the misguided propriety of those uneasy with the notion of a Christ in vulnerable human form, points towards a misunderstanding of the place of sex and sexuality in religious beliefs and practices – a misunderstanding that is highlighted in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

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In *All's Well*, Claudio protests that he is spiritually married to Julietta 'upon a true contract'; in Heaven's eyes, 'she is fast my wife', and they are only lacking the 'denunciation . . . / Of outward order' (I.ii.42–6) which is dependent on material circumstances. Here marriage is seen to be an entirely secular ceremony and institution, far removed from the divine consecration of marriage vows and laws as set down in the Bible. *All's Well* explores the social status that may be lost or gained through marriage and, Subha Mukherji maintains, offers a critique of the legalism surrounding marriage.[11] Mukherji emphasises the importance of

[11] Subha Mukherji, '"Lawful deed": Consummation, Custom, and Law in *All's Well that Ends Well*', *Shakespeare Survey* 49 (1996): 181–200.

consummation – and not, significantly, spoken marriage vows – as the primary criterion for a legal marriage in sixteenth-century England. In the final scene, Diana's feigned appeal to Bernard is based on the biblical proclamation that husband and wife are 'one flesh'. This culminates in the assertion that, because she has slept with him based on his promise of marriage, 'by vow' she is 'embodied' as his wife (V.iii.173); as we shall see below, the interplay between action and word is integral to both plays' sense of divine law. For Helena, who 'fain would steal / What law does vouch mine own' (II.v.83–4), the bed-trick is both 'wicked meaning in a lawful deed, / And lawful meaning in a wicked act' (III.vii.45–6).

Steven Marx writes that 'the body substitution at the heart of the bed-trick constitutes a comic version of the ransom story of atonement at the centre of gospel theology'. Furthermore, even if Renaissance audiences would not have been used to seeing the bed-trick as a stage device, Marx maintains that they would nevertheless have been exposed to texts that likened the prostitute Mary Magdalen to the dying Christ and to biblical stories of Tamar using a bed-trick to conceive Judah's child, Laban using a bed-trick to keep Jacob as his farmhand, and the Holy Spirit surreptitiously taking the place of Mary's husband to bring about the Incarnation.[12]

Kermode's reading of 'The Sexuality of Christ' is particularly relevant here; moreover, placing the bed-trick in the context of the above examples precludes any automatic association between sex and sin. Marx himself makes this mistake in a fairly conservative reading of *Measure for Measure*: '[Isabella's] appeal to the true Christian principle of redemption is tainted by her unconsciously seductive language'.[13] Although he demonstrates the extent to which the play is steeped in the gospel texts, Marx reduces Shakespeare to the role of biblical allegorist, attempting to forge a

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[12] Steven Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 90. Marx refers to both Matt. 20: 28 ('Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many') and 1 Tim. 2: 5–6 ('the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time').

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

consistent correspondence between the figure of the Duke and the God of the Bible.

I would argue that Shakespeare's familiarity with the English Bible (whether in the form of the 1560 Geneva version or William Tyndale's earlier translation) and the Book of Common Prayer allowed him to construct a more subtle theology than could be expressed or can be understood in terms compatible with a definable 'God' who speaks a definitive 'word'.[14] Stage events that seem to depict biblical events or represent theological truths carry the imprecise association of allusion rather than the symbolic weight of allegory. For example, the notion of Christ's human incarnation and death in our place is not only alluded to in the bed-trick, but also in the parallel substitution of the executed robber's head for Claudio's, inverting the Passion scenes in which Christ dies after the criminal Barabbas has been set free. The withdrawn Duke, remaining passive while his subjects and deputies mock the law, reminds us of the 'disappearing' God of the Old Testament – who announces, 'I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be' (Deut. 31: 20) – until he reveals himself among them.[15] This revelation, however, takes the form of a further disguise, that of God-as-man, and so the disguised Duke also reminds us of the New Testament Christ.

Many critics have found the Duke's abstruse motivation for his actions somewhat sinister, and Marx is more convincing when he concedes that the Duke can be interpreted as a 'malicious abuser' as much as a 'benign embodiment' of divine power: 'Shakespeare's work allows for both sides in these debates to be true, like the Bible itself'.[16] Shakespeare's work, that is, articulates an intuitive sense of God's ambiguity – an ambiguity reflected in, and reflected by, the characters in the plays. Even Helena in *All's Well* is not above reproach, as Kiernan Ryan emphasises:

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[14] See Richmond Noble's comprehensive account of *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer* (1935; rpt Folcroft, PA: The Folcroft Press, 1969).

