

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
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To what extent do *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* sustain or modify the patterns of Shakespeare's festive comedy?

The man ought to have known that he [was] now in his period of disillusionment, cynicism and gloom... so the critics fasten upon *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* like a stern schoolmaster, seizing two small boys who are to be flogged for being caught out of bounds.

(Chambers 29)

R.W. Chambers's sarcastic chastisement of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* for being too festive for the period during which Shakespeare composed his major tragedies describes perfectly the critics' pessimistic insistence on problematizing them. Believed to have been written in around 1603-1604, these two plays came fast on the heels of James I's accession to the throne in March 1603, and, since F.S. Boas's 1896 account, have come to be known as "problem comedies" (Wheeler 2) which share characteristics with the early festive comedies, the contemporary tragedies, and the late romances, but do not fit neatly into any particular group. In 1929, Arthur Quiller-Couch said of *All's Well that Ends Well* that "[i]n fine, we hold this play to be one of Shakespeare's worst" (qtd. in Styan 1), and although *Measure for Measure* is generally thought to be slightly "less depressing" (Lawrence 78), both plays have been consistently criticised for being disconcerting, uncomfortable, and tinged with darkness. This study, on the contrary, aims to prove that *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* absolutely, joyously, rebelliously sustain the patterns of Shakespeare's festive comedies. Even those uneasy elements which have spurred so many critics to label them "problem plays" are, I will argue, inextricably related to the plays' newfound city and court settings and are, therefore, inherently festive in their mischievous critique of the new authorities of the Jacobean era. Following a

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

discussion of what “festive comedy” entails, the study will go on to explain the ways in which the plays adhere to festive patterns: through their promotion of balance; through their sustenance of the festive structure; through their use of inversion; and through their presentation of conventional folkloric plot motifs which would have satisfied, rather than troubled, a Renaissance audience. Finally, it will propose that the ‘darker’ components of the plays, ultimately, enhance their festive nature.

Shakespeare’s “festive comedies” have been identified as plays in which the form and spirit of contemporary popular holidays is evident. The characters may be enjoying festive pastimes (such as the play extempore of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the pageant of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*), or they may, themselves, be part of a larger, festive scheme in the narrative, finding themselves “in the position of festive celebrants” (Barber 6). *Twelfth Night* is exemplary. Sir Toby and Sir Andrew are themselves revellers celebrating the December festivities, vowing “not to be abed [until] after midnight” (II.iii.1), paying Feste for songs (II.iii.21) and gorging themselves on “cakes and ale” (II.iii.89). Meanwhile, however, the play in its structural entirety resembles a holiday. It begins, with Olivia’s and Viola’s parallel mourning, in what Northrop Frye has named the “anticomic” period, which is redolent of Lent or Advent, and often has a funereal tone (73-5). The play then progresses to a time of confusion and sexual license – in keeping with Frye’s structure (76-8) – with the gleeful transvesticism of Viola’s disguise and the plots against Malvolio. It concludes with the actual period of festivity in which identities are revealed (Frye 78) and the characters’ sexual drives are reallocated to the correct recipients: Orsino realises his love for Viola, for example, whilst Olivia redirects hers towards Sebastian. *Twelfth Night* also fulfils Barber’s prescriptions for the festive structure of clarification via saturnalian release (4). During the play’s period of license and confusion, Maria engages in the release of energies which she need not keep pent-up in respect for her superiors. In her “license

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

to flout and flee at what [normally] command[s] respect” (Barber 7), she mocks the killjoy Malvolio and, in so doing, manages to secure a marriage to Sir Toby. Then, in the final scene of festive clarification, when the natural order of things reasserts itself, she, Olivia’s waiting-woman, is suspiciously absent. The play, then, both depicts festive celebrations and is in itself a festive celebration. Other key motifs characterizing Shakespeare’s early comedies include youthful energy, seasonal whimsy, and the controlling presence of a wise, young, loving woman such as Viola (Wheeler 14). Although in *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well* festive pastimes are often on the tips of characters’ tongues and are deployed as similes, confirming their firm institution in contemporary society – “As fit as... a pancake for Shrove Tuesday, a morris for May Day”, enthuses Lavatch (*All’s Well* II.ii.15-6); whilst Lafew likens Parolles to “him that leapt into the custard” (*All’s Well* II.v.28-9) – they are not actually witnessed in the course of the plays. Even Helen’s and Bertram’s wedding feast is delayed indefinitely (II.iii.174-6). What is crucial to these two plays is the idea, shown in *Twelfth Night*’s festive structure, that the festive can be a permeating ethos of holiday rather than a series of ritual pastimes: “the underlying... attitude is not adequately expressed by any one thing in the day or the play, but is the day, is the play” (Barber 6).

