



# Literature, the Humanities, and Humanity

Dr. Theodore L. Steinberg  
SUNY Fredonia

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2013

Open SUNY Textbooks



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*Published by Open SUNY Textbooks, Milne Library (IITG PI)*

*State University of New York at Geneseo,  
Geneseo, NY 14454*

*Cover design by William Jones*

*To Phyllis Marsha Kenshur Steinberg—“Many women have done  
well, but you surpass them all” (Proverbs 31:29)*

## About this Textbook

*Literature, the Humanities, and Humanity* attempts to make the study of literature more than simply another school subject that students have to take. At a time when all subjects seem to be valued only for their testability, this book tries to show the value of reading and studying literature, even earlier literature. It shows students, some of whom will themselves become teachers, that literature actually has something to say to them. Furthermore, it shows that literature is meant to be enjoyed, that, as the Roman poet Horace (and his Renaissance disciple Sir Philip Sidney) said, the functions of literature are to teach and to delight. The book will also be useful to teachers who want to convey their passion for literature to their students. After an introductory chapter that offers advice on how to read (and teach) literature, the book consists of a series of chapters that examine individual literary works ranging from *The Iliad* to Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. These chapters can not substitute for reading the actual works. Rather they are intended to help students read those works. They are attempts to demystify the act of reading and to show that these works, whether they are nearly three thousand or less than two hundred years old, still have important things to say to contemporary readers.

## About the Author

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Dr. Theodore L. Steinberg serves as Distinguished Teaching Professor in the English Department at SUNY Fredonia, where he specializes in medieval and Renaissance literatures, though he teaches in a wide variety of areas. His publications include studies of medieval and Renaissance English literature, medieval Judaica, modern epic, and Yiddish literature. He encourages students to see the contemporary relevance of older literatures and the importance of the humanities, particularly literature, in the development of civilized life.

# Reviewer's Notes

This is a book for college students and adult learners who think they ought to know something about literature, but don't actually enjoy reading it. This is also a book for teachers: for new teachers who have just been assigned an introductory course; and for old teachers who want to remind themselves why they became teachers in the first place. The author, Theodore L. Steinberg, is himself the kind of teacher who makes other teachers jealous: smart and learned (of course), but also warm, likable, and funny. Steinberg puts the pleasure back into literature, not by dumbing the books down, but raising us up to their level. His enthusiasm for books and their authors is unembarrassed and undefensive. His own pages read quickly because he has learned, from many years of experience, what students need to know and where they need help. In particular, he knows where students are likely to get bogged down, and he's an expert at clearing away the obstacles and misunderstandings that make reading a duty instead of a delight.

David Scott Wilson-Okamura  
Associate Professor of English at East Carolina University

## About Open SUNY Textbooks

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# Introduction

There are many reasons that a book like this has become necessary, but all of those reasons can be reduced to this point: we as a society seem to have forgotten that reading classic literature is supposed to be both enjoyable and beneficial. The Roman poet Horace made this point some two thousand years ago and the English Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney expanded on it some four hundred years ago. Sidney's point was that the enjoyment of reading literature encouraged people to continue reading and therefore made them more likely to profit from the instruction that was contained in the literature. This formulation sounds a lot like "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down," and anyone who has ever tried to give a child medicine hidden in some favorite treat knows that the process never works quite so simply. But Sidney does have a point. Classic literature is enjoyable to read, and it does have a great deal to teach us about what it means to be human and to live in this world. Literature teaches and it delights, and these functions are related.

Unfortunately, we have forgotten that literature is enjoyable and I fear that too often we distort it when we teach it. Thus the state of New York pays me a comfortable salary to be a professor of literature, but I wonder whether either the legislators or the taxpayers really understand why. I hope that this little book will help to explain why, at least in part by showing how literature delights and how it instructs. I hope, too, that it will inspire other teachers to emphasize the value and delight of reading literature without watering it down, without cheapening it.

## On the Humanities

One idea that requires immediate emphasis is the importance of the humanities in general. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama said: "Tonight, I'm announcing a new challenge to redesign America's high schools so they better equip graduates for the

demands of a high-tech economy. We'll reward schools that develop new partnerships with colleges and employers, and create classes that focus on science, technology, engineering, and math—the skills today's employers are looking for to fill jobs right now and in the future." While that statement presents a laudable goal, it also totally ignores the value of the humanities. In fact, at a time when we see an increasing dehumanization in society, a greater focus on economics, more reliance on technology, and ever more attachment to material goods, the humanities are increasingly vital to our individual and collective well-being. The humanities can help us learn how to manage, how to use properly, those skills that the President emphasized.

Now let me correct the oversimplifications of that last paragraph. A focus on the economy is not evil, so long as the economy is used to better people's lives. Technology is certainly not evil. I owe my life to technological advances. But less dramatically, technology also allows me to communicate with my children, who have chosen to live four hundred miles distant. And the humanities surely do not have an unblemished record. One of my favorite poets, Edmund Spenser, played a shameful role in the Elizabethan suppression of Ireland. T.S. Eliot, like so many others, was anti-Semitic; and the Nazis and the Soviets both manipulated the humanities to further their enterprises. So it is not enough to say that we need to study the humanities. We also need to study how to study the humanities, which is itself, paradoxically, part of the humanities. If we simply make the humanities into another example of unthinking, rote learning, then we transform them into a means of oppression rather than liberation.

The humanities, after all, are among the things that make us human. The concept of the humanities presents a number of problems, which are evident in our vague notion of what we mean by the term. Too often we simply equate the concept with the related but historically quite distinct terms "humanitarian" and "humane," and we tend to think of a humanist as someone who has certain humane qualities. Actually the term "humanities" comes from the Latin *studia humanitatis*, a phrase that we might translate as "a liberal education." Because few of us can agree on the meaning of "a liberal education," however,

that definition is of little help, though the early connection between the notion of the humanities and an educational system is significant.

For the modern world, the idea of the humanities was revived in the Renaissance, and although there is considerable dispute over what the word meant to the Renaissance humanists, we can say some definite things about it. For example, we know that it was again used to refer primarily to an educational system, in this case a system that developed largely as a reaction to late medieval scholasticism and that emphasized the study of classical Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek literature. Significantly, an overwhelming majority of Renaissance humanists were educators (most of the rest were statesmen), and consequently they conveyed their program not only through their numerous books and pamphlets, but also through their students.

Yet the idealism of the Renaissance humanists, their concern with human affairs and the higher aspirations of humanity, did little to keep the Renaissance from being a brutal age, and in fact led, by a rather complex process, to the excesses of the Reformation, the Counter-reformation, and the Inquisition. Even so, one of the leading humanist ideas focused on the dignity of humanity, the notion that humans can be either bestial or angelic, but that they have a duty to opt for the latter. Thus, the ideas and ideals of the humanists were good, but the overall program failed. With relatively few exceptions, Renaissance humanism did little to make human beings better, despite a lasting influence on education, which continued to emphasize the Greek and Latin classics until the twentieth century. At the same time, precisely because it was an ideal, it was bound to fail: ideals are things we strive toward, not necessarily things we accomplish. It is the striving that makes us better.

Today we might think that the humanities consist of all those fields of study and activities that teach us what it means to be human; in ways both bad and good. The humanities present us with numerous alternatives for behavior and the basis for choosing among them. This, of course, is hardly a new idea; and it may be appropriate at this point to quote Sir Philip Sidney, who says in his "Apologie for Poetrie," the following: "this purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceyt, which commonly we call

learning...[its] final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate soules...can be capable of...so that, the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skilles that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be Princes over all the rest" (160-61). This equation of knowledge with virtuous action, which goes back to Socrates, is central to my belief in the value of the humanities; and I should add here that I include religion as one of the humanities. By making us aware of alternative forms of action and by giving us a basis for choosing among them, the humanities should make us more truly human in the best sense of the word. The humanities, then, take advantage of our ability to dance, to sing, to sculpt, to draw or paint, and to use language in order to show us both what we have been, what we are, and what we can be. And I cannot stress this point enough: the humanities have a dimension of enjoyment.

## On Enjoyment

When I used to enter some of the chain bookstores that existed in shopping malls, I was struck by the way they classified their books. There was usually one section called "Fiction" and one, much smaller, called "Literature." Invariably the "Fiction" section was crowded with browsers, while the "Literature" section stood nearly deserted. Occasionally these stores made a further division and offered a section of "Poetry." If "Literature" was nearly deserted, "Poetry" looked like a quarantine zone.

What could these divisions mean? There are several possibilities to consider. One is that "fiction" and "literature" are regarded as quite different things. "Fiction," for example, is what people read for enjoyment. "Literature" is what they read for school. Or "fiction" is what living people write and is about the present. "Literature" was written by people (often white males) who have since died and is about times and places that have nothing to do with us. Or "fiction" offers everyday pleasures, but "literature" is to be honored and respected, even though it is boring. Of course, when we put anything on a pedestal, we remove

it from everyday life, so the corollary is that literature is to be honored and respected, but it is not to be read, certainly not by any normal person with normal interests.

The bookstores, of course, were not wholly to be blamed for making this artificial distinction. They simply reflected societal attitudes, attitudes that are still shared by devotees of both fiction and literature. Sadly, it is the guardians of literature, that is, of the classics, who have done so much to take the life out of literature, to put it on a pedestal and thereby to make it an irrelevant aspect of American life. Even an eminent critic like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., someone who is concerned with the nature of literature, once wrote in the Book Review section of the *New York Times* (February 27, 1989) that “no one went into literature out of an interest in literature-in-general.” I hope that Gates’s statement is mistaken; I know that in my case it certainly is. What this statement illustrates, however, is the power of specialization, which forces people into a much too narrow view of the field of literature. It would surely be more accurate to say that “no one went into literature out of an interest in the poetry of Matthew Prior” (just to choose one example). People study literature because they love literature. They certainly don’t do it for the money. But what happens too often, especially in colleges, is that teachers forget what it was that first interested them in the study of literature. They forget the joy that they first felt (and perhaps still feel) as they read a new novel or a poem or as they reread a work and saw something new in it. Instead they erect formidable walls around these literary works, giving the impression that the only access to a work is through deep learning and years of study. Such study is clearly important for scholars—I work in some highly esoteric fields myself, and I enjoy reading other scholars’ publications—but this kind of scholarship is not the only way, or even necessarily the best way, for most people to approach literature. Instead it makes the literature seem inaccessible. It makes the literature seem like the province of scholars. “Oh, you have to be smart to read that,” as though Shakespeare or Dickens or Woolf wrote only for English teachers, not for general readers. Is it any wonder that people who have learned about literature in such a system tend to shy away from it? We do not tell students that they must learn music theory before

they can listen to music. If they like music enough, they should want to understand it. The same is true for literature.

The teacher of literature has to remember why he or she entered the field of literature. The motivation was likely a love of words and of stories and of what good writers can do with words and stories. That sense is what we have to convey. When I see a good play in a baseball game, I call whoever might be home to watch the replay; or when I hear a new piece of music, I invite someone to listen with me. I want to share my enjoyment. So, too, with literature. I love *The Iliad*. It provides both aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment, and I want to share that enjoyment with my students.

## On Misconceptions

Of course, there are a number of misconceptions about literature that have to be gotten out of the way before anyone can enjoy it. One misconception is that literature is full of hidden meanings. There are certainly occasional works that contain hidden meanings. The biblical book of *Revelation*, for example, was written in a kind of code, using images that had specific meanings for its early audience but that we can only recover with a great deal of difficulty. Most literary works, however, are not at all like that. Perhaps an analogy will illustrate this point. When I take my car to my mechanic because something is not working properly, he opens the hood and we both stand there looking at the engine. But after we have looked for a few minutes, he is likely to have seen what the problem is, while I could look for hours and never see it. We are looking at the same thing. The problem is not hidden, nor is it in some secret code. It is right there in the open, accessible to anyone who knows how to “read” it, which my mechanic does and I do not. He has been taught how to “read” automobile engines and he has practiced “reading” them. He is a good “close reader,” which is why I continue to take my car to him.

The same thing is true for readers of literature. Generally authors want to communicate with their readers, so they are not likely to hide

or disguise what they are saying, but reading literature also requires some training and some practice. Good writers use language very carefully, and readers must learn how to be sensitive to that language, just as the mechanic must learn to be sensitive to the appearances and sounds of the engine. Everything that the writer wants to say, and much that the writer may not be aware of, is there in the words. We simply have to learn how to read them.

Another popular misconception is that a literary work has a single “meaning” (and that only English teachers know how to find that meaning). There is an easy way to dispel this misconception. Just go to a college library and find the section that holds books on Shakespeare. Choose one play, *Hamlet*, for example, and see how many books there are about it, all by scholars who are educated, perceptive readers. Can it be the case that one of these books is correct and all the others are mistaken? And if the correct one has already been written, why would anyone need to write another book about the play? The answer is that there is no single correct way to read a good piece of literature.

Again, let me use an analogy to illustrate this point. Suppose that everyone at a meeting were asked to describe a person who was standing in the middle of the room. Imagine how many different descriptions there would be, depending on where the viewer sat in relation to the person. Furthermore, an optometrist in the crowd might focus on the person’s glasses; a hair stylist might focus on the person’s haircut; someone who sells clothing might focus on the style of dress; a podiatrist might focus on the person’s feet. Would any of these descriptions be incorrect? Not necessarily, but they would be determined by the viewers’ perspectives. They might also be determined by such factors as the viewers’ ages, genders, or ability to move around the person being viewed, or by their previous acquaintance with the subject. So whose descriptions would be correct? Conceivably all of them, and if we put all of these correct descriptions together, we would be closer to having a full description of the person.

This is most emphatically not to say, however, that all descriptions are correct simply because each person is entitled to his or her opinion. If the podiatrist is of the opinion that the person is five feet, nine inches tall, the podiatrist could be mistaken. And even if the podiatrist

actually measures the person, the measurement could be mistaken. Everyone who describes this person, therefore, must offer not only an opinion but also a basis for that opinion. “My feeling is that this person is a teacher” is not enough. “My feeling is that this person is a teacher because the person’s clothing is covered with chalk dust and because the person is carrying a stack of papers that look like they need grading” is far better, though even that statement might be mistaken.

So it is with literature. As we read, as we try to understand and interpret, we must deal with the text that is in front of us; but we must also recognize both that language is slippery and that each of us individually deals with it from a different set of perspectives. Not all of these perspectives are necessarily legitimate, and we are always liable to be misreading or misinterpreting what we see. Furthermore, it is possible that contradictory readings of a single work will both be legitimate, because literary works can be as complex and multifaceted as human beings. It is vital, therefore, that in reading literature we abandon both the idea that any individual’s reading of a work is the “correct” one and the idea that there is one simple way to read any work. Our interpretations may, and probably should, change according to the way we approach the work. If we read *War and Peace* as teenagers, then in middle age, and then in old age, we might be said to have read three different books. Thus, multiple interpretations, even contradictory interpretations, can work together to give us a better understanding of a work.

## On the Best of Intentions (or the Worst)

Intentions are a problem in studying literature. One complication is easily dispensed with. Teachers should never ask, “What was the author trying to say here?” The question, of course, implies that the author was an incompetent who was so unsuccessful in making a point that student readers have to decipher it. The real question is something like “What do these words say?” You may notice the phrasing of that

question, which does not ask, “What does the author mean?” or “What does the author intend?”

The reason for that phrasing is that we cannot know (or we have to pretend that we cannot know) what the author intended. When we read literature, our focus has to be on what the words say, not on what the author intended. One reason that we have to take this stance is that an author’s words, even an author who is totally in control of those words, inevitably say more than the author intended. It even happens that the words may mean something that the author did not intend. I once attended a poetry reading, at the end of which someone asked the poet, “Why do you have so many images of flayed animals and animal skins in your poems?” to which the poet replied, “Do I?” After rereading his poems, he said, “Yes, I see that I do,” and he then tried to find a reason for those images, but clearly he was taken by surprise at what he himself had written.

Another reason to avoid focusing on the author’s intention is that if we know (or even think we know) what the author intended, we might cease our own interpretive activities. The author’s understanding of his or her work might be important, but strangely enough, it is only one understanding and might not be the best one. To use an analogy from music, Igor Stravinsky conducted many of his own compositions for recordings. Those versions are good, and they are surely important, but they are not the best interpretations of his own music.

Furthermore, we can never really know what an author intended, even if the author tells us. For one thing, authors are cagey creatures and might lie to us. For another, the author might not always know what his or her intention was. After all, how often do we really know our full intentions when we do or say something? And authors frequently use speakers in their works who are not themselves. If one of Shakespeare’s characters says something, we have to remember that we are listening to a character, not to Shakespeare. So, too, with poets and storytellers. Jonathan Swift’s Lemuel Gulliver tells us many things that Swift himself would never have believed. So focus on the words, not on the author. Furthermore, even if we think we know what the author intended, we must remember that the author’s reading of a work is still only one among many possibilities.

## On the Language of Literature

One of the problems in reading literature, of course, is that language itself can be so slippery. Let me give two examples to show what I mean. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello is describing how Desdemona loved to hear the tales of his adventures, and he says

She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd  
That heaven had made her such a man. (I.3.162-63)

Now what exactly do those lines mean? We must assume that Shakespeare knew what he was doing with language, and yet these lines contain an obvious ambiguity. Do they mean that Desdemona wished that heaven had made a man like Othello for her (reading "her" as an indirect object) or do they mean that she wished she had been made a man so that she could have such adventures (reading "her" as a direct object)? Should Shakespeare have clarified what he meant? Did poor old Shakespeare make a mistake here? As you might expect, the answers to those last two questions are both "no." The ambiguity is intentional, and both readings are "correct." On the one hand, Desdemona is revealing her love for Othello. She admires him and his deeds and wishes that a man like that existed for her. When we consider the kind of circumscribed life that a Renaissance woman of Desdemona's class was forced to live and the poor impression that most of the other men in the play make on us, her wish is even easier to understand. On the other hand, given that circumscribed life, she also might well wish that she had been male and she reveals that she is not simply a timid, shrinking woman who exists to be used by men in any way they choose. She is someone who rebels against the limits that confront her, and her words here prepare us for her independent actions as the play progresses. So Desdemona's wish is deliberately ambiguous, and both sides of the ambiguity are significant. What we must remember, then, is that writers use words the way artists use paint. In a work of literary artistry, none of the words are accidental or arbitrary, and if they seem ambiguous or out of place, we must try to understand why the writer used them. Yes, occasionally a writer makes a mistake, as Keats did when he identified Cortez as the European discoverer of the Pacific Ocean, but generally we have to assume that writers know what they

are doing; and before we attack their use of words, we must try to understand them.

This point leads to the second problem with language, which is that words change their meanings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (affectionately known as the *OED*) gives examples of how every word in it has been used over the centuries, and browsing in the *OED* to see how words have changed can be a lot of fun. Such browsing can also be important. One simple but well-known example will illustrate my point. In the Declaration of Independence we read that “all men are created equal,” but we must ask what this important phrase means. If it means that I am as good a baseball player as Stan Musial or as good a singer as Placido Domingo, then it is clearly untrue, but surely that is not what it means. It means rather that all men are equal before the law. Fine. But what about the phrase “all men”? Although Garry Wills has argued that Thomas Jefferson included African-American men in the category of “all men,” we can safely assume that many in his audience, including many of the Declaration’s signers, certainly did not. And no one would argue that Jefferson or any other signer of the Declaration included American Indians or women in the category of “all men.” Thus while we read (or I hope we read) the phrase generically to mean that everyone, of every gender, race, or religion, is equal before the law, the earliest readers of the Declaration understood it to mean that all white males are created equal.

Whose reading is correct? The question itself is almost absurd. Apparently Jefferson may have meant one thing while his audience understood another—both eighteenth-century understandings—while we, from another perspective, understand it in yet another way. So, from an enlightened eighteenth-century point of view, Jefferson was correct. But from a common eighteenth-century point of view, deplorable though we may find it, Jefferson’s audience was correct. And from an ideal twenty-first-century point of view, which has not yet become a reality, our reading is correct. While it is essential that we recognize the superiority of our reading of this phrase, we also must, in the interest of historical accuracy, acknowledge at least two eighteenth-century readings of the phrase. As we saw in the example from *Othello*, multiple meanings abound; and even if we can argue that

one interpretation has some kind of primacy, we must be sensitive to other possibilities that exist not as alternatives but as complements to the readings we prefer. And to return to our earlier discussion of intention, do we want to read this passage according to what we think Jefferson's intentions might have been or according to the way the language is now understood?

Of course, this approach to reading requires a great deal of flexibility from the reader, who must be open to multiple interpretations and to taking different approaches, an openness that may contradict human nature. This view also runs counter to what we usually learn in school, where the emphasis is so often on finding the single correct answer to a question rather than on asking complex questions and then considering their complexity. Certainly the latter method cannot be tested with a multiple-choice exam and graded by a computer, but schools are responding to and reinforcing a society that rewards the single correct answer. Consequently, when people read literature, they are afraid that they are not getting what it "really" says. Even if they enjoy the reading, they fear, often quite mistakenly, that they are missing the "message."

## On Messages

Here is another misconception about literature: that it contains messages, hidden or otherwise. Too often people approach literature as though it were all like *Aesop's Fables*. Those fables are wonderful: they tell stories, and each story is followed by a moral, such as "Necessity is the mother of invention." But very little literature works that way. Literature does have a moral dimension, of course, but great works cannot be summed up in pithy moral statements. A person who reads Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and decides that the point of the play is "don't kill your father and marry your mother" has perhaps followed the action of the play but has missed the important points that the play makes. Of course, anyone who needs to read a play to learn that important lesson probably has other, more serious problems. One basis

for such misconceptions is our uncertainty about what a work may be saying, which leads us to the easiest answer we can think of, an answer which is often a cliché or a moral truism. (This tendency is obviously related to our desire to get the one “correct” answer.) Another basis is the tendency among teachers to ask what the “theme” of a work is. This question is one that has often puzzled me because any good work contains multiple themes; when we pretend that a work has a single theme, we are likely to reduce a complex work to a single, aphoristic “message.” Telegrams convey messages, and if authors wanted to communicate such messages, they would send telegrams (or tweets) or write tracts or publish aphorisms. However authors want to convey some of the complexities and contradictions of human existence, and to reduce those qualities to “messages” or even to “main themes” is to do violence to what an author is trying to accomplish.

For example, the theme of most Renaissance love poetry (most of which was written by men) can be reduced to “I love her. She doesn’t love me. Oh rats.” We can find this “theme” in Petrarch, in Shakespeare, in Spenser, in Sidney, even in contemporary country-western music. Frankly it does not need to be said all that often, and if this is really all that those poets were saying, we would be foolish to waste our time reading them. But what they were doing was in fact quite different. They were using this stock situation to explore such aspects of the world as religion, the self, the nature of relationships, and the nature of love itself. Focusing only on their unrequited love is like buying a bicycle because of its color: the color may be interesting, but a person who decides on the basis of the color has missed the whole point of the bicycle.

Furthermore, a good deal of the enjoyment in such poems comes from the clever ways in which poets use that stock situation for their own purposes, often to mock their own speakers, as Sir Thomas Wyatt does in “They Flee from Me,” or even to be deeply critical of their speakers, as Sir Philip Sidney does in *Astrophel and Stella* (a point, incidentally, about which many Renaissance scholars might disagree).

The speaker in Wyatt’s poem may lament his beloved’s apparent lack of faithfulness to him, but the words he uses to describe their relationship make it clear why she has abandoned him. He compares her

to birds (or perhaps to squirrels—it's hard to tell), little creatures that come to his window and eat out of his hands. This comparison reveals that he thinks of her as a little domesticated pet, another creature who eats out of his hands; and as the poem continues, he reveals further that he thinks of her only in sexual terms as an object that he can use, not as a real person. Can it be any wonder that she has abandoned him? Part of the fun of this poem comes in watching the doltish speaker reveal himself as a fool while he thinks that he is exposing his lady's unfaithfulness. At the same time, this speaker is completely mystified because he truly believes himself to be a sincere and faithful lover. Similarly, Sidney's *Astrophel* shows himself to be a shallow, if ardent, lover—a young man who knows the rules of the game of love but who seems incapable of realizing that his beloved Stella does not want to play. On the other hand, Edmund Spenser's lover in the sonnets of the *Amoretti* learns what it means to be a real lover and, in an extraordinary turn of events for a Renaissance sonnet sequence, actually marries the lady.

Can we take three such different poets, all of them writing in the sixteenth century, and talk about the “theme” of their poems? They are exploring human existence by examining the essential human emotion of love, but they are doing so in distinctly different ways and having fun while they do so.

## On Reading Literature

So if language is ambiguous and if literature does not send aphoristic little messages, what is the point of studying or even of reading it? Since the State of New York pays me to teach students about literature, I ought to be able to answer this question—and I think I can. Actually I have several answers, some of which might strike other literature teachers as old-fashioned and even naïve but which I prefer to think of as enduring.

Let me begin my answer by saying that literature is not just an escape. Sometimes, of course, people do want to escape and there are books—or sporting events or television shows or video games—that

will help them to do so, but so much in our everyday lives has become a means of escape that I wonder how terrible life is to make people want such escapes. Literature, however, offers not escape but confrontation. As the later chapters of this book will show, literature forces readers to confront the complexities of the world, to confront what it means to be a human being in this difficult and uncertain world, to confront other people who may be unlike them, and ultimately to confront themselves.

And how does literature force these confrontations? The first thing we must realize is that reading literature is an interactive engagement. The composer Gustav Mahler said that a symphony is a world. So is a work of literature, but the relationship between the reader and the world of a work of literature is complex and fascinating. Frequently when we read a work, we become so involved in it that we may feel that we have become part of it. "I was really into that novel," we might say, and in one sense that statement can be accurate. But in another sense it is clearly inaccurate, for actually we do not enter the book so much as the book enters us; the words enter our eyes in the form of squiggles on a page which are transformed into words, sentences, paragraphs, and meaningful concepts in our brains, in our imaginations, where scenes and characters are given "a local habitation and a name." Thus, when we "get into" a book, we are actually "getting into" our own mental conceptions that have been produced by the book, which, incidentally, explains why so often readers are dissatisfied with cinematic or television adaptations of literary works. Having read *Anna Karenina* or *Wuthering Heights*, we develop our own idea of what Anna Karenina and Heathcliff are like, and no actress or actor, even Greta Garbo or Laurence Olivier, can replace our ideas. (Digression: Teachers may think that they are helping their students by showing film versions of works that they have read for class. Unless the work being read is a play, which was meant to be performed, they are not. Students should be encouraged to think of books as books, not as the rough material out of which films, often bad films, are made.) The author of a book creates, but the reader is called upon to recreate. The reader cannot function without the book, but neither can the book function without the reader. The book is the point where minds meet for a kind of communication that can take place nowhere else; and

when we read a work, whether by an ancient poet like Homer or a contemporary novelist like Kazuo Ishiguro, we are encountering a living mind, a mind that can give us a different perspective on the world we inhabit right now. (For an entertaining account of how reading works and of the relationship between books and readers, see Jasper Fforde's series of novels about Thursday Next, beginning with *The Eyre Affair*.)

In fact, though it may seem a trite thing to say, writers are close observers of the world who are capable of communicating their visions, and the more perspectives we have to draw on, the better able we should be to make sense of our lives. In these terms, it makes no difference whether we are reading a Homeric poem, a twelfth-century Japanese novel like *The Tale of Genji*, or a novel by Dickens. The more different perspectives we get, the better. And it must be emphasized that we read such works not only to be well-rounded (whatever that means) or to be "educated" or for antiquarian interest. We read them because they have something to do with us, with our lives. Whatever culture produced them, whatever the gender or race or religion of their authors, they relate to us as human beings; and all of us can use as many insights into being human as we can get. Reading is not separate from experience. It is itself a kind of experience, and while we may not have the time or the opportunity or it may be physically impossible for us to experience certain things in the world, we can experience them through sensitive reading. So literature allows us to broaden our experiences, though it is up to us to make use of those experiences.

Reading also forces us to focus our thoughts. The world around us is so full of stimuli that we are easily distracted. Unless we are involved in a crisis that demands our full attention, we flit from subject to subject. But when we read a book, even a book that has a large number of characters and covers many years, the story and the writing help us to focus, to think about what they show us in a concentrated manner. In this sense, too, a book is like a world. When I hold a book, I often feel that I have in my hand another world that I can enter and that will help me to understand the everyday world that I inhabit. Though it may sound funny, some of my best friends live in books, and no matter how frequently I visit them, each time I learn more about them and about myself. And if what I have just said is true about narratives, it is

even more intensely true about poetry, which is often a more intense form of literary creation.

And, to return to the point with which I began, reading literature in this way is enjoyable. Unfortunately, teachers, with the best of intentions, too often forget that literature is intended to be enjoyed. No writers (and this may be hard to believe) ever set out to bore an audience, nor, with relatively few exceptions, have they intended to be obscure. Thomas Hardy did not write his novels so that students could mine them for vocabulary words, and Jane Austen did not write hers so that students could be quizzed on chapter two. Though such activities may have their practical value, they surely serve to make the study of literature something less than enjoyable. If those activities are what constitute the study of literature, why would anyone ever want to study it?

A real indication of how unsuccessful so much teaching of literature is can be found in the frequency with which students speak of “dissecting” poems, stories, plays, and novels. What other kinds of things do they dissect? Dead things. So students are learning, whether overtly or by implication, that literature is dead, like the frogs in their biology classes. What a tragedy for them (as well as for the frogs). Literature may not literally be alive, but we can infuse it with life when we approach it correctly. Approaching it correctly means not relying on reading quizzes, not mining it for vocabulary words, and not forcing students to engage in searches for what is commonly called “symbolism.” Allow students to engage with the work, to take it apart very delicately—word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, verse by verse—so that they can examine those parts *and then put them back together* so that they can understand the work more deeply. Doing so will allow students to go beyond paraphrase but will not require that they get lost in the symbol hunting that they hate.

Another hindrance to the study of literature is the practice of making students memorize rules and terms before they have a chance to get excited about literature, as though the only way to enjoy music would be to memorize chord progressions. I do what I do now, that is, I teach English, because of a junior high school English teacher who made me so excited about literature that I wanted to learn the rules

and terms; and when I learned them, of course, the literature became even more meaningful and exciting. The job of the schools should be to encourage that excitement. Help the students enjoy what they are learning and they are more likely to learn. Of course, that is an easy statement to make and a hard one to accomplish. Best-sellers are often fairly simple, while works that I categorize, in what may seem like an elitist way, as “literature” tend to be more difficult. Why would we voluntarily undertake something difficult, especially when there are so many easy alternatives available? In fact, we often do difficult things because we enjoy them. Golf may be difficult, but apparently a lot of people like to play the game. So again, as Horace said, enjoyment is fundamental to our experience. In addition, some things pay off more if we work hard at them.

And what exactly is so enjoyable about reading literature? This is a difficult question for me to answer. I happen to love literature, so that it seems self-evident to me that reading literature is enjoyable (just as to someone who loves fishing, the joy of fishing is self-evident). I enjoy all the things that I have just finished describing as the valuable aspects of literature, the chance to meet interesting characters and to visit interesting places, the chance to use my imagination and to think about things that might otherwise escape my notice, the chance to see the world from perspectives that I would otherwise not have. In fact, some of these perspectives I would rather not have. I would rather see Oedipus, for example, than be Oedipus. At the same time, I will never be a woman or an African-American or a medieval man, but reading sensitively can help me see the world from those and other perspectives. These are exciting possibilities, and they are enjoyable, though perhaps difficult.

## On Words

But there are other kinds of enjoyment as well. There is, for example, the enjoyment of words. Because we are so surrounded by words, we take them for granted, but we must remember that words

and our ability to use them, to manipulate them, differentiate us from all other animals. As Philip Sidney says, the writer's ability to use words makes the writer like God. After all, the biblical story of creation shows God creating by using only words: "God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light." And the Gospel According to John begins, "In the beginning was the Word." In Hebrew, the same word, *davar*, means both "word" and "thing." Words *are* things, and through words we understand and recreate our world. So, too, though in a more systematic way, does the writer. But the writer also plays with words.

One pleasure that we seem to have lost in the modern world comes from the sound of words. Back in the fourth century, St. Augustine mentioned how odd his teacher Ambrose was because he read silently to himself, without even moving his lips. Obviously for Augustine, who was himself well-read, reading meant reading out loud; and even today when religious Jews study the Talmud, they do so by chanting it softly but out loud. Overall, however, we discourage the practice of reading out loud, and we even make fun of those who move their lips when they read. What a sad development. When writers write, they hear the music of their words, and we do them a great disservice when we fail to hear that music. Of course, we live in a world that is always in a hurry (what happened to all that extra time that computers were supposed to give us?) and reading out loud takes more time, but reading literature is not an activity that should be done quickly. We should savor it. We would not rush through a Beethoven symphony or a Duke Ellington song just for the sake of finishing it, nor would we fast forward through a movie and then claim that we had watched it. Nor should we speed our way through a work of literature, and when we read poetry we should by all means read it out loud. That is how poetry is meant to be read.

Again, let me use a specific example to illustrate my point. Take a few minutes and read the following poem out loud, slowly and with expression:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
 It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil  
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
 And for all this, nature is never spent;  
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
 And though the last lights off the black West wend  
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward wends—  
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

I have chosen this poem very deliberately and for a number of reasons. One reason is that it is simply so beautiful in so many ways. Another reason is that it is by one of my favorite poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins. And another reason is that Hopkins was a Roman Catholic priest in late-nineteenth-century England and consequently wrote from a time, a culture, and a religion that were completely different from my own. Given those basic differences between us, realizing that I share relatively few of Hopkins' assumptions, why do I find Hopkins' poem so beautiful? Why do I take such pleasure in it?

Clearly one aspect of the poem that is beautiful is the way it reads. "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?" What a wonderful line that is! Here we have nine one-syllable words, with all but the first two using short vowel sounds. The third and fourth words, "men then," use the same sound and rhyme with each other, while the fifth and sixth words, "now not," alliterate and use the same vowel sound but do not rhyme, and the seventh and ninth words, "reck...rod," repeat those vowel sounds in the same order, separated by the new vowel sound of "his." Put together, those seven short vowels, introduced by the long vowels of "Why do," create a kind of music. So, too, in a strange way, do the words "and all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil."

At this point Hopkins is bemoaning the effects of industrialization on the natural world, so he is hardly trying to paint a beautiful picture. He wants us to see how nature has been blighted by what human beings have done to it. Nevertheless, in what may seem like a paradox, he describes this blight in a way that can only be described as beautiful, as the three rhyming adjectives “seared...bleared...smeared,” two of them alliterating, contrast with the two long-vowelled alliterating nouns “trade...toil.” Furthermore, those adjectives are not particularly pleasant sounding words. The whole poem is full of such playing with sounds.

Another effect that Hopkins achieves comes from the way the words he uses sound like what they are meant to describe. We can hear this point in those adjectives or in the lines

It will flame out like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed.

