

VIRTUE IS NOT BORING

SHAKESPEARE AND THE MORAL LIFE

Richard Harp

Language . . . most shows a man.
—*Ben Jonson*

Aristotle's famous statement that virtue is a mean between two extremes is generally not quoted in its entirety. He does indeed say, "In respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean"—that is, a mean between two opposed vices. Courage is a mean between rashness and cowardice. But the other, less-noticed part of his definition is also crucial: "With regard to what is best and right [virtue is] an extreme."¹ That is, one cannot, in Aristotle's view, be a little bit sober or some of the time courageous; either he has the virtues of temperance and fortitude or he does not.

Today any fictional character with a pulse is called "daring" or "brave" in our "irreverent" popular culture. But Shakespeare's heroes as well as his villains are as likely, perhaps even more likely, to do the outrageous and the unconventional, not out of a spirit of rebelliousness or cussedness but

because of their own imaginative and forceful responses to the extreme circumstances that life has put them in. This is what makes them virtuous.

Ben Jonson said that language reveals character because it "springs out of the most retired and inmost parts of us and is the image and parent of it, the mind."² Shakespeare was adept at illustrating Jonson's precept for his "great variety of readers," as his acting colleagues Heminges and Condell addressed the purchasers of their *First Folio* in 1623. It was by invoking the different shades of the accumulated meanings of words, as well as more recent, subtle changes to those meanings, that he revealed the features of virtue. These talents help account for why Shakespeare retains his relevance and stature four hundred years after his death. For his depictions of virtue not only illuminate the moral dimensions of the early

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modern period but also speak to the moral dilemmas of our own age.

Looking at a word's etymology and its historical usage is one of the best ways to understand what the word means in any particular era. At the beginning of the early modern period, Erasmus in his composition textbook *De Copia* said that etymology, the study of a word's origins, "is an explanation of the meaning of a word."³ He gave several examples, such as *pecuniosus*, a "moneyed man"—that is, "one who possesses an abundance of cattle," a meaning derived from the Latin *pecus*, which meant "cattle." Jonson himself in his *English Grammar* (printed in 1641) called *etymologie* the "true notation of words."⁴

John Milton wrote in his *Art of Logic* that *notation* (etymology) was "the interpretation of a name, that is, a reason given why anything is named as it is." Milton also quoted Cicero's remark that "names are truly the signs of things" and gave as one of his own examples the derivation of *homo* from *humo* ("soil"): Milton said that the "notation is from the matter,"⁵ with the Latin word for "man" being derived from the material from which the Bible says he was created. Milton was not unmindful that traditional etymologies were sometimes fanciful, but he cited many examples in this chapter of his *Logic*—the kind of work the Renaissance thought necessary for the writer—that were genuine.

Underlying all this discussion is the assumption that there is a real connection between a word and the thing that it denotes. Although it is true, as Juliet says in *Romeo and Juliet*, that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," names still do stand for realities, in this play as much as anywhere else. It is Juliet's famous meditation on Romeo's name, as she stands alone on her

balcony—"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo"—that causes her lover hidden in the garden below to reveal himself and to express his love for her. The invocation of the name calls out the person and reveals the boldness of his character.

Of course, the meanings of words change over time, but a nineteenth-century writer on the arts of language, John Stuart Mill, spoke for all those who like to study this topic when he said in his own book on logic, "It may be good to alter the meaning of a word, but it is bad to let any part of the meaning drop."⁶

The plays suggest that Shakespeare agreed with Mill's assertions, that to unleash a word's full potency required that no "part of [its] meaning drop."

The word *virtue* derives from the Latin word *vir*, which means "man"—also a source for English words such as *virility*. The closely allied Latin word *virtus* means "valor," "worth," and "merit." In general the traditional idea of virtue had to do with "power," the ability to act or to animate—to be the "force," as Dylan Thomas says, "that through the green fuse drives the flower" as well his own "green age." This is not a "power" that has the modern political sense of "oppression." Nor is virtue for Shakespeare principally that schoolboy report card that Ben Franklin recorded in his *Autobiography* to show how he was behaving (very well, it seems).

