

“What Is Life? A Frenzy.” — On the Theme of “Seeming” in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract: The play world of *Measure for Measure* projects a prominent “feature” of Shakespeare’s time. The preoccupation of with the problem of “seeming” in this play can be better comprehended through the exploration of two elements in the historical background. One is the transformation of the social structure in Elizabethan England, the other is the intellectual orientation of the Jacobean age. Men often lie about their real purposes and pretend to be different from what they really are. Shakespeare has taken pains to make this crystal clear: the man in “judge’s robe” is evil, whereas the bawds turn out sometimes to be full of humanity. In the city of Vienna, “seeming” becomes a more perplexing problem than hypocrisy, for in order to survive in this corrupt society, everyone needs a certain amount of dissimulation to protect his life and individuality.

Key words: Madness; seeming; William Shakespeare; *Measure for Measure*; epistemological crisis.

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标题: “何为人生? 是疯狂。”——论莎士比亚剧本《请君入瓮》的主题

内容摘要: 《请君入瓮》这个剧本凸显了莎士比亚时代的一个主要特征。剧中人物对于破解“表里不一”这一难题所普遍感到的焦虑可以通过探索和梳理历史背景中两个不同的重要因素来获得更合理的阐释。人们在社会交往中经常口是心非, 企图隐藏其真正的目的。通过精心设计的戏剧情节和剧中人物的心理矛盾, 莎士比亚试图揭示以下事实: 即道貌岸然的伪君子往往心如蛇蝎, 而身份卑微的狎客却往往更具有人性。在作为剧本背景的维也纳城里,

“表里不一”已经不仅仅局限于“虚伪”这一内涵，因为在这个道德沦丧的城市里，每一个人都必须要矫饰自我，以保护其生命和个性。

关键词：疯狂；表里不一；威廉·莎士比亚；《请君入瓮》；认识论危机。

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There is one brief but crucial passage in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* that has so far received little critical attention. In Act Two, Scene One, Pompey the clown is acting as Master Froth's attorney when Lord Escalus investigates the bawd's offense done to Elbow's wife. He first asks Escalus to look into Froth's face and "mark it well," then he inquires: "Doth your honour see any harm in that face?" (II i 151, 153) ¹The negative answer brings out the following penetrating remark from Pompey:

Pompey. I'll be suppos'd upon a book, his face is the worst thing about him. Good then; if his face be the worst thing about him, how could Mater Froth do the constable's wife any harm? I would know that of your honour. (II i 155-159)

"Seeing is Believing," according to an old saying. Pompey's inference, though misleading, sounds so plausible and convincing that Escalus momentarily accepts it: "He's in the right, Constable, what say you to it?" (II i 160-161). Nevertheless, what Shakespeare really intends us to notice here is just the opposite. Pompey is wrong in assuming that a person can be judged simply by his appearance, because an impostor can put on all kinds of innocent faces, just as a skillful actor can play various roles, or a chameleon can wear different colors under different circumstances.

The above-mentioned episode serves as a foil to the characterization of Angelo, the proud, self-righteous deputy who enjoys an "unsoil'd name" (II iv 155). Beneath Angelo's fair seeming lies his ugly nature and a lustful heart. The sharp contrast makes his double-dealing all the more striking. His attempt at

1 Cf. John Donne. "The First Anniversary. An Anatomie of the World:" "New philosophy casts all in doubt ... 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone; ..." (Stringer 11-12).

blackmailing and seducing Isabella discloses his true color. The Duke's information about his malice in deserting Mariana indicates that Angelo's fall is not a sudden one. The new governor's perfidy in ordering Claudio's execution and his perjury against Isabella and Mariana again denote a hardened "seemer" (I iii 54).

Hamlet has made one profound observation on the function of drama: "... the purpose of playing, whose ends, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (*Hamlet* III ii 20-24). The play world of *Measure for Measure* projects a prominent "feature" of Shakespeare's time. The preoccupation of with the problem of "seeming" in this play can be better comprehended through the exploration of two elements in the historical background. One is the transformation of the social structure in Elizabethan England, the other is the intellectual orientation of the Jacobean age. However, these are extremely complicated questions, and here in the present paper, I can only try to offer a brief answer.