A prominent way in which both *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* are pervaded by the festive is through their insistence on the importance of balance, and, more specifically, of polarities keeping one another in check. Barber outlines the political expedience of the festive periods for those in authority. “Holiday”, he explains, “for the Elizabethan sensibility, implied a contrast with ‘everyday’... the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a ‘misrule’ which implied rule” (10). In other words, allowing the populace to unleash their rebellious instincts in an organised, regulated fashion, would keep any malcontent at bay and secure authority against sudden upsurges of mutiny. The practical nature of this

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

arrangement, as suggested by Elliot Krieger's Marxist reading of *Twelfth Night*, explains why Maria is kept offstage at the end. He asserts that the conclusion of the play "confirms the aristocratic fantasy that clarification is achieved when people are released from indulgence and restored to the degree of greatness with which they were born" (qtd. in Jensen 4). So, the one day of release from "decency and decorum" would ultimately result in "a clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit" (Barber 13). The notion of rebellion being kept in check by authority, and vice versa, which underlay Elizabethan festival, is inherent in both *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Both plays advocate this process of two extremes limiting one another, which we could call a situation of "paradox" according to Thomas Playfrere's 1595 definition of the term as "the intermingling of extremities" (qtd. in Platt 5).

In *All's Well that Ends Well*, the idea of rebellion is very much associated with the festive in that it is frequently linked to youthful, sexual urges. The Countess bargains with the King of France to forgive Bertram's neglect of the presumed-dead Helen on the grounds that it resulted from "Natural rebellion, done i'th'blade of youth" (V.iii.7), whilst the First Lord Dumaine, upon hearing of Bertram "pervert[ing] a young gentlewoman" (IV.iii.10), curses human lust: "God delay our rebellion!" (IV.iii.14). These natural urges to fleshly revolts reaffirm the political expedience of allowing occasional festive relief. In *Measure for Measure*, Angelo's Puritanical restraint, and the subsequent appeal of Isabella's similar determination not to "err" (II.ii.159), results in his uncontrollable carnal reflex, his Claudio-esque "rebellion of a codpiece" (III.i.334), whilst in *All's Well that Ends Well*, Bertram admits that it was Diana's very resistance that aroused him:

She knew her distance and did angle for me,
 Madding my eagerness with her restraint,
 As all impediments in fancy's course

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

Are motives of more fancy.

(V.iii.234-7)

Too much of one extreme, then, and the denial of a period of release to counter it, is documented as a cause for rebellion in these plays. Peter Platt presents the possibility that the title of *Measure for Measure*, though generally associated with the exaction of just revenge or reward discussed in Matthew 7:2, could also point towards the popular proverb promoting moderation: “He that forsakes measure, measure forsakes him” (47). If an extreme is not counterpointed by an inversion of that extreme, urges against the norm will manifest themselves in a revolt.

In *Measure for Measure*, extremes are constantly seen to curb one another. Lucio asks Claudio why he is imprisoned, to which Claudio replies, “[f]rom too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty, / As surfeit is the father of much fast” (I.iii.10-11). An inflammation at one end of the spectrum, Claudio suggests, is cooled by the application of its direct opposite. His lament is not purely personal, but instead looks outwards at the happenings in Vienna in general. Strict Angelo has been temporarily instituted to revive the laws which have lain so dormant for the past fourteen years that the city has run amok. For example, under Angelo, all the bawd-houses in the Viennese suburbs are being “plucked down” (I.ii.70). Such “headstrong weeds” as taverns and brothels, by virtue of their not having been moderated with “needful bits and curbs” (I.iv.21) during the Duke’s rule, are now being eliminated completely. This festive motif of one extreme being employed to mollify and thus reinforce the other extreme continues into *All’s Well that Ends Well* where the First Lord advises that “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.51-3). By interweaving polarities, he argues, the sting is taken out of the extremes, just as injecting periods of festival which invert the normal hierarchy dilutes the unpleasantness of living under authority and makes it more palatable for the masses, thus giving them less reason to rebel.