The Renaissance writer did not find this root sense of virtue applicable only to men. The rigorous Ben Jonson affirmed both men and women's shared virtuous identity. When Jonson was composing a picture of "what kinde of creature I could most desire to honor and serve," he thought it should be possessed of "each softest virtue" who would also have a "learned, and a manly

soule" (Epigram 76, "On Lucy Countesse of Bedford," 11.3–4, 11, 13–14). The countess's soul was "manly" because it was "virtuous," "powerful," a quality that applied equally to each sex.

The dynamic quality of virtue, its power, is attested throughout Shakespeare's plays. Its connection to valor is indeed frequent. In the most martial of all the tragedies, *Coriolanus*, the Roman general Cominius says it is commonly held that "valour is the chiefest virtue" (2.2.84).⁷ In the same play, when the patrician Menenius seeks to visit his exiled friend (and now enemy of the state) Coriolanus, he is denied entry into Coriolanus's camp by the watchman, who says, "The virtue [power] of your name/Is not here passable" (5.2.14–15). When Antony returns to Cleopatra after an unexpectedly successful battle against Octavius Caesar, she greets him with characteristic grand hyperbole by saying, "Lord of lords,/O infinite virtue, com'st thou smiling from/The world's great snare uncaught?" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 4.8.16–18). Antony's "infinite virtue" is his military prowess, although surely Cleopatra has also in mind the power of love in Antony's life to overcome all considerations of politics and world affairs.

Nor is virtue in this sense of physical strength of purpose confined to men. Cleopatra knows a liar when she hears one: when Octavius Caesar falsely promises her merciful treatment in Rome, she says, "He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not / Be noble to myself" (5.2.191–92); she escapes his plotting by committing suicide through "the joy of the asp." When, in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus's wife, Portia, is troubled by her husband's distracted behavior after he has been visited by the conspirators against Caesar's life, she tells him that he has some "sick offense within your mind,/Which by the right and virtue of my place/I ought to

know of" (2.1.269–71). In the same scene, she shows the strength of her virtuous loyalty to Brutus—that is, a loyalty informed by decisive action—by showing him the wound she has given herself in the thigh as a "strong proof of my constancy" (2.1.300). Shakespearean virtue is not satisfied with half measures.

Shakespeare frequently shows us that virtue is not so much a static state of character to be achieved as it is a dynamic activity to be continually renewed, an idea Aristotle suggested in his definition of happiness as *eudaimonia*, "virtuous activity." Echoing closely this definition, Lucentio at the beginning of *The Taming of the Shrew* tells his servant that he has come to Padua to study that part of philosophy "that treats of happiness/By virtue specially to be achieved" (1.1.19–20). The animating power of virtue is also seen in Hamlet's telling the visiting actors that their playacting should show "virtue her feature" (3.2.23)—that is, should bring to life the very picture of the abstraction "virtue," giving their spectators living pictures of her dramatic representatives choosing between good and evil. It is a tableau that the royal house of Denmark is in need of seeing.

Virtue's energy can also make it dangerous if it is misdirected. Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* has noticed from his study of nature "the powerful grace that lies/In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities" but also how they may be misused; he then reflects, "Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied/And vice sometimes by action dignified" (2.3.19–20). The Montagues and Capulets vividly illustrate this last statement with their obstinate insistence on following a code of revenge for a quarrel whose origins no one remembers. Which leads us to recall Aristotle's statement that virtue is an extreme with regard to what is "best and right."

Shakespeare's plots and heroes neither

tolerate tepid compromises of what is best and right nor finally accept as irreconcilable those seeming opposites that so bedevil our public and private lives—love and duty, desire and reason, justice and mercy, family life and career ambition, and that very disastrous separation so commonly heard today between what one “personally” believes and what he or she is publicly willing to advocate. In Shakespeare’s plays the times are nearly always desperate, and persons of character must confront them with a desperate resolve. “Virtue is bold,” says Duke Frederick to a woman who needs his help in *Measure for Measure*, and “goodness never fearful” (3.1.210).

This notion of the dramatist is different from John Keats’s romantic description (which has become standard) of Shakespeare as one who embodied a “negative capability” that allowed him to manifest a chameleon-like sympathy with his various characters. Thus, the Keats argument goes, whether a Shakespearean character’s actions are moral or immoral, admirable or reprehensible, is largely beside the point; they are part of the world as it is and therefore they command the artist’s and his readers’ interest and respect. Lady Macbeth is not a murderous conspirator but is rather “fascinating” (perhaps because of this very fact), and Falstaff is not a walking vice but is rather humanity writ large. That both Lady Macbeth and Falstaff are colossal characters is of course true, and we should indeed separate their sins from their persons, but surely this should be done within the context of what is most obvious about them.