Measure for Measure was written in the late Renaissance, a revolutionary time in which everything was rapidly changing. After the primitive accumulation of capital, the bourgeois class emerged from the lower orders of society to become a strong social force. The spirit of free competition and individualism drastically changed the conventional social codes and manners. Men at the bottom of society were no longer content to stay where they had been in the fixed social order but constantly lived in hopes of climbing up the social ladder. The existing order and degree of social hierarchy proved now to be only an imposition. Duke Vincentio does not forget to mention all this when he describes the situation in Vienna, where

... liberty plucks justice by the nose,
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum. (*M. For M.* I iii 29-31)

Agnes Heller's analysis of the Renaissance behavior provides an explanation of "seeming" from the social point of view. She points out that in medieval times the social orders were comparatively clear and stable, therefore there were fixed codes of behavior for people in different classes to follow. Yet, as alternation in social positions was frequent in the Renaissance, one would have to identify himself with different manners, different sets of rights and obligations and different norms: "Thus men became divided, relatively speaking, into 'individual' and 'roles'" (Heller,

1978).

There are numerous touches in Shakespeare's plays about such "roles." In reference to Angelo's "seeming" performances, we have only to recall Gloucester's confession:

Why, I can smile, and murder while I smile,
And cry, "Content" to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears
And frame my faces to all occasions. (3 *Henry VI* III ii 182-185)

This vivid description has brought to our minds some of Angelo's facial expressions in Act II, scene iv. There he first assumes a cold businesslike attitude; then, in his seductive word play, the face softens to that of a benevolent judge. A moment later, his saintly visage suddenly puts on the hideous grin of a fiend, which in turn gives way to a fierce howl as the rascal acts shamelessly to bluff the young girl Isabella. As for Angelo's motivation, Iago has provided an answer: "Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty. / But seeming so, for my peculiar end ..." (*Othello* I i 59-60).

The "role" behavior became so prevalent that it comes to dominate the characters in *Measure for Measure*. Men lie about their real purposes and pretend to be different from what they really are. Shakespeare has taken pains to make this crystal clear: the man in "judge's robe" is evil, whereas the bawds turn out sometimes to be full of humanity. In the city of Vienna, "seeming" becomes a more perplexing problem than hypocrisy, for in order to survive in this corrupt society, everyone needs a certain amount of dissimulation to protect his life and individuality. The Duke gains a deep understanding of the fact. His adventure as a disguised friar has taught him that precious knowledge of society and of man. When he is told that the bawd Pompey is to be severely punished by the new deputy, his self-reproaching observation is quite revealing:

That we were all, as some would seem to be,
From our faults, as faults from seeming, free! (III ii 38-39)

Thus, Lucio has every reason to reject the Duke's charge of libel in the last scene: "Faith, my lord, I spoke it but according to the trick" (V i 504-5).

To consider the relationship between the transformation of social structure and individual behavior is only one way, and admittedly a limited one, of approaching

the problem of seeming. A more important factor lies in the effect of the “new philosophy”¹ on the general mode of thinking.

The medieval mind took a static view of the world. The universe, according to the Bible, was created by God out of nothing and was proportioned in perfect harmony. The earth on which man lived was supposed to be the center of the universe, and the principle of hierarchy was of primary importance, for upon the scale of creation, each of God’s diverse creatures was allocated a position, according to “degree, priority and place,” as is described by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* (I iii 86). This basic medieval world outlook was epitomized in the authoritative works of St. Thomas Aquinas, who reconciled Aristotle with medieval Christianity.

Nevertheless, this faith in the rigid medieval doctrines was challenged during the Renaissance. New discoveries made in the fields of geography and astronomy revealed that the earth was a tiny planet revolving round the sun. The rediscovery of pagan cultures further broadened the horizon of the human mind, for the development of printing had made it possible to spread ancient Greek philosophy and scientific thinking across Europe, greatly enriching the stock of human knowledge. The fundamental base of the static world outlook was now shaken.

The feverish excitement of discovering a new world is reflected in many Renaissance literary works. In one of the Duke’s speeches in *Measure for Measure*, we also get a glimpse of the dynamic vision of this period:

Escalus: What news abroad i’ the world?