Here Hopkins describes two ways in which what he calls the “grandeur of God” can be perceived. The first way is sudden and brilliant, like light reflecting off the multifaceted, shining surface of crumpled foil. Again we have not only the alliterations of “flame” and “foil,” “shining” and “shook,” but the words actually sound like what they describe, “shining from shook foil.” Similarly in the next line, which shows the “grandeur of God” not as a sudden and diffuse phenomenon but instead as something that gathers slowly in a single spot, Hopkins makes the sound of his words reflect the meaning. There is, of course, more alliteration in the words “gathers...greatness...ooze...oil,” and that last phrase, “like the ooze of oil” is particularly effective in conveying the idea of a slow and deliberate gathering of that grandeur. Finally, the last word of the sentence, “crushed,” is postponed until the next line. All it means, literally, is that Hopkins is talking about the oil of crushed olives, plain old olive oil. But the effect of that word, the last word of the sentence occupying the first position on a new line, is, well, crushing. It changes the tone of what he has been saying from a description of the grandeur of God to the despair of “Why do men then now not reckon his rod?” It is a brilliant transition because it is both jarring and harmonious, disturbing and appropriate. It is absolutely

the right word in the right place, and there is something satisfying and pleasurable about that combination.

Hopkins, like other writers, creates similar pleasures by creating new phrases that show us things in new ways. Just as an artist might paint a portrait that reveals something new about a person or a composer might find a melodic or harmonic twist that makes us hear differently, so a writer, by using words in new combinations, can produce what Herman Melville called “the shock of recognition.” Suddenly we see something as we have never seen it before, at least not consciously. This effect is necessarily subjective; that is, different phrases will affect different people. For me, every time I read Hopkins’ line “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things,” I feel that shock of recognition. All he is saying is that nature constantly renews itself, that no matter what human beings do to it, there is something regenerative in nature. I know that. Everyone knows that. But what makes this line special is *how* Hopkins says it. “There lives,” there is something alive and organic, something that we cannot kill no matter how we try. And what is that something? It is “the dearest freshness,” a phrase that I could try to comment on for pages but that I would never surpass for concision and descriptiveness. For me, it is a phrase loaded with significance, and contemplating that phrase in its context, “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things,” as I consider the sounds, the words, the hopefulness, the promise of renewal, raise me above the mundane, the everyday problems that cloud our vision. And though Hopkins goes on to attribute this “dearest freshness” to his Christian, more specifically his Roman Catholic, view of God, I do not have to be Catholic to appreciate the poem. I can appreciate Hopkins’ faith and the genius that allowed him to transform that faith into art.

Finally, I find great pleasure in the structure of the poem. Formally the poem is a sonnet, that is, basically, a fourteen-line poem. No one needs to know that it is a sonnet in order to enjoy it, but knowing that it is and knowing the many ways that sonnets have been used in the last seven centuries increases one’s enjoyment of Hopkins’ particular manipulation of the tradition. Seeing how skillfully he uses the first eight lines (the octet) to pose a problem and the last six lines (the sestet) to resolve the problem, and seeing how he uses the meter and

rhyme scheme to reinforce that point make me enjoy the poem even more.

Perhaps what I am getting at here is that the poem, both in what it says and how it says it, is beautiful. I certainly am not foolhardy enough to try to define beauty, but I do know that there is not enough of it in our world. I once surprised a class—and myself—by asking what there was in their lives that was beautiful. When they did not seem to understand the question, I asked if the music they listened to or the pictures they looked at, the books they read, or the things that surrounded them were beautiful. They never did understand what I meant. Apparently no one, in all the years they had been in school, ever talked to them about the beauty of what they were studying, whether it was music or art, mathematics or biology. Students read poetry in school and are supposed to identify “themes” or define vocabulary words or distinguish between Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets. That’s not how to read poetry. Sometimes the best initial reaction to reading a poem is simply “Wow!” And the next reaction is to read it again. Students often apologize for having had to reread poems—“I didn’t get it the first time,” they say. Of course they had to reread it! Poems are meant to be reread, many times. Each reading should bring new understanding and new pleasures, and no reading will ever be exhaustive, will ever reveal all the meaning that is in the poem. That inexhaustibility is also part of the pleasure, just the way that finding new aspects of a person one loves increases one’s understanding and love. That inexhaustibility is why I have been teaching for forty-two years without getting tired of it.

What I hope to do in the following pages, then, is to introduce—or reintroduce—readers to some important works of literature. However, I have chosen these particular works not because they are “important” but because they are among my favorites and because I want to share my enjoyment of them with readers who might feel that one has to be a specialist to read them. While it is true that some of these works may be difficult and may require more concentration than other works, it is vital to remember that they were written to be enjoyed by people who were not specialists. What I want to do is demystify them so that people will feel free to read and enjoy them. I also want teachers to see

how these works can be taught so that they can be enjoyed by ordinary students whose lives can be enriched by literary experiences. I will try to provide some background to the works and some idea of how to read them, as well as some idea of why one should read them. I will try not to simplify them (though almost all commentary, by narrowing the focus of the work it comments on, tends to simplify it somewhat), nor will I be writing chapters to replace reading the works themselves. Nothing can replace the experience of reading these works, and what I have to say about the works is meant only to make them seem less formidable.

I hope that this book will be useful to teachers, who face the daunting task of interesting their students in this kind of literature. We are led to believe that modern students are neither willing nor able to read good writing, and the implication is that in the nineteenth century, for instance, young people, without the distraction of television, videos, rock, and video games, spent most of their time reading Shakespeare or Virgil. That was most assuredly not the case. A taste for fine things has to be developed, whether we are talking about wine, cheese, or writing. No one is born liking *Époisses de Bourgogne* (a relatively smelly cheese that was reportedly a favorite of Napoleon's), and no one is born wanting to read Keats. Reading literature is challenging and difficult as well as enjoyable, and we have to stress all of those aspects; but we cannot get students to read by using gimmicks, like showing a movie of every book we read or by giving them "busy work" based on the texts. We have to communicate our love for the reading we do. That may be hard to do, but it is what we must do.

So please, read and enjoy these chapters, but do not deprive yourself of the pleasure of reading the stories, the poems, and the plays they introduce. There are worlds out there to explore, worlds that will not only enlighten your mind but that will reveal parts of your mind that you may not have known existed. Take a chance and challenge yourself.

## A Note on Citations

I include citations for all quotations. For poems, like *The Iliad* or “The Rape of the Lock,” I cite by book and line number. For the novels, because there are so many different editions of each novel, I cite by chapter number rather than by page. Finding the quotations in the edition you are using will therefore require you to flip through some pages, but it will not require you to run to a library to find a particular edition.

## Chapter 2

# Homer, *The Iliad*

Why have I read Homer's *Iliad* fifteen or twenty times? The simple answer is that I have taught it many times and each time I teach a book I like to reread it. Of course, that answer is insufficient. I obviously could teach the book without rereading it, and besides, no one requires me to teach this particular book. So why have I read Homer's *Iliad* fifteen or twenty times? A better answer is because I love it.

As I said earlier, I like to think of books—the physical objects, books—as holding a world that I can enter; and as I also said, some of my best friends, some of the people I know best, live in books. When I read these books, I visit with these friends. Furthermore, I find *The Iliad* to be so profound, so true in what it says about being a human being and living in this world, that it never fails to make me see and understand the world differently and, I hope, better.

For a number of reasons, *The Iliad* is different from most of the literature we are accustomed to, and it helps to know something about those differences and the reasons behind them before reading the poem. It is worth stressing, in the first place, that when we read *The Iliad*, we are reading a poem. There are many fine translations of *The Iliad*, and some of them translate the poem into prose. My feeling is that it is vital to read a contemporary poetic translation that captures the feeling of the original Greek. None does this as well as the translation by Richmond Lattimore, though, to my ear, the more recent translation by Robert Fagles is a close second. But *The Iliad* is not

simply a poem the way, say, a verse work by Wordsworth is a poem, for the story of its creation was entirely different. To explain what I mean, I must condense the work of many scholars who know this material far better than I do.

*The Iliad* is about the Trojan War, but was there really such a thing as the Trojan War? Apparently there was, at some time in the late thirteenth century BCE. Was it fought over Helen of Troy and did it include great heroes from all over Greece and Asia Minor? Probably not. Actually we know very little about the war itself. The site of the war, at a spot in Turkey now called Hissarlik, has been identified, but the war itself was undoubtedly a relatively minor trade war of the kind that took place fairly frequently. The Trojans and some ancient Greek tribes were fighting over who would have commercial ascendancy, and the war itself, which was certainly important to those who took part in it or to those who suffered from it, was hardly crucial for the course of world history. But out of that war grew a series of legends that, over the course of several centuries, became *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (and a number of other poems that have mostly disappeared but that constituted a whole cycle of poems about Troy and the heroes who fought there). How did that transformation occur and what does it mean?

The answer is that no one knows for sure how it occurred, because the records we have come from much later, but apparently the legends were handed down orally from generation to generation, were combined with other legends about other legendary figures, and over the course of several centuries evolved into the intricately wrought and powerful poem that we now call *The Iliad*. *The Iliad*, then, is a work of composite authorship: it was put together over a long period by many bards, and the version we have, which was written down in about the eighth century BCE, represents only one version of what was even then an enormously popular story.

This account of the poem's origin does raise one other interesting question: who was Homer, whose name is always associated with the poem? The answer is that we really do not know if there ever truly was a person named Homer who was involved with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and it is of no great importance whether or not such a person existed. On the other hand, this account of the poem does solve a

number of problems in the poem. For example, the language of *The Iliad* is a kind of artificial, literary language that includes words from several ancient Greek dialects. The composite authorship of the poem over a lengthy stretch of time could help to explain this oddity, just as it explains why the poem describes warriors wearing armor from different historical periods or why it describes different burial practices that did not coexist. Obviously these elements from a variety of historical periods became part of the poem and were not updated or reconciled even when the historical reality changed. Furthermore, I have not referred to the “author” of *The Iliad*, since, according to this account of the poem’s origin, it had no single author. Until it was written down in the eighth century, it existed only in the memories of those bards who were trained to recite it at the various festivals that were celebrated in those days.

The ancient Greeks, however, lived in a culture that was primarily oral rather than visual, so that their notion of memorization differed from ours. If I wanted to memorize a poem by Adrienne Rich, which was created and continues to exist as a written text, I could look at the poem and try to memorize a few lines, then look away and recite the lines, then look back to correct myself, and continue in this way until I either memorized the poem or gave up. I would do it in this way because I am a product of a print culture, and I am used to having printed texts to which I can refer when I want to look something up or check a fact. But if I lived in an oral culture, I would depend on people whose job it was—and a prestigious job it was—to remember everything that was important to my culture, and such things would often be remembered, for mnemonic purposes, in verse. (In fact, the word “mnemonic” comes from the name of the Greek goddess Mnemosyne, Memory, who was the mother of the Muses, the goddesses of the various arts, including history. The narrator of *The Iliad* asks one of the Muses for her aid in the first line of the poem.) Of course, many of the things that people thought were worth preserving in memory actually were stories that were considered expressive of the culture’s deepest values. In ancient Greece, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were among the poems preserved in this way. But an oral reciter (in Greek, a rhapsode) did not memorize a poem the way we would memorize it. The rhapsode knew the story, knew the individual characters and episodes; but each time

the rhapsode recited the story, he recreated it. This technique helps to explain some things that we may find peculiar when we read the poems.

For example, we find a lot of repetition in the poems. Occasionally a few lines may be repeated, and sometimes relatively long passages are repeated, and we may be inclined to think of such repetitions as flaws in the poem. We should remember, however, that the poems were meant to be recited dramatically, which means that those passages would not have seemed like dry repetitions the way they might to us. In addition, such repetitions gave the reciter a chance to continue composing in his head as he repeated a passage that he had recited only a short time before. (We often do the same thing, except that instead of repeating ourselves we say “Uh” or “You know.”)

A similar explanation exists for what are called the epithets in the poem, phrases that are usually associated with the names of places or characters. Over and over, for instance, we read of “resourceful Odysseus” or “brilliant Diomedes,” and we may be tempted to wonder why the composer of the poem used the same descriptive terms so often. Again the answer has to do with oral composition. A person who was reciting the poem in front of an audience was under a number of constraints. First, he had to keep the poem going, but he also had to follow a particular metrical pattern that involved patterns of long and short vowels. (By long and short vowels, the Greeks did not mean the difference between “a” as in face and “a” as in fact, the way we do. They meant how long the vowels were held, which was dictated in part by grammatical rules.) The reciter could hardly pause while he thought about what came next. Instead, he would use these epithets, which were designed to fit the metrical patterns at particular places in the lines. They were, perhaps, a kind of crutch that the rhapsodes used, but they also add to the mood of the poem. If we read the poem out loud rather than to ourselves, and if we try to make our reading even the slightest bit dramatic, those epithets can lose their repetitious quality and we can start to appreciate the contribution they make to the poem.

In order to enjoy fully a poem like *The Iliad*, it helps to know this background about how an oral poem was put together. It is also essential to know the mythological background, because even if the

ancient Greeks modified their beliefs in the various deities over time, they certainly knew who those deities were, just as they also knew the mortal heroes and heroines. There are hundreds of characters mentioned in *The Iliad*, but there are really only a few that the reader must know intimately. And there is, of course, a background story that the ancient Greeks knew and that the modern reader has to know. After all, the siege of Troy lasted ten years and the story of the *Iliad* covers only fifty-four days toward the end of that ten-year period. So what happened earlier?

Long before the beginning of *The Iliad*, a relatively minor goddess named Thetis fell in love with a mortal named Peleus. As so often happens in mixed marriages, this marriage had its problems, and one of the problems began at their wedding, when Eris, goddess of discord, suddenly appeared, complained about not having been invited (who would invite Discord to a wedding, after all?), and threw a golden apple among the guests, declaring that it belonged to the most worthy of the goddesses. Clearly there was a reason that she was the goddess of discord, and discord immediately broke out, as three of the goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, each claimed to be the goddess worthy of the apple. Their discussions (to use the polite word) over the apple went on for many years, until finally they agreed to allow a young shepherd to decide among them. The young shepherd was Alexandros (also called Paris) and he was the son of Priam, king of Troy. Each of the goddesses, in the spirit of fair play for which they were known, tried to bribe him with their special gifts. Athena offered him wisdom, Hera offered wealth, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. Obviously it was no contest, and Alexandros awarded the apple to Aphrodite, thereby earning the eternal enmity of Hera and Athena for himself and his city.

All of Homer's audience would have known this before the poem began, just as they would have known that Aphrodite rewarded Alexandros by giving him Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaos. (Whether Alexandros kidnapped Helen or whether she ran off with him is not entirely clear in Homer's version of the story. In Aeschylus' dramatic version of the story from the fifth century, she ran off with him.) Menelaos' brother Agamemnon, who was the king of the Myce-

naeans (and who was married to Helen's sister Clytemnestra), gathered an army and brought it to Troy, where Alexandros and Helen had fled. When *The Iliad* opens, the Greek forces have been besieging Troy for nearly ten years and everyone on both sides is tired and discouraged.

*The Iliad* begins, like so many epic poems, *in medias res*, that is, in the middle of the story, and the audience is expected to know the background. There is nothing strange about this technique, and modern writers use it frequently. Anyone who reads the earlier novels of John Le Carré, for instance, has to know about the enmity between Britain and the Soviet Union and the series of spy scandals that afflicted the British Secret Service. Homer's audience would have known the story I just told, and they would have known, too, that the Achaian army (Achaian, Danaan, and Argive all refer to the Greek forces) supported itself through the ten-year siege by raiding nearby territories and taking provisions or kidnapping people who could be held for ransom or simply kept as slaves. Often such victims of kidnapping were women, who would be parcelled out like other items of booty. Shortly before the beginning of *The Iliad*, the Greeks had staged one such raiding party and captured two women, Chryseis and Briseis, who were given as prizes to Agamemnon and to the greatest warrior among the Achaians, Achilles, who happened to be the son of Thetis and Peleus, at whose wedding, ironically, all the problems had begun. (Everyone knows the story of how Achilles' mother dipped him in a magic river to make him invulnerable, except that she forgot that the hand she held him with covered his heel, which became his only vulnerable spot. Homer never mentions that story and it is irrelevant to *The Iliad*.) As the poem opens, Chryseis' father comes to the Achaians and, with the help of a plague sent by Apollo, convinces Agamemnon to return his daughter to him. Agamemnon does so, but, in order to assert his authority as leader of the Achaians, he demands that Achilles give him Briseis. In making this demand, Agamemnon indicates the kind of proud bully that he is; and in unnecessarily alienating his best warrior, he gives some indication of his strategic acumen. This kind of behavior will be repeated throughout the poem, but I will offer no more summaries of the poem. *The Iliad* is meant to be read (or heard), not summarized.

Of course, *The Iliad* is fairly difficult to read. Perhaps anything worth doing is difficult. I am not sure. But I am sure that reading *The Iliad* is worthwhile and that once a person starts to read it, it becomes progressively easier. We do have to remember, however, that this is a poem that was finally written down almost three thousand years ago and that much has changed during that time, including our expectations about literature. What continues to amaze me is that, given all those differences, so many things have remained the same. As we read *The Iliad*, we may initially be struck by the differences; but as we get used to the poem and as we look more deeply into it, we will undoubtedly see ourselves. Be prepared for that to happen. It can be a shock.

I can provide a few hints that can make the reading a bit easier. One that I have already mentioned is to read the poem out loud as much as possible. And read it dramatically. (I would read this way at home rather than on a bus or subway, but that may be just a personal preference.) Remember that this poem was not meant to be read quickly. Neither Homer nor any member of his audience would have understood the concept of speed reading, so slow down and savor the poem.

Another hint is not to worry too much about remembering all of the characters. Most characters appear only briefly and your understanding of the story will not suffer if you do not remember all the names. There are, however, some names that you must remember. I will list them here as Achaian or Trojan, but as you read the poem, you will find yourself automatically remembering who these people are. (The names below are taken from the Lattimore translation. More commonly Achilles is known as Achilles and Aias as Ajax.)

## MORTALS

### Trojans

Priam, king of Troy

Hekabe, queen of Troy

Hektor, leading Trojan warrior

Andromache, his wife

Alexandros, abductor (?) of Helen

### Achaians

Agamemnon, leader of Achaians

Menelaos, his brother

Achilleus, most powerful warrior

Odysseus, craftiest warrior

Diomedes, important warrior

Aias son of Oileus, warrior

Aias son of Telamon, warrior

Helen, alleged cause of the war

## DEITIES

Zeus, king of the gods

Apollo, god of the sun

Athena, goddess of wisdom

Ares, god of war

Hera, queen of the gods

Aphrodite, goddess of love

Poseidon, god of the sea

Thetis, mother of Achilleus

Just to complicate things a bit further (as though having two characters named Aias is not complicated enough), characters are often called “son of *father’s name*” Thus, Agamemnon and Menelaos are both sons of Atreus (and are thus known as Atreides). Achilleus is the son of Peleus, Diomedes is the son of Tydeus. If all of this sounds confusing, I promise that the confusion will disappear as you get involved in the story.

Another hint concerns the second half of Book II. Just as you begin to get involved with the story, everything stops halfway through

Book II so that Homer can present what is called the Catalogue of the Ships, a long list of all the warriors who came to Troy and where they came from. This list serves at least two functions. One is that it allows Homer to show off his skill at fitting all of these names into the strict metrical requirements of the verses. A more significant function is that it served as an historical record for the ancient Greeks while at the same time illustrating how important this war had been for their ancestors. (A friend of mine once met a gentleman from Greece at a party. When the Greek gentleman mentioned his birthplace, my friend said he had never heard of it. The Greek gentleman drew himself up to his full height and said, “We sent two ships to Troy.” So for him, at least, that catalogue was still meaningful. Archaeologists have also made use of the Catalogue to identify some of the ancient cities that are mentioned.) Despite the historical importance of that catalogue, however, my recommendation is that when you get to it, you should skip directly to Book III so that you can maintain the continuity of the story.

My last hint concerns the many battle scenes in the poem. We in twenty-first-century America have certainly become accustomed to violence in literature and film, not to mention everyday life, but of course we did not invent violence. *The Iliad* is full of violence. In its many pages of battle scenes, we read of hundreds of deaths, often described in graphic detail. These descriptions are hardly pleasant, and they get worse as the poem continues, but they are a very important part of the poem. You may tire of the battles and you may want to skip over them and over some of the gorier details. Do not give in to that impulse. If those scenes disgust you, the poem is working.

Let me begin discussing *The Iliad* by elaborating on that point. *The Iliad* is an epic poem (more about that later) and epic poems are so often full of fighting and other kinds of mayhem that many readers, relying on superficial readings, on their own prejudices, or on the traditions that exist about such things, assume that such works glorify fighting and mayhem. Such readers are likely to talk about “codes of honor” or “heroic codes” and to picture epic poetry as consisting of the kind of stories that warriors listened to around the fire after dinner in order to fortify themselves for their next battle. Invariably this approach to the

literature encourages the glorification of such “traditional male values” as strength, speed, ferocity, ruthlessness, and bloodthirstiness.

Of course, I am exaggerating, but not too much. Sophisticated readers tend to make these points in more, well, sophisticated ways, but the result is much the same: *The Iliad* is about the heroic code, they say, and Hektor, for example, is a hero because of his adherence to that code despite the odds against him. The twentieth-century philosopher Simone Weil even wrote a short book about *The Iliad* called *The Iliad: or The Poem of Force*. Weil wrote her book during the Second World War, which had dramatic effects on her life and which influenced the way she saw the poem (just as the world that I inhabit affects my view of the poem); but what Weil says about the poem as a kind of ultimate expression of the power of force is quite incorrect, just as those readers who claim that the subject of the poem is the “wrath of Achilles” are incorrect. Certainly the wrath of Achilles is mentioned in the poem’s first line, but we have to read by sentences, not by lines, and the rest of the first sentence describes the consequences of Achilles’ wrath: death, corpses being devoured by scavengers, and destruction. These products of wrath and battle are not being glorified in the poem.

Certainly there was some kind of heroic code when the poem was composed, just as, for many people, there is now. In fact, that code has not changed much over the past three thousand years, though Achilles weeps more than a modern American hero would. But one of the functions of literature is to challenge the accepted values of a society, and *The Iliad* challenges the values of its society at almost every point. Consider just one of the many deaths that Homer describes. This one is in Book XIII, when Asios and Idomeneus meet:

He was striving in all his fury  
 To strike Idomeneus, but he, too quick with a spearcast struck  
 him in the gorge underneath the chin, and drove the bronze  
 clean through.  
 He fell, as when an oak goes down or a white poplar or like  
 a towering pine tree which in the mountains the carpenters

have hewn down with their whetted axes to make a ship  
timber.  
So he lay there felled in front of his horses and chariot,  
roaring, and clawed with his hands at the bloody dust.  
(XIII.386-93)

This passage surely describes the reality of war: it is cruel, it is painful, it transforms human beings into objects. Asios, as he dies, has less value even than a tree, which at least can be made into a ship timber. All that Asios can do is scream and claw at the dust onto which his blood is spilling. There is not much glory in this picture. There is only horror. And later on, when Homer describes how

Before Aineias and Hektor the young Achaian warriors  
went, screaming terror, all delight of battle forgotten  
(XVII.758-59)

Surely he is commenting sadly on our image of war. This passage always makes me think of the enthusiasm that people manage to work up for wars. I think of the old newsreels of columns of young men marching off to World War I, smiling and confident that after a brief period of glorious fighting they will return healthy and triumphant to their families. It never happens that way, of course, and we never learn. Those newsreels might as easily show soldiers from any war anticipating the “delight of battle” while the reality is that they are being prepared for slaughter. (Tolstoy, incidentally, makes this point brilliantly in *War and Peace*.)

But *The Iliad* is more than simply a poem that describes the horrors of war. It explores the behavior of extraordinary human beings, male and female, in a world that is characterized by this war. The poem explores what it means to be a human being in a world where such wars, such shame, such mortality exist. Given the fact of human mortality—and the fact that we are so often in such haste to hurry it along—how do we, and how should we, continue to live in this world? These are Homer’s questions, and he addresses them throughout the poem.

Perhaps the best way to begin looking at these points is by considering two scenes from Book VI. The first of these scenes actually illustrates at least two important points. The first has to do with the

question of realism. In many ways, *The Iliad* is quite realistic, that is, it gives us a feeling for what the events might really have been like, as we saw in the description of Asios' death. But *The Iliad* is not a work of representational realism. It does not pretend to portray everyday actualities. Later in the poem there will be a scene when Achilles appears to be covered by a divine fire and sends the Trojan army running just by shouting. Or earlier in the poem, Helen appears on the ramparts and Priam, the Trojan king, asks her to identify all of the Achaian heroes who are arrayed against the Trojans. That scene might indeed seem realistic, except that the war is in its tenth year and it hardly seems likely that Priam has just gotten around to asking who his enemies are. There are, of course, explanations for each of these scenes, but the main point here is that we must not expect Homer to be realistic in the most common sense of the term. What the poem tells us about human existence is real, but the events of the poem are not necessarily realistic.

Such is the case in Book VI. When the book opens, the Achaians and the Trojans are engaged in a major battle. It is difficult for anyone who has never been in a battle to imagine what it is like, but we must try to picture the tumult of hand-to-hand combat, with spears and arrows flying through the air, armor plates banging against each other, men shouting battle cries and other men, like Asios, screaming in pain. The picture has to be one of nearly total chaos. In the midst of this chaos, two soldiers—Diomedes, from the Achaian side, and Glaukos, from the Trojan side—encounter each other. It is customary in Homeric battles—and it was probably the case in real battles—that when two warriors meet, they speak to each other, perhaps to issue a challenge or to offer insults or to boast about their prowess. (We can see this custom today in sporting events, where it is known as talking trash. Many things do not change.) As Glaukos and Diomedes approach each other, amid the tumult of the battle, Diomedes challenges Glaukos, asking who he is that he dares to stand up against Diomedes' power. Diomedes assures Glaukos that if the latter is one of the gods, he will not fight with him, and he explains why in a story that takes up sixteen lines. Glaukos responds by giving his own family background and, in over sixty lines, tells stories about his ancestors. We must recognize that such pedigrees were very important to these people. A

warrior had to establish his nobility, and family background was one of the criteria; but we must also remember that this lengthy exchange takes place against the noise and chaos of the fighting. Furthermore, when Diomedes learns who Glaukos is, he realizes that in days long past, his grandfather and Glaukos' grandfather had been allies, so he drives his spear into the ground and proposes that they vow never to fight against each other. Both warriors jump from their horses, shake hands, and, as a sign of their agreement, exchange armor, which means, obviously, that right there on the battlefield, with spears and arrows flying everywhere, they each remove their armor. Even those of us who have never been in a battle would have to agree that removing one's armor in the midst of battle is not a recommended procedure, but the narrator's only comment is that Glaukos got the worse end of the deal, since his armor was more valuable than Diomedes'.

What is going on in this strange episode? Is this peculiar and unrealistic scene an example of Homer's incompetence? Of course not. Homer has a point to make here that transcends representational realism. In the midst of battle, surrounded by the dead and dying, two great warriors meet, intending to kill each other, and yet in a brief instant, they discover their human connections. No longer are they faceless enemies bent on mutual destruction. They are human beings, each with an identity, united by events in the distant past and by their common struggle against human mortality. We can see this point when Glaukos first responds to Diomedes:

“High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation?  
As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humanity.  
The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber  
Burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.  
So one generation of men will grow while another dies.”  
(VI.145-50)

This philosophical and highly poetic response, based on an extended metaphor, hardly seems appropriate to a battlefield conversation; but if we forget about realism, it turns out to be amazingly appropriate. The battlefield is the site of death on a massive scale, and Glaukos' words address human mortality. The comparison of human life to the short life of plants is hardly novel, but Homer goes further than that. Individual human beings are like the leaves, which after a

short existence will fall and be scattered by the wind; but the tree itself will continue to create new leaves, just as human beings will continue to flourish, even though individual generations will die off.

Glaukos' words here, however, are insufficient. He is responding to Diomedes' challenge and so he downplays the worth of the individual in relation to the whole of humanity. The subsequent action, however, shows also the value of the individual. It is because of such values, as evidenced by their grandfathers, that these two warriors find and extend the link between them, and they, too, as individuals are vitally important. That is why the narrator's closing comment on the scene, when he remarks that Glaukos lost out on the exchange of armor, is a test for the audience. Does the audience think that the value of the armor matters? That value had become irrelevant. What matters is that amidst the dead and dying, vivid reminders of human mortality, Glaukos and Diomedes have managed to come together and somehow affirm life rather than death. This triumph, unfortunately, is a small one, since death and battle will continue, but even minor triumphs are triumphs.

The other key episode of Book VI involves Hektor. Still the battle is raging and Hektor's brother Helenos advises him to return to the city and ask the women of the city to offer a sacrifice to Athena so that the goddess might help the Trojans. The audience knows, of course, that such a sacrifice is futile because Athena is sworn to help destroy the city, but even beyond that tragic irony is the irony of sending the Trojans' best warrior away from the battle on such an errand. It would be like asking Babe Ruth to leave a World Series game in order to get coffee for the team. It makes no logical sense and it would never happen. On the other hand, as the action of the book develops, it makes a great deal of sense, because what happens to Hektor in Troy is vitally important to the themes of the poem, so that the sacrifice of realism becomes a minor, and easily overlooked, inconsistency.

When Hektor arrives at Troy, he meets his mother Hekabe and asks her to offer the sacrifice to Athena, which she does and which Athena rejects. Then he meets Paris, whom he rebukes for staying in Troy with Helen while all the other men are out fighting his battle for him. And finally he goes to find his wife Andromache.

Hektor first looks for Andromache at home, but he is told that she is on the ramparts with their baby son watching the battle. (This detail is important because later, when Hektor is fighting his final battle with Achilles, Andromache is not on the ramparts watching. Instead, in a kind of pathetic reversal of this scene, she is at home preparing a bath for what she thinks is the imminent return of her husband.) When Hektor finds Andromache on the ramparts, husband and wife have one of the most central and revealing conversations in the poem. To get the full import of this conversation, we must remember that Hektor, hero though he may be, is a young man, the husband of a young, loving wife. He is widely respected, and even Helen says that he alone has been consistently kind to her. He has been the Trojan leader in this awful war, loyal to his city even though he has doubts about the rightness of the city's cause regarding Helen's status, though by this point the war has taken on a life of its own and Helen's status barely seems to be an issue any longer.

When Hektor approaches Andromache, she weeps and pleads with him to stop putting himself in so much danger. She suggests that he pull his troops inside the city walls and concentrate them at the weakest spot, where the greatest attacks might be expected. Her plan would protect the city and the warriors, and it makes a lot of strategic sense. She strengthens her argument by telling him something that he already knows but that the audience does not know, that she has only Hektor and their son in the whole world, since her father, her mother, and her seven brothers have all perished at the hands of Achilles. With some justice, she fears that Hektor will suffer the same fate, and she knows that her life as a widow in a conquered city will be hellish. What she has done, then, because she loves him and needs him, because she is a woman in a society that did not greatly value women, is put Hektor in the position of having to make a clear choice, which he certainly does. He tells her that he knows that what she says is accurate: he knows that if he follows his present course, Troy will be conquered and he will die. What upsets him most, however, is her fate, for she will be carried off into slavery by the conquerors, who will not

only abuse her physically but who will also mock her as the widow of Hektor. So why does he not change his strategy and follow her advice?

I would feel deep shame before the Trojans and the Trojan women with trailing garments, if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting...  
(VI.441-43)

His only hope is that he will be dead before Andromache is captured so that he may not hear her screaming and know that what he foresees has actually happened.

Every time I read *The Iliad*, I find myself wishing that Hektor would change his answer and prevent the whole calamity from happening. He knows that if the Trojans continue to pursue the course they have been following, he will be killed and they will be conquered and destroyed. About the ultimate fate of Troy there can be no question (and remember that we have only recently heard Glaukos' words about human mortality). Furthermore, Hektor knows what will happen to his beloved Andromache when he is dead and the city is conquered. Nevertheless, he sees no way to implement her plan, because he has to win glory for himself. If he did what Andromache suggests, he would feel shame, not simply because he would be following a woman's advice but because he is trapped by the heroic code, which dictates that the only way to win glory is through battle, through what was thought of as "manly" behavior. He could, conceivably, prevent his own death, the enslavement of his wife and son, and the destruction of his city, but he will not do so simply on the basis of pride.

If we juxtapose Hektor's words here with Glaukos' words earlier in the book, as well as with the actions of Glaukos and Diomedes, we can see Homer building a pattern that will continue to develop throughout the epic. This scene, however, offers a particularly tragic part of the pattern, for Hektor knows that what Andromache fears will come true, yet he feels constrained to abandon his beloved wife and infant son for the sake of a pride that has little value. He knows from his meeting earlier with Paris and Helen that Paris is unworthy and that Helen despises her new partner. He knows that his city will be destroyed. None of those factors matter to him as much as his pride, as

his need to lead the fighting in a cause that is both futile and wrong. What a tragedy.

This scene between Hektor and Andromache, the only scene in the poem that shows a warrior with his family, contributes to one of the poem's major themes, its stance on war, and to do so it relies on the role that women play in the poem. War is clearly the province of men, who recognize its dangers but who believe in its nobility. They know the risks that they take. They know that they will either die gloriously in battle or live gloriously as victors (since no one in the Homeric poems ever survives with a disabling injury). These men have choices to make about their own destinies, though death, of course, is ultimately inevitable. But what about the women? Not only can they not choose to go out to the battlefield, that is, not exercise that particular kind of choice over their destinies, but their destinies are entirely determined by the fates of the men, who generally make their choices without considering the women. So Hektor, based on his male notion of glory, makes the decision for himself, his family, and his whole city, knowing full well what the consequences are likely to be. He allows himself to be trapped by a macho idea of glory into fighting a war that he knows is basically dishonorable and that he could end relatively quickly, a point that the ancient Greek historian Herodotus makes (2:120) when he discusses the ancient question of whether the real Helen was actually in Troy during the war. And while the decision to continue fighting is not an easy one for him to make, the consequences that he foresees for Andromache are surely worse than those he will face: he will die, which may not be a good thing but which happens quickly, while Andromache, who does not share his idea of glory and who has no role in making the decision, will continue to suffer for years. In this way, Homer undercuts the heroic ideal. We cannot say that Andromache is, after all, only a woman and that her fate is therefore not terribly important. Homer makes it important, and he emphasizes his point when Hektor reaches out for his infant son, who is frightened by his dirt-and-blood-covered father in his horsehair crested helmet. When Hektor removes the helmet, his son comes to him happily.