[15] Richard Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 1997), p. 7.

[16] Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*, pp. 81–2.

> The 'sweet practiser' who performs the miracles of healing and reunion in *All's Well* achieves her goal, after all, through blind obsession and the inflexible exertion of her will. . . . She saves the King, whose doctors could not save him, not for the King's sake, but as a means to secure the power to make Bertram marry her. The suppressed ferocity of the heroine beatified by Coleridge as Shakespeare's 'loveliest character' and praised by Hazlitt for her 'great sweetness and delicacy' suffuses the speech in which she stakes her life [II.i.169–73] . . . Helen comforts herself and her accomplices by quoting the play's title, inflating it by rephrasing it until it fills a couplet: 'All's well that ends well; still the fine's the crown./Whate'er the course, the end is the renown' (IV.iv.35–6). But, however often she recites her mantra, it cannot disguise the fact that her 'course' has been to fake her own death and practise a grotesque deceit on a man constrained to wed her. . . . Hazlitt could not have been wider of the mark when he insisted: 'There is not one thought or action that ought to bring a blush to her cheeks, or that for a moment lessens her in our esteem'.[17]

Hazlitt's hyperbolical praise ignores the less salubrious aspects of Helena's conduct. Yet if we acknowledge what he does not – that our heroine is both a victim and a perpetrator of duplicity – then this must affect our reading of the theology informing her self-styled 'salvation' at the end of the play. If humans are 'double creatures', but created in God's image, what can we deduce about the Creator? It seems that, comparable to the French King, such a divinity is

> not a day of season,
> For thou mayst see a sunshine and a hail
> In me at once.
> (*AWW*, V.iii.31–3)

[17] Ryan, '"Where hope is coldest"', pp. 44–5.

III

> In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1: 1)

Howard Felperin has written extensively on the sense of 'loss of verbal innocence' – the 'discovery of ubiquitous verbal duplicity' – that pervades Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, as if his works provide their own 'post-structural' critiques.[18] Discussing the role of the oracle of Apollo in *The Winter's Tale*, Felperin disputes the authority of this divine proclamation on two grounds. Firstly, he points out, Leontes' refusal to accept the oracle's decree must be seen in the context of 'the fondness of pagan oracles for ambiguity, obscurantism, equivocation and verbal trickery . . . commonplace in Elizabethan literature'.[19] Secondly, although in this case the oracular declaration is clear and unequivocal, Apollo is an absent presence in the play, *deus absconditus*, and

> once cut off from the presence of their divine speaker, with his univocality of meaning and intent, Apollo's words enter the realm of the human, the fallible, the ambiguous: in sum, the interpretable, where they can be contradicted or dismissed, for all we know, with impunity . . .[20]

This latter argument describes something remarkably similar to the process of Midrash or, more dangerously, the human interpretation and implementation of divine law – responsibilities assumed by religious and secular authorities following the disappearance of God (although Kermode's review of *The Bible As It Was* eschews 'fashionable theories' that scientifically 'deconstruct' works of art, it is clear that his own theory of interpretation is indebted to an awareness of the mutability of

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[8] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2nd edn (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 19–20.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 194.

language).[21] Yet a systematically post-structural view insists not only on the disappearance but on the *death* of God as an ultimate source of meaning: 'the condition of secularity within which we all, wittingly or not, inescapably dwell; language being . . . "the house we live in"'.[22] I would suggest, however, that Felperin's first argument – if applied to the Judeo-Christian God who, as much as pagan deities, has been seen to speak cryptically or ambiguously – allows us to deconstruct, or perhaps reconstruct, the language of divinity without venerating the idols of theory and without proclaiming the death of God. This is possible with (what I would call) the 'subtle' theology of *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*.

The creation account in Genesis emphasises the universe being spoken into existence: 'And God said . . .' . The idea that there is no meaning to be found outside of language is not entirely new to theologians. Consider St Thomas Aquinas elucidating, in his *Summa Theologica*, the mysteries of Christian teaching – in particular the Trinity, that supreme representation of God's multiplicity. Writing in the thirteenth century, Aquinas frames his explanation within an Aristotelian model of language. An 'exterior vocal sound', he argues, can be called a 'word' only when it signifies an 'interior concept of the mind':

> Therefore it follows that, first and chiefly, the interior concept of the mind is called a word; secondarily, the vocal sound itself, signifying the interior concept, is so called; and thirdly, the imagination of the vocal sound is called a word.[23]

Aquinas uses this linguistic framework to explicate the Trinitarian doctrine that Christ is consubstantial with God (that is to say, the

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[21] Kermode, *Pleasing Myself*, p. 165.