In a sense, Keats and his followers do not go far enough. The corollary to Shakespeare’s rejection of puritanical notions of behavior—his recognition that cakes and ale are not incompatible with virtue—is his allowing his protagonists maximum freedom and then asking, By exercising maximum

freedom, could they also exercise maximum responsibility?

As a playwright, Shakespeare paradoxically isolated his men and women even while they were immersed in complex social situations. Forced to rely on their limited personal resources, they are surprisingly, especially in the comedies, able to effect social change. They achieve their own individuation and larger social reform at the same time, frequently in extreme ways: through disguises, concealed identities, and pretending to be members of the opposite sex (Rosalind, Viola, Portia); through trafficking with the supernatural (Hamlet); or through feigning madness (Hamlet), being surrounded by madness (Viola’s in *Twelfth Night*), or actually going mad (Lear).

It will not do to say these are merely conventions of the theater—of course they are. But great art uses conventional plots and character types to appeal to audiences of its own time and then transforms these devices so that—intentionally or not—they appeal to audiences of *every* time. As the very quotable Jonson said about his friend, Shakespeare “was not of an age but for all time.” Shakespeare’s romantic and eventful plots were a sign not just of his knowing how to tell a good story but also of the spaciousness of his times, when one might hope like the voyagers in *The Tempest* to “rejoice/beyond a common joy,” as the old counselor Gonzalo remarks, because in a single journey “all of us [found] ourselves/When no man was his own” (5.1.208–9, 214–15).

In fact, it seems that virtue can be revealed for what it truly is—and not some bourgeois facsimile or politically correct imposture—only when characters are pushed into extraordinary situations where the exigencies of the moment override all ordinary responses. “Great wits are sure to

madness near allied/And thin partitions do their bounds divide,” said John Dryden in *Absalom and Achitophel*. Shakespeare had already made this notion current when his King Theseus remarked with a sudden illumination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/Are of imagination all compact.”

One of Shakespeare’s greatest plays was a five-act illustration of Dryden’s maxim. For the madness of King Lear is not an antic disposition like Hamlet’s, which can be taken on and off as the occasion demands, but the cracking of his human nature, which leads to a number of sobering insights into virtue and vice. With his furious wisdom, for example, Lear berates the hypocrisy with which he sees justice administered in society: “The usurer hangs the cozener,” says the outraged king. “Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;/Robes and furred gowns hide all” (4.6.163–65). When regarding the uncovered body—an unorthodox disguise, to be sure—of one of his court’s virtuous (and ostracized) remnants, the Earl of Gloucester’s son Edgar, Lear declares that this “Poor Tom” (beggar) at least does not partake of the adulterated sophistication of civilization: “Thou art the thing itself;/unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, /forked animal as thou art” (3.4.105–7).

This is as intense a situation as any that Shakespeare portrays in his tragedies: Lear, a very old man of eighty years, has descended into madness after irresponsibly bequeathing his kingdom to his two reprehensible daughters, Goneril and Regan, and disinheriting his only loyal daughter because she would not be a sycophant on demand. He is now exposed to the ragings of an apocalyptic storm because he has no home, and he can find consolation only in the compassionate and witty reproaches of his court fool. It

is the very extremity of this situation that brings forth from Lear his insights into human nature’s pretensions and vulnerabilities. He is not a model of behavior for others to follow, as he certainly did not practice what he has come to preach. But it is also true that had he not practiced as he did, he would have nothing to preach. “Madness and impertinency mixed!” exclaims Edgar as he listens to Lear rant. “Reason in madness!” (4.6.174–75).

The sententious Polonius—not always a fool—observes much the same thing about the presumed mad Hamlet: “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (2.2.208–11). The greatest of the villains, such as Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*, have a terrifying rationality that allows them to explain in lucid detail their motiveless malignities. They live in what G. K. Chesterton called in *Orthodoxy* the “clean and well-lit prison” of a single terrifying obsession: for Iago, an envious hatred of Othello; for Edmund, his prayer that the “gods [will] stand up for bastards” even as he acknowledges that he has no real cause for complaint: “Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund /As to the legitimate” son, Edgar (1.2.17–18).