As we read this scene, we must keep returning to Glaukos' metaphor of the tree. Yes, the leaves will pass, because they, like us, are

subject to mortality; but the leaves will die in their own time. They have nothing like war to hasten the process. This scene, short though it may be, is hardly an isolated episode. We may remember that the whole crisis of *The Iliad* occurs over the status of the captive Briseis—does she belong to Achilles or to Agamemnon? Despite the centrality of her position in the story, she herself does not appear in the poem until Book XIX, when she laments the death of Patroklos, explaining that like Andromache, she, too, has lost her whole family to the war and only Achilles' friend Patroklos has been kind to her. Therefore, she says, she weeps for Patroklos.

So she spoke, lamenting, and the women sorrowed around her  
Grieving openly for Patroklos, but for her own sorrows each.  
(XIX.302-03)

This is as strong a condemnation of the idealization of battle glory as I can imagine, and it is no accident that Homer put it into the mouth of the woman Briseis. Like Andromache, who lost her father and brothers in battle, Briseis lost her husband and brothers; Andromache, fortunately for her, has been happy with Hektor, while Briseis has been turned into a war-prize (which, unhappily, will be Andromache's fate as well). In fact, part of Briseis' salvation had been the promise that she would become the wife of the man who slew her husband. Such is the fate of women according to the heroic code that Homer's heroes (and their modern supporters) glorify.

Accordingly, Homer's narrator makes a significant comment here: as Briseis laments, so do the women who are with her, "openly for Patroklos, but for her own sorrows each." Briseis' lament is ostensibly for her rescuer Patroklos, but really it is a lament for herself, for the sorrows that she, as a woman, has suffered because of the men's wars. Her father and brothers are dead—their suffering is over. Her suffering, and that of her female companions, continues.

It is true, of course, that these episodes concerning Andromache and Briseis, even if we add to them those concerning Helen and Hekabe, comprise only a few lines out of the thousands that make up *The Iliad*. Nevertheless, these relatively few lines are essential to the work. *The Iliad* is largely concerned with examining how human beings confront their mortality, but if we focus only on the male heroes, we

get only a partial view. These lines about women not only provide another view of human mortality, but they transform the glorification of war. They are a reminder to anyone who thinks that Homer's gorier descriptions somehow recommend the joys of carnage. Without them, *The Iliad* would be a far different poem.

But it would not be completely different, because similar themes appear elsewhere in the poem. One of the most noticeable spots involves the shield of Achilles. After Achilles' friend Patroklos is killed in battle wearing Achilles' armor, Achilles asks his mother to get him new armor, and, as always, she does what he asks. She visits Hephaistos, the god of fire and of the forge, who creates a magnificent set of armor for Achilles, including a shield that is covered with scenes of human life, scenes to which Homer devotes considerable attention. Once again, in describing the shield of Achilles, we leave the realm of representational realism. First of all, to contain all the scenes that Homer describes, the shield would have to be as big as a football field. Furthermore, the poem's narrator offers a great deal of commentary on the scenes that would be impossible to know just from looking at them.

The scenes on the shield begin with the earth, the sky, the water, and the heavenly bodies, natural elements that place the rest of the scenes in the context of our world and confer on those scenes a cosmic significance. This context is important, for the next scenes we see portray two human cities. In the first city, a wedding is taking place, with appropriate celebrations, though in the marketplace an argument has broken out. Apparently one man has killed another, so the killer and the deceased's kinsman are arguing over the penalty. Surprisingly, the killer is offering more than the kinsman is asking, so the two go to the elders for arbitration and a prize is available for the person who comes up with the best solution.

This is a city at peace, where marriages and festivals, symbolic of union, of fertility, of life, are celebrated. This is a real city, however, populated by real people, and so there are disagreements and potential strife in the city as well, as in the case of the two men. In the world of *The Iliad*, the solution would lie in violence: the families of the killed and of the killer would settle the issue by fighting, just as the Achaians

and Trojans are attempting to settle their quarrel through war. In the world of the shield, however, there is an attempt at arbitration, and when the family of the deceased refuses the initial offer, there is further arbitration with a prize being given not to the best warrior in the city but to the person who devises the best peaceful resolution. No wonder there are festivals and marriages in this city—the city operates on the basis of law and intelligence, not on the law of the jungle.

The other city depicted on the shield is quite different. This city, with its “lovely citadel,” like the citadel of Troy, is, like Troy, under siege, and the warriors’ wives and children stand on the city wall. This is a city characterized by ambushes and treachery, by Hate and Confusion and Death. This is, in short, a city that embodies all the horrors of Troy, and it stands in sharp contrast to the other, ideal city.

The shield of Achilles, then, depicts the natural world as a world of harmony, but it describes two possibilities for the world of human beings. One of those possibilities offers peace and harmony, but the other offers war and destruction. The choice, Homer seems to say, is ours, though clearly the Achaians and the Trojans have made their choice. It is not enough, however, to say simply that they should choose differently, for they have chosen the way they have been taught to choose. The men are celebrated for their fighting ability, not their peacemaking ability. Only men who are past their primes, like Nestor, are looked to for intelligent thought. Odysseus, the wisest and wiliest of all the fighters, is an anomaly, and he comes in for his share of abuse in this poem as a result. (Digression: The two cities on Achilles’ shield are represented by the friezes on the two sides of the urn in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Keats, who loved Homer’s work, created the urn based on this passage. Another brilliant poem based on this passage is W.H. Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles.”)

But *The Iliad* is not a poem of simple contrasts. If the warriors were all evil men, it would be easy to dismiss them, but many of them are quite appealing. Hektor is a good person who is trapped by the image he and his society have created of himself, of what they think constitutes a hero, and who consequently makes some poor decisions. Diomedes is a fierce warrior who can demonstrate moments of true nobility. Telamonian Aias is a quiet giant who always tries to do his

best and who maintains his integrity throughout the poem. Even Menelaos, who is depicted as a weak and colorless character, has a good side, especially when he is contrasted with his brutal bully of a brother, Agamemnon.

It should be obvious that I am speaking about these characters in a book as though they were real people. Recently I heard someone ask, “How can readers fall in love with a character in a book? Characters are just collections of words.” That might be a very contemporary and sophisticated approach to literature, but it is not true to the experiences of readers, who act as accomplices to authors in giving life to the words. I feel sorry for the person who sees literary characters as “just collections of words.” Why, I wonder, would such a person study literature? The characters in *The Iliad* range from the very simple, like those who appear in a single line, just long enough to be killed, to those who are as complex as people we might know. One of the reasons *The Iliad* has retained its popularity for about three millennia is because the characters are so real. To show what I mean, let me briefly explore two characters, Agamemnon and Achilles.

Agamemnon, as I recently mentioned, is a brutal leader who bullies his men. Because of his pride, he alienates his best warrior and early in the poem he tests his men’s devotion by telling them that he has been instructed by the gods to end the war, whereupon he is shocked that the men are deliriously happy and run for their ships. So Agamemnon is not a military genius. He tends to get his way by threatening people or by shaming them in front of their companions. His cruelty is always evident. In Book VI, for instance, he intervenes when a young warrior on the Trojan side, Adrestos, begs Menelaos not to kill him but to hold him for ransom. Agamemnon ridicules his brother’s tendency toward leniency and states as his goal the destruction of every Trojan male,

even the unborn son in his mother's womb. Menelaos responds by pushing Adrestos away from him

And powerful Agamemnon stabbed him in the side and, as  
he writhed over, Atreides, setting his heel upon the midriff,  
wrenched out the ash spear.  
(VI.63-65)

Both his speech and his actions are full of gratuitous cruelty, and it is hard to believe that when Homer calls him a "hero" (in line 61), he is not being ironic. This kind of cruelty is what Agamemnon is all about. When he puts his foot on Adrestos' belly in order to get his spear out of the dead man's body, he deprives the poor young man of all humanity.

Similarly, when Agamemnon is in battle (in Book XI), he is described in far more brutal terms than almost any other warrior; but when he is wounded, the description becomes quite extraordinary, as his pain is compared to the pain of a woman in childbirth. Now we may be certain that the pain of childbirth is severe, but the comparison of a wounded warrior to a woman in labor would have been viewed as highly insulting (to the warrior, of course). In short, by using this simile, the narrator reveals something else not so flattering about Agamemnon: he may be a bully, but he is also weak. Nevertheless, toward the end of the poem, after Achilles has lost his best friend and has re-entered the battle, Agamemnon is relatively gracious in acknowledging Achilles' superiority, in giving him gifts, and in allowing Achilles to keep Briseis. Of course, at that point he also desperately needs Achilles to re-enter the battle. As we step back and look at Agamemnon, we can see that he is a disagreeable man, but we can also see that he is a commander who has gotten himself into a situation that is beyond his ability to understand or to control. It hardly comes as a surprise that according to the myth, and according to Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*, the first thing that happens when Agamemnon returns home after the war is that his wife kills him. At the same time, in Homer's presentation of him, we can see, even if only barely, other sides of his personality.

An even more complex character, the most complex in the poem, is Achilles. Through most of the poem, he is little more than a spoiled

child, sulking in his tent, refusing to help his comrades, weeping to his mother. Then, once Patroklos has died, he turns into a phenomenal killing machine, spreading terror and destruction everywhere, making Agamemnon's brutality appear casual and insignificant. Even the river, which has become plugged up with the bodies of warriors he has killed, tries to stop him; and he goes so far as to capture twelve young Trojans whom he later slaughters at his leisure during Patroklos' funeral. Finally, after he kills Hektor, he desecrates that hero's body and then refuses to bury it, sacrilegious behavior indeed. None of these actions make Achilles the least bit appealing or complex as a character, but in Book IX we learn one fact that entirely transforms him. As he explains to the delegation who have come from Agamemnon to ask him to return to battle, his mother had told him long before that he has a choice to make: he can either stay at Troy, fight, die, and gain great glory or he can leave the battle, go home, and live a long life in obscurity. These alternatives, of course, are the same alternatives that every warrior in the poem faces, but they are stated most starkly in the case of Achilles. Thus, more than any other character in the poem, Achilles must constantly confront his own mortality and the value of the heroic code, for he knows that if he stays at Troy to win glory in the battle, he will die there. Even Hektor's feeling that Troy will be defeated is a guess, accurate though it may be, but Achilles knows for certain that he must choose between life and death. When he sits in his tent during the battles, part of the reason is certainly that he is sulking over Agamemnon's insult, but another part is that he has not fully committed himself either to dying gloriously at Troy or to living without glory to an advanced age at home. We must remember that the Greek concept of an afterlife at this time was somewhat vague and frightening. In *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus visits the Underworld, he finds it to be a place of darkness and boredom, and the ghost of Achilles there explains that it would be better to be the lowest kind of slave on earth than to be in the Underworld. This information makes Achilles' choice even starker, and he only really chooses after Patroklos has died, when he almost instinctively re-enters the battle and commits himself to death at Troy, a decision he seems to regret in *The Odyssey*. That is a huge choice for a young, vigorous man to make, and it helps to explain many facets of Achilles' behavior. Of course, we all have to face our own mortality at some time, but the dramatic nature of

Achilleus' situation may help us to put our mortality in perspective and to choose the ways we must act.

As I write these words, I am aware of how much I am simplifying *The Iliad* and its characters. Such simplification is inevitable when we write about literature, just as it is when we write about people. My description of a person can never substitute for the experience of meeting the person, and my words about these characters are intended only as an introduction for readers who are about to meet the characters by reading the poem.

I paused in my discussion by inserting that last paragraph because I now must approach one of the most touching and painful scenes in *The Iliad*, the meeting between Priam and Achilleus in Book XXIV. Once again I will set the scene: Achilleus, having killed Hektor in battle, has kept the body, an action that outrages even the gods, who prevent the body from decaying. Finally Priam, Hektor's father, is prompted by the gods to bring Hektor's body back for proper burial. This is a task full of risks. It requires the aged and rather helpless king to cross through the enemy lines and to approach his deadliest enemy. Fortunately Priam is accompanied by the god Hermes (also called Argeiphontes) who has taken on the guise of a Trojan youth and who uses his divine power to bring Priam through in safety, all the way to Achilleus' tent. Priam enters the tent, falls to his knees, embraces Achilleus' knees, and kisses his hands, then asks for mercy by invoking Achilleus' memory of his own aging father, Peleus.

Try to imagine this scene: there is Priam, the king of Troy, on his knees as a suppliant to the man who has killed so many of his people and of his sons, including Hektor, thereby guaranteeing that the city will be destroyed. He holds Achilleus by the knees and kisses the hands that have killed his children. The emotions here are almost unimaginable. They are certainly beyond words, as we see when the narrator tells us that Achilleus was so moved by grieving for his own father that he gently disengaged from Priam's grasp

And the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled at the feet  
of Achilleus and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor

and Achilles wept now for his own father, now again for  
 Patroklos.  
 (XXIV.509-12)

When they have finished grieving, Achilles takes Priam's hand and helps him to his feet.

Yes, *The Iliad* is long, very long, but it has all been leading to this scene. These two men, one young and vigorous, one old, both knowing that they face imminent death, commune silently. This image of the two noble men weeping together, mourning not only their own deaths, not only the deaths of the one's father and the other's son, but their whole understanding of human mortality, is so profound, so masterfully accomplished, that it is virtually impossible to discuss; and when Achilles raises Priam to his feet and shows the older man the respect due to another human being, despite their sworn enmity, we suddenly understand so much. These men, despite the differences that separate them, are united by something far more powerful, their humanness, their attempts, failures though they may be, to deal with what it means to be human and mortal. It is a magnificent scene.

Finally Achilles addresses Priam, and he tells the older man that two urns stand at the door of Zeus, an urn of evil and an urn of good. Zeus, who distributes the evil and the good, does so in two ways. Either he gives a man a mixture of good and evil or he gives a man all evil. What a picture of human existence Achilles paints here. According to him, we face two possibilities from these urns. Either we have all evil or, if we are fortunate, we get a mixture. No one gets all good. Priam and Achilles have finally faced a basic truth that all the boasting, all the fighting, all the rituals of the war cannot cover up, and what Achilles says here is also true for the good city depicted on his shield. Human beings could, if they would, increase the amount of good, but always we must accept the evil. They are part of being human.

Having understood these things, Achilles returns Hektor's body to Priam and promises to give him a nine-days truce for the Trojans to hold their funeral rites. Then, of course, the war will continue to its inevitable conclusion. Priam takes the body and returns to Troy, and

*The Iliad* concludes with the laments of three women, Andromache, Hekabe, and Helen. There is such sadness here, such a deep feeling for those imponderable aspects of life that we face every day. It is amazing to realize that we share these imponderables with the people who composed and who listened to this poem three thousand years ago.

There are just a few things left that I would like the prospective reader of *The Iliad* to consider. One is the role of the gods in the poem. As we read *The Iliad*, we may find it difficult to believe that anyone ever worshipped gods who were this frivolous, quarrelsome, and generally ungodly. Even when characters in the poem worship the gods, primarily they are trying to appease them; but as we saw in Book VI, even valuable gifts do not always win the favor of the gods. Occasionally scenes that involve the gods are humorous. Some of the quarrels between Zeus and Hera, for instance, when they seem like the archetypal married couple who cannot get along or when they scheme and plot to outwit each other, are actually funny. (My favorite is when Zeus tries to tell Hera how beautiful she is and he compares her to all the young mortal women with whom he has had affairs.) Similarly, when Ares, the fierce god of war, whom no one likes, neither gods nor mortals, receives a minor wound in battle, he must be led groaning from the battlefield by Aphrodite, which is surely another comment on the real nature of war.

But the gods are not in the poem for comic relief. They have a much more serious role. Why is it funny when Ares is wounded? Of the hundreds of characters who are wounded in the poem, only Ares' injury is humorous. One reason, of course, is that he is the god of war, and we expect him to be a better fighter or, at least, to seem a bit more courageous when he is wounded. But the answer goes even deeper. We can laugh at his wound because we know that it is meaningless. Ares is immortal, and no matter how badly he may be wounded, he will quickly recover. Consequently, what is deadly serious for the mortals is nothing more than a game for the gods. No matter how deeply committed the gods may be to one side or the other, the war is only a diversion to them. While the mortals are slaughtering each other, the gods are rather like sports fans, who truly want their teams to win but to whose lives the teams' fates are not central. From the perspective

of the gods, the Trojan War is sort of fun; and it also offers them an opportunity to continue ancient alliances or rivalries.

Zeus, who avoids such alliances and rivalries, knows from the beginning what the outcome will be, and while he can change the details of the war—for instance, who triumphs in a particular battle—he cannot change what is destined to happen. There is, in fact, an implicit clash in *The Iliad* between destiny and free will, especially for the gods, but Homer never fully addresses the complexities of the problem. In one scene, however, Homer does address that question and at the same time shows how the war can become a serious issue even for the gods. In Book XVI, Patroklos is fighting with Sarpedon, who is Zeus's son. Zeus, who knows that Sarpedon must lose in this encounter, tells Hera that he is thinking of snatching his son out of the battle and wafting him back to his homeland. Hera, who is usually at odds with her husband, responds that Zeus certainly has the power to do what he suggests but that he should not do so because if he does, then all of the gods will want to save their favorites from death, thereby obliterating the distinction between gods and mortals. Zeus, she says, should allow Sarpedon to die, as mortals are meant to die, and then give him a good funeral. In giving this advice, Hera is unusually sympathetic to Zeus, who agonizes over the decision and finally agrees with her, though he “wept tears of blood...for the sake of his beloved son” (XIV.459-60).

We can see a number of important points in this episode. First, Zeus can, that is, he has the physical power to, alter the dictates of destiny. He *can* save Sarpedon's life, and he desperately wants to save Sarpedon's life, which indicates that the war has become something more than a simple diversion for him. But he *may not* save Sarpedon, because if he does, destiny will be diverted and the whole of the universe will be thrown off course. This moment is the most painful that any of the gods must face. (Aphrodite elsewhere can save Paris and Aineias because their death days have not arrived.) It is significant that in this crisis Hera, who has not been the most loving of wives, offers him consoling advice that he accepts. Even so, Zeus, the king of the gods, most powerful entity in the universe, weeps tears of blood, so deeply is he affected by the spectacle of human mortality when it

concerns someone he loves. Suddenly the game has become serious and, because it concerns Zeus, it has taken on cosmic importance.

This sense of cosmic importance is a large part of what makes the poem an epic. Certainly there are other conventions that contribute to the poem's epic status, but it is important to remember that "epic" means more than simply "long." It refers to a work that may be long, that may be written in an elevated style, that may involve long journeys or huge battles, but primarily it means a work that concerns a pivotal moment in the history of a city, a nation, a people, or even, in the case of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, all of humanity. Consequently an epic also has cosmic significance, which means that it involves every aspect of the world, from the mundane to the divine. Other epics that may be of interest to readers of *The Iliad* are Virgil's *The Aeneid*, the lengthy works from India called the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (in abridged versions!), *Beowulf*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

There are two more brief points that I should mention about *The Iliad*. One involves something called "epic similes." A simile, of course, is a comparison using "like" or "as." Homer frequently uses similes, but they tend to be many lines long, like the similes at the beginning of Book III, in which Homer, at relatively great length, compares the Trojan army to wild birds taking off from a lake and the dust raised by the Achaian forces to the mist on a mountain. Homer could have said simply that the Trojans came on in a wild and disorganized way, whereas the Achaians seemed unified and controlled. That description would be much more concise, and also much duller. By using his epic similes, Homer draws out the action (which was, in actuality, a lengthy process) and he makes that action much more vivid, much more appealing to our imaginations. Remember that *The Iliad* was not meant to be speed read. It must be read slowly and savored, and the epic similes are part of the savoring process.

The final point I want to make concerns the repetition of scenes. As I mentioned long ago, *The Iliad* contains many repeated passages, probably as a result of oral composition. But there are also a number of passages that are repeated with slight variations. In such cases it is important to pay attention to the variations, which are always there for

a reason. For example, Homer loves to describe the way the heroes put on their armor before a battle, and we find many arming scenes in the poem; but each arming scene is slightly different. Thus in the arming of Agamemnon at the beginning of Book XI, we find Agamemnon being treated with the respect due to a commander, but we also notice that on his shield is the figure of the horrible Gorgon, along with Fear and Terror. Given the image of Agamemnon that we saw earlier, that shield is absolutely appropriate, as it reveals something about its owner.

One of the funniest scenes in *The Iliad* is related to these arming scenes. Such scenes are, as we might expect, confined to the warriors, even if one of those warriors is the goddess Athena. But in Book XIV there is an arming scene that builds on the general structure of such scenes and is also quite different. Hera is planning to distract Zeus by seducing him so that, contrary to his orders, Athena can sneak into battle and aid the Achaians. This seduction is equivalent to a battle for Hera, and so, as she anoints her body with sweet olive oil and then puts on her sexiest goddess clothing, she repeats all of the conventional steps of an arming scene. There is not much in *The Iliad* that is humorous, but this scene is—if the reader is aware of what Homer is doing.

This has been a rather long introduction to *The Iliad*, which is a long and difficult poem. Now, as much as I would like readers to continue reading the invaluable things I have to say, I hope they will instead put this book down and read *The Iliad*. Even after reading this introduction, you will not grasp everything in the poem on one reading. No one could. Nor would I pretend that what I have said here, which is based on my readings of the poem as well as on the works of other readers of the poem, covers every aspect of the poem. But this introduction, like the other chapters of this book, should make the poem more accessible. Start the poem and just keep reading, as I tell my classes. As you read, the poem will become increasingly clear. And remember, enjoy it.

## Chapter 3

# Homer, *The Odyssey* and Virgil, *The Aeneid*

This chapter is intended for readers who really liked *The Iliad* and want to try either—or both—of the other great narrative poems of antiquity, Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Neither of these poems is quite as difficult as *The Iliad*, and both of them are fun to read. Of course, since almost everyone likes *The Odyssey*, even those who are not wild about *The Iliad* should give it a try.

## *The Odyssey*

For many people, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* seem to go together. After all, they are both by Homer and *The Odyssey* seems to be a continuation of *The Iliad*. Of course, the reality is not quite so simple. First, since we are not sure that a person named Homer either wrote the poems or even actually existed, it is dangerous for us to assume that the same person was responsible for both poems, and given the history of oral composition that I described briefly in the last chapter, it is dangerous for us to assume that any single person wrote either of them. Furthermore, *The Odyssey* is a continuation of *The Iliad* in only the loosest sense. People tend to remember Odysseus' spectacular adventures, but those adventures form only a small part of the poem.

Those adventures are exciting, but the heart of *The Odyssey* is elsewhere. Actually there were a number of other poems built around the Troy story, but except for brief fragments, those poems have disappeared.

*The Iliad* opens by announcing as its subject the wrath of Achilles and the destruction that resulted from that wrath. Achilles' wrath, with all its implications, begins and prolongs the action of that poem, a poem full of wrathful characters who feel compelled to show how heroic they can be in the most traditional sense of heroism. *The Odyssey* is quite different, as even the opening lines show, for the narrator announces as his subject not wrath or any other quality but a man, "the man of many ways" (again using Richmond Lattimore's translation). What we see immediately is not the rigidity of Achilles and his peers but the adaptability of Odysseus, the man of many ways." Even more important, we are introduced to Odysseus' intelligence. He may have had fantastic adventures, but what the narrator emphasizes is how much Odysseus learned from them. As we shall see, physical prowess is important in this poem, but it is far less important than mental ability. In addition, while *The Iliad* focuses on wrath, destruction, and death, *The Odyssey* focuses on a man, on his wife, on their son, and on life. *The Iliad* is an epic because it focuses on a pivotal moment in the history of Troy, the moment leading up to its destruction. *The Odyssey* is a romance because it focuses on individuals and on fantastic adventures.

*The Odyssey* then focuses on domesticity. Odysseus' entire purpose in the poem is simply to get home to his wife and son, as he explains to the Phaiakians in Book XIII. He is just a man who wants to get home. He does not talk about how he is the best warrior, how he is superior to others. He does not boast, but his goal turns out to be harder to achieve than we might expect. Achieving it requires Odysseus to learn about himself, about the many roles he (like any other human being) must play in life, and about his wife and child.

In fact, this poem requires that wife, Penelope, and that child, Telemachos, to learn about themselves as well. In this sense, *The Odyssey* tells three separate stories, not one highly unified story as we see in *The Iliad*. If we look only at Odysseus, we miss far too much of the poem. Perhaps that is why we never even see Odysseus until Book V,

and in our first view of him we see him sitting on Kalypso's island and weeping over his separation from his loved ones. Yes, our first view of the great hero shows him crying because he cannot get home. The first four books of the poem, and large parts of later books, are devoted to Penelope and Telemachos and their fates.

We must always remember that if Odysseus' plight—he has been away from home for twenty years, ten at the Trojan War and ten in his wanderings—has been hard on him, it has also been a trial for his family in Ithaka. His wife Penelope, one of the most remarkable women in all of literature, has awaited his homecoming for two decades, during the latter of which she has had to fend off the attentions of the one hundred eight suitors who have moved into her house and consumed the treasures that Odysseus left behind. Through a combination of wiles and intelligence (and often those two are the same thing), she has managed to preserve her independence, though as *The Odyssey* progresses, it is clear that unless Odysseus returns soon, she is about to lose that independence.

That Penelope's independence should even be a question, however, is an indication of how remarkable this poem is, for women in ancient Greece had very little independence, and *The Odyssey* is full of independent women: Athene, Kalypso, Circe, the Sirens, Nausikaa, Helen, and Penelope come immediately to mind, though all but the last three are divine or supernatural. Nonetheless, the emphasis on women is obvious, and these women make important points not only about themselves but about men as well. Circe, for instance, is famous for her ability to change men into pigs, but (dare I say it?), rather than actually transforming them, she only seems to be allowing them to show their real natures. We have ample proof in other episodes that Odysseus' companions behave like pigs, which means that Circe is just letting them be themselves.

Kalypso, on the other hand, is really taken with Odysseus and offers him immortality if he will stay on her island with her. She presents a major test for Odysseus, who indicates often in this poem that he is deeply concerned with the problems of human mortality; but Odysseus passes this test without a hint of hesitation. He wants only to be home with Penelope. He would rather be home with his by now

middle aged wife than to live forever on a tropical island with a beautiful goddess, which is surely a sign of how much he loves that wife.

Athene, too, is a central figure in this poem. This goddess of wisdom is Odysseus' protector and ally, and time after time we see that Odysseus would rather rely on the intelligence that she represents than on the muscle that he also has in abundance. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that the poem is largely about the uses of intelligence, which invariably triumphs over the more common male attribute of prowess in fighting. Time after time we see the superiority of wisdom over might. Might is a last resort, a lamentable last resort. Even Menelaos in Book IV expresses his regret to Telemachos over the Trojan War and its consequences. Menelaos and Helen, whose passions stood at the center of the war, have become images of domesticity, preparing in Book IV for the wedding of their daughter to the son of Achilleus, though we may sense some troubles beneath the surface. That modest domesticity, coupled with wisdom, is at the center of *The Odyssey* and brings us back to Penelope, who, despite her husband's mysterious disappearance, remains faithful to him and outwits the suitors. Furthermore, even when Odysseus reveals himself near the poem's end, Penelope has one more test for him. He cannot simply announce his return; he must prove himself to the woman who is so clearly his equal in intelligence. As we will see, Odysseus learns much about himself, largely through his encounters with women on his journey, but Penelope has also learned a great deal about herself during his absence.

The other character whose education about self is so important in this poem is Odysseus and Penelope's son Telemachos. As the poem opens, Telemachos is about twenty years old. He has grown up in the shadow of a famous father whom he has never known, has watched as his mother has been besieged by the suitors, and has been helpless to prevent them from devouring his inheritance. In *The Odyssey* we watch him turn from a boy into a man, as he begins to assert himself and then allies himself with his returned father. The importance of Telemachos' story to the poem as a whole can be seen in the way that the poem's first four books are devoted to him, as well as in the attention that is

given to Odysseus himself not only as Telemachos' father but as his parents' son. Family relationships are central to this poem.

Early in the poem, Telemachos announces one of the poem's major themes:

My mother says indeed I am his [Odysseus']. I for my part  
do not know. Nobody really knows his own father.  
(I.215-16)

James Joyce, in *Ulysses*, his rewriting of the Odysseus story, refers to this theme as the "mystery of paternity," but that mystery refers to more than the simple physical relationship between a child and the child's alleged father. In Telemachos' case, it refers to his need to define himself without the aid of his absent father, to discover what it means to be not Telemachos, the son of Odysseus, but just Telemachos. This process, which we might think of as the process of becoming an adult, is not easy for the individual involved nor for those around the person. In order to define himself, Telemachos must go on his own journey, visiting Nestor and Menelaos, defying the suitors, and even establishing his power in relation to his mother. In all of these endeavors he is aided by his father's guardian, Athene, goddess of wisdom, which means that he, too, is wise. Athene convinces him that his father will return, but she convinces him also that he cannot simply wait for that return. He must assert himself and take action on his own. As a result of this maturation, when Odysseus does return, Telemachos can relate to him not just as a son but as an independent person, which is an essential step in growing up.

This development in no way diminishes Telemachos' attachment to his father. If anything, it strengthens that attachment, because Telemachos is driven not only by what is expected of him as a son but by his own choice. One of the most touching moments in the poem—and there are many such moments, as Odysseus reveals himself to friends and family members—comes when Odysseus reveals himself to Telemachos. Thanks to Athene, Odysseus' appearance has been altered, so that when he meets Telemachos at the home of the swineherd Eumaios, the son does not recognize the father (whom he would not recognize anyhow), but Odysseus has a chance to see the fine person that his son has become. Finally, when the two of them

are alone, Athene restores Odysseus' appearance and he announces his identity, which Telemachos promptly doubts, until Odysseus says, "No other Odysseus than I will ever come back to you" (XVI.203-04) and the two of them embrace, father and son having proven themselves to each other and having accepted each other on their own terms as individuals. The moment is magical and almost as affecting as the moment when Odysseus reveals himself to Penelope and she tricks him into proving his identity, after which they "gladly went together to bed, and their old ritual" (XXIII.296).

Of course, growing up is never easy, and Telemachos has much to learn. Early in the poem, as he begins to assert himself, he criticizes his mother and tells her, basically, to go back to her room and leave the business of the household to him (I.356-60). He is not exactly delicate with his mother, and modern readers might well find the way he talks to his mother offensive, so we must be aware of the sexism inherent in the culture we are observing. In order to assert himself in front of the suitors, Telemachos, who is reaching male adulthood, must establish himself as independent of and more powerful than his mother. In terms of his society, he is correct to say that the household power is his, which Penelope acknowledges by doing what he says, but which she also laments as she weeps for her missing husband. In another sense, she is proud that Telemachos has asserted himself, though she is sad at the implications of his self-assertion for herself and for what it says about expectations for Odysseus' return, because it means that another generation has matured and is about to take over.

Elsewhere in the poem, however, Telemachos learns to be more diplomatic in his self-assertion, and despite Telemachos' harsh words to her, Penelope, as we have seen, is credited with insight and intelligence. The dynamics of this family are working themselves out in difficult circumstances, and it is vital, as we consider Odysseus, to keep in mind the stories of his wife and of his son.

Perhaps we should approach Odysseus first as a son himself, a role that he plays on two particular occasions in the poem. At the very end of the poem, after Odysseus has routed the suitors and been reunited with Penelope, he goes to tell Laertes, his aged father, of his return, but, being Odysseus, he cannot simply approach the old man and say,

“Hi, Dad. I’m back.” Although he is greatly affected at seeing how sad and old his father has become over the past twenty years, Odysseus concocts one of his many stories, describing himself as someone who had seen Odysseus only five years before and still hopes for his return. As a result of this speech, his father pours dust over his own head, a sign of mourning. At this point even Odysseus cannot continue the masquerade and he reveals himself, but we are left wondering why Odysseus would behave in such a way. Why, seeing his father after twenty years, does he play a role, making up a new identity for himself? The answer is not that he is a cruel man who enjoys tormenting people. In fact, as we see throughout the poem, Odysseus enjoys inventing identities for himself. He tells stories to Eumaios, to Telemachos, to Penelope, to the Cyclopes—to almost everyone he meets. Some of these stories are told for strategic purposes, because at times Odysseus must not identify himself, but some of them seem to indicate Odysseus’ need constantly to recreate himself, to create an identity for himself, as though he is not entirely secure in who he is.

One of my favorite instances occurs just after Odysseus discovers from a stranger (who is Athene in disguise) that he has awakened in Ithaka, and he identifies himself by telling one of his long fictional stories, full of realistic details and identifiable names, to which Athene basically responds, “Oh come off it. I know who you are” (XIII.291-95). Clearly Athene is fond of Odysseus, who is, after all, her protégé, and she recognizes much of herself in him. In other words, she knows that his deviousness and his deceptive tales, which are signs of his intelligence because he employs them so intelligently, are part of his nature. At the same time, she is telling him that though he may be great at inventing identities, he is no match for her. Simultaneously, then, he is being both praised and put in his place. He can adopt any identity that he likes, says Athene, but she will always know who he is.

We might legitimately wonder, however, whether he always really knows who he is, just as we may wonder whether *we* always really know who we are or whether, like Odysseus, we constantly go through a process of reinventing ourselves.

That question is raised not only by the many stories Odysseus tells and the many disguises he wears (some of them the work of Athene)

but by the well-known adventures that he describes to the Phaiakians. Perhaps his most famous adventure, his encounter with the Cyclopes, illustrates this point best. The Cyclopes are a savage group who have developed no societal structure. Furthermore, their possession of a single eye in the middle of their foreheads indicates a lack of depth perception, a deficiency that is both physical and intellectual. In order to deal with such barbaric creatures, Odysseus must deny not only who he is but what he is, so that when Polyphemos asks his name, he answers, “Nobody” (in Greek, *Outis*). This may seem to us like a fairly primitive trick, and we may laugh at Polyphemos for falling for it, but it has a deeper meaning for *The Odyssey*. By denying his identity, by saying that he is “Nobody,” he succeeds in saving most of his men, as well as himself. And when he does assert his true self by yelling out his name as they depart the Cyclopes’ island, he dooms his men and condemns himself to more years away from home. The point that is made in this episode, and throughout much of the poem, is that identity, selfhood, can be dangerous. It must be understood and controlled. Consequently, Odysseus must even visit the Underworld, where he learns of his future—that his death will come from the sea—and where he meets his mother, who has died from grief during his absence, because he was such a good son and because she loved him so much. His love for his mother, his identity as a good son, has killed her. In short, everything we do, the good and the bad, has unforeseen consequences. The poet always comments on the ironies of human existence.

It should be obvious now that every part of the poem—every character, every episode—contributes to the overall effect of the poem. Nothing is extraneous and nothing is out of place, though we as readers must often exercise our own intelligence to see and understand the connections. In this sense, this three thousand-year-old poem is interactive, as literature tends to be. It shows us the stories of Penelope, Telemachos, and Odysseus, but we as modern readers must put those stories together, see where they lead us.