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

Hierarchical order, in this sense, fits Parolles's paradoxical description of virginity: "[b]y being ever kept" in may be "ever lost" (I.i.109).

The political expedience of the festive period for maintaining authority is reflected, in *Measure for Measure*, by the use of equity to reinforce the law. In 1598, long before he ascended the English throne, King James wrote 'The True Lawe of Free Monarchies', in which he stated that when the King "sees the lawe doublesome or rigorous, he may interpret or mitigate the same, lest otherwise *summum ius* bee *summa iniuria* [extreme justice becomes extreme injustice]" (qtd. in Platt 58). This suppleness regarding the law is promoted, in *Measure for Measure*, by the Provost, who comments on Claudio's transgression that "[a]ll sects, all ages smack of this vice, and he / To die for't?" (II.ii.6-7). He thus advocates the use of reason instead of strict adherence to the rules. However, in general, *Measure for Measure* is much less concerned with finding a higher justice through bending the rules than it is with using this notion of equity to reinforce political power. The Duke intimates his concern with maintaining his popularity, and the political sway contained therein, to Friar Thomas:

I have on Angelo imposed the office,
 Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home,
 And yet my nature never in the fight
 To do in slander.

(I.iv.43-6)

For such a politically-savvy – and sneaky – character, the concept of legal equity is likely to appeal due to its political usefulness. In 1603, Samuel Daniel wrote a poem entitled, 'To Sir Thomas Egerton', in which he outlined the expedience of equity:

But equity, that bears an even rein
 Upon the present courses, holds in awe

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

By giving hand a little, and doth gain

By a gentle relaxation of the law...

(qtd. in Platt 61).

This explains why Vincentio reiterates to Isabella the lie that Claudio is dead. He is, as Platt explains, “summon[ing] the spectre of [Angelo’s] revenge and strict justice so that he can be seen to correct them, to be Equity himself” (64). He has earlier, in his Friar Lodowick disguise, told Isabella that her brother may be redeemed from “the angry law” (III.i.202), and in the final scene, when he is miraculously cured of his stage fright – it would be “wrong”, after all, to “lock [his thoughts] in the wards of covert bosom” (V.i.10-11) – he ceremoniously displays himself as the redeemer. Not only is Claudio produced alive, but the Duke dishes out pardons all round. The “law cries out” for “An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!” (V.i.420-2), but the Duke, in his compassionate equity, decides to (very publically) “quit” Angelo of his “earthly faults” (V.i.508). The political expedience of equity, then, is extremely redolent of the political expedience of holidays. People can be held “in awe / By giving hand a little” (Daniel, qtd. in Platt 61), and the masses will behave – as Mariana says all men will – “much the better / For being [allowed to be] a little bad” (V.i.458-9).

One of the key arguments against the classification of *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* as “festive comedies” is that the reconciliations made at their conclusions are superficial and seem to be awkwardly imposed and unfitting for the action which has gone before. There is often believed to be a discrepancy between the “conflicted inner worlds” of the characters and “the effort to create the theatrical appearance of an outer social order” (Wheeler 8), so we are never brought to that clarification about the individual’s relationship with the wider natural order that Barber believes is so crucial to the festive plays (8). For example, Bertram’s exclamation after Helen tells him that he is “doubly won” (*All’s Well* V.iii.338), that “[i]f she, my