In *King Lear*, the virtuous Kent may well forthrightly say, “I do profess to be no less than I seem: to serve him truly that will put me in trust; to love him that is honest” (1.4.13–15), but he does so only in disguise after the king has unjustly exiled him from the court for offering the good advice that Lear was too ruled by passions to accept. Truth will out in the plays, but not in conventional circumstances, and not without those who seek truth undergoing significant suffering and metamorphosis.

The advantage of this is the inestimable

benefit that virtue is never dull in Shakespeare. “Sweet are the uses of adversity,” says the unjustly exiled Duke Senior when we first meet him in the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*. The Duke and his band of “merry men,” we learn, “fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world” (1.1.111–14). The Duke is no romantic about nature—he acknowledges “the icy fang/And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,” but he is grateful that these are “counselors/That feelingly persuade me what I am” (2.1.10–11), as opposed to the obsequious flatterings of courtly fops. Like the blind Gloucester after his eyes are put out at the behest of Lear’s villainous daughters, in the forest Duke Senior is able to “see feelingly.”

Perception is sharpened in the plays by enduring misfortunes, deserved or not. In a reversal of how we usually look at things, the villains end up as bored dullards. The theretofore vainly loquacious Iago’s response at the end of the play about his motives in destroying Othello is a less-than-triumphant “Demand me nothing....From this time forth I never will speak word” (5.2.311–12). The Edmund in *King Lear* who boasted about how his schemes would make him “grow” and “prosper” can later only feebly declaim that he was loved by two murderous women, “the one the other poisoned for my sake/And after slew herself” (5.3.245–46). And the Macbeth who dared do considerably more than what “may become a man” finds ultimately the ennui of a life “signifying nothing.”

Shakespeare’s women also display virtue while being tested in extreme situations not of their own making. One of the greatest of them, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, is in extreme circumstances to which she must apply the virtue of patience. That “patience is a virtue” has been proverbial since the Middle Ages—

Chaucer’s Franklin in *The Canterbury Tales* says that it is “an high virtue, certainly”—but it often does not seem like one, because in practicing patience, one seems to do nothing. Or perhaps patience seems a weak virtue, because it may be the product of sterile resolutions easily forsaken.

But virtues are generally chosen and formed in the plays only when there are few if any other choices, a truth so obvious that Shakespeare in one instance employs a cliché to emphasize it: “There is no virtue like necessity,” John of Gaunt tells the soon-to-be exiled Bolingbroke in *Richard II* (1.3.278). Bolingbroke will return to England and overthrow the king who exiled him.

Viola’s patience achieves for her a perhaps even more satisfying reward. Already an orphan when the play opens, she is thrown by means of a (not infrequent) Shakespearean shipwreck into the land of Illyria, where she discovers that she has also apparently lost to the sea her only relative, a brother. She uses this occasion, however, not to whine but to decide quickly what is to be done—for patience can be no virtue if one first does not do everything possible to overcome difficulties. Many of the proverbs have matching opposites, so it was also sometimes said that “patience is a beggar’s virtue.” Shakespeare offers his own version in *Richard II*, when the Duchess of Gloucester speaks to John of Gaunt about his unwillingness to avenge his brother’s death: “That which in mean men we entitle patience/Is pale cold cowardice in noble breasts” (1.2.33–34).

But Viola is neither a coward nor mean, and therefore she immediately sets out upon a course of action, deciding to disguise her sexual identity—further isolation—and pretending to be a eunuch to obtain a position at the court of the man she loves, Duke Orsino. To complete her alienation from all that is familiar, she must use her head against

her heart when the Duke asks her to woo for him the “rich countess” Olivia. Viola does this so persuasively—it is against her own interests but her love for the Duke paradoxically inspires her—that Olivia falls in love with her. It is a complicated situation to say the least (and becomes more so as the play progresses), but Viola sums it up in soliloquy with characteristic lucidity. Concerning Olivia’s affections, she says it is not the Duke that Olivia loves but rather herself: “I am the man.” She continues:

. . . My master loves her dearly,
And I, poor monster, fond as much on
him;
And she, mistaken, seems to dote on
me.
What will become of this? As I am
man,
My state is desperate for my master’s
love;
As I am woman—now alas the day!—
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia
breathe!
O Time, thou must untangle this, not I;
It is too hard a knot for me t’untie.
(2.2.25, 33–41)