Usually a writer will help us in this task. A writer may focus on particular words or images to stress a point, or a writer may repeat particular kinds of scenes with significant variations, as we saw in *The Iliad*. In *The Odyssey*, the poet helps us by having numerous characters

refer to yet another story, one that seems at first to have nothing to do with Odysseus, the story of Agamemnon's homecoming. This story would have been known to the earliest audience of *The Odyssey*, but we may need to be reminded of it.

After the Achaians' victory at Troy, most of the leading warriors had trouble with their homecomings. Many, in fact, died before they could return home, and in the course of *The Odyssey* we hear about the fates of Nestor, Aias, Menelaos, and others. Most prominent, however, is the story of Agamemnon, who reached home relatively easily, only to be killed almost immediately by his wife Klytimestra and her lover Aigisthos, the latter of whom was killed several years later by Agamemnon's son Orestes. (Some three centuries after *The Odyssey* was completed, the Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote a trilogy of play, *The Oresteaid*, based on this story. The focus of Aeschylus' works, as well as numerous elements of the plot, is quite different from what we see in *The Odyssey*, though like all the Greek tragedies, they are well worth reading.) The story of Agamemnon is referred to prominently by Athene in Book I, by Nestor in Book III, by Menelaos in Book IV, by the occupants of the Underworld (including Agamemnon himself) in Book XI, and by Odysseus in Book XIII). Why? Clearly this story stands in sharp contrast to most of *The Odyssey*. Agamemnon, as we saw in *The Iliad* is a man of force and brutality, but his physical power counts for little when he returns home. His return itself is without obstacles, and he learns nothing from his experiences, unlike Odysseus, whose return is difficult but provides him a vital education. Klytimestra has hardly been faithful during Agamemnon's absence and she plays an active role in his death, whereas Penelope remains faithful throughout Odysseus' doubly long absence. (Of course, unlike Odysseus, Agamemnon came home with a captured woman, Kassandra, whom Klytimestra also killed. Agamemnon really is not terribly bright.) And Telemachos joins his father in combatting their enemies, while Orestes was forced to seek vengeance on his own. The characters in Odysseus' household all learn to subordinate their selfish desires to the greater good of the family, whereas in Agamemnon's household each character operates independently, rather like the Cyclopes, looking out only for him or herself. In fact, the two stories once again return us to the question of identity by focusing our attention on how these characters behave

and why they do so. It is revealing that the ghost of Agamemnon tells Odysseus what he learned from his bloody homecoming, that women are untrustworthy. Still the same old introspective Agamemnon that we saw in *The Iliad*. He contrasts sharply with Odysseus, who learns so much from his adventures, including that he absolutely must trust women.

There is one other aspect of *The Odyssey* that should be covered in this brief introduction, the role of the bards. There are a number of bards who appear in the poem, the most important of whom are Demodokos, the bard of the Phaiakians, and Phemios, the bard in Odysseus' house. There are a number of reasons that a reader should pay close attention to these bards. One is that they give us an idea of how a Homeric poet might have operated. After meals, the bards are brought in to recite in poetic form the exploits of some hero, providing what we would call after-dinner entertainment. It is especially interesting that Demodokos is blind, since Homer (if such a person existed) was reputed to be blind. In fact, bards in oral cultures tend not to be blind, but literate cultures assume that only blind people would be able to memorize so much poetry. Of course, as I explained in the chapter on *The Iliad*, we are not really talking about memorization but oral composition. Another thing that is important about the bards concerns Odysseus directly. While he is with the hospitable Phaiakians, in disguise, Demodokos tells a story about Odysseus. That is, Odysseus has become a hero, the subject of heroic poetry, in his own lifetime. Odysseus, who has been cut off from society for so many years, is shocked to realize that he has become the stuff of legend. So moved is he that he weeps (again). What Homer has done here is to create a fascinating mirror effect, a meta-narrative: within a poem about Odysseus, we see the creation of a poem about Odysseus. Odysseus becomes the audience to his own story, just as we become the audience to this story, which, as it relates to human identity, to the vicissitudes of human existence, is also our story.

Finally, we see the honor that is paid to the bards. Poets love to write about the importance of poetry, naturally, and the poet might well be exaggerating the role of the bards, but it is clear that Demodokos is a respected member of the court who receives all sorts of

special considerations. And Phemios, who is accused of collusion with the suitors back in Ithaka, is given the benefit of the doubt and spared. Perhaps the poet is simply glorifying poets, but more likely what we see is how important poets were to the society that produced these poems.

I have tried to make this discussion of *The Odyssey* shorter and less detailed than the discussion of *The Iliad*, partly because reading *The Iliad* is itself a preparation for reading *The Odyssey* and partly because *The Odyssey* presents fewer problems for modern readers, who tend to be more familiar with romance than with epic. There are fewer battle scenes, Odysseus' adventures are already well-known, and the poem is set on a smaller scale. It still has cosmic overtones, but not to the same extent as *The Iliad*. However foreign *The Odyssey* might be to us, its domestic concerns, as well as Odysseus' adventures, still resonate. He just wants to get home, to be with his wife and son and the loyal members of his household. He, like Achilles, is aware of the dark side of human life, and he knows after his visit to the Underworld that he is fated to go wandering yet again, but we all know that human happiness is fleeting. What *The Odyssey* confirms for us is that human happiness is a possibility that can be found in the mundane.

Incidentally, for readers who really like *The Odyssey*, there are two modern works based on it that may be of interest. One is Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, and the other, loosely related to *The Odyssey*, is Derek Walcott's beautiful and effective *Omeros*.

## *The Aeneid*

I am including a few pages here on Virgil's *Aeneid* because I know that readers who have finished *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* will want to read this third great poem of adventure from antiquity. That last sentence can be a bit misleading, however. It is easy for us to think of these three poems dating from antiquity as being almost contemporaneous, but we must remember that the *Aeneid* was written, that is, it was composed with pen and ink, between seven and eight hundred

years after the other two were finally written down. Eight hundred years is a relatively long time. Imagine if someone today wrote a series of laws to accompany the Magna Carta, which was written in 1215. So many things about our world have changed that it would seem silly to do so. Between about 800 BCE and Virgil's death in 19 BCE, many things had also changed. Greece was no longer a major power (though it was still a major influence), but Rome was in the process of becoming an empire. Greek ideals had been transformed into Roman ideals. Oral culture had largely been replaced by written culture in many areas. Ideas about heroism had changed. Even ideas about Troy had changed, since the Romans considered themselves descendants of Trojan warriors and could hardly be expected to feel sympathy for the Greeks, whom they were still in the process of displacing. So *The Aeneid* is a very different poem from its two most famous predecessors, even though in so many ways it is based on those earlier poems.

Before we get to *The Aeneid* itself, a bit of history is in order. In the third century BCE, a struggle began for control of the Mediterranean. The city that won this struggle would have the opportunity to develop great wealth and power. The contestants were Rome, a city that had developed prominence and power in Italy, and Carthage, a city in that part of North Africa that is now Tunisia. In the three Punic Wars (which took place over a span of one hundred twenty years) Rome soundly defeated Carthage and was launched on its way toward become the empire that we know.

But the road toward empire was not smooth, and the history of Rome in the first century BCE is the history of external conquests and internal power struggles. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, civil war broke out, with Marc Antony and Caesar's nephew Octavius on one side and the assassins, led by Brutus, on the other. After Brutus was defeated, there was further war between Antony and Octavian, until finally Octavian was victorious and established himself as Augustus, the sole ruler over what had become a vast empire. Under Augustus, relative peace broke out, order was restored to everyday life, and the arts flourished. Among the poets who wrote during the reign of Augustus were Horace, Ovid (who was eventually exiled from

Rome for having somehow offended the emperor), and, perhaps the greatest of all, Virgil.

Virgil's earliest poems are *The Eclogues*, a series of poems that describe the lives, conversations, and poetry of a group of ostensible shepherds. I hope I am not insulting shepherds when I say that real shepherds have never behaved the way Virgil's shepherds do (though Virgil helped to set the example that pastoral poetry would follow even into our own time). These shepherds are eloquent, philosophical, and deeply concerned with issues that were vital to the developing empire. Actually, Virgil was using isolated country settings to confront important issues that concerned him throughout his life. The same is true, though even less directly, about his next work, *The Georgics*. But his greatest achievement was *The Aeneid*, on which he was still working when he died. In fact, on his deathbed he is reputed to have asked that the manuscript be destroyed, though no one is quite sure why. One theory is that the poem was not finished—we can tell that it is unfinished because there are a number of lines that are metrically incorrect and it is likely that Virgil would have corrected them had he lived. Some readers also think that the poem stops without a conclusion, that it seems to end in the middle of an episode. Supposedly Virgil would have supplied a more appropriate conclusion had he lived. As I will show, I agree with those who think that the poem ends exactly as it is supposed to end. Yet another possibility is that Virgil realized that the poem is not the unalloyed praise of the new empire that Augustus and other Romans expected. Certainly the poem does praise Rome and its emperor, but it also contains pointed warnings about what the empire could become. Virgil could see clearly enough that in the greatness of Rome lay the seeds of its destruction, and he tried to warn his contemporaries so that they could emphasize the good and guard against the flaws that were inherent in Rome. Perhaps on his deathbed he worried about how that approach would be viewed. We simply do not know what he was thinking. We can only be thankful that his wishes were not carried out and the poem survived.

Until relatively recently, when Latin ceased to be a required language for virtually anyone who claimed to be educated, *The Aeneid* was one of the most extensively read and influential poems in history. Even

if students did not love it, they read it. The Latin is relatively easy and the story is good. In the Middle Ages, the poem was given Christian readings (though Virgil had died in 19 BCE). At times it was even a custom that when a person had a problem or an important decision to make, he (it was usually a he) would open *The Aeneid* at random and point to a line at random and then interpret that line as an answer to the problem. In the early fourteenth century, Dante used Virgil as his guide through Hell and most of Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*. Virgil continued to influence authors of epics (or mock epics or near epics) well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Henry Fielding's novel *Amelia* is heavily indebted to *The Aeneid*, as are scenes from numerous other works. There are also operas based on the poem, like Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Berlioz' *Les Troyens*.

Why has this poem exercised such power for so long? As I already mentioned, it tells a good story, full of romance, adventure, and memorable scenes and characters. It also raises a number of questions that have continued to engage people's minds over the two thousand years since it was written. Virgil may have used *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but he gave them his own stamp. Even in the poem's first words, Virgil announces his debt to Homer: "Arma virumque cano," I sing of arms and of a man (in Allen Mandelbaum's translation). The first six of the poem's twelve books are about Aeneas and his adventures as he sets out from Troy and ultimately arrives in Italy. In this section of the poem he is like Odysseus, even to the extent of repeating several of Odysseus' adventures. In this section as well Virgil focuses on Aeneas as "a man," referring back to the opening line of *The Odyssey*. In the second half of the poem, in which we see Aeneas' struggle to establish himself in Italy, we focus more on the "arms," and this section of the poem recalls *The Iliad*. Thus Virgil has combined these two great poems to create his own masterpiece, but he has done so in order to explore in his own terms what it means to be a Roman, what it means to be Aeneas, what it means to be a human being.

*The Aeneid*, like *The Odyssey*, begins in the middle of the action, tells a bit of the story, and then goes back to the beginning of the story and continues to the end. After a brief introduction, we see Aeneas and his men caught in a storm at sea and shipwrecked at Carthage, where

Aeneas meets Dido, tells her his story, falls in love with her, and then leaves (a point to which we will return). He visits the Underworld and then proceeds to Italy, where he becomes involved in a war to establish his right to stay there. That is the story. We have now to see what Virgil did with it.

From the very beginning, the narrator tells us that Aeneas is a remarkably good man who is being tormented by Juno. Throughout the poem, Juno, queen of the gods and goddess of marriage, stands for the irrational, the illogical, those aspects of the world that disrupt life without seeming to make any kind of sense. Her husband Jove (or Jupiter) is her opposite, but, even though he is all-powerful, he often lets her have her own way. The other important deity in the poem is Venus, goddess of love, mother of Aeneas, and of special importance to Rome. (Roma, the Latin name of Rome, spelled backwards is Amor, the Latin for love!) Unfortunately for Aeneas, Venus and Juno are deadly enemies, to the extent that goddesses can be deadly enemies. At any rate, they do not like each other. This enmity between the goddess of marriage and the goddess of love does tell us something about how the ancients regarded love and marriage: as we see in the poem, love and marriage are in no way connected.

Exactly why does Juno hate Aeneas? As we learn at the beginning of the poem, Juno feels a special affection for Carthage, and she knows that Aeneas is destined to establish Rome, which will overcome and displace Carthage. From a Roman point of view, her irrationality appears in two ways here: she irrationally favors Carthage over Rome and she irrationally believes that she can counter fate. This mixture of motives is itself proof that Juno's hatred is basically irrational, but of course Aeneas' innocence does nothing to ease his suffering, of which there is plenty. Thus *The Aeneid*, though it is about the triumph of Aeneas and of Rome, is ultimately a very sad work. As he moves toward his military triumph, Aeneas is forced to abandon everything that is important to him—love, family, friends, repose. He becomes increasingly isolated and tied to his sense of duty, and he becomes less rounded, more one-dimensional.

Throughout the poem, Aeneas is referred to as “pius Aeneas.” The Latin “pius” means more than we mean when we say “pious.” It

does mean godfearing, but it also means something like religiously and morally upstanding. As the story progresses, Aeneas realizes that he has duties to carry out and those duties are more important than his own happiness. Those duties are presented most poignantly in two separate episodes. The first occurs in Aeneas' description of the fall of Troy. Having been surprised by the ruse of the Trojan horse, the Trojans are being routed by the Greek forces. In the chaos created by the fire, fighting, and panic, Aeneas, who knows that the battle has been lost, becomes separated from his wife Creusa. When he tries to find her, he finds only her ghost, who briefly predicts his future and disappears. And when Aeneas finally does escape from Troy, he does so leading his young son by the hand and carrying his aged father on his back. In this sequence, we see first the beginning of the process by which Aeneas is gradually cut off from Troy and from family affection. There is little from his past in Troy that he can take with him into this future. This point is emphasized by the image of him with his father and his son. He bears his father, symbol of the past, on his back, and leads his son, symbol of the future, by the hand. In a sense, he offers simply a connection between the past, Troy, and the future, Rome, and in that role he must continually become depersonalized, especially after the death of his father, when he himself becomes the symbol of both the past and the present. Furthermore, his love for his wife, whom he seeks frantically in the falling city, shows him to be a passionate man who cares deeply for those around him, and his sorrow at losing her is quite moving.

We can see this point being carried further in the most famous episode of the poem, the story of Dido and Aeneas in Book IV. At first glance, Dido and Aeneas would seem to be a nearly perfect couple. Both are powerful leaders, both have been exiled from their native lands, both have been widowed. Moreover, they like each other. Unfortunately, there are a number of obstacles in their way, primarily fate—Dido is fated to found Carthage and Aeneas to found Rome. Juno and Venus, patron goddesses of those cities, try to outmaneuver each other in defense of their cities, and Dido and Aeneas are their victims. These two tragic figures are allowed to fall in love because Juno hopes to keep Aeneas in Carthage, away from Rome, but the status of their love is highly ambiguous. When they go out hunting, they

are trapped in a cave during a thunderstorm. There they consummate their love. Such love is the realm of Venus. The problem that will arise is whether this lovemaking constitutes an actual marriage, the realm of Juno. Dido thinks it does, but the narrator implies that she thinks so only in order to justify the lovemaking. Clearly Virgil has made this situation intentionally ambiguous: Dido and Aeneas are in love, but Dido considers them married and Aeneas does not. I can hear readers, at least some of them, muttering, "How typical!" but Aeneas is not simply ignoring his responsibility or commitment. He actually loves Dido and he sees in Carthage a chance to put his life back together. Consequently, when Jove sends Mercury to tell him that he must leave Carthage, that he has a duty to fulfill in founding Rome, he is reluctant to go, though he eventually does. But he leaves not on a whim, not because he lacks commitment to Dido. He leaves because the gods order him to. If Aeneas errs in this situation, he does so only in not telling Dido that he must leave until she confronts him, at which point he is honest with her, expressing his view that they are not married and telling her that he is leaving against his will.

Opinions about Aeneas' behavior at this point have varied considerably over the centuries. Many readers have taken Dido's part and been highly critical of Aeneas. (See Dido's letter to Aeneas in Ovid's *Heroides* for an example.) For these readers, Aeneas is the epitome of the unfaithful lover, the seducer who abandons his helpless lover. Other readers have accepted Aeneas' explanation that he is powerless, since he must follow the orders of the gods. I side with the latter argument, not because Aeneas' behavior is admirable but because he does it so clearly against his own wishes. Having lost his beloved wife, his city, his father, and many of his companions, Aeneas would like nothing better than to settle down with Dido, to live in peace. Of course, as a result of their love, work on building Carthage has stopped, so their love is not an unalloyed blessing for either side. Aeneas, however, must fulfill his destiny, regardless of how painful that destiny may be. His duty to Rome must take precedence over everything else in his life.

Virgil is here talking about what it means to be a Roman: it means responsibility rather than privilege, self-sacrifice rather than self-aggrandizement. Personal happiness cannot be as important as the

welfare of the empire. Or can it? For Virgil is not merely declaring that Romans must sacrifice all for the empire. Perhaps he is also questioning whether that is the case. Not only must Aeneas abandon Dido, but he must also, when he arrives in Italy, marry Lavinia, who may, for all we know, be a delightful young woman but who is presented in the poem as virtually without a personality. Aeneas' marriage will be based not on passion but on the needs of Rome.

This picture of what it means to be a Roman is ambivalent, as, I suspect, Virgil meant it to be. On the one hand it demonstrates the importance of the empire and the virtue of duty to the empire. Being responsible for an empire, being a Roman, requires a particular kind of selflessness. On the other hand, that duty to the empire hurts people: in this situation it hurts Dido, it hurts Aeneas, and in the course of the poem it hurts numerous other characters. What is the solution? Virgil offers no solution, since one purpose of literature is to raise questions at least as much as it is to offer answers. Clearly the empire is vitally important to Virgil. He sees it as a means of civilizing the world by bringing law and order. In Book VI, when Aeneas visits the Underworld, his father shows him a vision of Rome's future. Aeneas sees Augustus, the emperor who will restore the golden age to Rome. A golden age—this is the promise of Rome. But are people willing, and should they be willing, to pay the price for that promise? After all, Aeneas sacrifices almost everything and in return receives only the prediction of Roman glory. As a character, as an individual human being, he gradually disappears from the poem. If that is what Rome demands, it is a heavy price, but not to pay it is to go against the gods. It is to dally with Dido while neither city is being built.

And what are Aeneas' alternatives? He could, of course, die, as so many Trojans did, but death is hardly a solution. Or he could do what Helenus and Andromache do, in one of the saddest episodes of the poem. As Aeneas wanders around the Mediterranean looking for the land that has been promised him, he finds a city being ruled by Helenus, a son of Priam, and Andromache, the widow of Hektor. This city is a replica of Troy, with its tower, its gates, and its river. Troy may have been destroyed, but here it has been recreated, although this re-creation differs significantly from its original in being much smaller

and in having a little stream instead of a great river. At first Aeneas is happy to see this little Troy. Being there is like being home again. But it is not the same as being home: this Troy is a miniature. It mimes rather than replaces the real city. Helenus and Andromache are stuck in the past. So tied are they to Troy that they are willing to dwell in this poor reproduction of Troy. Aeneas knows that he cannot go home again, that Troy is gone forever, and that he must move not in the direction of the past but of the future, even if that future is uncertain and frightening. He carried his father on his back as a burden, but he led his son by the hand into the future.

So Aeneas has no other choice. He has his duty, which has been dictated to him by the gods and by fate, and he must fulfill that duty without hesitation or complaint. It is for this reason that as the poem progresses, Aeneas becomes so much less human. He represents the philosophy of Stoicism, or that aspect of it that called on human beings to carry out their duties in the face of adversities without showing human passions. Stoicism is in many ways an admirable doctrine, but, as the end of *The Aeneid* shows, it is not always a doctrine that human beings can follow. Whether they should try is another question altogether.

I should note that the second half of *The Aeneid*, the half that is more like *The Iliad*, is not as well known as the first half. The first half contains more separate adventures, and though Aeneas may lack Odysseus' panache as he experiences or recalls those adventures, the stories themselves are gripping and moving. In the second half of the poem, however, we have the fight for Italy and all the complications that accompany it. That aspect of the story is not so vital to modern readers, though the issues that Virgil confronts in the second half are vital and often relate to issues that were raised in the first six books. I will not summarize the plot except to say that many of Aeneas' troubles continue to be the result of Juno's enmity, which has become even stronger (if that is possible) since the death of Dido. One of Juno's main tools for trying to thwart Aeneas is Turnus, who was the king of the Rutulians, one of the peoples who lived in Italy, and who was originally supposed to marry Lavinia. Since Aeneas is destined to rule Italy and wed Lavinia, we might be able to understand why Turnus

is more than a little upset at this arrival and opposes him as much as he can, but, though Turnus is clearly the enemy in the poem, he is not presented as a thoroughly villainous person. He is, if one word can be used to describe him, outdated. His notions of heroism are old-fashioned, right out of *The Iliad* perhaps. He is not prepared to meet the future, which is represented by the arrival of Aeneas, and he launches a suicidal war in a fruitless attempt to preserve the values of the past. Those values, Virgil implies, may once have been admirable, but the future belongs to Rome, with its potential for good (and with its potential for abusing its power as well).

This opposition is evident throughout the poem's last six books, but it is especially obvious in Book XII. In that book both Turnus and Aeneas, under the influence of war, become vicious killers. Turnus is compared to a bull preparing to fight, and Aeneas becomes associated with brutal slaughter and violence (just as Rome would be). Finally, as Aeneas and Turnus face each other in the poem's climactic battle, Jove and Juno settle the heavenly aspect of the conflict. Juno at long last recognizes that Aeneas must triumph, and she asks only that the Latin language and certain native customs be preserved. Jove grants her wishes—Rome will not be simply a re-established Troy but it will combine the finest qualities of the Trojans and the native Latins—and Juno withdraws her opposition. At this point, Turnus is doomed to lose, even though the final battle has become unnecessary. The only significant question remaining is what form his loss will take, and the answer to that question brings the poem to its conclusion in a cloud of uncertainty.

As the battle progresses, Aeneas brings Turnus to his knees with a cast of his spear. At this point, everyone knows that the battle is essentially over, and Turnus appeals to Aeneas for mercy, concluding his moving speech with a plea that Aeneas will abandon hatred. In the face of this plea, Aeneas hesitates. Why should he kill Turnus, who has admitted defeat? Aeneas has been victorious and it would make political sense to spare Turnus, to show that he can be as merciful in victory as he can be fierce in battle; but then, as he is on the verge of agreeing, he sees the belt that Turnus is wearing, the belt that Turnus took after his earlier victory over the young warrior Pallas, who was dear to Aeneas.

Aeneas responds wrathfully, then stabs Turnus in the chest, and the poem ends with Turnus' soul hastening to the Underworld.

That's it. There is no more. No wonder that people think the poem is unfinished. What kind of a conclusion is that? In fact it is a very clever conclusion, for it ends the poem by posing some of the key problems that faced Rome in Virgil's time. Aeneas' response to Turnus is clearly not a Stoic response. Although it might seem reasonable for him to kill Turnus, he makes his decision not on the basis of reason but out of passion. Even "pius Aeneas," the great forefather and exemplar of Rome, cannot always act according to the dictates of Stoicism. What does that conclusion say about those lesser mortals who were Virgil's contemporaries? If even Aeneas is overcome by his ferocity and his passions, how well will the Romans of the empire behave with the most powerful army in the world? Will they be the masters of themselves and of their power or will they lose themselves and become the slaves of their own might? I frame these points as questions because Virgil, by ending the poem as he does, raises the questions. We must account for Aeneas' behavior not simply because we have to know about Aeneas but because we have to know about what Aeneas represents, the ideals of Rome. If Aeneas fails, what are the prospects for Rome?

These questions have been inherent in the poem from the beginning. For instance, when Neptune calms the seas after the storm that opens Book I, Virgil compares him to a righteous man who can control the passions of a rebellious, rock-throwing mob. The very oddness of that comparison calls our attention to it, to the use of reason to overcome passion, and to the existence of rebellious mobs in Virgil's Rome. Throughout the poem Virgil draws our attention to such problems, and we know from the history of the Roman Empire that Virgil saw clearly into both the virtues and the potential failings of that empire. We should hardly be surprised that medieval readers thought of him as a prophet.

There is one more episode that I would like to comment on briefly, Aeneas' voyage to the Underworld in Book VI. At this point in the poem, Aeneas visits the Underworld so he can receive further instructions from his father, and Virgil is clearly imitating Odysseus' visit

to the Underworld in *The Odyssey*. But Aeneas' visit is quite different from Odysseus'. Aside from the more highly developed picture of an Underworld that Virgil presents, there is another significant difference. Odysseus, on his visit, learns much about himself—about his role in his mother's death, about his ultimate fate, and about his way home to domestic bliss. Aeneas learns about the doctrine of reincarnation and is told about the future history of Rome. All that is important here is the future of Rome, and the only indication that Aeneas has any important individuality comes when he sees the ghosts of the Greek warriors, who flee before him, and when he sees the ghost of Dido, who rejects his attempts at explanation and also flees from him. Otherwise his individuality is entirely subordinated to the cause of Rome.

Another interesting aspect of Book VI is the way it encapsulates the whole poem. It unites the human and the superhuman, and it even includes one character, the Sibyl, who entered the Roman Catholic liturgy in the hymn called the "Dies Irae." Book VI, like the poem as a whole, focuses on Aeneas' duty and on his fate. It proclaims the future of Rome in glorious terms, and it tempers that glory by culminating in a description of the sadness of human life. This mixture of glory and melancholy typifies *The Aeneid*. In Book VI, Aeneas' father Anchises describes the great heroes of Roman history—Romulus, Numa, Caesar, Augustus (a bit of flattery there)—but then Aeneas notices one despondent spirit and Anchises explains that this is the ghost of Marcellus, Augustus' nephew, who, despite his many natural gifts and the promise he holds for Rome, is destined to die young. As always in *The Aeneid*, the promise of Roman glory is suffused with an air of sadness, of promises that cannot be fulfilled.

And just as Book XII ends on a puzzling note, so does Book VI. When Aeneas leaves the Underworld, he finds two gates. One is made of horn, and through "true Shades" can enter the world. The other is made of polished ivory, and through that gate false dreams enter the world. When Aeneas leaves the Underworld, his father sends him through the ivory gate, the gate of false dreams. Why? Is Virgil casting doubt on the veracity of his vision of Roman history? No one knows for sure why Virgil took this step, though interpretations abound, but the concluding passage about Marcellus and the exit through the gate

of false dreams certainly subdue the chauvinism of the rest of the book. Like the end of Book XII, the end of Book VI is an undiluted warning to Virgil's contemporaries. And like so much in this poem, it brings in that eternal note of sadness, of potential failure, that is such an integral part of the poem.

If Virgil's *Aeneid* contained only praise for Rome and the glorification of Aeneas, it would be a far lesser poem. It was part of Virgil's genius that he could write so honestly about the city he loved. We can only be grateful that his dying wish to have his poem destroyed was not followed.

## THE MIDDLE AGES

Although no works from the Middle Ages are covered in this volume, readers can find similar chapters on a number of medieval works in my earlier book *Reading the Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland, 2003).

## Chapter 4

# Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*

Sir Philip Sidney is not well known by today's reading public, but he is actually better known as an author today than he was in his own time. When he died, at a young age in 1586, he was honored as a statesman and a warrior, but only a small group of family and friends knew him as a prolific and accomplished writer. Nevertheless, he was one of the most important writers of his time, which is especially surprising when we realize that even he did not consider himself primarily a writer. Like those who honored him, he thought of himself as a courtier, a statesman, and a warrior, but had he not written some of the most important works of the English Renaissance, he would be little more than a footnote to history, known only to Renaissance scholars. It was his writing that made him into a Renaissance man, that immortalized him, and that made him such a fascinating figure. Poetry does triumph over arms.

Philip Sidney was born in 1554, received an excellent renaissance education, which means that he was fluent in the classics, travelled extensively on the European continent, and spent time at the court of Queen Elizabeth, where his headstrong ways often got him into trouble and forced him on occasion to be exiled from the court. In fact, it was during some of those periods of exile and enforced idleness that Sidney wrote several of his works. In 1585, he accompanied his

uncle, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to the Netherlands, where they were supposed to help the Protestant Dutch in their struggle with the Catholic Spanish who were trying to dominate their land. The expedition was a thorough disaster, largely because Leicester ignored the queen's orders. In 1586, Sidney was wounded when he and a small group of men, again against orders, attacked a much larger Spanish force. Although his wound appeared to be healing, it suddenly turned gangrenous and Sidney died shortly thereafter at the age of nearly thirty-two.

Sidney's death was widely mourned, but he was not buried until five months later, when an enormous funeral was staged in London. Cynics believe that the funeral was intended to distract public attention from the recent execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. They are probably correct. Elizabeth knew how to handle her people. Sidney's death was also accompanied by hundreds of eulogies, many in Latin and Greek and one in incomprehensible Hebrew, as well as many in English, including Edmund Spenser's "Astrophel."

None of Sidney's works was published during his lifetime, which is hardly surprising since, like many others at that time, he did not write for publication. Instead he wrote for a relatively small coterie of friends, family, and fellow poets. It was only after his death, in circumstances that we still do not completely understand, that Sidney's works were published, but even before their publication they were influential, and after their publication they were popular indeed. King Charles I, in the next century, quoted from Sidney's *Arcadia* before his execution.

What were those works and why are they so important? Sidney's major works are *The Defence of Poesy* (also known as *The Apology for Poetry*), a treatise in which he defends poetry against numerous attacks and in the process discusses the purposes and techniques of poetry; the *Arcadia*, a long prose romance that exists in two major versions (since Sidney left it partially revised at the time of his death); and *Astrophel and Stella*, the sonnet sequence that will be the subject of this chapter. There are a few shorter works as well, including a translation of the biblical Psalms that Sidney began with his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke, and that was completed by her. (Mary was an accomplished poet in her own right.) Even these few works were an

amazing accomplishment for someone who died so young and who had so many other interests. I still find what Sidney wrote in *The Defence of Poesy* valuable for the study of literature, and much of what he says has influenced this book.

At the time Sidney started writing, English literature had not achieved the eminence it was to reach before the end of the sixteenth century. The century had begun in a positive way for literature: the War of the Roses was over, a vigorous, young Henry VIII was on the throne, and England seemed poised for literary greatness. Poets like John Skelton, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, were writing in the traditions of the Continental Renaissance. Then came the English Reformation and both political and cultural chaos descended on England. In the middle part of the century, poets began writing again, but most of them were not terribly distinguished. The best of them was probably George Gascoigne, who deserves to be more widely read than he generally is. Then in 1579, a young poet named Edmund Spenser published *The Shepheardes Calender*, a series of twelve poems using a variety of verse forms, and a new age of English poetry was born. Significantly, *The Shepheardes Calender* was dedicated to Philip Sidney.

The major works written during the 1580's were Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, whose first three (of six) books were published in 1590, and the works of Sidney, though they were not published until later in the 1590's. Even before their publication, however, they had circulated in manuscript; and in the 1590's they were followed by numerous prose romances, while sonnet sequences became one of the most popular forms of poetry. Sequences were composed by such notable poets as Spenser (the *Amoretti*), Samuel Daniel (*Delia*), and Shakespeare. Even in death Sidney was a trendsetter, and as we read his sonnets today, we can still be amazed at how current they seem.

Before we can proceed to *Astrophel and Stella*, we must give some consideration to the sonnet as a poetic form. In the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth wrote "Scorn not the Sonnet," a sentiment that may reveal how the sonnet was regarded in Wordsworth's time, but in the sixteenth century the sonnet was extraordinarily popular. In fact, for more than two centuries before Sidney wrote, the sonnet had been

one of the favorite forms of Continental poets, largely because of the influence of the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch. Petrarch wrote hundreds of sonnets, mostly about a woman named Laura. We know that this Laura actually existed, and we also know that Petrarch never let the fact that he had had no personal contact with her interfere with his writing love poems to and about her. The first half of his collection of sonnets consists of straightforward love poems, in which he bewails his misfortune in never having his love returned. But then Laura died and Petrarch, like Dante before him, realized that his lady was in some way a heavenly being who had been sent to give him guidance, so that the second half of his sonnet collection both mourns her and celebrates her heavenly attributes.

Our concern at the moment is the sonnets of the first half, the ones in which Petrarch complains about unrequited love. In these sonnets he uses many of the conventions of that medieval form of love that is often called, with some license, courtly love: the lover virtually worships his lady, but at the same time he suffers. He alternates between burning fevers and shivers of cold, he cannot eat or drink, he certainly cannot sleep. He is, in short, rather like a lovesick teenager (and I mean no disrespect either to Petrarch or to lovesick teenagers—those teenagers, whether they know it or not, are also using ancient conventions). So insistent was Petrarch about his woes in love that modern critics often refer to his tone as the “Petrarchan moan.” Although the poetry can be ravishingly beautiful, cynical modern readers may be excused if they occasionally find Petrarch’s sentiments at least slightly excessive, but in the centuries following his death, his poetry was both popular and influential. He had numerous imitators on the Continents, and when Wyatt and Surrey began to write English sonnets, they started by penning translations of Petrarch’s works and gradually moved to creating their own works in the Petrarchan style. Sidney took Petrarch a step further.

By the time Sidney began writing *Astrophel and Stella* in the early 1580’s, the Petrarchan conventions were well known in England, but like all great writers, Sidney did not merely adopt the conventions. Instead he adapted them, made them his own, transformed them.

Furthermore, it was not only the conventions of love that Sidney transformed. He also transformed the sonnet form itself.

What is a sonnet? Basically, it is a fourteen-line poem with five or six feet to a line. That does not seem terribly complicated, but poets have used that fourteen-line form in a variety of ways, changing rhyme schemes, meters, and even the organization of the poems. For example, many sonnets use the first eight lines (the octet) to express some sort of problem or dilemma and the last six lines (the sestet) to offer a solution. (We saw this scheme in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur" in the Introduction.) But there are sonnets in which those numbers are reversed. There are also sonnets in which the first twelve lines explore a point and the last two (the couplet) comment on that point. Or there are sonnets in which the first thirteen lines make a clear point which is then contradicted by the last line. When these structural variations (and others) are combined with the large variety of rhyme schemes that poets have used in their sonnets, the number of permutations that are possible becomes astronomical, and poets, opportunistic creatures that they are, have used the versatile sonnet as a means of performing poetic acrobatics. John Keats, the great Romantic poet, records in his letters instances in which he and his friends held sonnet-writing competitions.

