SOCIAL DECORUM IN SHAKESPEARE'S EARLY PLAYS

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In this article my purpose is to show that Shakespeare, in his plays before 1600, not only reflects the social decorum of his day, but stood far enough above it to be able to satirize it. By “decorum” I mean those social conventions that almost invariably lead to affectation and propriety. That the arbiter of this decorum was Queen Elizabeth’s court, especially as it dictated the current fashion for things Italian, will be seen by an account of the “courtier” of Shakespeare’s day. I shall confine myself here to his courtly duties, his conventions for travel, his prescribed wearing apparel, his conversation and rhetoric as it appeared in its most artificial form in the sonnet conceit. And finally, since the sonnet was the mode of expressing love, the decorum of love will receive particular emphasis.

The favours of the court created a distinct member of society, the courtier—the perfect gentleman, complete in all things. He was at once the mirror of the Italian Renaissance and the embodiment of the Elizabethan ideal. At the court the gentleman learned good manners, the fine arts, statecraft, sports; in brief, he went to the court to receive his education. The fact that this education was Italian must be stated rather abruptly here, since the scope of this paper does not allow a full exposition of the Italian Renaissance—that fine rebirth of imagination that, beginning in thirteenth century Italy, moved across the continent of Europe, to flower in Elizabethan England. Italy was the home of culture to the Englishman then, as China has been in certain periods of Japanese history. And the most

popular "courtesy book," which set the mould for social conventions, was that of an Italian, Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. Translated into English in 1561 by Hoby, it was read by all, but studied by the English courtier. Even Roger Ascham, the enemy to everything Italian, was forced to commend it:

"This book advisedly read, and diligently followed but one yeare at home in Englande, would do a young gentleman more good, I wiss, than three yeares travel in Italy."

For this book not only contained all the rules for becoming a courtier, but satisfied the Englishman's craze for Italian culture. According to its author the courtier's main duty was to advise his prince in matters of government. So Elizabeth surrounded herself with such men, and though she was the sovereign freely sought their advice upon affairs of state. In Shakespeare's early plays, Valentine, for one, "attends the Emperor in his royal court." And in as late a play as *King Lear*, we find the two sons of Gloucester abroad receiving their education to become courtiers. "Home-keeping youths," Shakespeare says, "have ever homely wits."

This custom naturally gave rise to a whole technique of travel for the gentleman, and, on the other hand, considerable material for satire. Beginning in the reign of Henry the Eighth, a tide of Englishmen poured into Italy in order to further their accomplishments and to bring back to their own country the Italian

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3 *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I, iii, 27.

4 Ibid., I, i, 2.
culture. Such books as Turler's *The Traveler* were well conned before departing. It was Bacon who suggested that in traveling one should take a tutor and a servant, keep a diary, learn the language, sequester himself from his countrymen, and see eminent persons. The abuse of foreign travel became apparent; Ascham fought against it on the grounds that the Italians were atheistic, vain, and dirty. That the Italians did not relish the transplanted English in their midst is attested by the well-known Italian proverb: "*Englese italianto è un diavolo incarnato*." James Howell in 1642 writes about this passion for travel in sarcastic language:

"Nor can one exchange three words with him at an ordinary, but presently they are th'other side of the sea, commending either the wines of France, the fruits of Italy, or the oils of Spain."1

Although Shakespeare was too busy to travel much himself, we have no doubt that he read Eden's *Historie of Travayle* and Raleigh's *Discoverie of Dutch Guiana*; and he certainly was well acquainted with the courtier freshly returned from Italy. It is this conventionalized traveler whom he satirizes in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*,2 but that he set most of his plays in foreign countries was to satisfy his audience's mania for travel. It was part of the Elizabethan decorum.

Wearing apparel, being most easily changed, was one of the first things to become Italian. In matters of dress Castiglione advised the Englishman "not to bee extreme in any part, like the French or the Dutch, but like the Italians," which is frank enough, especially with the final promise that "garments for pleasure can be merie, cut pompous and riche."3 An interesting Shakespearean comment on the passion for foreign clothing is contained in Portia's words:

"How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his

1 Quoted from J. D. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
2 Also in *King John*, I, i, 189 et seq.
round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behavior everywhere."