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever, dearly" (V.iii.339-40) sits uneasily at the close of the play. He does not address Helen herself but rudely directs his speech to the King, as if the true reason for his acceptance of Helen is, for the second time, only to obtain royal favour. Moreover, it is dubious that Bertram will "love her dearly" considering he has spent the preceding two acts gallivanting around the Mediterranean in order precisely to avoid the aforementioned "detested wife" (II.iii.260). It also seems a highly unlikely response to the dual revelation that he has been raped under the cover of Florentine night-time and that the wife he presumed dead – the rapist herself – has just been revealed by Diana in a display which could only have been more theatrical if it had featured a drum-roll (V.iii.325). In a similar vein, the Duke's unexpected proposal to Isabella at the close of *Measure for Measure* is unsatisfying. Throughout his prior exchanges with the nun, he has addressed her as his "fair and gracious daughter" (IV.iii.98) and assisted her in avoiding sexual debasement. It is shocking in itself that *she* apologises to *him* when he reveals himself to be the Duke –

O give me pardon

That I, your vassal, have employed and pained

Your unknown sovereignty

(V.i.397-9)

– rather than being outraged that he has impersonated a holy man of the Catholic order and, in so doing, been privy to some of her deepest intimations. This lingering sense of dissatisfaction is furthered by his sudden, unanticipated assertion that they will now be wed.

This antagonism between the plays and their outcomes could be seen to deviate from the patterns of festive comedy because the audience's sense of psychological unfulfilment is married with an apparently happy ending. Erik Erikson, talking about childhood play, describes the satisfactory completion of a the playing activity as a moment of "play satiation" (qtd. in Wheeler

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

6) which is a similar notion to Kenneth Burke's idea of "artistic felicity" in relation to the theatre: a feeling of "exaltation at the correctness of the procedure" of a play, be it a Racinian tragedy or a Shakespearean comedy (Wheeler 6). This psychological "equipment", Richard Wheeler suggests, is "at first fully engaged by *Measure for Measure* but responds ultimately with a sense of distrust... of something left over" (6). Admittedly, in many ways, the denouements of *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* do seem precariously balanced on plays they do not quite fit: like Claudio's head following his arrest, these endings "stand so tickle on [the shoulders of the play] that a milkmaid, if she be in love, may sigh [them] off" (I.iii.56-7).

However, this argument can be completely exploded and the two plays defended as festive comedies if we consider "festive", like Frye and Barber, to refer to a type of structure rather than to a mood: "[a] comedy is not a play which ends happily", says Frye, "it is a play in which a certain structure is present" (45). In that case, the forcing upon the plays of awkward endings makes *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* even more festive in their rigid adherence to the conventions of the genre. Frye suggests that it would be much less satisfying for an audience to witness a play that deviates from the structure than from the mood of festive comedy: "the author must follow the convention or the reader will feel cheated... he does not feel cheated when that convention overrides his sympathies" (45). The conventional festive structure, as described earlier, involves a movement from an anticomic society through a period of confusion and license to a new festive community. Both *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* can answer to these structural prescriptions. *All's Well that Ends Well* begins with a funereal atmosphere as we are made aware of the recent death of the old Count of Rossillion, and the cast are apparelled in black. With the curing of the King and transfer of the action to Florence we enter a period of license: Helen, like a typical festive female plot-engineer, disguises herself as a pilgrim, and Bertram attempts to sniff out some extra-marital intercourse. Through

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

this period of release, we reach the clarification of the festive ending as Helen has fulfilled Bertram's tasks and therefore, when all is revealed, wins his hand in marriage. The progression of this festive structure is burlesqued by the Parolles sub-plot. The disguise of the Lords and Bertram as they blindfold Parolles and effect strange languages mirrors the confusion and license stage of the festive comedy, through which Bertram reaches a state of clarification that his companion is weak and has an undisciplined tongue: "let me live, / And all the secrets of our camp I'll show" (IV.i.63-4), he hears Parolles cry. Parolles, too, through his humiliation, achieves a clarified understanding of his relation to the world: "There's a place and means for every man alive" (IV.iii.248), he realises.