Viola’s “I am the man,” then, means initially and literally that she is the “man” whom Olivia thinks she loves. Viola is also a “man” in that her “state is desperate for my master’s love”—as both a human being and a woman, she might by her nature and character hope for this union. Finally, she says, “I am woman”: humorously, it is this last identity that provokes Viola’s only bemused exclamation (“alas the day!”). She acknowledges that only “Time” can resolve her dilemmas and later describes herself like “patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief” (2.4.114–15).⁸

If virtue is manifested especially brightly in the isolating circumstances of the Shakespearean design, it is also explored revealingly in its root word, *vir*, “man.” For Shakespeare, “What does it mean to be a man?”—that is, “What does it mean to be a human being who shares a human nature with other like-minded creatures?”—is usually a philosophical rather than a merely rhetorical question. His custom, as we have seen, is to play on different shades of traditional meaning within the term, often connected to etymology, even while he is manifesting newer—and frequently darker—psychological senses.

Macbeth and its Scottish hero provide a particularly good example of what virtue is in this root sense and how that sense may be subtly distorted. Macbeth becomes increasingly isolated, not because of the fluctuations of fortune but because of his own misdeeds. And his sins are not confined to a particular moment of irrational passion but are the result of conscious deliberation over many years. His goal is to become “secure” in his power (the witch Hecate says that “security/Is mortals’ chiefest enemy” [3.5.32–33]), which requires more and more murders.

His trafficking with the supernatural for his own benefit increases his and his wife’s isolation from other human beings: Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking speaks the eloquent incoherence of guilt, and for a personal attendant Macbeth must rely on one whose name is “Seyton.” At the beginning of the play Macbeth has as much *virtu*—virtue as military prowess—as anyone could desire, but the question after that is whether he can achieve the more comprehensive *virtus* of a good human being. It is one of Shakespeare’s own virtues in this play to make searching distinctions between spontaneous battlefield courage and the patient manliness required for domestic life.

Particularly vivid and dramatic illustrations of such distinctions are found in the discussions between Macbeth and his wife over the qualities necessary for him to become king of Scotland.

In the beginning the almost-indomitable Lady Macbeth asks her ambivalent husband to do what it takes to become king—that is, to commit murder. When Macbeth tells her that he would “dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none” (1.7.47–8), his wife is unimpressed: when you informed me of the witches’ prophesy that you would become king, she says, “then you were a man;/And, to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more the man.” The time is right to act, she continues, for the king, Duncan, is coming to stay the night at their castle. But the “fitness” of the opportunity “does unmake you,” she tells her husband (1.7.49–52, 54–55).

Shakespeare makes the particular murder being contemplated here especially foul. The prospective victim is a good ruler, beloved by all. He has just granted Macbeth a promotion, from Thane of Glamis to Thane of Cawdor, based on his courage and loyalty to his sovereign. To compound the crime, the murder is committed as Duncan sleeps, when the king is defenseless (“innocent sleep,” Macbeth later calls it [2.2.40]). A further twist of treachery comes when Macbeth blames the murder on the grooms guarding Duncan’s bedchamber, whom the hosts have made drunk and senseless, then killed so that they cannot defend themselves against false accusations. The episode offers a vivid illustration of how the virtues of basic humanity may be cast aside by freely chosen villainy.

The poetry that articulates these issues is powerful and moving. First there is Macbeth’s understanding that he owes his king and his own human nature something more than base wickedness: the “horrible imag-

inings” that accompany the ambition the witches have aroused in him so shake “my single state of man/That function [‘natural power of action,’ as David Bevington glosses the term here] is smothered in surmise/And nothing is but what is not” (1.3.138–39).

And then there is Lady Macbeth’s challenge to her husband’s eminently sensible reaction to his fantasies, which introduces a new conception of “man”: one who has the gumption, the *cojones*, to do what his imagination has made “real” to him, regardless of human context or circumstance. Real men no more listen to conscience than they eat quiche, just as real women like herself do not hesitate to carry out a resolve such as Macbeth has made: Lady Macbeth says that even though she has known the natural joy of giving suck to an infant child, “I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/And dashed the brains out” (1.7.57–59).