In fact, writing sonnets is a very difficult task. Try it. Not only do the rhyme and meter have to be precise, but a complete thought must be presented and examined in a limited space. I like to think of sonnets as diamonds, small, multi-faceted, and precious. That Sidney wrote one hundred eight of them for *Astrophel and Stella* (Shakespeare's collection consists of one hundred fifty) is amazing. Not all of them are perfect, but enough of them are to convince us that Sidney was a very great poet indeed. Furthermore, Sidney used his sonnet sequence to tell a fairly clear story. As in Spenser's *Amoretti*, we can see the outlines of a plot in *Astrophel and Stella*, though the *Amoretti* ends happily, culminating in the "Epithalamion," a wedding song, while *Astrophel and Stella* ends in sadness. In both of the sonnet sequences we can see the individual sonnets as isolated "spots" in an extended period of time, and each of those "spots" illustrates some aspect of the speaker's relationship with his beloved or, more often, some aspect of the speaker's consciousness.

In *Astrophel and Stella*, for example, though Astrophel appears to direct our attention to Stella, almost every poem focuses somehow on his thought processes. There are, however, several poems in the sequence, especially among the eleven “songs” that are interspersed among the sonnets, in which Stella is given more objective attention.

There is one more background point that we must consider before we actually get to the poetry, the question of autobiography in *Astrophel and Stella*. Sidney’s use of the names “Astrophel” and “Stella” is a nice touch, since the former means “star-lover” and the latter, appropriately enough, means “star,” and we know that Sidney was occasionally referred to as “Astrophel,” which was the name Spenser used for his elegy after Sidney’s death. But to what extent is the sequence autobiographical? It has long been thought that Astrophel actually represented Sidney, while Stella was Penelope Devereux, sister of the Earl of Essex and wife of Robert, Lord Rich. In fact, several of the sonnets seem to refer to Lord Rich, for example Sonnet 24, “Rich fools there be,” which uses the word “rich” four times. Readers who emphasize this aspect of the sequence try to identify when each poem was written by referring to episodes in the lives of Philip and Penelope and examining the course of their alleged adulterous relationship. I reject such a reading of the poems for several reasons. First of all, my major interest is not in the life of Philip Sidney, fascinating though he may be. I read poems for the value of the poems, not because they might illuminate the poet’s biography. Furthermore, poets may use elements from their biographies in their works, but they transform those elements. The characters Astrophel and Stella may be modeled on Philip and Penelope, but the sequence is not the story of their love. And most of all, Astrophel, as we will see, is something of a dope, to put the case as nicely as possible, and it is difficult to believe that Sidney would present himself in the way he presents Astrophel. If he did, he surely had a poor self-image! Astrophel, we must remember at all times, is a fictional character who writes love poems both to and about his equally fictional Stella. The voice we hear in the poems is that of Astrophel, not Sidney, though Sidney is the intelligence that creates and controls the voice. It is essential that readers maintain this distinction.

And now to the poems. The sequence opens with an introductory sonnet in which Astrophel explains why and how he is writing his sonnets:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
 That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;  
 Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;  
 Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;  
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain;  
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.  
 But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;  
 Invention, nature's child, fled ste-dame study's blows;  
 And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.  
 Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,  
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,  
 'Fool,' said my muse to me; 'look in thy heart, and write.'

We can see immediately that the poem consists of three sentences. The first eight lines comprise one long sentence, while the second and third sentences are each three lines long. Those first eight lines are also tied together by rhyme, for the rhyme scheme is a-b-a-b-a-b-a-b. The last six lines, however, have a rhyme scheme of c-d-c-d-e-e, which looks like a quatrain (four lines) and a couplet (two lines); but that rhyme scheme stands in a kind of counterpoint to the sense of the poem, since the sentences run c-d-c and d-e-e. Although we may not be conscious of this counterpoint as we read, it does have an effect on our appreciation of the poems, especially since Sidney uses the technique quite frequently. It throws us ever so slightly off balance and calls our attention to the conclusions of the poems in a different way than a single couplet might. (Musically it is analogous to the use of three-not figure, a triplet, against a two-note figure.)

The first line of the poem gives us a great deal of insight into what will follow in the whole sequence. Astrophel begins by telling us that he loves in truth. We may wonder exactly what that means, though it certainly sounds promising, but then he says that he is "fain in verse my love to show." "Fain" means happy or obliged, and in either of those senses we get a picture of Astrophel wanting and needing to

express his love in poetic form, but if we look again at the phrase “fain in verse,” it is hard to believe that the pun on “feign” is unintentional. In other words, Astrophel may protest that he loves in truth, but his language indicates that “loving in truth” may be little more than a pose and he is feigning that love in his verse.

Astrophel’s expectations for that verse are expressed in the next three lines, as he indicates what he wants to accomplish. Sidney, in his *Defence of Poesy*, says that poetry should do two things that lead to its ultimate purpose. It should delight and instruct. If it delights enough, people will want to read it and will therefore be more likely to learn what it teaches. But the ultimate aim of poetry, he says, is to move readers to virtuous action. People who read and are delighted enough to read more should learn what virtuous action is and, since it is more virtuous to perform virtuous actions than not to perform them, should be moved to perform them. Astrophel—*not* Sidney—uses similar reasoning. He wants Stella to find pleasure in his pain, that is, to enjoy reading the poetry in which he describes the pain he suffers because of his love. If she enjoys reading about pain, she will read more, which will make her know about his pain, which will make her pity him, which will move her to bestow grace on him. At first glance, this plan seems straightforward enough, but we must ask what kind of woman would enjoy reading about someone else’s pain. Does Astrophel think that Stella will enjoy his pain? Further, we must ask exactly what it is Astrophel hopes to obtain from her. He says “grace,” but that is at best a vague term. Sidney, as a devout Christian, would have known that in a religious sense “grace” would have meant unmerited favor bestowed by God on human beings, but we may justifiably doubt that this is precisely the meaning that Astrophel has in mind. He may mean that what he hopes to attain is unmerited, but what does he hope to attain? He might mean that he simply wants her to look favorably on him, but that explanation hardly seems likely when we consider the bulk of *Astrophel and Stella*—even before we know what the poems say. More probably, he wants what all writers of love sonnets want, his lady’s love. That love, of course, is almost invariably unattainable. After all, if the lady returned the speaker’s love, there would be no reason for him to write more sonnets and he and his lady might be otherwise occupied, so love poetry flourishes as a result of unrequited love.

But what do we mean when we say that Astrophel desires Stella's love? If grace means "unmerited favor," what kind of favor could Stella give him? There is a hint in this first sonnet, a hint that develops throughout the sequence, that Astrophel desires some kind of sexual favor. I want to emphasize here that Astrophel is probably not aware of the implications of all that he says. In fact, throughout the sequence we can see that Astrophel seldom understands his actions, his words, or even his own feelings. He is not, at this point, being intentionally deceptive. He is, in his limited way, being perfectly honest. It is Sidney, the genius behind Astrophel, who makes his words so ambivalent, because what Sidney is giving us in *Astrophel and Stella* is a portrait of a young man in love, a young man who is not at all certain what it means to be in love. Like so many of the speakers in Renaissance (and medieval) love poetry, he is at least initially confused over the relationship between love and sex. He resembles Romeo in the early sections of *Romeo and Juliet* or Colin Clout in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*: he is a young man who thinks he should be in love and who thinks that he knows how a young man in love should behave.

In pursuit of his goal, whatever that goal may be, Astrophel has sought the proper words to convey his pain, and he has sought them in the works of other poets. He has turned their "leaves," their pages, to find inspiration, which he describes by punning on "leaves." He has turned their leaves to see if, like the leaves of trees, they have any moisture to soothe his "sunburnt brain" (which is one of my favorite phrases in the whole sequence). Why is his brain sunburnt? As the sequence develops, he frequently refers to Stella, his "star," in terms of brightness and light, so perhaps he simply has too much Stella on the brain. Whatever the precise cause may be, however, love has not inspired him. Instead, it has dried up his brain and he has turned to the work of other poets for relief. It is quite clear that Astrophel is not writing poems about Stella but about himself, and even in this first sonnet we can see the problems that plague him until the end.

Astrophel's attempt to harness the words of others is as unsuccessful as we might expect, and he explains, in a mini-allegory, that "Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows." Invention, the ability to construct a poem, is according to Astrophel, a natural

ability, the child of nature. Study can only be the stepmother of invention, and, in keeping with the stereotype of a stepmother, study is cruel to invention, forcing invention to flee. In short, leafing through other poets' works is not helping. Their feet—the metrical units of their poems—simply get in his way. Consequently, he is “great with child to speak and helpless in my throes.” This image of the poet gestating and giving birth to poems is wonderful, for it expresses a truth about the process of poetic composition and about the relationship between poets and their poems. Astrophel knows what he wants to say (or thinks he does), but he cannot get it out. The ideas will not take the proper form no matter how much he struggles with them. Finally, in desperation, he realizes what he must do as his muse, presumably an inner voice, tells him to “look in thy heart, and write.” Surely this advice is good, but the curious reader might well wonder at a young man who claims that he loves truly and yet does not know that his poems should come from his heart. There is at best a kind of naiveté in this declaration, if not a real attempt at “feigning” in verse.

In fact, as we read the poems of *Astrophel and Stella*, we quickly realize that although Astrophel thinks that Stella is his subject, Sidney's subject is actually Astrophel. Stella is certainly a real character, especially later in the sequence when she tries, sometimes gently and sometimes not so gently to dissuade Astrophel from his obsession with her, but generally what we find in this sequence is a revealing portrait of Astrophel, and what it reveals is not always flattering. Although Astrophel writes wonderful poems, those poems are often on the traditional subjects of love poetry rather than reflections of what is in his heart, and frequently they contain hints that undercut the supposed purity of his love.

An example of the former quality, the traditional nature of his subject matter, is sonnet 9, in which Astrophel plays with the traditional blazon, a description of the beloved lady. Astrophel confines himself to describing her face, again in a kind of mini-allegory. Her face, he says, is so beautiful that it is like the court of Queen Virtue: her forehead is like alabaster (women in Elizabethan times wore a heavy coat of white make-up), her hair is like gold, her mouth is like porphyry, and her cheeks are like red and white marble. These may be

valuable materials, and they are surely colorful and beautiful, but they are also cold and hard. Does Astrophel want us to think that she is cold and hard? There is no question that she has been so toward him, though he finds that he is the straw that has been ignited by the heat of her eyes. Furthermore, there is no relation between these hard, cold minerals and the virtue he professes to find in her face.

The word “virtue” also plays a part in the sonnets in which Astrophel undercuts himself, even as early as sonnets 4 and 5. In sonnet 4, he addresses virtue, which he says has created a debate between his will and his wit on the subject of his love. Instead of engaging in the debate and trying to investigate the nature or meaning of his love, however, Astrophel, after referring to “the little reason that is left in me,” concludes that virtue itself will love Stella. That sentiment may be cute, but it also dodges the issue, the very issue that is raised in sonnet 5:

It is most true, that eyes are formed to serve  
The inward light; and that the heavenly part  
Ought to be kind, from whose rules who do swerve,  
Rebels to Nature, strive for their own smart.  
It is most true, what we call Cupid’s dart,  
An image is, which for ourselves we carve;  
And, fools, adore in temple of our heart,  
Till that good god make Church and churchmen starve.  
True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,  
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade  
Which elements with mortal mixture breed;  
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,  
And should in soul up to our country move;  
True; and yet true, that I must Stella love.

In this poem, Astrophel spends thirteen lines declaring Neoplatonic truths about love—Neoplatonism, to offer a very sketchy definition, was a Renaissance philosophy that emphasized the metaphysical value of spiritual rather than physical love. In these thirteen lines, Astrophel argues that the spiritual aspects of love are truly superior. A traditional symbol of fleshly love, Cupid’s arrow, is an image that we create and “adore in temple of our heart”—it is an idol that we worship instead of directing our faith where we should. Instead of thinking about our heavenly goal, we allow ourselves to be distracted by transitory earthly

beauty. Astrophel knows all of these truths, he says, but he persists in loving Stella, implying that his love is largely physical. While the poem is beautifully and cleverly written, it is no longer cute. Rather, it allows Astrophel to express and gloss over serious problems that he should really consider before he continues in his current course. Does he really believe those Neoplatonic sentiments? If he does not, then perhaps he can justify his physical love for Stella. But if he does think those sentiments are true, as he says he does, then he must explain how he can continue loving her the way he does, which apparently is not so spiritual.

Similarly in sonnet 14 Astrophel argues that love is only sinful if we consider faithfulness in word and deed to be sinful, if we consider “a loathing of all loose unchastity” to be sinful, and he concludes, “Then love is sin, and let me sinful be.” In a Romantic poet, such a declaration would be challenging, but in a poet writing in Elizabethan England, it is positively startling. His argument should be that his love is not sinful, not that if what he perceives as love is sinful, then he is willing to be sinful. This point is especially important because Astrophel has clearly not considered what his love means. As we saw in sonnet 1, he is not entirely sure what he wants from Stella, and in sonnet 5 he is willing to continue loving her even though that love verges on idolatry.

This particular theme in *Astrophel and Stella* reaches its climax in sonnet 71, in which Astrophel once again devotes thirteen lines to the elaboration of Neoplatonic doctrine and then demolishes that doctrine in the fourteenth line. As he does so many times in the sequence, he argues here that Stella’s beauty teaches him virtue, and he refers again to the inner light of reason. Not only is Stella herself virtuous, but she moves everyone who sees her to be virtuous, and while her beauty makes him love her, her virtue moves him to perform good actions. Here we have a beautiful description of the potential of love as a positive force in the world, a fine expression of Renaissance Christian Neoplatonism. If the poem ended after thirteen lines, we could have nothing but praise for Astrophel. The poem, however, is a sonnet, and the fourteenth line undermines everything that Astrophel has said: “But ah, desire still cries: ‘Give me some food.’” Astrophel is moved not by love but by desire, and despite all his protestations about love

and virtue, what he wants, as he told us in sonnet 52, is “that body.” His reason may tell him how pure and heavenly love should be, but he is being controlled by his desire.

Perhaps we should say that there is nothing wrong with Astrophel’s physical desire. After all, he is human. But even if we make this allowance, we must recognize his fundamental dishonesty. From the very beginning of the sequence, he has focused on virtue, on love, on beauty as a heavenly attribute, when what he has wanted all along, whether he acknowledges it or not, is her body. He wanted her to pity him so that she would bestow grace on him. Pity is hardly a basis for love, and, as we saw, grace is a vague term in this context. Now we can see what he really meant by grace, and we can see how blasphemous his use of the term was. The question that we must consider is whether Astrophel is consciously dishonest. At the beginning of the sequence, we might be justified in arguing that he is more confused than dishonest. After all, sexual desire is a natural feeling, and Astrophel, like any young man of his time, must balance that feeling against such societal strictures as the Neoplatonic emphasis on spiritual love. How can Astrophel reconcile his natural feelings with what he has been taught that he should feel?

His confusion becomes less honest, however, as the sequence goes on and as he continues to proclaim the spiritual purity of his love while increasingly declaring the frankly physical nature of his desire. Thus sonnet 72 begins

Desire, though thou my old companion art  
And oft so cling to my pure love, that I  
One from the other scarcely can descry,  
While each doth blow the fire of my heart...  
I must no more in thy sweet passions lie...

Astrophel can no longer distinguish between pure love and desire, but there is no doubt that he feels sympathetic to the desire that he personifies in this poem. Again, that sympathy might be understandable if it were handled properly. We can see examples of physical desire being handled sympathetically in Sidney’s contemporaries Spenser and Shakespeare. Astrophel, unfortunately, is not capable of handling it so. Instead he becomes positively willful in his treatment of Stella, so

that in sonnet 72, though he seems to be ridding himself of desire, he is actually expressing the impossibility of doing so.

We can also see willful behavior in sonnet 63, in which Astrophel announces his joy at Stella's having finally responded positively to his love. This poem is probably the best poem ever written about grammar rules. Astrophel is simply delighted at the way grammar works, he says. Recently, he tells us, he "craved the thing, which ever she denies." This "thing" is as vague as the "grace" he mentioned earlier, but we can be pretty sure that they refer to the same thing, and we can see that not only is he communicating with her outside the context of the poems, but he is communicating with her in frank terms. As always, Stella denies him that "thing," but this time she does so emphatically: "No, no," she says, almost the only words we actually hear from her, and Astrophel responds in this sonnet by saying that grammatically two negatives make a positive and so her "No, no" means "yes." We might be inclined to regard his reaction as a joke. After all, no one could really believe that "No, no" means yes, and Renaissance grammar would have shown him his error. But whether he really believes what he is saying or not, he behaves as though he believes it, and we know that there are men today who believe that even a single "no" means "yes."

After this sonnet, we find the first of the sequence's eleven songs, that is, poems not in sonnet form. Most of these songs further the action in some way, but the first song only praises Stella and shows his devotion to her. In each of the song's nine stanzas, the third line reads

To you, to you, all song of praise is due.

We may regard this line as evidence of his deep love, though we already know that we must be suspicious of his emotions; but even more important, we must see that in the sixteenth century such a line could not—or at least should not—be directed to one's human lover. All song of praise is due only to God, and in fact this line sounds rather like something Astrophel would have heard in a hymn. Understanding "no, no" to equal "yes" might be regarded as cute in some quarters, but now he has crossed the line into blasphemy, and in the next sonnet, he tells poor Stella—for we must regard her as virtually being persecuted, or in modern terms, stalked by him—that he will not be dissuaded by her advice to give up on his courtship. Clearly, Stella has told him to

stop, and just as clearly he has convinced himself that she is playing some sort of courtship game, that she is playing hard to get. In sonnet 67, addressing his own personified Hope, he says,

I am resolved thy error to maintain  
Rather than by more truth to get more pain.

He refuses to admit that Stella does not love him, that she wants him to go away, though apparently he knows. Instead, in the next several sonnets he fans his passions to such an extent that, as we saw in sonnets 71 and 72, his actions are controlled by Desire.

The second song shows us that if we have not believed Astrophel, or if we have thought these poems were just the musings of a lovesick young man, we have been quite wrong. In this song, Astrophel finds Stella sleeping and he contemplates his action, for he wants to teach her that she “is too too cruel.” At first he seems to be taunting her: she may say “not” when she is awake, but what kind of “no” can she say when she is asleep? And then, in the most frightening line in the sequence, he thinks, “Now will I invade the fort.” All pretense of love is gone here, and he is being ruled by Desire, both for sex and for revenge, as he contemplates forcing himself upon her. Eventually he decides not to rape her, but only from fear of her anger, and instead he kisses her. When the kiss awakens her and she is angry, Astrophel berates himself for not having taken more than a kiss.

Astrophel is no longer a lovesick swain, if ever he was simply that. He is a dangerous young man who equates lust with love and has no real regard for the lady he allegedly loves. Even if we in the twentieth century regard a kiss as relatively innocent, especially compared with what he might have done, he has run the risk of compromising her reputation, a very serious matter in Elizabethan England. Furthermore, in the next several sonnets he makes light of her anger. In sonnet 73 he says, in effect, “You’re cute when you’re angry, so cute that I want to kiss you again.” Not only does he show here how old this line is, but he also reveals his total insensitivity to her. In sonnet 74 he says that his poetry is as good as it is because he has been inspired by Stella’s kiss, and in sonnet 81 he says that if she wants to make him stop talking about the kiss, she should shut his mouth—with another kiss. Finally

in sonnet 82 he seems to be apologizing to her, but even there he asks for another kiss.

Astrophel may appear charming, then, and Sidney certainly makes him the author of beautiful poetry, but Astrophel also reveals the failings of so much love poetry. It is deceptive, focusing on the wrong things, revealing more about the speakers than about love. And since the speakers in English love sonnets are overwhelmingly male, these sonnets reveal important facets of male approaches to love. What has only recently been noticed by a number of scholars, however, is the extent to which Stella is given a voice by Sidney. Certainly Astrophel does most of the talking, but it is clear that between sonnets, Stella has done her best to disabuse Astrophel of his mistaken notion that she will fall in love with him. In fact, since Astrophel is playing what he thinks is the game of love and she is not, she ultimately appears to be more real while he seems more foolish, as he moves from infatuation to obsession. This sense of Stella as a real person is extraordinary when we consider how little she actually says. In sonnet 63 we heard her “No, no,” and that sentiment is repeated in the fourth song, in which Astrophel offers one reason after another for her to “Take me to thee and thee to me,” after each one of which she responds, “No, no, no, no, my dear, let be.” Although she repeats the same line nine times—and Astrophel, as we understand, does not grasp the meaning of “no”—that line tells us much about her. It indicates her firmness with him. She is not flirting or leading him on, and despite his clear persecution of her, she is not even rude to him. Unfortunately for her, her politeness involves addressing him as “my dear.” All she wants is for him to desist, but he pays more attention to “my dear” than to “no, no, no, no.”

The last stanza of this song is especially interesting, for in it Astrophel threatens that if she continues to hate him—and we must notice that she has never said that she hates him—he will die, possibly by killing himself. We might well wonder how much more of a cliché he can make himself, but Stella responds with the same line, “No, no, no, no, my dear, let be.” At this point the line is dismissive, as she tells him laughingly (at least I hear laughter) that he will not kill himself, that she sees him as a little boy who needs to go away and grow up.

She is not a romance heroine, nor is she someone who plays at being a romance heroine. She is a real woman who wants to be left alone.

Astrophel's response, of course, is not what she hopes for. In the fifth song he calls her, among other things, a witch and a devil, but then he admits that he will love her anyhow. In the eighth song she tries another strategy, saying that she does love him (if he understands her correctly) but that she must keep her feelings concealed. By the ninth song, however, Astrophel realizes that she was just pretending and the rest of the sequence, including the eleventh song in which she dismisses him more forcefully than she had earlier, is one long paean to self-pity. Even when Stella is ill, Astrophel interprets her paleness as evidence of her love. By the end of the sequence, he is truly a pathetic creature, and it is probably no accident that the last word in the sequence is "annoy," which is what Astrophel has been doing to Stella.

Like Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, its most important English predecessor, *Astrophel and Stella* ends without resolution. Sidney's Astrophel, like Spenser's Colin Clout, remains confused and distraught. These works are not like Victorian novels in which all the loose ends are tied up, and they may consequently leave readers feeling dissatisfied. If we do not expect closure, however, we will not be disappointed. Our pleasure must come from the intricately worked sonnets themselves and from watching Sidney's skill as he depicts Astrophel's changing relationship to love and to Stella, and I will conclude this chapter by looking more closely at three of my favorite sonnets.

Sonnet 17 comes at the point when Astrophel is still infatuated and his feelings are still more innocent than they will later become. A number of the sonnets at this point in the sequence describe Stella's charms and her beauty, and several focus, as does this one, on her eyes. Eyes, of course, have always played an important role in love poetry. Lovers look deeply into each other's eyes and fall in love with what they see there. This phenomenon led poets like Sidney (or characters

like Astrophel) to imagine that Cupid lived in the beloved's eyes, from where he shot his arrows:

His mother dear Cupid offended late,  
Because that Mars, grown slacker in her love,  
With pricking shot he did not thoroughly move,  
To keep the pace of their first loving state.  
The boy refused, for fear of Mars's hate,  
Who threatened stripes if he his wrath did prove.  
But she in chafe him from her lap did shove,  
Brake bow, brake shafts, while Cupid weeping sate:  
Till that his granddame, Nature, pitying it,  
Of Stella's brows made him two better bows,  
And in her eyes of arrows infinite.  
O how for joy he leaps, O how he crows,  
And straight therewith, like wags new got to play,  
Falls to shrewd turns; and I was in his way.

Astrophel actually uses a clever idea here: Cupid's bow is broken, Nature replaces it with Stella's eyebrows, and when Cupid tests his new bow, poor Astrophel is shot, which is why he loves Stella. Astrophel is here the accidental victim whose own will has nothing to do with his situation. Still, the way Astrophel makes the point is interesting. First, in explaining why Cupid needs a new bow, he refers to the well-known myth of an adulterous affair between Venus, goddess of love, and Mars, god of war. This myth was popular in the Renaissance, when it was cited as an allegory of the relationship between love and war, between harmony and disharmony. In the National Gallery in London, for example, is a painting of Mars and Venus by Botticelli, in which Mars lies sleeping after his tryst with Venus, while a group of little satyrs lay with the armor he has discarded. Love and harmony clearly triumph over war and disharmony.

Sidney's use of the myth, however, is somewhat different. Astrophel's Venus is upset that Mars's love has grown weaker and she wants Cupid to shoot him again, to give him, in effect, a booster shot, or, as Astrophel puts it with an intentional pun, a "pricking shot." But Cupid is afraid of Mars's wrath and refuses, so Venus pushes him off of her lap and breaks his bow. Astrophel's Venus certainly demonstrates an odd kind of love here. She is petulant and violent, not unlike Astrophel

himself. It is no wonder that Mars's love has grown slack, and if this is how Astrophel pictures the goddess of love, we cannot be surprised at his behavior as the sequence continues. Once again, Astrophel has revealed an important facet of himself even while writing a clever and charming sonnet.

Another revealing sonnet is the forty-ninth. Philip Sidney took great pride in his horsemanship, a skill that was most important for a courtier, and he even began *The Defence of Poesy* by telling a story about horsemanship. His character Astrophel, too, is a good horseman, as we learn in sonnet 41, where he tells of having won the prize at a tournament. In sonnet 49, he uses the image of a rider on a horse to describe his relationship with love:

I on my horse and love on me doth try  
 Our horsemanships, while by strange work I prove  
 A horseman to my horse, a horse to love...

Like the story of Mars and Venus, the image of a man mounted on a horse had traditional associations. Together the man and the horse represented a human being, with the human part signifying the spiritual and intellectual aspect and the horse signifying the carnal, bodily aspect. In theory, the man should control the horse, just as the spirit should control the flesh; and when we give in to our bodily desires, we allegorically allow the horse to take control. It is significant, then, that Astrophel says that he is to his horse as love is to him. In other words, as a horseman, he can control his horse, but as a lover he is controlled by love and he takes the carnal, bodily role. This description, of course, reinforces what we have already seen about Astrophel, that he is motivated more by his bodily desires than by real love.

After this strange admission, Astrophel allegorizes the equipment used in horsemanship to illustrate how he is controlled. The reins that love uses to control him are "humbled thoughts," for instance, the bit is "reverence" and it is held in place by "fear" and decorated with "hope." Again the concept is clever, but Astrophel reveals things about himself that might better be kept secret—and even better, reformed—especially when he says that love "spurs with sharp desire my heart." Not only does the horse image show us Astrophel's state, but now he advertises his impure motivation. And not only does he proclaim his

tainted motivation, but he concludes the sonnet by announcing that “in the manage myself takes delight,” that is, he loves being under the domination of love, he loves being controlled, and he loves being subject to desire. Astrophel is not, perhaps, the kind of lover one would want courting one’s daughter.

We must wonder what makes Astrophel behave as he does. Is his case a simple matter of testosterone poisoning or is there another explanation? One possible explanation is that Astrophel, the fledgling poet, is behaving the way he thinks young men in love should behave, the way Colin Clout believes in *The Shepheardes Calender* or as Romeo behaves at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*. After all, he has learned his amorous stance from reading love poetry, from, as he said in the first sonnet, “turning others’ leaves.” His problem is not so much that he is in love as that he thinks he should be in love; and as the sequence progresses and his plans do not work out, he becomes increasingly belligerent, increasingly self-centered. The pattern that he had expected from his acquaintance with literary love just does not work, and finally the sequence ends in despondency. In this sense the sequence is consistent with what Sidney said in *The Defence of Poesy*, when he noted that if he were a woman, he would never be persuaded by love poetry, which tends not to be persuasive because so much of it does nothing but repeat the same motifs. Despite the claims of so many of Astrophel’s poems, then, we can say that he has been more influenced by reading other lovers’ writings than he has been by love itself.

The final sonnet that I will mention is also concerned with the real and the fictional aspects of Astrophel’s passion. In sonnet 45, Astrophel tells us again that Stella has ignored all the evidence he has provided her of his love. He has shown her “the very face of woe” and a “beclouded stormy face” to no effect, but what most upsets him is that recently she heard a fictional tale about “lovers never known,” that is, about made-up people, and she wept at their plight. Astrophel is struck by her reaction to fiction and her complete lack of reaction to

him; and he decides that if fiction so moves her, she should think of him as a fiction:

Then think, my dear, that you in me do read  
Of lover's ruin some sad tragedy:  
I am not I, pity the tale of me.

This sonnet shows Astrophel at his most pathetic. In the cause of a hopeless and largely self-inflicted love, he is willing to deny his own reality, to sacrifice his sense of a self. Love, as he should know from his reading, is supposed to be an ennobling sentiment, but his mistaken notion of love has reduced him to self-abnegation. If only Astrophel would become a bit more rather than a bit less self-aware, he would be much better off.

But of course Sidney is playing with us in this sonnet. Lest we forget, Astrophel really is a fiction, and when he denies his reality, he is only telling us what we already know. However, if we have forgotten that he is a fiction, if we think of him as a real person who has denied his own reality, then we have made the same error that Astrophel has made in reading other love poets, thinking that they, too, have been creating fictions. Sidney has played a neat trick on us, leading us to think of Astrophel as real. Such is the power of literature. Unlike Astrophel, we must be aware of its fictionality, so that, for one thing, we do not confuse Astrophel with Sidney, and we must also be aware of the conventions of love poetry and the proprieties of love so that we do not confuse Astrophel's behavior with the behavior of a true lover.

My approach to *Astrophel and Stella* makes Astrophel seem like a truly repugnant character, and in some ways he is. At the same time, he is rather pathetic. Every time I read the sequence, I hope that this time he will stop and think about what he is saying. Of course, he never does. In this way he resembles most of us: his confusions are human, and we, like him, are frequently not clear about what we want or why we want it. So Astrophel is not a monster. He is a person who has been influenced by the culture that surrounds him and who has not begun to think for himself.

Sidney asks us to do many things as we read his poetry, because he knows that reading should not be a passive activity. We must be aware

not only of the surface meaning of Astrophel's sonnets but of the deeper (not hidden!) implications as well. Reading these sonnets is not like reading a novel. The sonnets must be read slowly and several times before they begin to make sense and before those deeper implications become evident. Reading in this way may sound like work, but it is work that provides rewards. Not only do we get an intimate portrait of Astrophel, but we also get a good picture of Stella and, in addition, we are treated to language used in masterful ways. The pleasures of reading *Astrophel and Stella* are well worth the effort.

# Chapter 5

## Shakespeare

It is with real trepidation that I begin this chapter, for several reasons. One reason is that Shakespeare is among the greatest poets in history and it is always daunting and humbling to approach the works of such a poet—but of course the other chapters in this book also deal with great writers. Another, more important reason for my trepidation is that Shakespeare has become such an icon, both in the academic and non-academic worlds. At my own college, Shakespeare is the only author who has two separate courses all to himself, and to many people, the name Shakespeare is synonymous with literature. This phenomenon has its positive side because Shakespeare was, after all, so great. It also has a negative side, however, because in deifying Shakespeare, we distort literary history. Yes, Shakespeare was a great poet, but so, in his time, were Sidney and Spenser; and so, in other times, were other writers. For all his greatness, Shakespeare was as much a part of his time as any other great writer. He was a man of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries whose writings reflect sixteenth- and seventeenth-century modes of thought and, like the works of all great writers, say something to us as well. Whether Shakespeare says these things better than anyone else, whether he says the same things to all people, and whether what he says is universally true are other questions that are worth considering, but the first task is to read the plays.

One question that we might consider, however, is why Shakespeare is always taught in English literature classes. It is true that he wrote a

number of poems—the sonnets, “Venus and Adonis,” and “The Rape of Lucrece” are the most famous—but generally when people think of Shakespeare, they are thinking of his plays. (Incidentally, in Shakespeare’s time, plays were hardly considered literature at all. In fact, it was Shakespeare’s works that helped persuade people that drama was more than simply entertainment.) Should not Shakespeare, therefore, be studied as drama? Should Shakespeare courses be taught in Theatre Arts departments rather than English departments? Such questions point to an unfortunate aspect of educational institutions, the division of knowledge into seemingly independent fields. The answer to the questions—or rather, my answer—is that the more ways we study Shakespeare, the better. Shakespeare was a dramatist who wrote dramatic poems. If we treat them only as drama or only as poems, we distort them. We must see them as both.

This approach to Shakespeare, or to any drama, has many implications. For example, elsewhere in this book I have expressed reservations about films based on novels, even when they are as good as David Lean’s *Great Expectations*. I want to imagine Pip and Estella and London and the whole action of the novel as Dickens presents them to me, not as a director and a screenwriter reinterpret them for me, with all the cuts and adaptations that the move from novel to film requires. Drama, on the other hand, was intended for performance and it is therefore vital to see the plays performed as well as to read them. We must remember, of course, that every production of a play is an interpretation of the play, and we may disagree with some of those interpretations. I do not think that we need to be like the composer Brahms, who said that he never went to performances of Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni* because none of them could match his own conception of the opera. Seeing an interpretation with which we disagree still reinforces our sense of the drama in Shakespeare and helps us, when we read the plays, to read them dramatically. And certainly it is vital when we see a film version of a play to keep in mind the differences between film and stage.

One helpful way to read these plays, or any play, is to pretend that you are a director trying to envision how the play should be performed. How should the lines be delivered? Where should the characters stand? What should they wear? What should the settings

look like? These are questions that must be considered in staging any play, but they are especially challenging in Shakespeare. A person who begins reading a play by George Bernard Shaw will find, in addition to Shaw's sometimes exhaustingly lengthy prefaces to the plays, detailed stage directions that describe what the characters look like, what they wear, what the room and its furnishings look like, where the characters stand, where they move, and how they think. None of these directions are in Shakespeare. Often we know that a character comes on stage because another character says something like, "Here comes Othello"; and often we can tell that a scene is ending because Shakespeare often ends scenes with a rhyming couplet (though not every such couplet signals the end of a scene). We only know what a character is wearing or what a character looks like if someone refers to that character's appearance. Otherwise Shakespeare gives us nothing like modern stage directions, which means that as readers (or directors) we have many decisions to make, and some of these decisions are fairly difficult.

Let us consider just the matter of costumes. If we are presenting one of Shakespeare's Roman dramas, like *Antony and Cleopatra*, what kind of costumes should the actors wear? We know that the play is set in Rome and Egypt at the time of Augustus, so ancient Roman garb might seem appropriate. On the other hand, we also know that Shakespeare's actors wore the clothing of their own time, so that if we wanted to approximate a Shakespearian performance we might well have our actors in costumes from the early 1600's. On the third hand, if Shakespeare's actors wore clothing that was contemporary in their own time, we might want to have our actors in contemporary clothing, too. Each of these approaches to costuming has a clear rationale, and an inventive director might well have a rationale for yet another approach. Similar questions can be raised about every other aspect of a production, which means that the attentive reader must constantly be making decisions about the text.