Shakespeare does something even more interesting, and even more festive, with the structure of *Measure for Measure*. It still follows the three-part pattern: the play opens on a decaying Vienna within which jobless soldiers are suffering from hunger – "Heaven grant us its peace, but not the King of Hungary's!", the First Gentleman bitterly jokes (I.ii.3) – and where even the brothels are "custom-shrunk" (I.ii.58-9); progresses to a period of defected rule and disguise; and concludes with the reinstatement of the Duke's power and an exposé of Angelo's character. However, whilst loosely upholding the model of festive comedy, Shakespeare actually seems to invert it in this play. The Duke's reign, during which even the constable's wife has been seen entering a "bawd's house" (II.i.69) in search of "stewed prunes" (II.i.80), reminds us of a festive period. We are told that the law, during this time, "hath slept" (II.ii.12), which evokes images of the Christmas Lord of Misrule reigning over the house at night whilst the true master is asleep (Barber 25). Syphilis itself has run wild and "made a feast" of the First Gentleman (I.ii.40), and the normal hierarchy has been overturned in a raucous inversion of the accepted order: "[t]he baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart / Goes all decorum" (I.iv.31-2). Angelo's brief rule, although it is a period of disguise and of several social inversions – Pompey, the

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

infamous pimp, is appointed Abhorson's apprentice, for example – has a distinctly unfestive stricture. Isabella describes Angelo as a man whose “settled visage and deliberate word / Nips youth i'th'head and follies doth enew / As falcon doth the fowl” (III.i.96-8). This spirit is directly opposed to the “holiday liberty” which Barber believes to be central to the festive comedies, and which “frees passion from... the control of the older generation” (qtd. in Wheeler 79). Even the Duke embarks on a detox during Angelo's reign. We might not believe Lucio's assertions to the ‘Friar Lodowick’ that the Duke was known to pardon sexual transgressions because he himself “had some feeling of the sport” (III.i.337), filling “clack dish[es]” left, right and centre (III.i.344) and being “drunk too” (III.i.344), were they not more subtly corroborated by the fact that the Duke enters Act I, Scene IV trying to reassure a concerned Friar Thomas that “No, holy father”, he does not desire “secret harbour” in order to pursue “the aims and ends / Of burning youth” (I.iv.1-6), not this time. The festivities that have created a reputation that so precedes the Viennese ruler are put on hold during Angelo's power, but reinstate themselves in the final part of the inverted festive structure, when he returns in his usual get-up, looking to “restore” the festive liberation of the city (V.i.546).

Nevertheless, this inversion of the traditional festive pattern does not detract from *Measure for Measure's* festive quality but actually heightens its festivity. Holiday itself, according to Barber, was all about “inversion” (4) and Frye announces that Shakespeare's festive comedies draw on “the greater Saturnalia suggested in the Gospels in which the social ranks of this world are reversed in another” (106). Indeed, throughout *Measure for Measure*, the recurring motif of deputation and substitution – Angelo for Vincentio, Mariana for Isabella in the bedroom, Ragozine's head for Barnardine's in the prison – along with the constant reminder that some of the most powerful characters are those of the lowest status – Barnardine decides he “will not consent to die this day” and therefore does not (IV.iii.38-9), whilst Lucio describes the Duke as

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

having “usurp[ed] the beggary he was never born to” (III.i.318-9), which inverts the very concept of usurping power from those of a higher social status – present a festive inversion, a topsy-turvy take on the normal order. This is seen, too, in *All's Well that Ends Well* where Helen, one of “the poorer born, / Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes” (I.i.148-9), is in the position of the highest power: she cures the King and has the pick of his courtiers. If festivity centres so much around reversal then the structure of *Measure for Measure*, with its inversion of inversion, is doubly festive.

Furthermore, the argument that the endings of these two plays are too uncomfortable and disjointed to be festively satisfying is contradicted by the evidence that an Elizabethan audience would not have found the conclusions troubling. Oliver Elton’s sonnet which asks “*All's Well!* – Nay, Spirit, was it well...?” (qtd. in Lawrence 36) very much reflects modern anxieties about the play which would not have concerned Shakespeare’s contemporaries. For example, Bertram’s change of heart towards Helen at the close of the play, which is admittedly troubling, was an accepted convention of medieval and Elizabethan story (Lawrence 38), so it would not have been surprising to a contemporary theatre-goer. In the source materials, particularly William Paynter’s translation of the story from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, which much of the audience would have been acquainted with, if not through reading it, at least via a sort of osmosis of the values of the culture’s collective unconscious, Beltramo’s acceptance of Giletta (the Helen character) is justified by his “perceivng her constaunt minde and good witte” in completing the tasks (qtd. in Lawrence 39). A large part of Shakespeare’s audience would have had “no education or literary training, but... a good acquaintance with traditional story” (Lawrence 69). Therefore, Bertram’s sudden vow to “love [Helen] dearly” (V.iii.340) would seem less of an arbitrary concession to the convention of the happy ending because the audience were watching the play fully aware of Beltramo’s justification in the *Decameron* version which speaks silently for Shakespeare’s