[22] Felperin, '"Tongue-tied, Our Queen?"', p. 203.

[23] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, 3 vols (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1: 177 (Pt I, Q. 34, Art. 1). More accessible (abridged) versions can be found in Timothy McDermott (ed.), *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (London: Methuen, 1989), pp. 73–4, and *Light of Faith: The Compendium of Theology* (New York: Sophia Press, 1998), pp. 36–7.

relationship of God the Father to God the Son is such that the Son is not created by the Father but indistinct from him in time and in nature). The intellect, he argues, can be said to understand or 'conceive' only insofar as it is able to express that understanding and convey the form of the thing understood; thus God, 'conceiving' of himself, articulates a word for that conception – which 'proceeds' from him as Son proceeds from Father. This, Aquinas concludes, is why John began his gospel with an assertion that Christ was God's Word, and that the Word was of one being with God: a precept with tremendous implications. God's self-knowledge is verbalised and, moreover, he can only be understood by his creations insofar as he can communicate himself to them.[24] For humans, then, God's existence is in its very nature linguistic – even to the believer, one might say, God cannot exist outside of language – and the linguistic is, to paraphrase Felperin, ambiguous, obscure and equivocal.

The perplexed protagonists of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* fail to grasp this paradox, although their 'doubling' language is perhaps an unconscious reaction to it. Claudio signals this briefly in his bitter despair: 'The words of heaven: on whom it will, it will; / On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just' (*MM,* I.ii.121–2). 'God's Word' is understood here only as a divine decree – equivalent to the laws set down in the Bible and therefore the laws of civil society – and not as Christ, 'the Word of God' who came to 'fulfil the Law' (Matt. 5: 17) by freeing sinners from it, which is in turn a central tenet of the Pauline creed. St. Augustine himself, following the opening conceit of John's gospel, explained this salvation linguistically:

> All other things may be expressed in some way; He alone is ineffable, Who spoke, and all things were made. He spoke, and we were made; but we are unable to speak of Him. His Word, by Whom

[24] *Summa Theologica*, 1: 179; in his translation, McDermott uses ' issue' rather than 'proceed' in this context to avoid confusion with the procession of the Holy Spirit. See also 'How God is Known by Us', *Summa Theologica*, 1: 48–59 (Pt I, Q. 12), esp. pp. 58–9.

> we were spoken, is His Son. He was made weak, so that He might be spoken by us, despite our weakness.[25]

Steven Marx quotes Wilson Knight's sense of the 'sublime strangeness and unreason of Jesus' teaching',[26] an 'unreason' which, I have suggested, is opposed to the harsh 'rationality' of the law. In this very 'strangeness', however, Kermode finds a quality of alienation; the meanings of Christ's parables, he suggests, are especially rarefied and not easily accessible to a secular audience. Inevitably, the parables themselves are interpretable material, obfuscating our image of Christ and our understanding of his message. Even if this message can be understood, the most devout followers cannot always obey it. The pious Isabella finds herself 'at war 'twixt will and will not' (*MM,* II.ii.33) in the same way that St. Paul has to admit, in his treatise on the burden of the law, 'what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I' (Rom. 7: 15). The 'new commandment' of Christ's teaching potentially amounts to a new Law, insufficient to reconcile men to God if sin remains a certainty. For this reason, Isabella reminds Angelo (in a synopsis of Christian doctrine), it was necessary for Christ to die for the forgiveness of sins: 'all the souls . . . were forfeit once', but 'He that might the vantage best have took / Found out the remedy' (II.ii.73–5). It was a remedy of action, not words; indeed, 'the Word' died. It is significant, therefore, that the acts of substitution in the bed-tricks can only take place if no words are spoken. Christ's own teaching advocates right action as preferable to holy – or hypocritical – words, for 'wisdom is justified of her children' (Matt. 11: 19),[27] while Paul's message is less concerned with Christ's philosophy than with 'Christ crucified' (1 Corinth. 1: 23).

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[25] St Augustine, *Enarratio in Psalmum* xcix.6, cit. and trans. in Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 35. Latin text in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. Eligius Dekkers and Joannes Fraipont, *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina, vols 38–40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956).