Furthermore, that attentive reader should practice reading aloud. All poetry, as I said earlier, should be read aloud, but poetry that was intended for performance *must* be read aloud. And the reader need not try to sound like Dame Judith Anderson or Diana Rigg, Sir Laurence Olivier or Derek Jacobi. They are fine actors with fine, cultivated

British accents, but what we now call a British accent is not at all what a British accent sounded like in Shakespeare's time. (Surprisingly, the pronunciation of English in parts of the Appalachians or on the Delmarva Peninsula is closer to Shakespeare's pronunciation than are the British accents of Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.) In fact, thanks to changes in pronunciation, many of the puns in Shakespeare's plays are overlooked. More important than the pronunciation, then, are the rhythm of the language and the way the words work together. The reader should just be sure not to pause at the end of every line unless there is punctuation there that requires a pause. Finally, reading aloud makes the reader more aware of Shakespeare's incessant use of word play.

Let me add a word about that word play. It used to be commonplace that Shakespeare included in his plays a kind of low humor, like puns or sexual innuendoes, to satisfy the lower classes, who could not be expected to understand the more profound implications of the plays. That view is simply incorrect. There certainly is a lot of humor in Shakespeare, much of it explicitly sexual and much of it quite "low," and there are puns and double-entendres everywhere. (A quick look at Eric Partridge's book *Shakespeare's Bawdy* can be instructive in this area.) But the humor, the sexual references, and the puns always have a meaning. A good example of the humor can be found in *Macbeth*, which so many people have read in high school. Just as Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth are killing the king, there is a knock at the gate and the drunken porter comes onstage to admit Macduff and Lennox to the castle. His speech, delivered in a drunken voice as he staggers to the gate, repeating "Knock, knock, knock" every time the impatient Macduff knocks at the gate, has often been viewed as an episode of comic relief at a moment of high tension. Without question, the scene has its humorous aspects, but when we look closely at the porter's words, at his references to Hell, to Beelzebub and other devils, to an "equivocator," we can see that this speech refers directly to the horrifying action of the play and to the nature of its main character. And, since the word "equivocator" refers specifically to events that surrounded the Gunpowder Plot, an attack on the English government, the porter's speech also serves to connect that action and themes of the play with current events, as virtually everyone in Shakespeare's audi-

ence would have recognized. Not only is this speech not a distraction, not something inserted just to keep people's attention or to keep them entertained, but it is an integral part of the play. In fact, whenever we come across a scene like this, a scene that seems so incongruous, we should concentrate on it, because such scenes frequently give us deeper insight into the plays.

As for Shakespeare's puns—and I write as someone who loves puns—we must realize that in the Middle Ages and even into the Renaissance, puns were regarded as manifestations of the divine, since they indicated connections in the universe that would otherwise be hidden. Even Jesus used puns, as when he said to Peter, whose name means “rock,” “Thou art Peter and upon this rock will I build my church.” Consequently, Shakespeare's use of puns is often humorous, but, as we shall see, it also often contributes another sense to Shakespeare's words beyond their literal meaning.

And then there is the matter of Shakespeare's sexual references. There are plenty of critics around who find sexual references everywhere, even when they seem non-existent to less highly trained eyes, but there is no question that Shakespeare, despite our veneration of his plays as “high” art, was indeed fond of sexual innuendo. The plays teem with double-entendres and sexual references. Many of these rely on slang from Shakespeare's time (duly noted in the Partridge book mentioned earlier), but many are still clear today. Among the former are Hamlet's advice to Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery,” in which Hamlet might be telling Ophelia to go not to a convent but to a brothel, which is entirely appropriate in view of his feelings about his mother's sexual relationship with his uncle (although a convent, a place devoted to, among other things, chastity, might be equally appropriate). Among the latter are the passages at the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* in which Sampson and Gregory discuss how to “thrust [Montague's] maids to the wall,” after which Sampson clarifies what he means by “cutting off the maids's heads” by saying, “Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads, take it in what sense thou wilt.” Some years ago, a major publisher, in preparing an edition of *Romeo and Juliet* for high school use, censored this passage, as though it were just some “funny stuff” that students had to be protected from. But *Romeo and Juliet* is about,

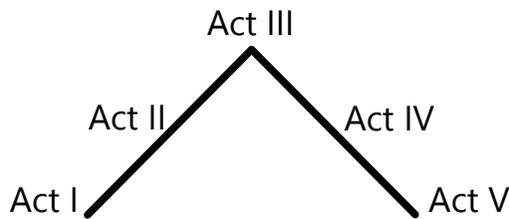
among other things, sex and brutality and the relationship between them, and this opening passage helps to prepare the way for what follows. If we cut out or ignored every such passage, *Romeo and Juliet* would be a very short play indeed and Romeo and Juliet themselves might just as well be pen pals.

But they are not. They are real people who feel real passions, as do the other characters in the play. One striking quality of Shakespeare's plays is how real so many of the characters seem. If we read other dramatists from his era, even the best, like Marlowe and Webster, their characters seem more two-dimensional. Shakespeare's are more like people we know, or could know, which leads us to another misconception about Shakespeare, the notion that the heroes of his tragedies have a "tragic flaw." Actually the idea of a "tragic flaw" derives ultimately from Aristotle's *Poetics*, a book that Shakespeare seems to have pretty much ignored, where it means something like "mistake." As the concept is now thought about and taught, it derives largely from Renaissance discussions of Aristotle which were heavily influenced by Christian ideas of original sin. Most of Shakespeare's tragic heroes do not have a single "flaw" that leads to their downfalls, and it is a waste of time and a distortion to try to find such flaws. Is Hamlet indecisive? Perhaps at times he is, but if he took clearer action, we would probably think him headstrong. As it is, everyone in the play is fine as long as Hamlet dithers. It is only when he starts to act that the bodies begin to fall. More to the point, who in Hamlet's situation would not be occasionally indecisive? Hamlet is not Superman. He is a real person trying to cope with an impossible situation. If he makes mistakes—and he does make mistakes—he does so because he is a human being, not because he is a towering figure who has a single overwhelming flaw. Macbeth offers an even clearer case: rather than being a good man with a tragic flaw, Macbeth is a weak, ambitious man who has a few redeeming qualities. We can hardly say that ambition is his tragic flaw because ambition very nearly defines him, nor does anyone weep at his death.

So was Shakespeare breaking the rules? Was he breaking them when he ignored the Renaissance requirement for "unity of time" and allowed sixteen years to pass during the intermission of/in *The Win-*

*ter's Tale?* Was he breaking them when he ignored “unity of place” in *Antony and Cleopatra* and allowed the scene to change from Rome to Egypt and back, over and over? The answer, of course, is certainly not. Shakespeare did not write to a formula, nor did he construct his lays by following rules. Like all great writers, he knew the conventions and used them to make his own rules. Looking for tragic flaws and imposed unities may make the reader’s task easier, but it has little to do with what Shakespeare wrote.

Another misconception about Shakespeare that is still taught is that Shakespeare’s tragedies have a structure that looks like this:



This is an old notion that may once have seemed helpful to readers but that, like the idea of a tragic flaw, has little to do with the reality of the plays. We can make the plays fit the diagram, but only by distorting them. Perhaps the most telling evidence against the accuracy of this structural diagram is the fact that the act and scene divisions in the plays are not Shakespeare’s. They were added later, when the plays were printed. Again, instead of trying to fit Shakespeare into someone else’s scheme, we should look at the plays themselves.

Before we actually get to the plays, however, there are still several issues left to clarify. One came up recently at a dinner party I attended when someone, learning that I teach English, naturally turned the conversation to Shakespeare and asked why Shakespeare’s plots were always so silly. I carefully turned the conversation in yet another direction, but if my questioner reads this book, he will find an answer. One answer is that Shakespeare’s stories are generally not silly, but the real answer goes beyond that facile response. Even if someone thinks that Shakespeare’s stories are silly, we must remember that Shakespeare did not invent them. Almost without exception, Shakespeare took his

stories from other sources. The history plays, of course, are based on various chronicles of English history, and the Roman plays are based on the work of historians like Plutarch, though Shakespeare made changes even in those sources, but the rest of the plays also have clear sources. Some derive from earlier sources and some come from contemporary works. It is true that Shakespeare often combined stories from different sources in his plays, which is a kind of invention, but even so, he did not create the stories. In twenty-first-century terms, then, Shakespeare was a plagiarist and a thief.

But Shakespeare did not write in the twenty-first century. It is only relatively recently in history that people have been so concerned about the originality of intellectual material. Previously the use of someone else's material was regarded as a form of flattery. Furthermore, originality lay not so much in what story one was telling but in how one told the story. If we think back to Greek drama, we can see that the playwrights all relied on mythological stories for their plots. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides each have a play based on the story of Electra, but those plays differ tremendously, sometimes commenting on each other. So it is with Shakespeare. It makes no difference that the stories were used elsewhere. What is important is the way that Shakespeare tells them, the poetry he uses, the twists he makes in the plots, his insights into the characters and their actions.

This last point leads to another frequently asked question: Did Shakespeare's original audiences understand the subtleties of the plays? This is a difficult question to answer, since no one interviewed those audiences as they left the theatre and there was no London *Times* to review the plays. Clearly Shakespeare was considered an important dramatist, though drama was not considered in his time to have the high status of other forms of literature. Shakespeare may never have intended to publish his works—the first dramatist who did so was Ben Jonson, whose life overlapped Shakespeare's—but whether he did or not, the publication of Shakespeare's plays in 1623, after his death, testified to the importance of those plays. We must remember that Shakespeare lived in a time before videotape, before instant replays. He would have expected his audience to see his plays once, not to read them, not to buy the DVD, not to wait for the movie. In those circum-

stances, could anyone, even in a more oral culture than our own, have grasped the full subtleties of the plays? Of course not. Even today, with printed editions and recorded performances, we cannot grasp them fully. Nonetheless, the plays were obviously considered good entertainment. Apparently Shakespeare made a living from them.

Or did he? Did a country actor named William Shakespeare really write these plays? This is actually a non-question. The answer makes no difference at all, and the question only concerns people who prefer not dealing with the plays. If the plays are so brilliant that we cannot believe they were written by a country actor, they are so brilliant that we cannot really imagine the mind that did create them. If that good-looking bald actor did not create them, then someone else did. What matters is the plays. We do not search *Beowulf* in order to learn its author's identity, and we do not read these plays to learn about Shakespeare.

Speaking of *Beowulf*, though, I should point out that the language of Shakespeare's plays is not Old English or even Middle English. It is Early Modern English, and, aside from notoriously obscure passages, it is not all that difficult. Furthermore, modern editions of Shakespeare modernize his spelling. Consider this passage from the second scene of *As You Like It* as it appears in the First Folio:

Yong Gentleman, your spiritf are too bold for your yearef: you  
 haue feene  
 cruell prooffe of this manf ftrength, if you faw your felfe with  
 your eief,  
 or knew your felfe with your iudgment, the feare of your  
 aduerture would  
 counfel you to a more equall enterprife.

Shakespeare's spelling and punctuation (and elsewhere even his grammar) differ from ours. The letter "j" is represented by "i" and the letter "v" by "u." In addition, the modern letter "s" is represented by the long s, which looks like an "f" without the line all the way through the stem. If reading a modernized Shakespeare seems difficult, get a facsimile of the First Folio and read that. The modernized version will very quickly begin to seem easier.

Another, more important, problem has to do with determining what Shakespeare wrote. The quick response is that we often do not know, which is a big problem when we come to do close readings of the texts. Many of the plays were not printed until long after Shakespeare had died, but even for those that were printed earlier, we do not know how involved Shakespeare was in preparing the texts for publication. In those plays for which we have more than one early edition, the texts are often quite different. Editors since Shakespeare's time have come up with fairly standard texts, but the relationship between those texts and the plays as they were performed in Shakespeare's time is unclear.

It occurs to me that reading Shakespeare's plays is analogous to painting a house. The painting itself is relatively easy once the preliminary work has been done. I have spent a long time on preliminaries here so that the reading itself might be easier and more enjoyable. Now it is time to turn to the plays. I have chosen two to discuss in the hope that if readers enjoy these plays, they will read others. The two plays I will discuss are the comedy *As You Like It* and the tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*. I chose the former because the comedies are important and not taught as often as they should be, and this is just a wonderful play. I chose the latter because it is a great tragedy, but it is not as well-known as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *Othello*.

## As You Like It

Shakespeare's comedies cover an enormous range of styles. His earliest comedy was *The Comedy of Errors*, based largely on work by the Roman playwright Plautus. This play is amusing, though it is rather simple, but with its two sets of twins separated in infancy and accidentally reunited, it foreshadows Shakespeare's continuing concern with themes of identity, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. Among his last plays are several, including *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, that take the notion of comedy so far that they are classed together as romances. What could "comedy" mean that it covers so many different kinds of plays?

Although numerous comedies were written in fifth-century BCE Greece, very few have survived, and they are all by Aristophanes. If Aristophanes' comedies were staged today as they were in his own day, they would be considered obscene. They are full of sexual jokes, both verbal and visual, and they are often quite funny. But they are also quite serious. Aristophanes, whose political views tended to the conservative side, used his comedies to comment on some of the most important moral issues of his time. His most famous play, *Lysistrata*, is a very funny yet devastating attack on the Peloponnesian War and on the male values that prolonged that destructive and useless war.

In the Middle Ages (how is that for a leap?), comedy came to mean a story that ended happily. The best example is a poem rather than a play, Dante's early fourteenth-century *Comedy* (which his contemporaries renamed *The Divine Comedy*). There are not a lot of laughs in Dante's description of his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven; but the heavenly ending, including Dante's vision of God and his assurance of order in the universe, makes the poem a comedy, a divine comedy. It ends happily and it conveys a profound sense of order and truth.

Shakespeare's comedies show this same progression. He begins with an imitation of Plautus, who himself imitated Aristophanes, and he ends with the sublime poetry of *The Tempest*. It should be clear by now that describing a work as a comedy does not necessarily mean that it is funny. There may be much to laugh at in these comedies—the last act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be particularly hysterical—but the comedies also present a view of the world that can be profound and moving and that even now challenge many of our assumptions. There are times in Shakespeare when comedy verges on tragedy and tragedy verges on comedy. For instance, if Romeo had not been quite so impetuous, if he had talked for only another minute or two in the last act, Juliet would have awakened, the tragedy would have been averted, and they could begin sending out wedding announcements. The play would have been a comedy. On the other hand, if Aemilia had not appeared at the end of *The Comedy of Errors*, the play would conclude with executions and other punishments and, despite all of its humor, it might have been *The Tragedy of Errors*. It may be a little too

simple to say that the end of a play determines whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, but my point is that the comedies are not simple vacuous entertainments and they are hardly frivolous, funny though they may be. In fact they often provide profound commentaries on human existence. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* offers serious reflections on a number of political issues, while *Taming of the Shrew* raises issues of gender relations that are still with us.

Actually, in many ways the comedies are more difficult to deal with than the tragedies. In a tragedy the hero dies—Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Troilus, Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra all die, and so their stories end. In the comedies, the main characters' stories will continue, because the comedies convey a sense of rightness, of wholeness, of preparation for a better future. In fact, the comedies usually end with weddings, with the promise of happiness to come. (Some of the plays, however, like *Measure for Measure* or *All's Well that Ends Well*, conclude with the prospect of marriages that may not turn out well, which leads these plays to be classified among the “problem” plays.) Tragic heroes may learn about themselves and the world, but at the end they are gone, though the world continues. In the comedies, the characters also learn about themselves and the world, and at the end they are ready to apply that knowledge in a world where that knowledge might prove beneficial.

*As You Like It* is a wonderful example of Shakespearian comedy. It was written almost exactly in the middle of Shakespeare's playwriting career and combines the fun and humor of the early comedies with the special kind of profundity that characterizes the later ones. The play is based on a romance by Thomas Lodge called *Rosalynde* that had been printed in 1590. *Rosalynde* is fun to read, though late sixteenth-century prose can take some getting used to, but we do not need to read it in order to grasp the play, for Shakespeare made the story his own as surely as Sophocles made the story of Oedipus his.

One of the key factors in this play is the way Shakespeare eventually moves all of his characters from the various corrupt courts that they inhabit into the forest of Arden, where harmony and order can be restored. Shakespeare used a similar device in other plays, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it is not a device that Shakespeare

invented. Rather it fits into the history of the pastoral. In numerous highly developed societies, the rural world has been used as a symbol of naturalness and simplicity. Of course, from the ancient Greek writers Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus through Virgil and modern writers like Robert Frost, there have been tremendous variations on pastoralism. Frequently the characters in pastoral poetry, who are usually shepherds, speak in very sophisticated ways about politics, poetry, and religion, a combination that Christianity developed in part based on the traditional imagery of Jesus as both the good shepherd and the lamb of God. The great age of Elizabethan poetry began in 1579 with the publication of Edmund Spenser's pastoral collection, *The Shepheardes Calender*.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare uses a slightly different conception of pastoral. All of his major characters come to the forest of Arden, a rural retreat where the complexities of court life can be largely forgotten. In a sense, the Duke still maintains his leadership, but there is no pomp in the forest, no court behavior. He is the first among equals rather than the leader who must be obeyed. Even the tyrannical villains who enter the forest, Oliver and Duke Frederick, cease to be villains when they get there. This forest, or as it is often called, this "green world," has therapeutic qualities. People come there and their problems are straightened out. The native inhabitants of the forest, however, like William or the shepherds Corin and Silvius, are presented as really simple, highly unsophisticated people. Occasionally Shakespeare, like other pastoralists, pokes fun at their simplicity, but just as often their simplicity is contrasted with the artifices of sophistication so that their native goodness is allowed to appear. As we read a play like *As You Like It*, then, we must avoid stereotyping the characters. Phebe and Audrey may be a little simple, but they are not evil. They provide some humor, but so, in different ways, do the more sophisticated characters. And we should realize, too, that Orlando is several times referred to as the son of Rowland de Boys. Since "de Boys" means "of the woods," we can see how thoroughly the pastoral motif pervades the play.

Although the pastoral setting seems to have healing powers, it is not the Garden of Eden. There are, as we shall see, numerous references in the play to a kind of Edenic existence, but the effect of those

references is to remind us that we live, in the Christian terms that Shakespeare would have grown up with, in a fallen world, a world that, no matter what we do, we cannot wholly repair. But by the end of the play, we certainly feel that at least some healing has taken place. In Shakespeare's tragedies we often feel that there is evil in the world and that evil must be excised so that healing and reconciliation can take place. In the comedies, we often see healing and reconciliation. In both kinds of plays, the characters must come to terms with themselves, must learn who and what they are. *Hamlet* opens with the key words that resound throughout Shakespeare's plays, "Who's there?" At the end of *Othello*, Othello knows better than he has ever known in his life what he is, but along with that knowledge comes the necessity of death. In *As You Like It*, too, self-knowledge and self-deception play important roles, but no one dies.

Actually Shakespeare was always fascinated by questions of role-playing and self-discovery, which probably is not surprising for someone who was involved in theatre. In many of his plays, characters stage scenes, as Polonius and Iago do, while other characters adopt disguises or pretend to be other than they are. One of the best examples comes in *As You Like It*. One of the conventions of Shakespeare's theatre was that women's parts were played by boys. We do not know why, but it is interesting to note that in ancient Greece and in Japanese Noh dramas, women's parts were played by men. Although the female characters are so important in all of these kinds of drama, women themselves were not allowed on stage. At any rate, at one point in the play, Rosalind, the young woman being played by a boy, disguises herself (or is it himself?) as a young man and that young man then pretends to be Rosalind. In other words, we have a boy playing a girl playing a boy playing a girl, and each identity is real at some level. We even have Rosalind pretending not to be Rosalind pretending to be Rosalind. The reality keeps changing, depending on where the observer is.

Rosalind's disguises, however, are voluntarily assumed. Many of the other characters also disguise themselves, but less self-consciously.

The play abounds with references to role-playing. For instance, the Duke says,

This wide and universal theater  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.  
(II.vii.137-39)

On one level he is talking about the world, and he is acknowledging that other people, elsewhere, also have their own stories; but on another level he may be referring to this scene, the seventh scene of the second act of *As You Like It*, and saying that the theatre, the reflection of human life, encompasses any number of stories. And when Jaques replies with his famous “All the world’s a stage, /And all the men and women merely players” speech, he complicates matters even more. If all the world’s a stage, then all the men and women watching him make this speech on a stage are also on stage, and what they are watching is—shades of *Hamlet*—a play within a play. And suddenly the boundaries of reality have been stretched again. Where does one play end and the other begin? That dividing line between the stage and the audience dissolves, as the audience becomes part of the larger play that includes both players and observers. If the actors in *As You Like It* are portraying characters who are seeking or affirming their identities, then so are the people in the audience, that is, the people who have undertaken to play the role of the audience in the context of the larger play of the world.

We can see this theme worked out in a number of ways throughout the play. At the beginning of Act II, we hear the Duke, who has been

exiled to the forest by his usurping younger brother, comment on how nicely things have worked out:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.  
(II.i.12-17)

To which one of his attendants, Amiens, responds, “I would not change it.” The Duke claims to have found good in the evil that has befallen him, and Amiens agrees. Truly, by the end of the play, when order and harmony are restored and everyone is happy, this sojourn in the forest proves to have been universally beneficial. Still, as soon as the Duke learns that his brother Frederick has taken up a religious life and abandoned the court, he proclaims his intention to return there immediately. The forest may be nice in adversity, but none of the characters except Jaques want to stay there. Has the Duke been lying—even if only to himself? No. In adversity he loves the forest and finds it beneficial, but he is a man of the court and longs to return there. Perhaps at court he will live in accordance with the things he has learned in the forest. Perhaps he will not.

The words that the Duke uses in his adversity speech are also important in other ways. When he finds tongues, books, and sermons in the trees, brooks, and stones, he means that nature has taught him lessons, good lessons about proper living, the kind of lessons he might find in sermons. Shakespeare could have made that point in a number of ways, however, so that we must look at the significance of the words he used. When he made similes out of tongues and books and sermons, he focused our attention on nature and language, though this speech is hardly the first occasion in the play when these motifs are combined.

In the very first speech in the play, Orlando complains to Adam about his treatment at this brother’s hands. In a play in which the characters retreat to an almost Edenic forest, an old man named Adam is a significant character. Orlando complains that while his middle brother is off at school, he is kept at home and treated like an animal.

He compares his situation to “the stalling of an ox,” says the horses are treated better, and adds that his brother “lets me feed with his hinds.” Surely Orlando’s complaints are justified, and yet he is also quite mistaken. Later on, he will obtain an education, but he will do so in the forest, not in a school, and his education will teach him that he must be more natural. When he falls in love with Rosalind, he makes the trees speak by hanging his love poems from them. In the Duke’s terms, he gives “tongues” to the trees, but unfortunately his poetry is not very good, full as it is of all the clichés that composed so much Elizabethan love poetry. He must go beyond the clichés and be able to feel and to express his natural love. One reason that doing so is so difficult is fallen human nature. What Orlando seems to want to learn in his opening speech is to be like the courtiers, perhaps even like his brother. What he ultimately learns is to be himself, to be natural—that is, as without artifice as a human being can be, at one with nature.

We can see these ideas in Orlando’s conversation with his brother in the first scene:

*Oliver.* Know you where you are, sir?

*Orlando.* O, sir, very well; here in your orchard.

*Oliver.* Know you before whom, sir?

*Orlando.* Ay, better than him I am before knows me. I know you are my eldest brother, and in the gentle condition of blood you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the first born...

(I.i.40-47)

This exchange recalls two conversations from the beginning of Genesis. One is the conversation between God and Adam after the latter has eaten the fruit, when God asks, “Where art thou?” Whether or not Shakespeare knew that the word “paradise” comes from a Persian word that means “orchard,” Orlando’s answer makes us recall Eden, the archetypal orchard; but Oliver is not God. He is a simple human tyrant who uses human customs, the primacy of the first-born, to torment his brother. Thus the other biblical conversation that is recalled here is the one between God and Cain, when the latter asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The natural answer to this question is “Yes, of course you are,” but the customs of men have made the answer less clear. Again, the

return to nature in the forest will result in Oliver's learning the natural answer to his question as he ceases to be his brother's oppressor. To return once more to the words of the Duke, there are "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones," if only we learn how to read and hear them.

There are two visions here, then, and the characters can choose between them. Do they prefer the vision of Eden, though it must necessarily be a fallen Eden, or do they prefer the fratricidal vision of Cain? The whole plot focuses on two sets of brothers, Oliver and Orlando, the Duke and Frederick, who are at odds. Frederick has exiled the Duke, and Oliver tries to have Orlando killed; but by the end of the play, Oliver and Orlando are reconciled, and Frederick has withdrawn to a religious life and restored his brother to the dukedom. Furthermore, every available couple is about to be married. There are any number of new beginnings at the end of the play. Are we allowed to say, therefore, that everyone lived happily ever after? Well, no. They still have to live in the world, and the world is a tricky place. It is, as Jaques tells us, a stage, and the great play that is enacted on that stage is not over. At the play's end, for instance, when Rosalind reveals her identity and all the couples fall naturally together, we may want to believe that things are what they seem, and we must remind ourselves that this Rosalind, who is no longer pretending to be the young man Ganymede, is still a girl being played by a boy. And lest we forget, Shakespeare sends him (or her?) to deliver the epilogue, which includes the words "If I were a woman" and which concludes with a request for applause. "Don't forget," Shakespeare is saying, "you are watching a play." And yet, if all the world's a stage, everything is a play, and this particular play is as real, or as pretend, as anything else.

In fact, though, things are seldom what they seem, and if the Duke finds reminders of language in nature, the play shows us time and again how slippery language can be. As I said earlier, much of Shakespeare's word play is difficult to see because it depends on sixteenth-century pronunciations. A good example is the character Jaques. We cannot pronounce his name in the modern French way, "zhak", because the meter of some lines indicates that the name has two syllables: "The melancholy Jaques grieves at that..." We also need to know, however,

that the “a” is pronounced like a long “a”, which makes the name “jake-es” and which makes it sound the same as the word “jakes”, an Elizabethan term for an outhouse. Perhaps this is just an example of Shakespeare’s toilet humor, but the pun on this character’s name is appropriate for a character who takes such delight in being melancholy. Jaques’ cynicism represents another important perspective in the play, but the humor of his name makes that cynicism seem just a little bit ridiculous. It makes us question Jaques’ attitude—after all, he is the happiest when he is the most melancholy—and yet Shakespeare never makes things that simple, because at the play’s end, when all of the exiled courtiers who proclaimed their love for the forest are excited about getting back to the court, Jaques alone says that he will stay in the woods with Frederick. He may be slightly ridiculous, but he does have a serious side. He has learned something in the forest, and he is not ready to trade that knowledge in for a chance to be back at the court. The little word play involving his name makes us aware of, and adds to, his complexity.

Much of the word play in the play makes us aware of a subtext. The words, in their primary sense, mean one thing, but in their alternate sense they mean something quite different but something that bears on the major themes of the play. At one point Jaques reports the words of Touchstone:

‘Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,  
 And after one hour more ‘twill be eleven,  
 And so from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,  
 And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot:  
 And thereby hangs a tale.  
 (II.vii.24-28)

This melancholy moralizing should appeal to Jaques, and yet he says that when he heard the fool being “so deep contemplative” he laughed for an hour. What is so funny about Touchstone’s reflections on human mortality and the passage of time? Nothing, unless we realize that when the play was written, “hour” was pronounced so that it sounded almost the same as “whore.” Touchstone has managed, therefore, to comment not only on human mortality but on courtly morality and to make a connection between them, for such courtly morality (or immorality) is sure to hasten the course of human mortality. And

Touchstone makes this point with an appropriately earthy pun. Jaques not only find the fool humorous, but he wishes he were such a fool himself:

O that I were a fool!  
I am ambitious for a motley coat.

*Duke S.* Thou shalt have one.

*Jaques.* It is my only suit—

(II.vii.42-44)

The pun on “suit” in the last line, where it refers to the motley clothes of a fool and to Jaques’ desire to wear those clothes, shows that Jaques is correct. Like Touchstone, he can manipulate words and concepts.

We have seen two kinds of word play so far, one involving names and one involving puns. There is another type in which the speaker plays with other people’s words and somehow transforms them:

*Celia.* Were you made the messenger?

*Touchstone.* No, by mine honor, but I was bid to come for you.

*Rosalind.* Where learn’d you that oath, fool?

*Touchstone.* Of a certain knight, that swore by his honor they were good pancakes, and swore by his honor the mustard was naught. Now I’ll stand to it, the pancakes were naught, and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.

*Rosalind.* How prove you that, in the great heap of your knowledge?

*Touchstone.* Stand you both forth now. Stroke your chins, and swear by your Beards that I am a knave.

*Celia.* By our beards (if we had them) thou art.

*Touchstone.* By my knavery (if I had it) then I were. But if you swear by that that is not, you are not forsworn. No more was this knight, swearing by his honor, for he never had any; or if he had, he had sworn it away before he saw those pancakes or that mustard.

(I.ii.59-80)

I will not attempt to explain why the knight was eating mustard with pancakes. What is important here is what Touchstone does with the words. He swears by his honor that he is not a messenger but that he was sent with a message, a clear contradiction. To prove that he is not swearing falsely, he cites the knight, who swore by his honor that the pancakes were good and the mustard bad. When the women still do not understand, he has them swear by their beards that he is a knave, and then he explains that if they swear by that which they do not have, beards, they are not swearing falsely. Hence the knight, who had no honor, could swear by it without lying, just as Touchstone could swear by his honor that he has not come as a messenger though he has a message. Since Touchstone is obviously lying, he must have no honor and is therefore a knave, though he says that he is not because Rosalind and Celia have sworn by beards that they do not have. The intricacies and paradoxes of this argument could be traced even further, but the point is that Touchstone's apparently silly arguments blur the distinctions between what is true and what is not. Is he a messenger? Does he have honor? Does the knight have honor? Were the pancakes good and the mustard bad? Do the women have beards? (Remember, they were played by boys!) The words in this passage, instead of presenting truth and clarifying reality, obscure the truth and make us wonder where reality is, if it exists at all. In fact what Touchstone does here, and elsewhere in the play, is analogous to what Shakespeare does in the play as a whole, with his use of disguises and his obscuring of the distinction between the stage and the audience.

If we think about Touchstone's behavior in the play, we come up with some surprising ideas. We may be able to accept that Rosalind dresses like a man and no one, even her father or her lover, sees through the disguise. We may explain that someone, Shakespeare or someone else, made a mistake when Rosalind is described as shorter than Celia in I.ii and taller than her in I.iii. But how do we explain Touchstone's dressing like a fool throughout the play? After all, when he is not at court, there is no reason for him to play the fool, and even a fool deserves a day off. Touchstone, however, both dresses as and plays the fool throughout the play. He distorts reality, he plays with words, and he himself gets caught up in his own confusion, even though he often sees the truth in things more clearly than the other characters. He

is in many ways like the playwright, like Shakespeare, who makes us consider the nature of reality through the medium of words because he sees it more clearly. I am not saying that the fool is Shakespeare's portrait of himself, but rather that the fool in this play, and in other Shakespeare plays where fools appear, is an image of the playwright, the worker with words who may seem foolish but who is ultimately very serious.

As with any great work of literature, no commentary, however lengthy, can replace actually reading the work or treat every aspect of the work, and this particular commentary is only intended to prepare the way for reading this multifaceted play. Nevertheless, there are still some points to be covered. One involves the family relationships in the play. Not only are there two sets of brothers in which one brother oppresses the other, but there are two sets of fathers and daughters as well—and (interestingly, as in most of Verdi's operas) no mothers. The two sets of brothers we can relate to the Cain theme that we saw earlier, but it is more difficult to explain the absence of mothers. I like to think that if Celia's mother or Rosalind's mother or Orlando's mother were in the play, then the evil men would not behave so badly. Aside from Celia, Rosalind, and the country women, the world of the play is a world of men who behave duplicitously, who try to exert power over each other, who deceive themselves and each other. Perhaps if the mothers were in the play, Shakespeare's focus would have had to change. Or as a friend of mine suggests, if mothers were there, they would have to suffer, as they do in *The Winter's Tale*.

Even without the mothers, however, love is still an important issue. As I said in discussing *Astrophel and Stella*, love was a major concern in Elizabethan literature. A great deal of literature was devoted to love, and a great deal of that literature was also devoted to making fun of the great deal of literature that was devoted to love. *Astrophel and Stella* seems to take the latter course, until *Astrophel* makes the situation sinister and threatening. *As You Like It*, too, mocks the cult of love, but in a more gentle and humorous fashion. Orlando, who is admittedly unschooled and unused to the ways of the world, is a naïve lover who hangs his poems from the trees. These trees may have tongues,

but because Orlando's poetry is so bad, what they say is foolishness. Touchstone, naturally, takes great delight in mocking these verses.

But bad poetry does not make a bad person. Orlando must forget about the conventions that are supposed to accompany love and simply learn what it means to be Orlando. We can see this point when Orlando speaks to the disguised Rosalind, who is describing the signs by which a lover can be recognized:

A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken,  
which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have  
not; a beard neglected, which you have not: but I pardon you  
for that, for simply your having in beard is a younger brother's  
revenue; then your hose should be ungarter'd, your bonnet  
unbanded, your sleeve unbutton'd, your shoe untied, and every  
thing about you demonstrating a careless desolation  
(III.ii.373-81)

The signs that Rosalind mentions are those that are typically associated with lovers, and Rosalind is clearly teasing her naïve beau, who takes everything she says seriously. But then Rosalind, with her courtly background, says that the woman he loves is more likely to love him than to admit that she does, which in fact is a perfect description of what Rosalind is doing by making that speech. Once again the levels of reality become confused, as the disguised Rosalind, while telling Orlando what Rosalind would do, simultaneously does it, for she loves him without admitting it. Only in IV.iii, when Rosalind hears of Orlando's narrow escape from danger, does she show her feelings for him, by fainting, and he is not even there to see her. If he has had to learn to be Orlando, she has had to learn to be Rosalind.

Soon Rosalind does reveal herself, but only after Shakespeare makes certain that we see how complicated the situation seems and how simple it really is. As long as we remember that Rosalind is a woman, we know that things will work out for the lovers: Orlando will finally have his Rosalind, Silvius will have his Phebe, and Touchstone will have his Audrey. The play is, after all, a comedy; and just as we may be sure that a tragedy will end with at least one death, we may be sure that a comedy will end with at least one marriage. And not only does romantic love triumph, but Orlando is reconciled with his brother and

the Duke is restored to his office. Whatever has ailed the world has been healed through the magic of the forest, through the magic of the fairy tale.

As profound and moving as many of Shakespeare's tragedies are, I find an even greater profundity in many of the comedies, for the comedies show beginnings, show how the world might be. In the tragedies, people tend to learn what *As You Like It* has to teach and then die. Their learning provides a conclusion. In the comedies, the learning is a beginning. There is a joy, a hopefulness in these plays that I find deeply moving. The tragedies may provide us with catharsis, but the comedies provide us with another, a healthier way, of looking at the world. So read *As You Like It* and revel in it, and then read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, which is a more disturbing comedy. Then look at those comedies whose worlds seem more seriously threatening, like *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Measure for Measure*. And then look at *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* to see how sublime Shakespeare's plays can be. Then come back and we will look at *Antony and Cleopatra*.