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

Bertram, too. Moreover, Shakespeare vacates his Bertram of the niceties of Boccaccio's Beltramo, who develops an endearing affection for Giletta, "imbrac[ing] her and kiss[ing] her... as his dere spouse and wife" (qtd. in Lawrence 40). By doing so, Shakespeare does not darken the ethos of the text but makes it even more pleasing because Helen's character seems even more amicable so we celebrate her successes over him more whole-heartedly (Lawrence 62). "Equally untenable", argues William Lawrence, "in the light of early analogues, is the idea that the bed-trick is immodest" (51): it was perfectly acceptable for a wife to lie with her lawful husband, just as Terence's Pamphilus was satisfied when he realised that the only disguised hooligan who had raped his wife was he himself (Frye 44). The Christian law was more important than any modern ethics of morality for Shakespeare's audience. That Helen won her husband by her adroitness would have been celebrated as just another version of the Clever Wench tale in which a woman wins a man's attention by her wits (Lawrence 42-8). Besides, many a princess in the history of literature has met a similar wedded fate when her father needed a riddle solved or a dragon slain. And Dorigen never made a fuss. For an Elizabethan audience, then, the endings of the plays would have been unproblematic for the festive mood.

Anne Barton suggests that the main problem modern audiences encounter with *All's Well that Ends Well* is that Shakespeare "suddenly imposes on a play,... which has been essentially realistic, an ending which is that of the fairy tale" (qtd. in Wheeler 8), as if his well-observed forays into the depths of human emotion have suddenly been bundled into an inappropriately perfect-looking package. Of course, the folkloric motifs of the play are there throughout, as discussed, but are less discernible to a modern eye than to an Elizabethan one. This may be the reason why stagings of the play which emphasize its fairy tale-like detachment from reality have appealed most to twentieth-century audiences. For example, in his 1981 Stratford production of the play, Trevor Nunn staged the scene in which Helen chooses her husband as a lavish ball,

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

dressing his heroine like a Cinderella in a beautiful gown (McCandless 149). This interpretation, which divorced the play from realism, filled its audience, according to Michael Billington, with a “radiant overpowering happiness” (qtd. in Styan 4) suggesting that the infectious festivity of the original play can be translated to the modern theatre.

Not every dark, unfestive element of *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* can be attributed to a modern detachment from the folkloric conventions of the early seventeenth-century, though. In both plays, the “wanton vitality” that characterises a saturnalian attitude (Barber 7) is suppressed. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, vitality is overshadowed by the mortality inherent within it. Against the backdrop of the king with his “fistula” (I.i.25), and his desire for “corporal soundness” (I.ii.30) as “haggish age” (I.ii.35) steals upon him, the youth are faced with the dilemma of where to channel their restless sexual energies. The fear of inner decay spurs them to release these urges before their sexuality becomes “a withered pear” (I.i.130), but they are not sure how to. The young men are “sick / For breathing” (I.ii.20-1), Lavatch says his “poor body” is driven by the “devil” (I.iii.21-2), and Bertram is faced with “sick desires” (IV.ii.42-3). Meanwhile, Helen is searching for “remedies” for her own urges (I.i.175), which, the Countess contemplates in her banter with Lavatch, are, for women, “questions” awaiting a male “answer” (II.ii.13). These instances of sexual energy being related to disease reflect the French court’s inadequacy in providing channels for youthful expression. Pent-up desire is foregrounded even more by the setting of the play in France, which was typically regarded by the English as exceptionally lusty. Lafew suggests that if any knights were to reject Helen’s advances, they must be “bastards to the English, the French ne’er got ‘em” (II.iii.86-7), since the French are desperate for sex: “our French lack language to deny / If they demand” (II.i.21-2), and there is nothing “lustier” than the dauphin (II.iii.23). Freedom for this characteristically French virility is sought in the “Italian fields” (II.iii.258) where “manly marrow” can be more wholesomely spent