Duke: None, but there is so great a fever on goodness, that the dissolution of it must cure it. Novelty is only in request, and it is, as dangerous to be ag’d in any kind of course, as it is virtuous to be consistent in any undertaking, there is scarce truth enough alive to make societies secure, but security enough to make fellowships accurs’d. Much upon the riddle runs the wisdom of the world. (III ii 221-229)

The Duke’s wise observation draws a fairly accurate picture of Jacobean England, where the religious and political situations were uncertain and insecure, and the economic order was crumbling. The vacuum left by the reign of Elizabeth I, the

1 At the end of his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola lists the three Delphic utterances (“Nothing too much,” “Know thyself,” “Thou art.”), through which “we can attain to the true Apollo.” Cf. Agnes Heller, *The Renaissance Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978): 445-452.

“primum mobile” of her world, was strongly felt. “Novelty is only in request” is paraphrased by Wilson Knight (1930) as “Our whole system of conventional ethics should be destroyed and rebuilt” (89). There are even more telling interpretations:

There is scarcely enough knowledge to make human nature current in the world to make society safe; but ignorant self-confidence (i.e., in the matter of justice) enough to make human intercourse within a society a misleading thing. (Knight 89)

In this depiction of moral and perceptual confusion, and of the complex relationship between man and man, Shakespeare faithfully registers the impulse of his age.

The trend of going after “novelty” and the subsequent shifting of values are described by some critics as an “epistemological crises” (Muir & Schoeubaum, 1978, p. 190). The general intellectual confusion in this mental maelstrom was faithfully recorded by Montaigne in his *Essays* (II 12):

... When any new doctrine presents itself to us, we have great reason to mistrust and to consider it before it was set on foot, the contrary had been in vogue, and that as that has been overthrown by this, a third invention in time to come, may start up which may knock the second on the head. (Hutchins & Adler 276)

It was a time of restlessness, in which the old world outlook was questioned whereas a new one was not yet firmly founded. The prevalent thinking of the time existed and Aquinas’s philosophical system remained intact. Each day brought in new fads, scientific findings, religions, movements, or frauds, but never before had so many people been thus intellectually helpless before this kaleidoscopic view of conflicting ideas. But fundamentally, the Renaissance thinkers had not entirely broken through the limitations of the medieval mode of thinking. The humanists looked to classical antiquity for a moral and intellectual revival, and the Protestant reformers tried to find salvation exclusively in the Bible. Torn between these two Worlds, men became more confused than ever (Ford 15-45).

The confusion led to doubts. Theodore Spenser (1949) explains this complicated phenomenon in clear-cut terms:

The conflict was: belief in each one of the inter-related orders — cosmological, natural and political — which we have seen were the basic pattern of all

Elizabethan thinking, were being punctuated with a doubt. Copernicus had questioned the cosmological order, Montaigne had questioned the natural order, Machiavelli had questioned the political order. The consequences were enormous. (29)

Of the three persons mentioned above, Montaigne's influence in *Measure for Measure* cannot be underestimated, for by his skepticism, the validity of human knowledge proper is questioned. Men thought that they knew but actually they did not — this paradox is seen everywhere in this play.

Under these crucial circumstances, the immediacy of reappraisal and redefinition of conventional values makes itself felt in *Measure for Measure*. Yet since all these values are based on our reasoning and understanding, they are also subjected to incertitude and controversy. Beside the issue of justice, which we have already discussed, the old conception of divine authority is undermined in the play. Angelo realizes that his hypocrisy is a byproduct of social power when he cries out in pain that he is induced by "place" and "form" to "false seeming," and to "write 'good angel' on the devil's horn" (II iv 15-16). Like Machiavelli, he seems to think that as a man in high authority, his perfidy is inevitable and necessary. This view is confirmed by Isabella, who points out that "... authority, though it err like others, / Hath yet a kind of medicine in itself ..." (II ii 134-135). Even though the attention of some critics has been diverted by the Duke's image as "pow'r divine" (*M. For M.* V i 369), Shakespeare has made the audience see that Vincentio's way of maintaining his authority is also Machiavellian.