## Antony and Cleopatra

I will actually be very disappointed if my readers have just kept going here. Go read the comedies and then come back. I'll wait.

It may seem surprising, but Shakespeare's tragedies are often easier to understand than his comedies. We know what to expect in the tragedies, not just because the stories are so famous but because we know that a Shakespeare tragedy will end with the death of at least one major character and most of the play's action leads directly toward that death. I am not saying that the tragedies are simple—no one could argue that point. I just mean that the comedies are less predictable, and though many of them end with marriages, often those marriages seem tacked on, while the action of the plays moves in a number of unpredictable directions. We may be surprised by how the conflicts in a comedy are resolved. We are seldom surprised in a tragedy. This dif-

ference may explain why the comedies are less often taught in schools: they are more amorphous and therefore more difficult.

On the other hand, difficulty does not determine quality. Shakespeare's tragedies, predictable and well-known though they be, are magnificent plays that not only move us but that make us look at our world in new ways. The most famous of them, like *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, are so well known that they could become clichés, but so great are they that such a transformation never occurs. The less well-known among the tragedies, like *Troilus and Cressida* or (my own favorite) *Coriolanus* are also worth reading. In fact, for readers to whom the other plays have begun to feel like clichés, those less famous tragedies might be a good place to start. The tragedy we will examine here, *Antony and Cleopatra*, is not so well known as the most famous, but neither is it too obscure.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* are lovers, but they are not young lovers. Antony is often described in the play as being old, and historically he was about fifty at the time of his death. Cleopatra's age is not given, but she is the mother of a child by Julius Caesar, who had been dead for fourteen years at the time of her death. Historically, she was thirty-nine when she died. Octavius, whose youth is often contrasted with Antony's age in the play, was in his early thirties at the time. Of course, we will be mistaken if we look to history to determine our understanding of the play, or, worse, if we regard the play as faithful to history. Shakespeare took his story from Plutarch, the ancient Greek historian and biographer, but the playwright, as he always did, made the story absolutely his own, giving personalities to the historical figures and creating new characters when necessary.

Although the play is called *Antony and Cleopatra*, the relationship between these two characters is only one of the play's key relationships. Another is between Antony and Octavius, and yet another is between Cleopatra and Octavius. And beyond these relationships is the story of Enobarbus, Antony's friend and ally. And even beyond these aspects of the play are the contrasts between very different ways of looking at the world. These sharp contrasts, in fact, lie behind one of the play's interesting characteristics, the rapid changes of scenes, from Egypt to Rome, from Rome to Egypt, from Egypt to the battlefield. In the third

and fourth acts (keeping in mind that the acts were not so indicated by Shakespeare) there are thirteen and fifteen different scenes, respectively, as Shakespeare paints one contrast after another.

One aspect of these contrasts is evident from the very beginning, when Philo and Demetrius are speaking:

*Philo.* Nay, but this dotage of our general's  
 O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly eyes,  
 Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn  
 The office and devotion of their view  
 Upon a tawny front...  
 Take but good note, and you shall see in him  
 The triple pillar of the world transform'd  
 Into a strumpet's fool.  
 (I.i.1-13)

“Dotage” means a kind of mental impairment that results from, perhaps, an infatuation, and Philo (whose own name, ironically, means “love”) is not the only person who thinks of Antony in this way. Everyone remembers him as a great general, as the conqueror of Brutus and Cassius, as the savior of Rome, and almost everyone now regrets the attention he shows to Cleopatra, for she distracts him from his martial Roman duties. To these Roman soldiers, Antony, a member of the triumvirate that rules the world, has become “a strumpet’s fool.” He has been seduced not only by a woman but by a degenerate Eastern woman. They are Romans—we will see what this means to them—and for them Egypt is a place to be plundered, a place where they can have a good time but not a place where they should stay. As Romans, their duty is to rule the world; and while they may relax and enjoy the sensuality of Egypt, they feel the need to be involved in the serious business of jockeying for power, of tyrannizing the rest of the world.

Antony, on the other hand, enters the play while conversing with Cleopatra about the extent of his love, and he says, “Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth” (I.i.17). In the context of his conversation with Cleopatra, this line is figurative: “I love you so much that if you want to know the extent of my love, you need to create a new world.” But in the context of the play, the line is closer to being literally true, for their love cannot exist in the world as it actually is.

Everything in this world—Antony’s Roman background, his martial prowess, Octavius’ and Pompey’s ambitions—makes their love impossible, especially because Antony wants to live in both worlds, the world of Egyptian sensuality and love and the world of Roman conquest. The problem is that these two worlds are incompatible, and Antony cannot choose between them. So, when Antony learns that he has news from Rome, he responds, “Grates me, the sum” (I.i.18), or, in modern terms, “What a nuisance. Tell me quickly.” And when Cleopatra mocks even this small attention to Roman business, Antony declares

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang’d empire fall! Here is my space...  
(I.i.33-34)

Antony seems to scorn Rome and opt for Cleopatra; but shortly after, we hear that

He was dispos’d to mirth, but on the sudden  
A Roman thought hath strook him.  
(I.i.82-83)

Cleopatra, as she so often does, here mocks both Antony and the seriousness of Rome. This contrast between “mirth” and a “Roman thought” defines the extremes between which Antony operates. It also makes us wonder how serious Cleopatra is about her love for him. Does she truly love him? Is she keeping him around only for her own security? Or is she just having a good time? At this stage in the play, we cannot tell.

At the play’s beginning, then, we see Antony unable to choose between two attractions, two ways of life, the mirth of Egypt and Cleopatra or the business of Rome. Even Antony’s wife, Fulvia, has been engaged in Roman military activities until she dies, thereby freeing Antony to marry Cleopatra. But Antony, who seems incapable

of choosing between the two alternatives, marries Octavius' sister Octavia for political purposes, telling her,

Read not my blemishes in the world's report:  
I have not kept my square, but that to come  
Shall all be done by th'rule.  
(II.iii.5-7)

By assuring Octavia that he will reform his behavior, Antony appears to be reaffirming his devotion to Roman occupations. Nevertheless, at the end of this scene—and the scene is short—he declares,

And though I make this marriage for my peace,  
I' th'east my pleasure lies.  
(II.iii.41-42)

Has Antony been lying? And if so, which time is he lying? Since he returns immediately to Cleopatra, he might be lying to Octavia, but since he has already acknowledged that Octavius always seems to triumph over him, it would be particularly stupid of him to purposely deceive Octavius' sister. A more likely explanation is that Antony means both statements, that he is genuinely torn between these two aspects of his life. It would be to Antony's advantage if he could make a definitive choice, but even when he fights with Octavius, he allows Cleopatra to come along as an ally, and twice when her ship flees the battle, he follows after her, then blames her for the resulting disaster.

Antony's friends are quite right when they criticize his behavior. Camilius says, "So our leader's led, / And we are women's men" (III. vii.69-70), and Scarus, recalling the play's opening, compares him to "a doting mallard" (III.viii.31). His inability to choose decisively leads to his death, and it is as difficult for us as it is for his friends to believe that this is the same Antony who had behaved so nobly earlier in his career.

In fact, Antony's very identity is an issue for several characters. In the play's first scene, Cleopatra says, "I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony will be himself" (42). Her implication is that she is playing at being frivolous, while Antony is truly a fool. Perhaps she is teasing

him, as she does elsewhere in the play, but perhaps she is not. We have no way of knowing for sure. A few lines later, however, Philo says,

Sir, sometimes when he is not Antony  
He comes too short of that great property  
Which still should go with Antony.  
(57-59)

While Cleopatra says, whether in jest or in earnest, that Antony is a fool, Philo implies that the real Antony has a nobility that does not show when he is not being himself, that Antony has abandoned his true self through his dalliance with Cleopatra. Again we see two views of Anthony and it is impossible for us to know which is more accurate. Somewhat later, Antony says, "If I lose mine honor / I lose myself" (III.iv.22-23). Unfortunately, by the time he says this, Antony has lost his honor in virtually everyone's eyes but his own, and, as virtually everyone agrees, he is not the Antony he used to be. He is, at best, rather pathetic.

Cleopatra's identity is also something of a puzzle. As a woman in a clearly male-dominated society, she is forced to use her sexuality as a political tool, and it is consequently difficult to determine precisely what she is and whom she loves. At the play's beginning, she seems to love Antony, but, as we saw, she also teases him and seems to think he is a fool. In II.v, she physically attacks the messenger who brings her news of Antony's marriage to Octavia, but we still cannot be certain about her feelings. She might be upset at the political implications of Antony's marriage for her or she might be jealous that another woman has taken her place. Or she might really love Antony. Her anger is clear, but the true cause of her anger is not. She is certainly no fool, and all of her actions are calculated. We simply are not allowed to know what the calculations are. Cleopatra is too complex for us to be able to see through her.

Cleopatra's problem is most evident in III.xiii, when Octavius' man Thidias offers her the excuse that she allied herself with Antony not from love but from fear, and she agrees:

"Mine honor was not yielded, / But conquered merely" (61-62).  
When Antony rebukes her for seeming to abandon him in favor of Oc-

tavius (though he is already married to Octavius' sister), she responds, "Not know me yet?" (157). The answer to that question is "No." Antony does not know her, and we do not know her. Part of the reason is the medieval and Renaissance notion that the monarch has two "bodies," a public body and a private one. As a private woman, Cleopatra has feelings and desires; but in her public role as queen, she must have other feelings and desires. Sometimes these feelings and desires overlap, but often they do not. So Cleopatra is not being duplicitous when she shifts from one role to another. In fact, part of her tragedy is that she must try to play both roles in spite of their frequent incompatibility. Like Antony, she is torn between two legitimate desires.

We can see Cleopatra's two roles quite clearly in the scene of Antony's death. Antony has fallen on his sword but has only succeeded in mortally wounding himself rather than killing himself outright. As he is dying, he has himself brought to the tower where Cleopatra has taken refuge and he asks her to come out to him so that, in true romantic tragedy style, he can kiss her one last time. We might well expect her to come running, and if she were Juliet, she would. But this is Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and in real anguish she says,

I dare not, dear—  
 Dear my lord, pardon—I dare not,  
 Lest I be taken.  
 (IV.xv.20-22)

She loves Antony and she wants to be with him, wants to give him that parting kiss; but as the queen of Egypt, she does not want to be captured and paraded through the streets of Rome. She may love Antony, but not to distraction. Instead, in what must have been an incredible scene in Shakespeare's theatre, Cleopatra and her attendants pull Antony up to the tower, where he can get his kiss and die. There is love in this scene, but not the heedless love of youth. These are two mature people who ultimately do love each other, but who, unlike Romeo and Juliet, unlike Othello and Desdemona, unlike Hamlet and Ophelia, recognize that they must temper their actions with prudence.

The one major character in the play who is not at all ambiguous is Octavius. His main interest, indeed his only interest, is power, and he is willing to use the other characters' weaknesses to gain it. He speaks of

himself in the third person and uses the royal “we”—It is not Caesar’s natural vice to hate/Our great competitor,” he says (I.iv.2-3)—and his every action is aimed at consolidating power. He has no qualms about lying to Cleopatra when he tries to make her submit to him, and there is no ambiguity in his words. Antony may be torn between two ways of life and may therefore contradict himself, but Octavius is never torn. When he lies, he intends to lie. Lying and duplicity are just means to an end. He is efficient, ruthless, and cold. He lacks human feeling, a lack which makes him impervious to Cleopatra’s charms; and we must realize that when Cleopatra kills herself, she does so not because Antony is dead but because Octavius has not succumbed to her.

The emphasis on Antony’s age and Octavius’ youth, then, has a purpose. We are watching the death of an old world that is romantic, indulgent, and founded on personality and the birth of a new, that is efficient, bureaucratic, and flaunts its power. Antony had his faults, but Octavius is a machine. Perhaps the most revealing thing Octavius does, aside from his blatant lies to Cleopatra, can be found in V.i, when he hears of Antony’s death. His first reaction seems appropriate:

The breaking of so great a thing should make  
A greater crack. The round world  
Should have shook lions into civil streets  
And citizens to their dens.  
(14-17)

And he continues to eulogize Antony. In fact, he really seems to get into the spirit of it, becoming positively eloquent. He is about to launch into a full-fledged oration. “Hear me, good friends—“ he says, but then a messenger enters and Octavius stops:

But I will tell you at some meter season,  
The business of this man looks out of him;  
We’ll hear him what he says...  
(49-51)

Abruptly Octavius is brought back to business. He has an empire to consolidate and he cannot be bothered with sentimental nonsense.

Antony may be a troubled character, torn between conflicting loyalties, but compared to Octavius he is a heroic and human character. His death, with its nearly botched suicide, is typical of his life: he wants

someone else to run him through but then does the deed himself (like Saul in the book of Kings), and yet even when he does it, he is not fully successful. His death is a heroic gesture that is made quite human. Cleopatra, too, despite her attempt to come to terms with Octavius, dies with some nobility, finally confirming her love for Antony. At the play's end, these noble characters are dead and the world belongs to Octavius. That may not be an entirely bad thing, because Octavius will bring order to a disordered world, and the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* certainly is disordered. From the play's opening words, "Nay, but..." we see that the play opens in the middle of a conversation; and the sense of movement and disorder can also be felt in the large number of rapid scene changes that characterize the play. Nonetheless, it is not entirely certain that the cold and efficient order that Octavius will bring will be better than the disorder of Antony and Cleopatra.

It is interesting to speculate on whether Shakespeare was thinking of his own world. This play was written in about 1609, six years after the death of Queen Elizabeth. Surely no one, with the possible exception of James I himself, ever thought of James I as Octavius. He was a dislikable, devious king who replaced the "romance" of Elizabeth's reign with his own kind of efficiency. In this sense, James was rather like Shakespeare's Octavius. For England, the transition from Elizabeth to James marked the same kind of change in sensibility that we see in the play. Such parallels can only be speculative and they should be viewed with caution, but they are worth thinking about.

Of course, there are other characters in the play as well, primarily friends or allies of the three principals. These are the characters who are most immediately affected by the actions of the principal characters, and the most interesting of them all is Antony's friend Enobarbus. Enobarbus enjoys the pleasures of Egypt; but as the play's resident cynic, somewhat like Jaques in *As You Like It*, he knows better than anyone what is really happening. He recognizes Cleopatra's manipulations of Antony, for instance, and when Antony says that he must leave Egypt, Enobarbus responds, "Cleopatra, catching but the elast noise of this dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment" (I.ii.139-42). Antony does not always appreciate Enobarbus' sharp comments and in II.ii he shuts him up rather rudely. Neverthe-

less, it is clear in scenes like II.vi and III.ii that the minor characters like Enobarbus, Agrippa, and Menas have a greater understanding of what is actually happening than do the central characters, and it seems as though Enobarbus has the clearest vision of all.

But Enobarbus, cynical and intelligent as he is, is also loyal. When so many of Antony's allies desert him, Enobarbus says,

I'll yet follow  
The wounded chance of Antony, though my reason  
Sits in the wind against me.  
(III.x.34-36)

His reason tells him that Antony is doomed, but he will remain loyal; and soon he reaffirms his loyalty:

The loyalty well held to fools does make  
Our faith mere folly; yet he that can endure  
To follow with allegiance a fall'n lord  
Does conquer him that did his master conquer,  
And earns a place I' th' story.  
(III.xiii.42-46)

He knows that Antony's foolish behavior will lead to their doom, but as long as he maintains his loyalty, as long as he is constant, he will be the victor no matter what happens to Antony. Soon, however, in the face of Antony's increasingly irrational behavior, Enobarbus comes to the opposite conclusion and resolves to flee, but we never actually see him leave. Instead, in a brilliant piece of stagecraft, Shakespeare has a soldier tell Antony that Enobarbus has gone, and Antony's reaction reveals his true nobility. By IV.v, we have become accustomed to Antony's posturing, to his often manic reactions; but when he hears of Enobarbus' flight, he is subdued. Instead of raging, as we might expect, he orders Enobarbus' effects to be taken to him, along with a note of greeting that is only slightly sarcastic. And then, in a truly surprising move, Antony blames himself: "O, my fortunes have / Corrupted honest men" (IV.v.16-17).

Even before Enobarbus hears from Antony, however, he knows that he has made a mistake, and Antony's gesture merely confirms that knowledge. Among Enobarbus' last words before he kills himself is an acknowledgement of Antony's nobility. Rationally, logically, Enobarbus

was right to abandon Antony, but truly correct behavior transcends the rational and logical. Antony has made a series of catastrophic mistakes, and the ethos he represents is clearly past. Nevertheless, in rushing to the world offered by Octavius, the world of Rome, Enobarbus has betrayed not only Antony but himself. The story of Enobarbus is almost a miniature version of the whole play.

One other aspect of the play requires attention, the poetry. A quick look at the play indicates how much of it is written in verse, and we must marvel at how Shakespeare uses his iambic pentameter lines to achieve so many effects. There are two passages especially in II.ii that should be noticed, both spoken by Enobarbus. One begins “The barge she sat in...” (191) and the other “Age cannot wither, nor custom stale/ Her infinite variety” (234). Such poetry might make us wish that we could be there with Antony and Cleopatra.

So read *Antony and Cleopatra* and then go back and try to read the other famous tragedies with fresh eyes. Not long ago I was playing in an orchestra that was doing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. I thought I knew the Fifth pretty well. After all, it is the most famous symphony in the world, but as we played, I began to see it in new ways and I discovered that there were things about it that I took for granted and really did not know. That should be your experience as you go through *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, or *Romeo and Juliet*. You might think you know them, but if you read them closely, you will see how much more there is to know. Like all great literature, they are inexhaustible.

## Chapter 6

# Pope, “The Rape of the Lock”

Why is it that when I watch a sporting event on television and something exciting happens, I call whoever is nearby to come in and see the replay. Why is that when I taste something I really like, I invite friends to have a taste as well? Am I making the point that I have it and they do not? Am I trying to make them jealous? I hope not—at least not usually. I am, instead, doing what people often do, sharing the things I enjoy. Writing this book is another way for me to share things that I enjoy. In choosing which works I will discuss, I have been guided by my sense of what I enjoy and what I hope readers will enjoy. (I have, in addition, tried to choose works from a number of different historical periods.)

I thought I should mention this subject again at the beginning of this chapter because I am not certain how much general readers will enjoy Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock.” At the same time, I hope they will, because it is a marvelous poem that deserves to be read and enjoyed. Although it was written in response to a trivial event that took place in the early eighteenth century, it is still a very funny poem, and, like the best funny things, it is also very serious.

Why, then, do I have doubts? Pope’s style of writing is out of fashion today in at least two ways. First, the poem is written in iambic pentameter rhyming couplets, known as heroic couplets, a style that

can make modern readers feel uncomfortable, especially on a first reading. It takes getting used to. Consequently, the reader of “The Rape of the Lock” must be patient until the verse form feels more familiar. Ultimately the observant reader will be amazed at how Pope uses the form, at how many effects he can produce with what at first seems like a severe set of constraints.

The second reason for my doubt is that this poem is a satire, and satire is seldom appreciated as much as it should be (or as much as I think it should be). Satire was extraordinarily popular in the eighteenth century, and it has become popular today through television personalities like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, but because it so often depends on a knowledge of specific events or people, it often seems far removed from people who lack that knowledge. For example, Samuel Butler’s verse satire *Hudibras* requires knowledge of late seventeenth-century politics and religion, as does John Dryden’s *Ab-salom and Achitophel*. Once the reader has that knowledge, these works become effectively satiric, but until that time, they can seem awfully tedious. Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* can be appreciated without such detailed knowledge of eighteenth-century concerns, but having such knowledge makes the work even more effective. Fortunately, the knowledge required for appreciating “The Rape of the Lock” is fairly straightforward, and perhaps because its inspiration was so trivial, the satire in the poem seems more universal than the satire of Butler or Dryden. Since the poem is based on such a minor incident, Pope was forced to find ways to make it significant. That Pope thought his poem was significant can be seen in his having written it in 1712, revised it extensively in 1714, and then revised it again in 1717.

The incident that lay behind the poem occurred when Robert, Lord Petre, cut a lock of Arabella Fermor’s hair without having secured that lady’s permission. This act caused a rift between the two principals’ families, and Pope’s light treatment of the incident was originally intended to reconcile them. As he said, the poem was meant as a diversion to point out certain follies. Of course, when people become exercised over trivia, they are generally not anxious to be calmed down, and Pope’s poem was, in that regard, unsuccessful. As he revised it,

however, it became much more than a peace offering. In fact, it became a masterpiece.

Although Pope himself called the poem “An Heroi-Comical Poem,” critics like to call it a “mock epic,” for Pope, who had immersed himself in classical and modern literatures, was an expert on the conventions of epic poetry and he includes many of them in this poem. The way he tells the trivial story by dressing it up in epic garb, borrowed largely from *The Iliad* (which Pope had translated into English) and from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, adds to the comic nature of the poem. Instead of Homer’s gods and Milton’s angels, for instance, Pope uses sylphs, gnomes, nymphs, and salamanders, supernatural figures that Pope borrowed from the Rosicrucian religion. These airy sprites flutter through the poem, imitating in a miniature way the supernatural machinery of the real epics. Similarly, while *The Iliad* and *Paradise Lost* contain numerous battle scenes—Trojans against Greeks or fallen angels against unfallen angels—“The Rape of the Lock” contains two major battles: one is a military description of a card game called ombre and the other the battle that ensues after the lock has been cut. Again, Pope has taken the lofty conventions of epic poetry and reduced them to the size of his poem, thereby achieving humorous effects and simultaneously making a comment about the nature of eighteenth-century society, as we will see.

Pope’s verse, as I said earlier, can be difficult for modern readers. Not only might the heroic couplets sound strange to our ears, but Pope, who was schooled, like his contemporaries, in Latin, often uses a Latinate style, which also may seem strange, as we can see in the poem’s opening lines:

What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs,  
 What might Contests rise from trivial Things,  
 I sing—This Verse to *Caryll*, Muse! Is due;  
 This, ev’n *Belinda* may vouchsafe to view:  
 Slight is the Subject, but not so the Praise.  
 If She inspire, and He approve my Lays.  
 (I.1-6)

First, the new reader should not be put off by the eighteenth-century convention of capitalizing nouns. Instead, look at how Pope

loves to use balance as a stylistic device. In the first two lines, for example, we see “dire Offence” and “mighty Contests” balanced against “am’rous Causes” and “trivial Things” at the same time that we see “dire Offense” paired with “am’rous Causes” and “mighty Contests” paired with “trivial Things.” Schematically the pairing looks like this:

$$\begin{array}{c} \{\text{Offence} \longleftrightarrow \text{Causes}\} \\ \{\text{Contests} \longleftrightarrow \text{Things}\} \end{array}$$

This balance is not only stylistically neat, but it also contributes to the themes of the poem, for it emphasizes that the “dire Offence” that led to the “mighty Contests” sprang from “am’rous Causes” which are, in truth, “trivial Things.” Pope uses such rhetoric over and over in this poem, and part of the pleasure in reading the poem lies in appreciating the ways in which Pope treats language and ideas within the constraints of his verse form. (And again I urge the reader to read sentences, not lines, and to read the poem aloud.)

Another part of the pleasure, of course, lies in understanding what Pope has to say about his characters, the situation in which they find themselves, and the society that produced them, all of which are subject to Pope’s satire. On a first reading, it might appear that the poem is hopelessly sexist, that it targets women and makes them look foolish and empty-headed. I will try to demonstrate that this reading is so incomplete that it is really mistaken, but at the same time there can be no doubt that women are the targets of much of the poem’s satire. For instance, early in the poem we are told by Ariel, the chief of the sylphs, that the sylphs are simply the spirits of women who have died:

Think not, when Woman’s transient Breath is fled,  
That all her Vanities at once are dead...  
(I.51-52)

According to Ariel, women are composed largely of “Vanities,” and when they die, the vanities live on in sylphs. Surely this description is not flattering, but Pope goes even further when Ariel explains that the sylphs are responsible for guarding the “honour” of young women,

thereby associating honor and vanity. And then Pope takes this point even further when Ariel says,

With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part  
 They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart,  
 Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots  
 strive,  
 Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive.  
 This erring Mortals Levity may call,  
 Oh bling to Truth! the *Sylphs* contrive it all.  
 (I.99-104)

“The moving Toyshop of their Heart” implies that the young ladies whose honor is guarded by sylphs are hardly serious creatures, and especially not in matters of love. The lines about wigs, sword-knots, beaus, and coaches, while imitated from Homer, show the kinds of things that fill young society ladies’ toyshop hearts—not heroes and great deeds but young dandies whose swords are covered with decorations and are unfit for fighting. Of course, Pope is not saying that men should be like the Homeric heroes, but he is saying that if the women’s hearts are toyshops, the men who fill them are toys. These people who occupy the upper echelons of society, both the men and the women, are shallow and hardly deserving of their status. If the “dire Offence” rose from “trivial Things,” the people involved in the episode are equally trivial. The problem is that they can also be charming. These characters are not simply villains whose villainy is held up to ridicule. They are perfect products of their society who have adopted, without questioning, the attitudes and behaviors of that society.

So, when we see our heroine Belinda awaken after Ariel’s speech, the first thing she does is go to her dressing table, which, in epic fashion, is presented as an altar, with Belinda as both the goddess and the priestess who worships the goddess. In other words, she worships herself. Furthermore, her dressing recalls the scene in *The Iliad* when Hera is presented “arming herself” in her finery in order to seduce Zeus. Like Hera, Belinda is preparing herself for battle—“Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms” (I.139)—but the enemy she wants to conquer is the male sex and her weapons are “Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux” (I138).

Lest we think, however, that only women are satirized in this way, we can look at the beginning of Canto II for a description of the Baron's religion:

For this, ere *Phoebus* rose, he had implor'd  
 Propitious Heav'n, and ev'ry Pow'r ador'd,  
 But chiefly *Love*—to *Love* an altar built,  
 Of twelve vast *French* Romances, neatly gilt.  
 Theree lay three Garters, half a Pair of Gloves;  
 And all the Trophies of his former loves.  
 (II. 35-40)

Belinda's altar is covered with women's weapons and the Baron's, constructed of cheap love stories, is covered with trophies of his past romantic conquests. Clearly this couple were made for each other. Or they are destined for an incredible battle. Or both.

But there is a serious level to all this foolishness as well. Belinda, to whom Honor (by which we are to understand her reputation for chastity) is the highest good, does everything in her power to make herself seductive, though she is required to fight off anyone whom she seduces. Sort of self-defeating, isn't it? At the same time, the baron, under the pretense of love, is himself bent on seduction. They are both operating within accepted societal boundaries. As the poem says,

For when Success a lover's Toil attends,  
 Few ask, if Fraud or Force attain'd his Ends.  
 (II. 33-34)

Those social boundaries, then, encourage them to adopt hypocritical roles: the emphasis on success means that any method of achieving that success is fair. Consequently, she must pretend that she wants to be seduced, though she does not (we assume), and he must pretend that he does not want to seduce her, though he most certainly does. Much of the poem, then, revolves around the subjects of honor, chastity, and hypocrisy, and Pope has some interesting things to say on those subjects. In fact, the poem approaches them on at least three levels. The first level is the literal story of a trivial event that is blown out of proportion. The second level describes the societal approach to dealing with honor and chastity, an approach that promotes hypocrisy

and a kind of double standard for both sexes. And the third level explores what is really at stake in questions of honor and chastity.

In dealing with the first level, we can see Pope's feelings about the shallowness of the people he is describing reflected everywhere in the poem, but it shows most clearly at the beginning of Canto III, where he describes the activities of his characters at Hampton Court:

Hither the Heroes and the Nymphs resort,  
 To taste awhile the Pleasures of a Court;  
 In various Talk th-instructive hours they past,  
 Who gave the *Ball*, or paid the *Visit* last:  
 One speaks the Glory of the *British Queen*,  
 And one describes a charming *Indian Screen*;  
 A third interprets Motions, Looks, and Eyes;  
 At ev'ry Word a Reputation dies...  
 Mean while declining from the Noon of Day,  
 The Sun obliquely shoots his burning Ray;  
 The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,  
 And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine...  
 (III. 10-22)

With lines like these, it is no wonder that Pope was regarded as a dangerous, stinging writer. From the sarcastic labeling of these fops and flirts as "Heroes and Nymphs" to his description of their character-assassinating gossip, he is obviously critical of these unproductive but self-important people. (Later he will give the names of some of the "Heroes," names like Sir Plume, Sir Fopling, and Dapperwit, names that further indicate their vapidty.) We can also see in this passage a technique that Pope uses throughout the poem: he frequently pairs items, one serious and one trivial, to indicate how this society trivializes everything. They give equal attention to politics ("the Glory of the *British Queen*") and interior decorating ("a charming *Indian Screen*"). But if these people are shallow and obsessed with trivia, what difference does it make? Is anyone being hurt? The answer, Pope says, is yes. Not only do reputations die, but because judges are more concerned with their comfort than with justice, people die. The judges are quick to sign death warrants so that they can more quickly get to dinner. In a society that glorifies the transformation of substance into trivia, trivia rules. Dinner becomes more important than justice, or than human

life. This society, notable for its conspicuous consumption while people starve, is hardly as charming as it thinks it is. It is, in fact, dangerous.

The second level of the poem, that dealing with the societal appeal to honor and chastity, we have already touched on by considering the altars of Belinda and the baron, but there are numerous other references in the poem to the hypocrisy that society imposes on its unthinking members. For instance, we read that before the game of ombre, Belinda “swells her Breast with Conquests yet to come” (III.28). Since the game is presented as the equivalent of an epic battle, Belinda’s gesture is perfectly appropriate; but in the context of the war between the sexes, that gesture could just as well be seen as provocative. Belinda, in gearing herself up for the card game-battle, flaunts her sexuality.

In fact, Belinda’s sexuality is a constant focus of the poem, as it is a constant focus of her own attention. When Ariel tells the other spirits about his premonition that something terrible is about to happen, he lists several possibilities:

Whether the Nymph shall break *Diana’s Law*,  
 Or some frail *China Jar* receive a Flaw,  
 Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,  
 Forget her Pray’rs, or miss a Masquerade...  
 ` (II. 105-108)

Here again, Pope gives us some significant pairings. One set of alternatives, breaking Diana’s law (that is, losing one’s virginity) or breaking a piece of China, offers a telling comment on the inherent value of Belinda’s virginity. Virginity is not to be preserved for its spiritual value or out of a sense of purity. It is, rather, a commodity, like “some frail *China Jar*” which, when once broken, cannot be repaired and therefore loses its financial value. And, like the China Jar, it is frail. As Ariel says, “Belinda’s petticoat must be guarded,” because “Oft have we known that sev’nfold Fence to fail” (II.119). In plainer words, the petticoat is there to protect the frail treasure of her virginity, but even such daunting fortresses as eighteenth-century petticoats often are ineffective in protecting what lies beneath. Similarly, there is no difference between Belinda’s staining her honor or her new brocade. To outsiders, like Pope and like the readers he envisioned for his poem, there may be a big difference, but not to the society represented in the

poem, for whom honor, like virginity, is an important and valuable commodity.

This commodification of virginity has always been part of the double standard that required virginity in a woman but not in a man, and Belinda, like other young women, knows that she must keep her virginity—or her reputation for virginity—in order to marry well. But it is difficult for a woman to preserve either in a society where gossip is a full-time occupation and where men are encouraged to make conquests, where

When Success a Lover's Toil attends,  
Few ask, if Fraud or Force attain'd his Ends.  
(II. 33-34)

The result is the repression of true feelings on both sides and behavior that is necessarily hypocritical. Everything becomes a matter of show, as reality and truth give way to deception. Perhaps the most revealing lines in the whole poem come at the end of Canto IV, when Belinda cries out in frustration

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! Been content to seize  
Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these!  
(IV. 175-76)

As early readers of the poem (including Arabella Fermor) realized, Pope is again making a covert sexual reference. What Belinda is really saying here is that she would have preferred it had the Baron made an even more intimate assault upon her, as long as his doing so could be hidden from society. She may regret the loss of the lock of hair, but even more she regrets the public nature of his action. And, she implies, she would not have objected so strenuously to a more sexual assault if it had been discreetly done, so that once again we are made aware of the nature of virginity in this society: whether Belinda has it or not, she must seem to have it.

This recognition brings us to the poem's third level, in which we see that what is at stake is neither honor nor chastity but the reputation for honor and chastity and that a good deal of societal hypocrisy concerns sexual matters. Even the poem's title contributes to this theme. One meaning of "rape" is the seizure of something that is not one's

own, and the Baron does indeed seize the lock of hair; but “rape” also means forcible sex, and a lock is an often-used symbol of the female genitalia. (Anyone who doubts that should take a look at the scene in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice encounters a problem involving locks and keys.) Furthermore, locks protect treasures, and, as we have seen, Belinda’s virginity (or her reputation for virginity) is her treasure. The real subject of the poem, then, is sex, how it is treated in this society, how it forms the foundation for actions and relationships, and how the society tries to pretend that it does not. In this sense, hypocrisy or no, the Baron’s assault on the lock is a kind of rape, as Pope constantly plays on the sexual meanings of events.

For example, we saw in Ariel’s speech the equation of Belinda’s virginity and a “frail China Jar.” Later, after the Baron cuts the lock, we hear Belinda’s screams:

Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav’n are cast,  
When Husbands or when Lap-Dogs breathe their last.  
Or when rich *China* vessels, fal’n from high,  
In glittering Dust and painted Fragments lie!  
(III. 157-60)

Lapdogs are equivalent to husbands, both equally mourned by society ladies, and China vessels are equivalent to virginity. Thus, the Baron’s actions, given that he lives in this society and has agreed to play by its rules, are equivalent to rape.

Elsewhere Pope is even more emphatic about the sexual foundation of both the incident and the poem. When one of the spirits, Umbriel, visits the Cave of Spleen, he sees “maids turned bottles, call aloud for corks” (IV.54), and when Jove, in imitation of a scene from *The Iliad*

Weighs the Men’s Wits against the Lady’s Hair;  
The doubtful Beam long nods from side to side;  
At length the Wits mount up, the Hairs subside.  
(V. 72-74)

And finally, Pope tells us that the Baron “sought no more than on his foe to die” (V.78), which seems innocent enough unless we know that “to die” meant to achieve a sexual climax. These double entendres and sexual references provide a sexual undercurrent to the poem, just

as there is a sexual undercurrent to the actual incident that the poem commemorates. The incident, Pope is telling us, was trivial and was blown out of proportion; but on another level, a level not recognized by the participants, the incident was indeed important. It not only revealed truths about the society in which Pope lived and about the individuals in that society, but about human relationships, specifically about human sexual relationships. The way Pope makes this point is brilliant, for he does so with wit and humor and even delicacy. The satire is so finely done that we can see Pope's point, laugh at the folly he reveals, and not feel that we or the poem's characters have been bludgeoned.