[26] Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible*, p. 99.

[27] The New International Version renders this: 'wisdom is proved right by her actions'.

It is tempting to read the resolutions that follow the 'shadow and silence' (*MM,* III.i.240) of the bed-tricks as forming a composite image of the resurrection: Claudio is restored to life, the Duke reveals his true identity and Helena appears miraculously in front of an admiring crowd who had thought she was dead. One might even suggest that the impending wedding celebrations herald the marriage of Christ and the Church. As various readings and productions have shown, however, the comic endings are not without menacing undertones. Can the bed-tricks represent a purely beneficent divine act? Desens, we remember, emphasises the element of violent deceit at the heart of the staged bed-trick. Snyder is troubled that both Helena and the Duke are 'high-handed' in their restoration of harmony – because, 'like Angelo . . . the erring Bertram and Parolles seem totally incapable of discovering and developing any better natures in themselves', they are 'dragged into redemption, such as it is, quite against their wills'.[28] This is the terrain of predestination or determinism, suggesting the constraints placed on free will by God's omnipotence. For Paul, however, if God imposed his solution upon humans, it was an act of love, 'in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5: 8).

The plays do not resolve this dispute, but can rather be recognised as complex pictures of the 'doubleness' of divinity. Snyder sees in both plays a 'pessimism about faulty humanity left to its own devices'.[29] Some readers or audiences would respond that, if this is the case, we are dependent on divine intervention for salvation. Others, arguing that God (insofar as we know Him, or are able to know Him) is just as 'faulty', would agree with Helena that 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven' (*AWW*, I.i.218–19). Of course, Helena's assertion does not negate divine intervention, but it does emphasise free will and the consequent responsibility of individuals to act (applying an Existentialist paradigm) in good faith:

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[28] Snyder (introd.), *All's Well That Ends Well*, p. 18.

[29] *Loc. cit.*

The fated sky
Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
Our slow designs, when we ourselves are dull.
(*AWW,* I.i.19–21)

Roland Frye identifies in these lines echoes of a sentiment expressed by Luther and Calvin: 'it is an essential part of faith in God's providence that Christians should act vigorously, making free use of those means which God has provided'.[30]

If both Calvin and Luther 'affirmed that [humans are] free to act in secular relations' and 'called for action in the assumption of responsible decision between good and evil', they were nevertheless both insistent that Christian doctrine places clear restrictions on sexual behaviour, although Calvin is more systematic and rigid than Luther.[31] Luther's celebration of sexuality within marriage adopted the Pauline line, with its implicit condemnation of extra-marital sex:

> It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. . . . I say therefore unto the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Cor. 7: 1-9)

Thus, while Paul and Luther both acknowledge that human beings are 'double creatures', the Pauline deprecation of the physical – 'For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of

[30] Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 164.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 157–8; see John Witte, Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage*, vol. 1 of *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

death?' (Rom. 7: 18–24) – lent grounds to the Lutheran reformers who were more severe in their judgement of 'right' and 'wrong' sexual behaviour.[32]

As *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* show, however, precisely because the 'double Creator' has created double creatures, 'Christian theology is at root highly subversive of fundamentalist certainties'[33] – an affirmation that undermines Biblical- or doctrinal-based judgements on sexual conduct.

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Critical writing on Shakespeare and religion is often concerned with the apparently irresolvable questions of Shakespeare's confessional allegiance (Protestant or Catholic?) and whether he subscribed to orthodox Christian beliefs at all (or was his humanism part of 'the new paganism . . . which accompanied the rediscovery of ancient works' during the Renaissance?).[34] These are perhaps misguided pursuits; rather than asking about Shakespeare's hidden religious agenda, we should instead ask about his secular aims, which would have included – and this is, admittedly,

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[32] Lyndal Roper notes, for instance, that 'When Lutheran reformers began to put pressure on secular authorities to make society more godly, one of their first objects of attack was the public brothel, the most conspicuous example of society's toleration of what reformers regarded as the sin of fornication' ('Luther: Sex, Marriage and Motherhood', <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/History/teaching/protref/women/WR0911.htm>).

[33] Rupert Shortt, 'Counting the world as dust: The papacy of John Paul II. A case for the prosecution', *Times Literary Supplement* 29 March 2002: 3–4, p. 3.

