

1: Measure for Measure (Vol. 86) - Essay - www.enganchecubano.com

SC Volume 86 Shakespearean Criticism Criticism of William Shakespeare's Plays and Poetry, from the First Published Appraisals to Current Evaluations (Shakespearean Criticism (Gale Res)).

In the opening line of the play the Countess expresses sorrow at the imminent departure of Bertram, but does so by emphasising the fundamental nature of family bonds: The pattern is continued a few lines later with the first reference to Helena. She too has lost a father and has become the adoptive daughter of the Countess. Immediately there is a weighing and balancing of admirable qualities: The implication is that honesty is valued even above life-saving skills. Characteristic of the problem plays is the way in which we plunge into a consideration of values. The relationship between inherited qualities and education is developed by the Countess in her praise of Helena: The suggestion that talent and honesty do not always go together is followed by an awareness that integrity is not necessarily inherited. Thy blood and virtue Contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness Share with thy birthright! His inexperience is revealed in her plea to Lafew: Indeed, the impression made by Bertram on her imagination is so powerful that it has erased all other images. In his bright radiance and collateral light Must I be comforted, not in his sphere. The hind that would be mated by the lion Must die for love. Not only are they separated by a social gulf, but Bertram seems unaware of her as a young woman. Moreover, there is nothing in the early exchanges to suggest why Bertram should attract such admiration—other than the fact that he is a handsome young man. That Helena is not just a silly young girl is made clear by her shrewd assessment of Parolles: Helena quickly routs Parolles in a battle of wits which reveals an ease of manner that enables her to cope admirably with his bawdy talk and self-importance. It is her resilience and strength of character which are manifested in the closing speech of the scene: Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. The mightiest space in fortune nature brings To join like likes, and kiss like native things. Leaving everything to heaven often serves as a pretext for inaction; and frequently seemingly disparate things are brought together and conjoined. If the audience feels any scepticism at this stage it is not about her determination to be active but rather about the worth of Bertram. Has this young woman so idealised the object of her love that he will not prove worth the effort? Significantly, her enthusiastic description of him is confined to physical characteristics: Moments later the King directs the attention of the audience back to this duality with its potential for conflict: And when the King reaches the climax of his praise it comes as something of a surprise: Such a man Might be a copy to these younger times; Which, followed well, would demonstrate them now But goes backward. The King undoubtedly creates a sense of two distinct eras, with the present being inferior to the former. While this could easily appear to be part of the traditional expression that things are no longer what they were, there is a feeling that the King is not merely responding as an ageing man idealising the past. One of the minor links between the problem plays is criticism of the obsession with the new-fangled: In expressing this feeling Shakespeare has the Countess employ his favourite source of imagery: I say I am your mother, And put you in the catalogue of those That were enwombed mine. He exhibits a powerful sense of social superiority. However, before revealing his attitude in this important sphere Bertram expresses an enthusiasm for the value of military honour. Yes, my good lord, But never hope to know why I should marry her. I know her well: Disdain Rather corrupt me ever! Clearly for Bertram, unlike the King and his mother and father, status is everything; personal qualities are irrelevant. But do not so. Good alone Is good, without a name; vileness is so: The property by what it is should go, Not by the title. Honours thrive When rather from our acts we them derive Than our foregoers. What should be said? If thou canst like this creature as a maid, I can create the rest. Virtue and she Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me. Starting at the fundamental physiological level the King makes a statement of fact that blood cannot be distinguished in terms of social status. The King argues that the comparison must be between actions regardless of the status of the actors. He then goes one step further: Finally, he insists that Helena has derived outstanding qualities from nature, which she may transmit to the next generation and so produce genuine honour, as opposed to the honour of title unsupported by virtuous

character. It is all the more remarkable coming from the King: The argument does not necessarily undermine the principle of inheritance, the existence of an aristocracy or a hierarchical society, but it does imply that title and high status require virtuous behaviourâ€”honour goes with actions not titleâ€”and that there should be no barrier to upward social mobility: The King reminds Bertram of this but not before Helena has attempted to relinquish her reward and the King has insisted that fulfilling his side of the bargain is a matter of honour: Here, take her hand, Proud, scornful boy, unworthy this good gift, That dost in vile misprision shackle up My love and her desert; that canst not dream We, poisoning us in her defective scale, Shall weigh thee to the beam; that wilt not know It is in us to plant thine honour where We please to have it grow. Check thy contempt; Obey our will which travails in thy good; Believe not thy disdain, but presently Do thine own fortunes that obedient right Which both thy duty owes and our power claims; Or I will throw thee from my care for ever Into the staggers and the careless lapse Of youth and ignorance; both my revenge and hate Loosing upon thee in the name of justice, Without all terms of pity. Pardon, my gracious lord; for I submit My fancy to your eyes. And what of Helena? The problem for the audience is to comprehend how she will be able to retain her feeling of love for Bertram after the treatment she has received in this scene. Can she still idolise him? When Helena next appears it is to be informed by Parolles that she has to forgo the consummation of her marriage because Bertram has urgent business elsewhere. Before Helena receives the remainder of her instructions from Bertramâ€”to return to Rossillion where he will join her in two daysâ€”the audience has had the opportunity of seeing Parolles thoroughly exposed by Lafew, while being accepted as a worthy confidant by Bertram. Bertram, then, is singularly undiscerning: He then proceeds to lie to her and in response to her tentative plea for a kiss he dismisses her coldly. His behaviour towards Helena is callous. However, even after receiving the next blowâ€”the riddling letter informing her that Bertram will never accept her as his wife until she has his ring and a child fathered by himâ€”Helena expresses no antagonism towards Bertram. Rather she suffers great anxiety on his part and a sense of guilt that she has caused him to court danger in the wars: The Countess is direct in her chastisement of her son: Nothing in France until he have no wife! Ironically, when Bertram does return from the war the honour he has gained in battle does serve him well in gaining quittance for his treatment of Helena. What angel shall Bless this unworthy husband? He cannot thrive, Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear And loves to grant, reprieve him from the wrath Of greatest justice. It is the young virgin herself who insists on placing moral considerations in the final estimation of a man: Likewise, Mariana in cautioning Diana against Bertram states: Here is the topsy-turvy world of the dashing young nobleman: In a play overflowing with references to worth and honour Shakespeare has created an awareness of the incongruities between scales of values. When Helena puts her proposal of the bed-trick before the widow she has to persuade her that there can be no question of improper behaviour. The ring is of far greater symbolic significance than the drum ostensibly sought by Parolles. Unlike Bertram who possesses physical courage in abundance, Parolles is a natural coward. At no point in the play does Bertram ever display such a sense of insight into his own character: Dismissing the ties of his enforced marriage he pledges undying love to the woman whom he intends to use: The entire section is 11, words.

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