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

(II.iii.249) than in exchanging unsatisfying glances from “fair eyes” (III.ii.101) in the “sportive court” (III.ii.100). In addition, the supposedly emasculating powers of women, a notion which is taken to tragic levels in *Othello*, is voiced through Lavatch’s clowning about the ‘little death’ incurred by orgasm: “the danger is in standing to’t. That’s the loss of men, though it be the getting of children” (III.ii.31-2). The Tuscan wars, Bertram thinks, would be a healthier channel for his virility than to let it fester at court, emasculating him in his “box unseen” (II.iii.247). Helen’s “[a]mbitious love” (III.iv.5), too, drives her away from the French court to Florence.

The city setting of *Measure for Measure* similarly offers no healthy channel for sexual energies. Wheeler notes that “all the sexual transactions of the play occur outside moral and legal codes” without a counterpoise to “sweeten the sexual imagination” (104). The only solution proposed that could possibly end the sexual deviance of Vienna would be to “geld and splay all the youth of the city” (II.i.183). Meanwhile, the frosty deputy whose urine, it is speculated, must be “congealed ice” (III.i.331-2), begins to melt in the absence of the Duke’s external authority which had helped him to repress his sexuality. After sleeping with Mariana (believing her to be Isabella), he feels that “[t]his deed unshapes me quite” (IV.iv.15) which disconcertingly echoes Iago’s assertion that “[t]his is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite” (*Othello* V.i.140-1). These comedies’ preoccupation with how men can release their carnal energies without undermining their masculinity aligns them with the concerns of the contemporary tragedies.

Yet *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* are even more festive due to their “dark corners” (*Measure* IV.iii.143), since these are inextricably related to their city and court locales. Following his sorties in the Parisian court, Lavatch complains to the Countess of Rossillion that his virility – that festive carnality which is “driven on by the flesh” (I.iii.21) – has been dampened:

0602326
 Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
 Prof. Bate
 March 2009

I have no mind to Isbel since I was at court. Our old lings and our Isbels
 o'th'country are nothing like your old ling and your Isbels o'th'court. The
 brains of my Cupid's knocked out, and I begin to love, as an old man loves
 money, with no stomach.

(*All's Well* III.ii.9-12)

His lament speaks more generally for the effect of the relocation to city and court settings on Shakespeare's comedy itself. The attempted translation of the festive spirit onto the urban setting of *Measure for Measure* and the courtly environments of *All's Well that Ends Well* signifies a move away from what Barber has called "the unselfconscious regions" of the green, Elizabethan Merry England (16) towards the "complex and challenging" urban world with its burgeoning Puritan groups and the new Jacobean court (Barber 16). But far from making the plays less festive, Shakespeare's relation of these settings to perverted sexuality and suppressed vitality is, in itself, a mischievous comment on the Puritan authorities pervading London and the parallel corruption of James I's court. Barber describes the decline of holiday celebration in England as cities grew: "Festivals which worked within the rhythm of an agricultural calendar, in village or market town, did not fit the way of living of urban groups" with their "Puritan ethic" (16). By railing against the very London-like city of Vienna – Mistress Overdone is cockney, through and through – and the problems it encounters under Puritanical misrule, Shakespeare is cheekily undermining the authority of these urban groups who called for an end to festival pastimes. Indeed, if Thomas Middleton's pen is believed to have intervened in the text of *Measure for Measure*, his declining sympathy with Puritanism (Taylor, ODNB) is detectable. Meanwhile, by suggesting the lusty corruption of the Parisian court in *All's Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare is simultaneously mocking "the defense of holiday pleasures by a group whose everyday business was pleasure" (Barber 17): that is, the Jacobean court, with its infamous "accounts of... occasions

0602326
Shakespeare and Selected Dramatists of His Time
Prof. Bate
March 2009

when court entertainment went badly wrong, being swamped by drink” (Wormald, ODNB). By slyly smirking at these new sources of authority of the early Jacobean days, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* are rendered even more innately festive since they are releasing – and celebrating – rebellious urges towards authority.

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