It is known that Shakespeare's contemporaries wore practically all foreign clothing—Italian, French, and Spanish—but the most popular articles, such as the long-breasted doublets and Venetian breeches, were Italian. In *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* Nash raises his voice against the gorgeous attire of the English, "a sin lifting up the flesh against God," as Dante did during the Italian Renaissance preceding. William Harrison, in 1587, wrote:

"And as these fashions are diverse, so likewise it is a world to see the costliness and the curiosity, the excess and the vanity, the pomp and the bravery, the change and the variety, and finally the fickleness and the folly, that is in all degrees, insomuch that nothing is more constant in England than the inconstancy of attire. . . . Thus it is come to pass that women are become men, and men transformed into monsters."

To consider the head-dress of the women of Shakespeare's day is to be reminded of certain styles of hair-dressing one sees in Japan today. As Philip Stubbes describes it, their hair was "frizzled and crisped, laid out in wreathes and borders from ear to ear, propped with forks and wire."

The most prized possession of the courtier, however, was not his Italian clothes, but his honour. Being a gentleman carried with it a certain expectancy for prowess, and the knight had to live up to it. Lest he seemed ashamed of his father's name, he continually boasted; and to defend the family escutcheon he was ready to die at a moment's notice—but even in this he had to obey strict rules of decorum. Of the many books which told

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1 *The Merchant of Venice*, I, ii, 77-81. For another excellent description of an Elizabethan in foreign clothes, see *The Taming of a Shrew*, IV, iii, 53 et seq.
2 This pamphlet, written in 1593, censures many Elizabethan social conventions.
3 *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIII.
4 Quoted from J. D. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
him how, perhaps that by William Segar is the most famous. Since the gentleman was one who "professeth honour, vertue, and armes," when his honour was challenged the first thing he should do was to "put on a bold aspect, which countenance the Turkes doe much affect."

Especially did this code of honour govern the duel in Shakespeare's day; and it may be that the large number of fencing matches in Shakespeare's early court plays is due to the presence at court of Vincenzo Saviola, who taught the art of rapier and dagger. One of the rules governing this sport was that a commoner should not expect satisfaction from a superior, a rule that accounts for Mercutio's description of Tybalt as "a duellist, a duellist; a gentleman of the very first house, of the first and second cause. Ah, the immortal passado! the punto reverso! the hai!" Likewise it was "unlawful that any murderer, thiefe, or other vicious person be allowed to accuse or fight with a gentleman."

But nobles of equal rank challenged each other on the slightest provocation, and were taken up immediately, for "if the challenger did not vanquish the defender in the day of the fight, he himself was judged vanquished, and could not after challenge any other gentleman." Of this readiness to fight a duel Shakespeare makes fun in the swaggering companions of Romeo: "Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes." Even Peter is ready "to draw as soon as another man, if I see occasion in a good quarrel, and the law is on my side." And Antipholus of Syracuse, having had his honour slighted, says to the merchant:

"I'll prove mine honour and mine honesty.

2 Romeo and Juliet, II, iv, 22–27.
4 Ibid., III, 7.
6 Ibid., II, iv, 167–169.
5 Romeo and Juliet, III, i, 20.
Against thee presently if thou dar'st stand."
Merch. "I dare and do defy thee for a villain. (They draw)."

Not only the language of honour and the duel, but the everyday conversation at court was a carefully prescribed art, a "delicate foppery." It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the Italian tongue was studied assiduously, mainly through the influence of John Florio, the famous teacher whose first book on Italian grammar was published in 1578. Henry the Eighth spoke Italian; and at Elizabeth's court Surrey and most of the courtiers, we can well imagine, had to learn it. In Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio alludes sneeringly to "these perdona-mi's." Castiglione decreed the courtier's conversation with women "to be always gentle, sober, meeke, lowlie, modest, serviceable, comlie, merrie, not bitinge or scluandering with jestes, nippes, frumpes, or railings, the honestie of any." The perfect gentleman had to have grace and ease so that he could flatter artfully, or, if he committed a faux pas, to withdraw with absolute propriety. In all situations he trained himself to say the proper thing at the right occasion, and those formulae, like the Japanese aisatsu, he used over and over again. Such modes or fashions in conversation are, as Walter Pater says, "an example of the artistic predominance of form over matter; of the manner of the doing of it over the thing done; and have a beauty all their own." But generally the deeper speech falls into conscious grooves, the more void of sincerity does it become.