Honor, another high norm of both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, has been scrutinized and ridiculed by Falstaff in a familiar speech:

Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skin in surgery then? No. What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is in that honor? Air. (*1 Henry IV* V i 131-135)

Indeed, the word "honor" is so abused by the "seemer" that it sounds most hollow in *Measure for Measure*. When Angelo vows to Isabella that he would keep his word in exchanging her virginity for her brother's life, he declares: "Believe me, on mine honor ..." (II iv 148). But we know perfectly well that he cannot be trusted.

The disillusionment in *Measure for Measure* culminates in Isabella's evaluation of man. Her speech on pride and human ignorance as shown by Angelo

is most suggestive and powerful:

... man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
(His glassy essence), like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As make the angels weep. ... (II ii 117-122)

Angelo certainly is a living example of this dressed-up "ape," playing "fantastic tricks" of seeming before other characters as well as the audience. But the implication of this momentous passage is not limited to Angelo alone. Who is not, in this play, "most ignorant of what he's most assur'd"? The Duke vows at the beginning of the play to curb the "headstrong steeds" with "strict statutes and most biting laws" (I iii 19-20), only to set them free in the end. Claudio, who boasts of his readiness to encounter death "as a bride," shrieks with terror a moment later: "Death is a fearful thing" (III i 115). And Isabella does nothing less in conniving for Mariana than what she has regarded as a mortal sin.

From this speech, we discern a streak of Montaigne's skepticism, which shadowed the late Renaissance period. According to Professor Rossiter (1961), the word "Renaissance" implies three things:

(a) belief in man as the measure of all thing; (b) the resulting problem of power ... ; (c) scepticism: not merely about established religious dogma, but as a method of doubt, which calls every principle in question till empirical evidence, gained from observation of the outside world, proves it by test and trial (and thus proved, it disproves much that men hold dearest). (186)

For fear that the reader might overlook the last point, Mr. Rossiter immediately adds that "these three patterns of thought feel together in Shakespeare's mind as the result (mainly) of reading Montaigne" (p. 187). Though he is discussing *Hamlet*, his incisive analysis of the intellectual background here is closely relevant to *Measure for Measure*, which is also focusing on the evaluation of man, the contention of powers and is imbued with skepticism. When Isabella voices her disappointment, she is unwittingly holding up a "mirror" to the mentality of the "age" she lives in.

The Christian prejudices against men were deeply rooted, for the idea of Original Sin was essential to its doctrine. In the Christian psychological hierarchy,

man occupies a precarious position between Angel and animal, “ni ange, ni bête” (Spenser, 14), merely an “ape,” as Isabella describes. In an effort to break away from the manacle of medieval thinking, the humanists of the early Renaissance began to take an optimistic view of human nature. Pico della Mirandola (1996)’s notion of man’s dignity pushed the position of man to an unprecedented height. Created in the image of God, and with infinite potentiality, man was thought to be free to shape his own destiny.¹ A similar idea is expressed in one of Shakespeare’s most famous soliloquies:

Hamlet. ... What [a] piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving, howl express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals ... (*Hamlet* II ii 303-307)

Nevertheless, under the erosion of dark reality, this optimistic view of man gradually grew sour, and the disillusion about the grandeur of man was generally experienced by the late Renaissance empirical thinkers. Francesco Guaccinardini (1984) demonstrates in *The History of Italy*, how out of stupidity and weakness, man made mistakes that gradually narrowed down the range of his scope to choose an alternative course until finally he was trapped in the web of fortune. From the political point of view, Machiavelli presumed that human nature was basically evil. However, Montaigne’s vision of man comes closest to Isabella’s “The frailest and the most miserable of creatures is man, and at the same time the most arrogant” (Hutchins, 215). Referring to the “epistemological crisis,” he challenges: “Can anything be imagined to be so ridiculous that the miserable and wretched creature ... should call himself master and emperor of the world, of which he has not power to know the least part, much less to command it” (213).