From this time forward Macbeth’s use of “man” bears no resemblance to his avowal to Lady Macbeth’s tauntings above: “I dare do all that may become a man;/who dares do more is none.” In that statement he “dares” to uphold the status and stature that his fortunate high social birth and chivalric deeds have attained for him; at that moment, exercising proper discipline and restraint represents a daring and virtuous adventure for Macbeth, requiring just the additional touch of Viola’s patience for its perfection.

But just a few lines later, “manliness” becomes something quite different. Irony and pathos pervade Macbeth’s subsequent use of the term. After Duncan is found dead, Macbeth calls on the other lords and Duncan’s sons to “put on manly readiness” and meet in council to determine a course of action. In doing so, he is appealing to a quality that he no longer has.

The Macbeths continue to explore exactly

how far human nature can be pushed before it breaks. When Macbeth later sees Banquo's ghost (seen by no one else) at a dinner party given for assembled Scottish lairds, his emotional reaction is so extreme that Lady Macbeth asks, "Are you a man?" He replies, "Aye, and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appal the devil." She later complains that he is "quite unmanned in folly" (3.4.58–60, 74). Lady Macbeth apologizes to the peers for Macbeth's unmanly behavior, but he defends himself by saying, "What man dare, I dare," adding that he could stand against "the rugged Russian bear" and "never tremble." It is only the "horrible shadow" and the "unreal mockery" of the ghost that disturbs him. When the ghost leaves, he says, "I am a man again" (11.100–109).

But how diminished his idea of human dignity now is. Before he told Lady Macbeth that he would "dare do all that may *become* a man [emphasis added]"—the whole scope of human possibility was open to him. Now to be a man for Macbeth means only that he is not seeing the specters that no normal human being sees. To abandon virtue is to abandon human nature.

Macbeth is not the only play in which Shakespeare demonstrates the dimensions of virtue, linguistically and thematically, by reference to "manliness." As *Hamlet* begins, King Claudius tells the prince that his excessive display of grief over his father's death is "unmanly" (1.2.94). Masculine displays of emotion are often characterized this way in the plays, but that does not mean they have the author's endorsement.

In *Henry V*, Exeter describes the death of the Earl of Suffolk and the Duke of York at the Battle of Agincourt, where York threw his wounded arm over Suffolk's neck and kissed his lips: "And so, espoused to death,

with blood he sealed / A testament of noble-ending love" (4.6.26–27). Exeter concludes that "The pretty and sweet manner of it forced / These waters from me which I would have stopped" but could not because "I had not so much of man in me, / And all my mother came into mine eyes / And gave me up to tears" (11.28–32). Henry V responds, "I blame you not," confessing that hearing the story has forced him to control "mistful eyes."

This scene challenges the idea of "man as macho" with which Lady Macbeth mocks her husband. At the same time it illustrates affecting the traditional idea of "man"—that is, man and woman both—as the union of soul and body, reason and emotion. There is nothing effeminate about Exeter's telling of the event or about the manner of the death of the knights, who, as York says, "kept together in our chivalry" (4.6.19).

Nor is there anything "unmanly" in Hamlet's grief over his father's death. Playing on the stereotypical idea of maleness, Claudius can subtly tease his stepson in ways that would resonate with a wider courtly audience. But Hamlet knows as well as his comrade Marcellus that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," that something is deeply inhuman in the manner of his father's death, his mother's overhasty marriage, and his own being shunted aside from the throne.

Alasdair MacIntyre, a distinguished modern proponent of the Virtue Ethics tradition (there was a time when this would have been a redundancy, but no more), has argued in his widely praised book *After Virtue* that coherence in moral thought is only "intelligible in terms of a context of practical beliefs and of supporting habits of thought, feeling, and action, a context that has...been lost [since the medieval/early modern period], a context in which moral judgments were understood as governed by

impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good.”⁹

Shakespeare is superb in showing us both the “shared conception of the human good” and the early modern challenges to it, challenges that have become very nearly our exclusive postmodern assumptions and convictions. When in *Othello* the poor sap Roderigo tells his “honest” friend Iago that he has not the “virtue”—that is, the strength—to abandon his hopeless pursuit of the beautiful and now-married Desdemona, Iago ridicules the notion (with an accompanying obscene gesture): “A fig! ’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus.” He continues, “Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners” (1.3.323–24)—all is within our own power, declares Iago, if we have but the will to make it so.