The rhetorical conversation at court took many forms. Sometimes it was balance of clause against clause, or line against

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1 The Comedy of Errors, V, i, 30. Cf. how Shakespeare satirizes the practice of his day by making a clown excuse himself scientifically, according to all the rules of decorum, from a duel in As You Like It, V, iv, 50-112.
2 II, iv, 35.
3 The Courtier, ed. cit., p. 59.
4 Appreciations (London: St. Martin's St., 1889), essay on "Love's Labour's Lost."
line, like the rhetoric of the pre-Lyly academic plays. That Euphuistic antithesis is a characteristic of the speech of Shakespeare's early characters is proof enough that Euphues had a tremendous vogue at court. Good examples are

"If haply won, perhaps a hapless gain;
If lost, why then a grievous labour won"; 2

or Mercutio's studied jest on his wound:

"No 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door." 3

The more allusions to classic mythology and learning a courtier could pack into his conversation, the more highly was he esteemed. Shakespeare's courtly characters, true to their day, are constantly referring to such personages as Hector, Achilles, Aeneas, Pompey, Phoebus, Phaethon, Pluto, Cupid, etc. One of the few characters wherein such speech is not serious in Shakespeare is Holofernes (in Love's Labour's Lost). This character may be a satire of John Florio, Queen Elizabeth's Italian teacher. At least Shakespeare satirizes in this pedant, who uses long words, Latin phrases, whole sentences from the classics, and all sorts of "fanatical phantasmes," the highly learned "ink-horn" diction of that time. Proverbs and epigrams, 4 too, were an excellent test of the good conversationalist, since like Japanese senryu they demanded the shaping of sense, by means of a nimble wit, into a very few words. Conversation was decorated, furthermore, by oxymoron, such as "Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health," 5 or "beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical," etc. 6 Too often the conversation was, to use Puttenham's word, mere "surplussage," as "I saw the wound, I saw it with mine eyes." 7 Nor were

1 For example cf. The Comedy of Errors, III, i, which is a translation of Plautus "Amphitruo."

2 Two Gentlemen of Verona, I, i, 32.

3 Romeo and Juliet, III, i, 99.

4 Such as are contained in Two Gentlemen of Verona, I, i, 158.

5 Romeo and Juliet, I, i, 186.

6 Ibid., III, ii, 75.

7 Ibid., III, ii, 52. Cf. Merry Wives of Windsor, I, i, 150.
repetition and alliteration lacking in this conventional Euphuistic speech so common in Shakespeare's day.

The most important device of rhetoric, however, was the sonnet conceit, which can only be touched upon here. Conversation could not find a more genteel form in which to couch the flattery and love of court life. It was the vogue in writing, of course, since Wyatt and Surrey had imported the form from Italy; and conversation soon glittered with sonnet conceits, often far-fetched, but befitting the gay courtier and the artfully blushing lady. The conceit of the "canker and the rose" and "the rose and the thorn," or the sun and star theme, as "at first I did adore a twinkling star, but now I worship a celestial sun," were very common. *Romeo and Juliet*, being a play of love and courtship, is full of these and many other sonnet conceits, direct translations of the amorous phrases of the Italian sonneteers. And yet Romeo is one of the few characters in this period of Shakespeare's workmanship in which these conceits ring true. It may be said, therefore, that just as Basho saved the Japanese *haiku* from falling into a mere frivolous pastime at court, so Shakespeare rescued the sonnet as a form in English poetry.

The sonnet ruled primarily the expression of love, a fact which partly accounts for the conventionalized love which we shall now examine. Rather than give vent to his own feelings, (as fortunately for English literature Shakespeare, though not always, did) the lover would search for a sonnet phrase. As these came to be used over and over again, they gradually lost their original meaning, so the sonnet was in grave danger of becoming a mere jingling echo of worn-out stereotyped phrases. Thus, in this curious way, love came to be considered the only inspiration for poets:

"Never durst poet touch pen to write,

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Until his ink were tempered with Love's sighs.\(^1\)

And unless a man composed sonnets he was not considered fitly in love:

"Longaville did never sonnet for her sake compile."\(^2\)