[34] Lily B. Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. vii. If, as Leonard Barkan suggests in *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 'Ovid, metamorphosis, paganism and antiquity come as close as anything does to occupying the heart of Shakespeare's imagination' (p. 270), then it is difficult to affirm a Christian conviction in his work. Writing about the appearance of deities in the pagan settings of Shakespeare's late romances, in 'Theophanies in the Last Plays', in *Shakespeare: Contrasts and Controversies* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985), pp. 67–77, Kenneth Muir notes that, 'Although there is no reason to doubt that Shakespeare was at least a nominal Christian, it is apparent [that happy outcomes are] determined more by human character and conduct than by divine omniscience and omnipotence' (p.76).

phrasing the playwright's vocation in lofty terms – the modification of his audiences' actions in the world. Kiernan Ryan affirms that, by 'framing the play's religious discourse as figurative rather than factual, Shakespeare declutches it from dogma . . . . The Christian's hope for grace and resurrection houses the indomitable human hope for freedom from misery, justice and oppression'.[35] We cannot be certain if Shakespeare was Catholic or Protestant, but what is certain is that Shakespeare witnessed first-hand the destructive antagonism bred of religious fervour – a phenomenon that takes its impetus partly from socio-political motivations and partly from doctrinal certainty or unwavering convictions based on what are, ultimately, exegetical exercises.

The writer or dramatist, as this reading of *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* has aimed to show, is as well placed as the theologian – perhaps even better – to engage with and to undermine such certainties. A final word, then, about the role of the artist in doctrinal debates. The Countess of Roussillon's truth-licensed clown reminds us that 'young Chairbonne the puritan and old Poisson the papist, howsome'er their hearts are severed in religion, their [cuckolded] heads are both one' (*AWW,* I.iii.52–4).

With regard to the Roman plays, J.L. Simmons notes, in *Shakespeare's Pagan World* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1974), that 'Shakespeare's pagan world' presents 'a perplexing moral environment' not easily reconciled with Judaeo-Christian notions of 'good and evil' (p.3). Finally, one might add that even critics who read in *King Lear* the expression of 'a Christian outlook' find that the invocation of non-Christian gods by various characters 'shows how valuable Shakespeare's pagan framework is', according to J.C. Maxwell, 'The Technique of Invocation in *King Lear*', *Modern Language Review* 45.2 (April 1950): 142–7, p. 146.

Carol Curt Enos, in *Shakespeare and the Catholic Religion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing, 2000), pp. 39–40, cites John Dover Wilson's *The Essential Shakespeare* (1920) and E.K. Chambers's *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (1930) as early twentieth-century contributions to the debate over Shakespeare and Catholicism – to which could be added George Seibel's *The Religion of Shakespeare* (1924) – before going on to list a range of more recent examples. E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: The 'Lost Years'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), has provoked much speculation and research on 'Catholic Shakespeare'. *Shakespeare and Religions*, ed. Peter Holland, spec. issue of *Shakespeare Survey* 54 (2001), contains numerous articles indicating that Shakespeare's religious affiliation remains a point of interest among scholars.

[35]Ryan, '"Where hope is coldest"', p. 38.

Our vulnerable sexuality humanises us, humbles us and, as Angelo learns, prevents 'the demi-god, authority' (*MM,* I.ii.119) from any pretence to a righteous power. In Shakespeare's London there were puritan voices, like Angelo's, calling for the capital punishment of those who submitted to 'the rebellion of a cod-piece' (III.i.379), and ignoring Paul's injunction to 'serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter' (Rom. 7: 6). The same voices campaigned against the 'bawds' of the theatre. Traditionally, critics have seen in some of Shakespeare's puritanical characters a mocking riposte to opponents of the theatre; on the other hand, according to Jeffrey Knapp, Shakespeare 'equivocates about whether his puritanical characters are really puritans at all', fearing 'the potential divisiveness of his religious beliefs'. Knapp describes Shakespeare's approach as one of 'accommodationism'.[36] This term suggests how the theologian-artist may approach contentious issues such as the place of sexuality in the realm of the sacred: not with polemic, but with the combination of biblical scholarship, compassion and, ultimately, good humour manifested in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Those grappling with questions of sex and doctrine (or sex-in-doctrine) in the twenty-first century could do a lot worse than to follow this example.

[36] Jeffrey Knapp, 'Jonson, Shakespeare, and the Religion of Players', *Shakespeare Survey* 54 (2001): 57–70, p. 68.