Man is “ridiculous” and “miserable” mainly because the uncertainty and weakness of his senses have incurably damaged his perception and judgment, and that makes it hard for him to tell seeming from being. Montaigne points out the fact that it is not only that serious accidents overthrow man’s judgment, but that “the least thing in the world would do it”; “there is hardly a single hour in man’s life wherein our judgment is in its due place and right condition, our bodies being

¹ At the end of his Oration on the Dignity of Man, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola lists the three Delphic utterances (“Nothing too much,” “Know thyself,” “Thou art.”), through which “we can attain to the true Apollo.” Cf. Agnes Heller, *The Renaissance Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978): 445-452.

subject to so many conditional changes, and replete with so many several sorts of springs ..." (273). This fickleness of human nature is again echoed in *Measure for Measure*, when the Duke describes to Claudio man's true essence: "Thou art not certain; / For thy complexion shifts to strange effects / After the moon" (III i 23-25).

By the time Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure* and his other problem plays, the Renaissance view of man had already gone through a whole cycle of vicissitudes toward the dark vision of skepticism. It is significant that the beginning of the 17th century is marked with the translations of Montaigne's works, which fell into the hands of playwrights of the time. The mood of misanthropy and melancholy was typical of some prominent dramatists who picture the folly of the age as inordinate and its crime monstrous. The following passage is a short dialogue taken from Marston's *Malcontent*:

Pietro: All is damnation, wickedness extreme.
There is no faith in man.
Malcontent: In none but usurers and brokers
They deceive no man. (IV iv 20-23)¹

In the next scene, Malcontent again laments, "Man is slime of this dung pit ..." (IV v 135). This is indeed a bitter disillusion of man. It is noticeable that a similar analogy of man appears in Shakespeare's plays. Immediately after Hamlet praises the dignity of man, he adds with an abrupt turn of mind: "... and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me — nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so" (II ii 308-310). The same image of man as dust recurs in *Measure for Measure*, when the Duke tells Claudio: "Thou art not thyself / For thou exists on many a thousand grains / That issue out of dust" (III i 19-21). In this skeptical speech, the Duke admonishes Claudio to "Be absolute for death," because human life is a thing "none but fools would keep" (III i 5-8). He makes a long list of reasons why human life is not worth keeping; the fear of death, base accommodations, mental cowardice, unhappiness, inconsistency, burden of wealth, friendlessness, torture of illness, and dullness of mind. Things are not so good as one imagines; man is not so noble, valiant or happy as he appears to be. The Duke in *Measure for Measure* may sound halfhearted in what he is saying, but the speech is nevertheless a logical fruit of Shakespeare's knowledge of human life. With

1 Arthur H. Nethercot et al, eds., *Elizabethan Plays* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, INC., 1971), 788.

strenuous efforts, the dramatist manages to put all the details into a total framework of thought. Almost every important speech in this play serves as an illustration of the central theme.

The general temper of Shakespeare's assertion of doubt and his consciousness of "seeming" in *Measure for Measure*, as seen in Mariana's dialectical view of human weakness and the Duke's powerful speech in the prison scene, by no means suggests an attitude of utter despair and gloom. Neither does Montaigne's skepticism. A sense of relativity, rather than a completely negative view of the human situation is characteristic of Montaigne's thinking, which seems to be positive and negative in the same breath.

Montaigne's relativism was an immediate product of the "epistemological crisis," in which he tried in vain to evaluate the ever-changing world with set standards. He ended up fruitlessly by suggesting that there were no fixed standards of truth. A man playing with a cat could be regarded as a cat playing with a man (Hutchins, 284). It was only a matter of perspective. Virtue under certain circumstances may become vice and the vice versa. This brings to our mind Isabella's argument against Angelo's "justice," the play's preoccupation with "seeming" and the uncertainty of knowledge, and also Duke Vincentio's evasion in passing his judgment.

"Seeming! Seeming!" (*M. For M.* II iv 150) — the resounding echoes of this magic incantation are also heard in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. The disillusioned prince of Denmark proclaims: "... there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet* II ii 248-249). Cressida retorts upon her uncle: "To say the truth, true and not true" (*Troilus and Cressida* I ii 97). The disorientated Angelo in *Measure for Measure* also confesses that nothing goes right, no matter how hard he tries (IV iv 34). Whatever mystery we find in this play may thus be dispelled.

The sentiments of this puzzling generation are well summed up in one of the famous quotations by Pedro Calderon de la Barca: "What is life? A frenzy. / What is life? An illusion, / a shadow, a fiction" (*Life Is a Dream* II i 1195-1197).

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