If the lover would take to prose instead, he would invariably consult Pico della Mirandola's book on the art of love-letter writing. That love in Shakespeare's time, as well as the other phenomena of social discourse, was subject to the same tyranny of convention and fashion is shown by the number of sonnet conceits and stereotyped love-letters in his early plays.\(^3\)

Underneath the love of sonnets and letters was a philosophy that went back as far as Plato, and that had been conventional in poetry through the Italian Renaissance. Castiglione favours only that love which is freed from all sensuality—a desire to enjoy pure beauty, which is most perfect when severed from every earthly tie.\(^4\) As Bembo, his high-priest of love, puts it on the "fourth evening":

"His love toward women not to be fleslie or sensual but honest and godlye, and more ruled with reason, then passion, and to love better the beauty of the mind, then of the bodie."\(^5\)

This essentially Platonic love, described ages before in the Symposioum and the Phaedrus, was "re-born" in the poetry of Cavalcanti and Dante; and by the time it had come to Spenser and Surrey, and was expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets and

\(^1\) Love's Labour's Lost, IV, iii, 345-6.
\(^2\) Ibid., IV, iii, 134.
\(^3\) Sonnet conceits abound in all the early plays, but especially in Love's Labour's Lost, which is a delicious satire upon them. In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare not only gives us Romeo's outburst of passion in sonnet conceits (I, v, 46-55), but in the same play satirizes this conventional love-diction through the wit of Mercutio (II, iv, 39-49). For love-letters the one alluded to in Two Gentlemen of Verona (II, i, 110) is significant in that it is the first case of Shakespeare's women wooing their men. Two other conventional love-letters in this play appear in III, i, 139; and III, ii, 74.
\(^4\) Castiglione, op. cit., p. 342.
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 373.
early plays, it was pretty well conventionalized.

For example, the Platonic ideal of love was expressed in a conventional phrase. "Love of the eye" can be only sensual and fleshly, while "love not of the eye" was the Platonic love of the beauty of the mind. The first occurrence of this convention in Shakespeare appears in *Love's Labour's Lost*, in the character of Biron:

"As love is full of unbecitting strains,
   All wanton as a child, skipping and vain,
   Formed by the eye."

And when Antipholus tells Lucianna of his mad love for her, she chides him with:

"It is a fault that springeth from your eye."

Naturally enough, love of the eye was considered a fault of young men:

"Hath not else his eye
   Strayed his affection in unlawful love?
   A sin prevailing much in youthful men
   Who give their eyes the liberty of gazing;"

and throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence warns the passionate young lover to beware of "love of the eye." In Shakespeare, "love is blind," as he says, not only to the possible defects of the loved one, but also "blind" to her bodily beauty lest it should out-dazzle the beauty of mind and character.

The finest example of this Platonic convention of love in Shakespeare is undoubtedly the well known "casket scenes" in *The Merchant of Venice* (II, vii; ix; and III, ii). Here are three caskets, one made of gold, one of silver, and one of lead. In one of these lies the picture of Portia, who will become the wife of the lover fortunate enough to choose the right casket. On

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2 *Comedy of Errors*, III, ii, 55.
the first casket, the golden one, is this inscription: "Who chooses me shall gain what many men desire." It may signify the flesh. The inscription on the silver casket, "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves," is at most dubious. But the third inscription, on the dull leaden casket, stands for self-sacrifice: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." The first lover, Morocco, in choosing the golden casket is guilty of "love of the eye." Too late he learned that

"All that glister is not gold."

The second lover, Aragon, is apparently the representation of Renaissance egoism and pride. Relying on his intelligence alone, he chooses the silver casket, which he finds upon opening to be the symbol of the rather flashy show of the intellect:

"Take what wife you will to bed,
I will ever be your head.

And as he leaves, Portia says, "O, these deliberate fools! When they do choose, they have the wisdom by their wit to lose."

There remains the pure Platonic love of the soul, whose outside is but dull lead, but whose inward worth is beyond value. Note how Portia hints to Bassanio to choose the leaden casket. "If you do love me," she says, "you will find me out," 1 striving to remind him of all he has read of Castiglione’s love-philosophy. And as if that were not enough, later she alludes directly to the inscription on the leaden box by her remark: "I stand for sacrifice." Finally, while Bassanio is wondering which casket to choose, she causes this song to be sung:

"Tell me where is fancy bred;
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, reply.
It is engend'red in the eyes,

1 *The Merchant of Venice*, III, ii, 41.
2 The word "fancy" here means sensual, un-Platonic love. Cf. Furness, *Variorum*.
With gazing fed; and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.
Let us all ring fancy's knell;
I'll begin it,—Ding, dong, bell.”