To complement this discussion of “man,” consider one final word, *sense*. In a spiritual or immaterial manner, one may make sense, or talk intelligently; in a physical or concrete way, one may use his five external senses to apprehend his environment and then refer them to his interior senses such as imagination or memory or the “common sense.” Aristotle said that all knowledge—not just some but all—comes from the senses, and this was still a commonplace in Shakespeare’s time. In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella asks the Viennese governmental official Angelo to commute the capital sentence of her brother for his offense against virtue, fornication. Although Angelo is known for his rectitude, his lust is awakened by her rational, sensible appeal. So he (not very) subtly propositions her, but the chaste young woman is oblivious. Surprised at his aroused attraction to her petition, he

remarks in an aside that “She speaks, and ’tis / Such sense that my sense breeds with it” (2.2.142–43).

When Isabella leaves, Angelo asks rhetorically, “Can it be / That modesty may more betray our sense / than woman’s lightness?” (11.67–69). Angelo’s previous icy reserve—which passed for “virtue” in the increasingly puritanical usage of the term—is leaving him, but he realizes that his intellect is shaky as well. When he tells her in their next meeting that “your sense pursues not mine,” it is a terse irony worthy of Iago himself. In fact, Isabella’s sense as well as her senses are passionately united in pursuit of justice and mercy for her brother and ultimately for her enemy Angelo. Hers is an integrity that discovers, as Prospero does in *The Tempest*, that the “rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance.”

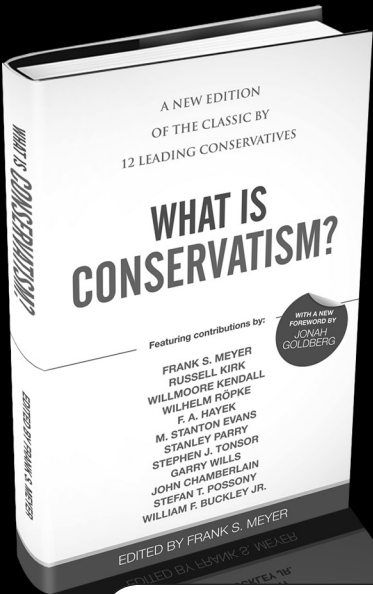
Within the same play and often in the same passage, Shakespeare can show us both the expansive communal and transcendent meaning of words such as *virtue*, *man*, and *sense* and their almost simultaneous reduction to a restrictive and destructive individualism. Of all the plays’ heroes, Hamlet best summarizes the early modern situation, and his “prophetic soul” divines what has become the principal moral dilemma of our own time. Speaking forcefully (virtuously) to his mother about her marriage to his corrupt stepfather, he is moved to say:

Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pursy time
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him
good.

(3.4.159–62)




- 1 *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. W.D. Ross (London: Oxford University Press, 1915), 2.6, 1107a.
- 2 *Explorata, or Discoveries*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.567.
- 3 *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 24.332.
- 4 Cambridge Edition, 7.311.
- 5 *Columbia Edition of the Works of Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38), 11.221.
- 6 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*, 8th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 479. On the status of etymology in contemporary linguistics and philosophy, see David del Bello's interesting discussion in *Forgotten Paths: Etymology and the Allegorical Mindset* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).
- 7 All reference to the plays are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th ed., ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004).
- 8 The intricate union of the two sexes is of continual interest to Shakespeare, and his sophisticated discussions of the matter might give hope to a world that finds the subject largely puzzling and problematic. The ancient idea of the hermaphrodite, described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, that man and woman were originally both part of a primeval egg later separated but now seeking to be reunited, is relevant here. Even more relevant are the complementary accounts of the creation of man and woman in Genesis. In the first account the two sexes are equal and intimately associated with each another and with the divine: "God created man in his own image . . . male and female created he them" (Genesis 1:27); in the second, the sociability between man and woman is emphasized in Eve's being taken from the rib of Adam. The first account declares the equality of the sexes in their created nature and in their closeness to God; the second declares their closeness to each other.
- 9 Alasdair MacIntyre, "Prologue to the Third Edition: After Virtue after a Quarter of a Century," *After Virtue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), x.



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