Early Modern Literary Studies

Measure for Measure (*Lika för lika*), presented by Gothenburg City Theatre, Gothenburg, Sweden, 28 November, 2012

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Directed by Tobias Theorell. Scenography and costume: Magdalena Åberg. Lighting: Ellen Ruge. Sound: Karin Bloch-Jörgensen. Mask: Maria Agaton. Dramaturgy: Cecilia Ölveczky (text), Lucas Svensson (production). With Örjan Ramberg (The Duke [Vincentio]), Caroline Söderström (Isabella), Jacob Ericksson (Angelo), Gustav Ekman Mellbin (Claudio), Mats Blomgren (Lucio), Eivin Dahlgren (Escalus), Thomas Nystedt (The Provost), Victoria Olmarker (Alfonsina [Mistress Overdone], Julia, Mariana, Messenger), Gothenburg Boys' Choir. Translated by Göran O Eriksson.

There were many schoolchildren in the audience on the late November evening I saw Gothenburg City Theatre's production of *Measure for Measure*, and it is a credit to the production's, and the play's, intensity that there was very little interference from the crowd during the three hours' performance. The stage was bare, with benches running along the sides on which actors rested when not involved in the action. On the greyish white walls and stage were written a number of words in capital letters: 'hell,' 'convent,' 'prison,' 'mortal sin,' 'mercy,' 'for sale,' 'covetousness,' and, rather inexplicably, 'Shakespeare.' A red neon sign told us we were in Vienna. Costumes were contemporary, with suits for the men of power, making Isabella's white novice's habit and veil and the monks' robes stand out. Music by Thomas Morley, Henry VIII, K. H. Cohen, Thomas Aquinas, John Dowland, William Cornish, Thomas Tallis, and John Wilson was performed by the Gothenburg Boys' Choir, in breaks between scenes or to set the mood, and the boys wore Elizabethan puffed trousers and doublets. In the programme, the director explains their period costume as a nod to Shakespeare, and the boys' singing from above the stage as a way to stress innocence as contrasting with, and impotently watching, the cynicism enacted below. Perhaps the mixture of costume could also signal the continual relevance of the story; the production's tagline, as read on the theatre's website was: 'Bribery. Prostitution. Blackmail. Everything and everybody can be bought.'

The stark simplicity of the scenery focused attention on the actors and the acting, which was in some cases impressive. Jacob Ericksson was magnetic as Angelo, in complete control of body, gestures and voice. Given the power to rule over Vienna, symbolised by a black briefcase handed to him by the Duke, he at first had Escalus carry it. Soon, though, he caressed its black leather lovingly, then smelled his fingers, caressed, and smelled. The same gestures - touching and smelling - were repeated in the fifth act, when he was given what he believed to be Claudio's head in a plastic bag. Obsessed with cleanliness, Ericksson/Angelo worked his way through a number of wet wipes during the performance, at the same time as his skin got paler and his face more hollow-eyed, until finally his moral deterioration was visible in a large blister below his lip, perhaps herpes. But it was with his body that Ericksson owned the stage and established Angelo's character: its painful tension, its refusal at times to obey his will, its shrinking in the presence of the Duke, its brutal strength in the second meeting with Isabella which turned into an attempted rape.

The contrast with the Duke was complete: Örjan Ramberg's ruler spoke slowly, moved with weight, as at ease with his power as with his belly, accentuated by a slightly-too-tight jacket. When in disguise, his slowness gave an impression of improvisation, of not quite knowing the ropes; when another character kissed his hand, he kissed it himself as well. His interest in Isabella was signalled through touches and caresses. He addressed her as 'my little heart,' and he wrote a poem to her (consisting of some lines from his speech at the end of Act Three, otherwise largely cut). His slipperiness became obvious in the final scene, when his vouching for Mariana's 'worth,' being her confessor, was delivered with an unmistakable innuendo. Lucio was this evening played by an understudy, Mats Blomgren, who made the script he carried around together with a plastic bag of beer cans work amazingly well to strengthen a casually absent-minded and slightly tipsy impression, benevolent and opportunistic at the same time. The interaction between Lucio and the Duke resulted in a number of seriously comic scenes. Claudio, on the other hand, did not awaken either sympathy or interest, mainly due to voice problems; either the actor, Gustav Ekman Mellbin, had a cold that evening, or he needed voice coaching.

Caroline Söderström's Isabella too would have gained in interest through more variation in vocal expression. At times she was difficult to hear. Isabella's important first lines, declaring her severe attitude to her vocation and the Saint Clares, were cut and replaced by silent prayer. Nervous and uncomfortable in discussions with Angelo, Claudio, and the Duke alike, her lip-licking, false starts, and general tension signalled a wish to be elsewhere. Still, she hugged the Duke to thank him for helping her, and despite the

awkwardness of the gesture, it gave an impression at odds with both her character as depicted in the play, and in this production.

Isabella's hug could of course have opened the way for a happy ending, but it did not. The play's intriguing ending, with the Duke's offer of marriage and Isabella's silence, is something every production of the play must find a solution for. The three Swedish stagings I have seen have all played it differently. In 1994, the brilliant production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, directed by Lennart Hjulström, made Isabella, sharply played by Stina Ekblad, raise her clenched fist in silent but hopeless protest. On the same stage in 2005, directed by Yannis Houvardas, Livia Millhagen instead turned her face to the audience with a beaming smile. In Gothenburg, a serious take on the ending was quickly undermined by an added joke. The Duke's first proposal comes just after Claudio has been discovered alive, and in this production Isabella's reaction to his 'Give me your hand and say you will be mine' was one of puzzled interruption. She soon reverted back to Claudio and much of the rest of the scene the two were locked in a tight embrace. The second time the Duke verbalised his intentions, and Isabella understood what was about to happen, her reaction was more strongly negative: shaking her head with quick jerky movements she tried to step away from the Duke, as if in denial. But just as the audience began to see how far the destructive and corrupting male power of Vienna reached, the scene changed, and the moment was lost. 'Dad!' one of the choirboys called, 'Dad!' running towards Angelo, and all eight of them started calling for their fathers, running to different male characters on the stage. The boys were greeted with smiles signalling love and acceptance before the lights went out. The audience laughed, but what did this ending actually signal? If the ending was intended as one further evidence of the cynical state of Vienna, in line with the director's comment referred to above, this raises the question; if it was suddenly not problematic with illegitimate children, then why all the seeming and hiding earlier on? And if the production had a feminist agenda, as indicated by the text in the programme entitled 'A Woman's Value Lies Between her Legs' (written by theologian Ann Heberlein), then the added joke effectively undermined that agenda, turning our focus away from Isabella (and the actress who played her) and, once again, onto the boys.