Taking the hint as well as the truth, Bassanio opens the leaden casket, and becomes the proud husband of Portia. Bassanio is a faithful portrait of the ideal lover of Shakespeare's time.

We have just seen how frankly Portia made the first advances in her love affair with Bassanio. It is significant that most of Shakespeare's heroines do likewise—in an attempt, perhaps, to voice their own feelings in protest against prescribed decorum. Since theoretically the lady was supposed to put her suitor off as long as possible, sometimes they apologize for being forward. Rosaline exults in the prospects of making Biron

“fawn and beg and seek,
And wait the season, and observe the time.”

But Juliet, unable to overcome the tide of true love, yet realizes that she has disobeyed decorum by accepting too readily:

“Or if thou thinkst I am too quickly won,
I'll frown, and be perverse and say thee nay.”

How differently she treats Paris, the lover assigned for her by her parents:

“And gave him what became love I might,
Not stepping o'er the bounds of modesty.”

As Shakespeare's genius transcended literary formulæ, so his heroines act naturally, in the face of convention. The reason for this may be that their anxiety to hide their love came not from a natural modesty, but from a false one—mere decorum. Lest she should see the love-letter, Julia chides her maid “too churlishly,” and later makes amends for it by:

“How angrily I taught my brow to frown,

1 Love's Labour's Lost, V, ii, 62.
2 Romeo and Juliet, II, ii, 95-96.
3 Ibid., IV, ii, 26-27.
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When inward joy enforc'd my heart to smile."

Usually the heroines attempt to conceal their love by the prescribed methods. One of these was what Dante described in La Vita Nuova as "la donna dello schermo," or the screen-lady. By paying attention to this lady of second choice, he could keep people from guessing where his true affections lay. So Juliet, in order to hide her real love from her parents, pretends that she is weeping for her slain kinsman, Tybalt, when in truth she wept for her banished Romeo. And the ladies usually attended to their prayers with more than usual vigor, so that it might not seem that they were in love.9

But was the young man, also, loving by prescription? Yes, if we can believe Juliet when she says to her Romeo: "You kiss by the book."10 And the Duke in Two Gentlemen of Verona says to Proteus, "This discipline shows thou hast been in love."11 The young Elizabethan lover was supposed to "wreathe his arms like a malcontent; to relish a love song; to walk alone . . .; to sigh . . .; to weep . . .; to fast; to watch . . .; to speak puling."12 These were some of the accepted signs for the love-stricken youth. And another thing, he should not be able to garter his own hose, so that when a man came out on the stage with his garters dangling about his ankles, the audience knew immediately that he was in love.6 Valentine, we see, properly goes through "penitential groans, and daily heart-sore sighs."17 And Romeo, the true lover,

"With tears augmenting the fresh morning's dew
Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs,"18

1 Two Gentlemen of Verona, I, ii, 62–63.
2 See Two Gentlemen of Verona, V, vi, 41; Romeo and Juliet, II, v, 67; IV, ii, 3, etc.
3 Romeo and Juliet, I, v, iii.
4 Two Gentlemen of Verona, III, ii, 88.
5 Ibid., II, i, 18–32.
6 Ibid., II, i, 83. Cf. As You Like It, III, ii, 398.
7 Two Gentlemen of Verona, II, iv, 132.
8 Romeo and Juliet, I, i, 138–139.
is after all quite conventional.

Thus most of the courtier's actions were carefully ruled for him—his travel and wearing apparel, his honour and methods of conducting a quarrel, his conversation, writing, and even the love he might feel for a lady. But periods of decorum in manners come and go. When these conventions are caused by a sudden change in material prosperity and by the decrees of a court whose main interest seemed to be to keep abreast of the latest Italian fashion, the high artificiality of the life soon leads to disillusionment. It was not long before the Elizabethan farthingales were smothered in Puritan cloaks. But the fact remains that before Shakespeare's genius reached that point where he portrayed humanity as a whole rather than the mere conduct of his time, he is a reflection as well as a criticism of the decorum of his day.

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