Nor, at the end, do we feel that the poem is hopelessly sexist. Of course, women are satirized in the poem, but so are men. Belinda may be vain, but so is the Baron. Belinda may treasure her virginity for its economic value, but it is the men who have given it that value and who attack it. And we can never forget that, regardless of all other considerations, the Baron's assault on the lock is absolutely wrong; nor can we possibly think that Pope's portraits of Sir Plume, Sir Fopling, or Dapperwit are meant to be flattering to those gentlemen.

On the other hand, one of the strangest and funniest sections of the poem clearly does satirize upper-class women like Belinda. This section is Umbriel's visit to the Cave of Spleen in Canto IV. Once again Pope is borrowing from epic conventions, relying on Odysseus' visit to the Underworld in *The Odyssey*, Aeneas' similar visit in *The Aeneid*, and the scenes in the House of Morpheus and the Cave of Mammon in Books I and II of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. This visit, however, is to the Cave of Spleen. In Pope's day, the spleen was considered to be the source of an ill-defined collection of symptoms that afflicted wealthy ladies, so naturally Pope, as he skewered the upper classes, included spleen in his picture. In the Cave of Spleen, watched over by Ill-nature and Affectation, Umbriel gathers, among other things, "Sighs, Sobs, and Passions" (IV.84), which he brings back to aid Belinda in the battle. This scene, which does actually satirize a particular class of women, may strike modern readers as rather strange, but to Pope's contemporaries, who would have been intimately acquainted with his epic sources, this passage would surely have seemed both brilliant and extremely funny.

There is, however, one serious speech in the poem, that of Clarissa in Canto V. Clarissa recognizes the foolishness that surrounds her, and she recognizes how that foolishness victimizes especially the women, who are forced to subordinate their good sense to their quest for youth and beauty. Youth and beauty are bound to disappear, she tells them, and too much pointless flirting will result in no marriage at all:

What then remains, but well our Pow'r to use,  
 And keep good Humour still whate'er we lose?...  
 Beauties in vain their pretty Eyes may roll;  
 Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul.  
 (V. 29-34)

She acknowledges that in society as it was then constructed, women were at a clear disadvantage, but she charges her listeners nevertheless to assert their power by focusing on what was truly important. She tells them not to play the game according to the rules established by and favoring the men but to “keep good Humour” and rely on “Merit.” It is interesting that she urges women to “keep good Humour still whate'er we lose,” since she seems to suggest compliance with rape, or with the gossip that destroys reputations. In fact, she seems to acknowledge that men and women are both playing a game whose rules they have tacitly agreed to follow, even though the women are at a distinct disadvantage; and she suggests that women ought, perhaps, to work at changing the rules. Despite the realistic confrontation with fact in her argument, however, “no Applause ensu'd” (V.35). Instead she is completely ignored, as the men and women attack each other with mock-epic ferocity. As in every society that has ever existed (or is likely to), common sense and good advice hold no appeal for Pope's characters.

“The Rape of the Lock,” then, is a sharp satirical attack on Pope's society as well as a comment on the relationships between men and women that we see even now; but Pope made his attack with such delicacy and wit that we read the poem with laughter rather than with horror at the harsh realities that Pope uncovers. The poem's conclusion, too, adds to the sense of delicacy, and even of elegance, that Pope has achieved, for as the battle reaches its climax, it appears that the lock, like the Holy Grail, has disappeared, and the narrator assures Belinda—and Arabella, and us—that the lock has been taken to the

heavens as a constellation, where it will be seen by the whole fashionable world.

And then Pope makes an interesting point. He says that after many years have passed, after Belinda and all those involved in this trivial affair will have died,

*This Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame,  
And mid'st the Stars inscribe *Belinda's* Name!  
(V. 149-50)

The fashionable world, the belles and the beaux, will all have passed away, but Belinda's name, like Belinda's lock, will still exist, thanks to the Muse upon whom Pope called on in the poem's third line. In short, Belinda will be immortal not because of her beauty or her charm but because Pope has written about her. It is true that Pope is using a poetic convention about the power of the poet to immortalize his subject. It is also true that he was right.

It is vital to remember that Pope's poetry, like all poetry, must be read in sentences rather than lines and that the iambic pentameter, along with Pope's variations on it, requires close attention. For readers who enjoy "The Rape of the Lock," I recommend Pope's "Epistle to Arbuthnot" and for those who are really willing to take a chance, "The Dunciad." The latter is another mock-epic, this time concerned with "glorifying" contemporary writers whom Pope thought of as dunces, followers of the goddess Dullness. Reading "The Dunciad" requires careful attention to footnotes, because the writers Pope castigates are barely known today except through Pope's poem. It is, however, another very funny poem and a work that shows that people have been proclaiming the disintegration of civilization for at least the past two hundred fifty years. So far, they have been wrong.

## Chapter 7

# Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*

It may seem odd, but this chapter is the first in which we will look at a novel. The reason is quite simple: the novel as we know it, a prose story about people who seem real in situations and settings that seem real, did not come into being in Europe until the eighteenth century. Certainly there were earlier fictional prose narratives. In England during the sixteenth century, for instance, there was a good deal of prose fiction, works that we have already mentioned like Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* or Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, but—and scholars surely differ on this matter—such works are not novels. They belong to another kind of literature, the romance, which had been popular for centuries. For example, there is a group of works from Greece, written in the second through the fourth centuries, that are often referred to as “Greek novels,” works like Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* or *The Aethiopica* of Heliodorus. These works, like those I mentioned earlier, are certainly fun to read, but they, too, are more like romances than novels. Their characters are not people who ever could have existed, and they are set in far-away places that are more imaginative than real. Their action is extravagant and often relies on supernatural interventions.

Of course, some of these judgments are necessarily subjective. What seems realistic to me might not seem so to someone else. But instead of calling all prose narratives novels, we should try to make

these distinctions. Just as we are not content to refer simply to trees but we distinguish among oak trees, maples, beeches, willows, and others, so we ought to distinguish among different types of prose fiction, for the different types try to accomplish different things. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, was very careful to say that he was writing romances and not novels. The difference mattered to him, and we will read his works incorrectly if we see them as novels.

A further complication is that it may be difficult to decide whether a work is a novel or some other form of literature. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is certainly novelistic, but there are differences of opinion over whether it is a novel. Similarly, the works of Daniel Defoe, written in the early eighteenth century, seem very close to being novels, though again there is no agreement on whether they are or not.

But there is no doubt that a group of works written toward the middle of the eighteenth century are novels or that these novels began a vogue for such writing that continues even now. It is interesting that while the study of novels is now a staple of literary study, in earlier times the novel was not deemed worthy of the exalted title of "literature." Literature consisted of poetry, and prose fiction was considered a much lower form, just entertainment. In part, this judgment resulted from tradition, but it also represented intellectual and economic elitism. The novel was the literature of the newly developing middle class, a middle class that was making gains in both material wealth and literacy, as we can see in one of the works that started the English tradition of the novel, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*.

*Pamela*, which was published in 1740, has as its subtitle *Virtue Rewarded*. It is the story of a young servant girl, Pamela Andrews, who works for the B\_\_\_\_\_ family. (The name is never given, a technique that was used frequently in the eighteenth century in order to provide a sense that the events recorded really happened and the characters' identities had to be protected.) After the death of his mother, Mr. B\_\_\_\_\_ keeps Pamela employed in the household, but, according to Pamela, he does so because he desires her sexually. Pamela, however, perseveres against his advances, and by the novel's end, she and Mr. B\_\_\_\_\_ are married. Her virtue has indeed been rewarded.

*Pamela* is an epistolary novel—that is, most of the novel is in the form of a series of letters exchanged among the main characters, which means that all of them, including Pamela and her poor parents, are literate. Pamela herself is a prolific letter writer, and she writes at the darndest times. (One of Richardson's later works, *Clarissa*, is also epistolary—and is one of the longest novels in English. The eighteenth-century English did like to write letters, but Richardson perhaps got carried away. One wonders when the characters actually *did* anything, since they seem to spend all their time writing letters.)

*Pamela* is still an interesting work to read, though it may strike modern readers as one-dimensional, as well as unlikely. Nonetheless, it took eighteenth-century England by storm. Not only was it popular, but it was even used by preachers as an illustration of its subtitle, virtue rewarded. Pamela Andrews, after all, resisted great temptations in order to preserve that virtue, and she was rewarded with marriage and a fortune. Richardson's contemporaries were delighted with the lesson that this new work taught.

At least, most of his contemporaries were. Others were less enchanted, and among the latter group was Henry Fielding. Fielding had been a popular playwright whose highly satiric plays and farces often focused on governmental incompetence and hypocrisy. So effective had those plays been, that eventually the government passed the Licensing Act, a bit of censorship that ended Fielding's playwriting career. Fielding then took up other careers, including the study of the law, but he lived for some time in financial difficulties. When *Pamela* appeared and became so popular, he was outraged, for his view of the novel was both more subtle and more sinister than the common view. Furthermore, he saw a chance to earn some much-needed money by playing on the work's popularity. Consequently, he wrote a hysterically funny parody of *Pamela* that he called *Shamela*. This brief work purports to tell the real story behind the novel, and in a series of letters, Shamela tells Pamela's story in a whole new way.

Fielding had two major objections to *Pamela*. One was that the novel, while claiming to teach moral lessons, contained a number of titillating scenes. After all, if Mr. B\_\_\_\_\_ constantly strives to seduce Pamela, there are bound to be seduction scenes. Fielding saw these

scenes as being hypocritical. He thought they were salaciousness masquerading as morality. Even more important, Fielding saw that another way to look at the moral lesson of *Pamela* was to say that young women should hold on to their chastity until they can get the right price for it, as Pamela did. Richardson may have subtitled his book *Virtue Rewarded*, but to Fielding it presented a case of virtue treated as a commodity that could be exchanged for financial and social gain. Shamela skillfully reveals these aspects of the novel and in so doing makes a mockery of Richardson's work. We need only consider Fielding's transformation of Mr. B\_\_\_\_\_ into Mr. Booby to catch the spirit of the work.

Richardson, whose novels I enjoy, was not known for his sense of humor (read his books and you'll see) and was not amused at Fielding's parody. Even many years later, when Fielding complimented another of his works, Richardson refused to be mollified. Had Fielding stopped with the publication of *Shamela*, that work would probably have become an interesting footnote in the history of English literature, but Fielding did not stop there. Instead, he was inspired to write another work on the basis of *Pamela*, a work that helped determine the course the English novel would take. The title of this work, as it appears on the title page of the first edition, is *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, And of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams. Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote*. Fortunately, we call it just *Joseph Andrews*.

*Shamela* was a brilliant parody, but *Joseph Andrews* is a real novel, a satiric novel, that goes far beyond parody. While I will try not to divulge any of the novel's convoluted ending, I can safely point out that Joseph Andrews is the brother of Pamela Andrews, that (in what seems to be a family tradition) he writes letters to, and that toward the end of the novel both Pamela and Mr. Booby, newly married, appear in Fielding's work. The focus of the plot, too, was inspired by *Pamela*, for handsome young Joseph Andrews, like his fictional sister and like his biblical namesake Joseph, also has his chastity put to the test. Several of the novel's female characters, most notably Mrs. Slipslop and Mr. Booby's aunt, Lady Booby, have designs on the young man, and poor

Joseph is often hard-pressed, as his sister was in her novel, to preserve his virtue.

Of course, in one respect Fielding was having fun by reversing the genders in Richardson's story. The idea of having a young man's virginity sought by two older women, the idea of his resisting all of their advances, the idea of his rejecting all the benefits they might bestow on him—all of these have their humorous side. But again, if this humor were all Fielding was after, *Joseph Andrews* would be just another parody, a one-joke book. It is far richer than that, however, and that long title from the original title page helps to explain why. Fielding may have originally been moved to write the book by *Pamela*, but the work that truly inspired *Joseph Andrews*, as it inspired so much writing in eighteenth-century England, was Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which had been written over two hundred years earlier.

Cervantes was in many respects the patron saint of eighteenth-century prose satirists. Not only are there works like *The Spiritual Quixote* and *The Female Quixote*, but numerous writers, like Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne, modeled parts of their novels on the Spanish Don. What was it about *Don Quixote* that made it so popular, and how did Fielding use it? First, in writing *Don Quixote*, Cervantes drew on the traditions of picaresque literature. In picaresque works like *Lazarillo da Tormes*, the reader follows the adventures of a person who has no fixed place in society but who moves relatively freely from class to class. Every time the hero, the picaro, enters a new social setting, that setting becomes the subject of the picaro's satiric vision, and the result is a satiric work that criticizes virtually the entire society.

Cervantes used this model but went far beyond it. His Don Quixote is an old man who has read so many knightly romances that he begins to think of himself as a knight. Dressing himself in makeshift armor and riding a broken-down nag, accompanied by his friend Sancho Panza, he sets out to perform knightly deeds, to rescue maidens, to right wrongs. Of course, the Don is demented and presents a ridiculous appearance; and as he travels the roads, he encounters people from various levels of society who find increasingly inventive ways to mock and torment him.

What the reader soon realizes, though, is that Don Quixote may be a fool, but he is an idealistic fool. After all, he wants to do good deeds; and however foolish he is, he never does anything that seems to him less than noble. The people he meets, however, with few exceptions, never have a noble thought. Their enjoyment lies not in good deeds, however misguided, not even in the contemplation of good deeds, but in tormenting an obviously demented old man. Like the picaresque, Don Quixote becomes a touchstone against which can be measured the values of the people he meets, and, unhappily, they come off very badly. The idealistic fool is far more admirable than the heartless knaves who are incapable of understanding his idealistic outlook.

Not only does *Don Quixote* explore romance idealism and satirize society, but it does so with good humor and with an astounding sense of compassion for its hero. Yes, he tilts at windmills, and yes, he is on the receiving end of a chamber pot or two, but he retains a peculiar kind of nobility. We can laugh at him and love him at the same time. These, I think, are the qualities that endeared Cervantes to his eighteenth-century successors, and especially to Fielding. Fielding used Cervantes' work as a model, but he made it his own. He transformed the Don and his squire into Parson Abraham Adams and his protégé Joseph Andrews. Parson Adams has many quixotic characteristics, but he is far from demented; and Joseph is a strong character, not at all like the ever-nervous Sancho Panza. Nevertheless, their journey from London back to their country home, with the cross-section of English society that it presents, with its good-humored treatment of knaves, fools, and idealists, is certainly Cervantean.

But Cervantes was not the only writer who influenced Fielding. There is, for example, a strong biblical influence on the novel. For instance, Abraham Adams is named for the biblical patriarch whose story consists of a series of tests, most of which he passes, like the command to sacrifice his son that is withdrawn at the last second, and some of which he fails, like falsifying his wife's relationship to himself in order to save his life, an act that demonstrated a momentary lack of faith. Similarly, Joseph Andrews is named for the biblical Joseph, who, after having been sold into slavery, resisted the blandishments of his master's wife and was rewarded by being accused of attempted

rape and who consequently found himself in prison, only to be raised eventually to a position of prominence in Egypt. And, in one of the novel's most memorable scenes, Fielding adapted the parable of the Good Samaritan, as we will soon see.

Yet another influence, though in a strange way, was the work of Homer. Of course Fielding, growing up in the eighteenth century, would have had a classical education, that is, an education based on Greek and Latin; he would have expected many of his readers to be as familiar with classical literature as he was. Not only does he make numerous references to classical literature (Parson Adams, after all, is a special devotee of Aeschylus), but he makes particular use of Homeric style when he describes some of the brawls and battles in his novel. The best example, perhaps, is found when Adams is attacked by a pack of hunting dogs and Joseph comes to his rescue, brandishing his cudgel: "it was a Cudgel of mighty Strength and wonderful Art, made by one of Mr. Deard's best Workmen, whom no other Artificer can equal; and who hath made all those Sticks which the Beaus have lately walked with about the Park in a Morning..." (III.6). In this description, the educated reader would have recognized the description of Achilles' shield from *The Iliad*, and in the ensuing battle, such a reader would have caught reflections from any number of Homeric battle scenes. Like Pope in "The Rape of the Lock," Fielding used these epic references to provide and enhance his satiric perspective. In this case, we can see that while Achilles' magnificent shield has become a simple walking stick and the great battle for Troy has been replaced by a canine attack, Joseph nevertheless behaves heroically, though his heroism is fully in keeping with his station in life.

I have referred to *Joseph Andrews* as a novel, but Fielding called it something different. In his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (and I recommend that readers read the novel before they read the Preface), he calls the work "a comic Romance," which he defines as "a comic Epic-Poem in Prose". What he meant by these terms has been debated by scholars, but the reason he did not call his work a novel was that the term had not yet come into popular usage. He knew, however, that this work was not like the serious romances that had preceded it. For one thing, "it differs in its Character, by introducing Persons of inferior Rank,

and consequently of inferior Manners, whereas the grave Romance, sets the highest before us..." We must remember that Fielding's England, even more than modern England, relied very heavily on a class structure. People knew their places—or at least they were supposed to know their places—and earlier romances tended to focus on the upper classes, using the lower classes as the butt of humor. But as the middle class began to develop, people wanted to read books about people like themselves in situations that they could recognize. *Joseph Andrews* has its share of upper-class characters, but now *they* tend to be the butt of humor.

Even so, Fielding's humor differs from the humor in many other romances, as he himself points out. In Sidney's *Arcadia*, for instance, the shepherds and other lower-class characters are caricatures, hopelessly stupid. Their presentation is, as Fielding puts it, "the Exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural." Even if we find them funny, Fielding would classify them as burlesque rather than comic, and he insists that he is not interested in the burlesque. His concern is with the comic, by which he would exclude the monstrous. As he says, in pursuing the comic, "we should ever confine ourselves strictly to Nature from the just Imitation of which, will flow all the Pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible Reader." The comic writer needs only to copy nature, he says in the Preface, for "life every where furnishes an accurate Observer with the Ridiculous."

Now Fielding gets to the heart of the matter, for his focus in this book is on the ridiculous, which he describes as growing out of affectation, while affectation is the result of either vanity or hypocrisy. To be sure, as we read *Joseph Andrews*, we see many examples of both vanity and hypocrisy, and though Fielding condemns both vices, he does so with such good humor that this work is anything but a tract against sin. What is most interesting about this preface, however, is the way Fielding wrestles with this new kind of literature, the novel. Richardson had numerous followers, but Fielding set the course that some of England and America's greatest novelists would follow.

Of course, when Fielding says that he is "imitating nature," we must be wary, for "imitating nature" has had a variety of meanings. When Wordsworth and Coleridge published their "Preface to the

Lyrical Ballads” at the very end of the eighteenth century, they claimed that they were making poetic diction more natural than it had been in eighteenth-century poetry, and in a sense they may have been right, but even at the high point of the Romantic movement, people did not naturally speak in rhyming stanzas or iambic pentameter. My point is that we cannot expect Fielding, who claims to confine himself “strictly to Nature,” to read like a twenty-first-century writer, whose conception of that phrase would be entirely different. Fielding may have helped to revolutionize the writing of prose fiction, but he was still a man of the eighteenth century.

In fact Fielding was quite self-conscious about what he was doing, as we can see not only from his preface but from his practice in the novel. Throughout the novel, his narrator calls the reader’s attention to the fact that it is a work of fiction (a technique known as “metafiction,” which has been rediscovered by numerous modern novelists). For instance, the heading of chapter eight reads, “In which, after some very fine Writing, the History goes on...” And what does Fielding mean by “very fine Writing”? He means this paragraph:

Now the Rake Hesperus had called for his Breeches, and having well rubbed His drowsy Eyes, prepared to dress himself for all Night; by whose Example his Brother Rakes on Earth likewise leave those Beds, in which they had slept away the Day. Now *Thetis* that good housewife began to put the Pot in order to regale the good Man *Phoebus*, after his daily Labours were over. In vulgar Language, it was in the Evening when *Joseph* attended his Lady’s Orders.  
(I.8)

This is “very fine Writing” in the sense that it echoes Homeric mythological descriptions of dawn, but of course it does so in a typically Fieldingesque, humorous way. Hesperus, the evening star, is called a rake, a man about town, and the thought of such a mythological figure calling for his “breeches” is thoroughly incongruous. But then Fielding refers to “his Brother Rakes on Earth” who, like Hesperus, sleep through the days so that they may be wide awake for their nighttime revelries. Referring to the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, as “the good Housewife,” merely adds to the incongruity. Finally, the closing sentence, “In vulgar Language, it was the Evening...”

concludes the parody. Fielding is capable of manipulating traditional mythological imagery, and he knows the epic tradition, but this work is a “Comic-Epic Poem in Prose.” Here, as elsewhere, we have epic imagery adapted to comic prose. After all the fancy language, the narrator tells us in plain words, “it was in the Evening.”

Fielding plays such games everywhere in the novel. Several times, for instance, he implies that he has learned the story he is telling from the main characters, as though they were real: One chapter begins, “When he came back to the Inn, he found *Joseph* and *Fanny* sitting together ... Indeed, I have been often assured by both, that they spent these Hours in a most delightful Conversation...” (II.15). Fielding knows that he is writing fiction, and he knows that we know it, but he also knows that we have agreed to be taken in by his fictional game, and so he continues to play it. He and we are in on the whole game together. Is the story true? No. Does it contain truth? Certainly.

(I must briefly digress here. Although elsewhere in this volume I am critical of movies that are based on famous books, I feel compelled to recommend the film of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, directed by Tony Richardson. In this outstanding film, Richardson captures the tone of Fielding’s narrator, who guides us through the novel. The success of *Tom Jones* led to the filming of other eighteenth-century novels. Those films should be avoided.)

Between the narrator’s metafictional games and Fielding’s references to other works ranging from *The Iliad* to *Pamela*, *Joseph Andrews* is already a comical work, and we have not even considered the novel’s plot or characters yet. Of course, it never works to explain humor, but fortunately most of the things that Fielding found humorous are still humorous. Even when he is describing truly deplorable behavior, he manages to make it seem somehow funny, not because he approves of it but because he recognizes its origin in ordinary human failings. He knows that it comes from vanity or hypocrisy and that ultimately it is another example of the ridiculous. In writing *Joseph Andrews*, he condemns such behavior by laughing at it, not with scorn but with what we might call charity. He knows that all of us have a share of ridiculousness.

One of the most famous scenes in *Joseph Andrews* is an adaptation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Joseph has been set upon by robbers, who take everything he has, including his clothes, and leave him lying badly injured by the side of the road. As Joseph regains consciousness, a passing stage-coach stops, and each person on the coach reacts to Joseph's predicament. The coachman says they are late and have no time to spare for Joseph. A lady wants to help, but hearing that Joseph is naked, she cries, "O J-sus'" and urges the coachman to drive on. An old gentleman, hearing that Joseph has been robbed, fears that the thieves may still be there and urges the coachman to leave. A lawyer explains that they have to try to help Joseph, because if he dies and anyone finds out that they were last in his company, they will be held responsible. Prompted by this appear to their common self-interest, they agree to help, but then the coachman refuses to take him unless someone pays his fare (until the lawyer again threatens him) and the lady refuses to ride with a naked man. Of course, no one will lend the wounded and freezing Joseph a coat, until

the Postillion, (a Lad who hath been since transported for robbing a Hen-roost) had voluntarily stript off a great Coat, his only Garment, at the same time swearing a great Oath, (for which he was rebuked by the Passengers) 'that he would rather ride in his Shirt all his Life, than suffer a Fellow-Creature to be in so miserable a Condition.'

(I.12)

Like the "righteous" men in the parable, the passengers are moved entirely by self-interest, and their first inclination on seeing a fellow human being in trouble is to get away from him as quickly as possible. Only the Postillion, who, like the Samaritan, is someone to be looked down on, shows true charity. The others can behave selfishly, perhaps even murderously, and maintain their respectability because of their social positions, while the postilion, who will later suffer a major punishment for a minor transgression, is alone in demonstrating true charity. Even his censure by the passengers for his great oath is odd, for the lady received no such rebuke for her "O J-sus." In fact, he is not being rebuked for his oath but for his implied criticism of the uncharitable passengers and for his revelation of the real shabbiness that lies under the surface of their respectability. Here we find the hypocrisy

and vanity (in the sense of emptiness) that Fielding spoke of in the Preface. These people are tested, and they fail miserably, as do several other characters in this chapter. There is, for example, the surgeon who is called to help Joseph and who has almost finished dressing, thinking that he is going to help a gentleman or a lady, but who, on hearing that his patient is a poor pedestrian, goes back to bed.

The chapter's examination of charity culminates during a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Tow-ouse, who run the inn where Joseph has been deposited. Mr. Tow-ouse is inclined to help him, but Mrs. Tow-ouse wants the wounded man thrown out. When Mr. Tow-ouse says that " 'common Charity won't suffer you to do that,' " she replies, " 'Common Charity a F—t! ... Common Charity teaches us to provide for ourselves and our Families...' " (I.12). This definition of charity may strike us as idiosyncratic (at least), but it is indeed the definition that people seem to use throughout the novel. In fact, a good deal of *Joseph Andrews* is taken up with an examination of what charity really means (as exemplified by the postilion) and how society regards it (as shown by almost everyone else in this chapter). Mrs. Tow-ouse's "Common Charity, a F—t!" may be more explicit than most of the characters choose to be, but the phrase clearly represents their views.

Fielding may be focusing his humor on such views, and his presentation does make us laugh, but there is a very serious point to what he is saying, for Fielding was concerned with a contemporary religious debate. I do not need to go into detail here except to say that the debate focused on the relative importance in Christian thought of faith and works: some theologians argued that a Christian needed only faith for salvation, while other argued that works alone might suffice. As Parson Adams says,

"...Can any Doctrine have a more pernicious Influence on Society than a Persuasion, that it will be a good Plea for the villain at the last day: '*Lord, it is true I never obeyed one of thy Commandments, yet punish me not, for I believe them all?*'" ... "Ay, Sir," said Adams, "the contrary, I thank Heaven, is inculcated in almost every Page [of the Bible], or I should belye my own Opinion, which hath always been, that a virtuous and good

Turk, or Heathen, are more acceptable in the sight of their Creator, than a vicious and wicked Christian, tho' his Faith was as perfectly Orthodox as St. Paul's himself."  
(I.17)

The kind of empty faith that Adams and his creator Fielding are attacking is a perfect target for satire. Satire, as Fielding makes clear in the Preface, focuses on hypocrisy, and the claim that all one needs is faith and that if one has faith, one need not help one's fellow, is a fine example of hypocrisy. This attitude can be found in a number of episodes in *Joseph Andrews*, including Adams' discussions with Barnabas and his encounter with Parson Trulliber. These clergymen, especially in contrast with the highly devout and charitable Adams, who combines faith and works, are shown to be frauds of the highest caliber.

Adams, of course, is the most interesting character in *Joseph Andrews*. He may be highly devout, but he is hardly perfect and he provides some of the novel's greatest humor, most of which has its source in his almost complete innocence. As Fielding's narrator tells us, Adams was "as entirely ignorant of the Ways of this World, as an Infant just entered into it could possibly be" (I.3). This innocence does not necessarily imply foolishness, though the good parson is occasionally foolish. What it does imply is that Adams tries to live up to the biblical ideal of perfection and that he therefore believes that everyone else tries to live up to that ideal as well. That Adams is alone in this belief is a condemnation not of his foolishness but of the corruption of a society that claims to rely on biblical ideals but in truth is based on selfishness. Here lies the resemblance to Don Quixote, another innocent whose innocence illustrates the corruption surrounding him. Like Don Quixote, Adams is never discouraged by the failures he sees in others. His view of the world never becomes jaded, no matter how many rascals he encounters.

One of the best episodes for illustrating Adams' character is his meeting with Parson Trulliber. Adams, finding himself, Joseph, and Joseph's beloved Fanny stranded at an inn without funds, assumes that he need only ask the local clergyman for a loan and the local clergyman, heeding the biblical injunctions on charity, will give it to him. If Adams were asked for such a loan, he would not hesitate to give it,

but Adams and Parson Trulliber, though sharing the same religion, do not share the same principles. Short, fat, and crude, Trulliber is a parson only on Sundays. The rest of the week he is a hog farmer, and he welcomes Adams only because he thinks Adams has come to purchase some of his hogs. After a series of misadventures, none of which cast great credit on Trulliber, Adams tells the parson why he has come, adding, "I am convinced you will joyfully embrace such an Opportunity of laying up a Treasure in a better Place than any this World affords" (II.14). There is Adams' innocence. He assumes that Trulliber will happily lend him, or even give him, the money, since such a good deed would receive heavenly approval.

Trulliber's response is highly equivocal: "Lay up my Treasure! What matters where a Man's Treasure is whose Heart is in the Scriptures? There is the Treasure of a Christian" (II.14). Adams understands him to mean that he is happy to lend him the money without any thought of reward, heavenly or otherwise, simply because he has been instructed by Scripture to do so. Our quixotic innocent expects the money to be immediately forthcoming and grabs the hog farmer's hand, while the latter immediately thinks he is about to be robbed, for what he really meant was that as long as he believed in Scripture, as long as he had what he called faith, he had no need to provide charity, to engage in good works.

Adams may be naïve, but he knows his theology, and he knows when his devoutly held beliefs are being flouted: he concludes his angry response to Trulliber by saying, "Whoever therefore is void of Charity, I make no scruple of promising that he is not Christian" (II.14). Trulliber, naturally, is furious and even appears ready to strike Adams, until his wife "interposed, and begged him not to fight, but shew himself a true Christian, and take the Law of him." In other words, fighting is not Christian, but having Adams arrested would be.

This scene illustrates a number of points about *Joseph Andrews*. First, it shows us that though Adams is innocent and trusting, he is also firm about maintaining his principles. His religion is not just something he talks about; it is something he practices to the best of his ability. But we also see, in this scene and throughout the novel, that Adams is nearly alone in doing so. Certainly his pupils Joseph and

Fanny share his convictions, but virtually no one else does. This is another point that the novel is making by means of Adams, that England may call itself a Christian country, but it is so in name only. Fielding offers here a strong condemnation, but what saves the novel from over-moralization and from bitterness is Fielding's unceasing humor. He condemns Trulliber and his like by making us laugh at them. The idea that Trulliber calls himself a parson is laughable in itself. The idea that this short, fat, nasty man would attack Adams, whom we already know as a good fighter, is ridiculous. And the idea that being a true Christian means not to strike someone but to take him to law is ludicrous. By providing so much humor in these episodes, Fielding allows us to express condemnation through our laughter. By making these characters so lifelike and by revealing their failings so clearly, Fielding focuses our condemnation on the sins rather than on the sinners. He makes us wish the characters behaved better rather than wishing that we might see them punished. Considering the serious nature of Fielding's criticism, what he accomplishes is quite extraordinary.

Adam, of course, for all his nobility, also has his failings. Occasionally, for instance, he takes his principles too far. When Fanny is kidnapped and in danger of sexual assault, while Adams and Joseph are tied to the bed posts at an inn, Joseph weeps and groans and bemoans the situation. Adams "consoles" Joseph first by reviewing their situation in such detail that Joseph feels even greater agony and then by telling him that his duty is to submit. Adams' advice may be true. It may be perfectly in keeping with the philosophical views of Seneca, Boethius, and Cicero, whom he cites as authorities, but it is hardly consoling. When Joseph tells him, "O you have not spoken one Word of Comfort to me yet," Adams is truly taken aback, and he asks in all sincerity, "What am I then doing? What can I say to comfort you?" (III.11). Senecan and Ciceronian consolations may be fine philosophical positions, but they are of little help when one is tied to a bedpost and one's beloved is about to be ravished. Similarly, near the novel's end, it appears that Joseph cannot marry Fanny (for reasons that I will not reveal) and Joseph is again reduced to bemoaning his situation. Again Adams tries to console him by telling him of his duty to accept what God has allowed to happen. This time, however, Adams' very unconsoling consolation is interrupted by the news that his son

has drowned, at which he completely falls to pieces. In his weeping and grieving, he totally ignores Joseph, who has been reminding him of his own forms of consolation. Fortunately it turns out that the boy has not drowned and Adams is able to resume his advice to Joseph, but even Joseph cannot overlook his teacher's hypocrisy, which Adams tries to explain away by pointing to the difference between losing one's son and losing one's beloved.

So Adams, as good as he is, is not perfect. That news is hardly a revelation. Adams is a human being, and like all the human beings in this novel—or in the world—he has his failings. He is more principled than most people, but if we cannot expect perfection in him, how can we expect it in anyone? We can laugh at him and admire him—even simultaneously—for he is both funny and admirable, but he shares the human situation with the Trullibers of the world. Like Don Quixote, he reveals the failings of the people he meets, but he is not immune to those failings himself. By creating Adams, Fielding has shown the depth of his human understanding: this character, whose portrayal includes humor, anger, principle, hypocrisy, perceptiveness, and blindness, is an image of how far even the best of us can succeed as we make our way in the world.

If Adams has such flaws, it is no wonder that other characters have them, too. Lady Booby is particularly interesting, as she struggles interminably with her sexual feelings for Joseph and her knowledge both that such feelings are improper and that a lady of her stature should not be obsessed by a servant. At first her rapid changes of mind are amusing, especially as her servant Mrs. Slipslop tries to use them to her own advantage, but then she becomes more seriously interesting, in strong contrast to *Pamela's* Mr. B\_\_\_\_\_, who was both predictable and manipulatable. Mrs. Slipslop, too, is an amusing character who operates entirely out of self-interest. What she does to language is hysterical, but it is also amusing to watch her as she takes a superior attitude toward the other servants in the Booby household and an apparently inferior one toward the Boobys, though clearly she feels herself superior to everyone. She is a case of satire arising from a thoroughly misplaced vanity.

It is worth noting that much of *Joseph Andrews* consists of a journey away from London and toward a rural setting. Near the novel's beginning, when the Booby household goes to London, even Joseph, that paragon of virtue, adopts the styles of the city. He gets a fashionable haircut and devotes his attention to looking good. He would not take to gambling, swearing, or drinking, but "when he attended his Lady at Church (which was but seldom) he behaved with less seeming Devotion than formerly" (I.4). Although his morals remain uncorrupted, Joseph is easily swept up by the more worldly atmosphere of London, an atmosphere with which fielding himself had had much contact and for which he had little tolerance, as we can see in *Joseph Andrews*, *Tom Jones*, and in his more somber last novel, *Amelia*. In fact, it seems in much of Fielding's work, the higher a person's social class and the closer that person's attachment to the city may be, the more corrupt that person is apt to be.

Certainly there is a long history in literature of contrasting the city and the country, often by people from the city who suppose the country to be closer to nature and therefore more innocent. The accuracy of that supposition may be debatable, but the contrast is a convenient one and works very well for a satirical work like *Joseph Andrews*, where innocence and corruption are so clearly contrasted. Not all country people are innocent, but in the country the corruption of a Parson Trulliber stands out even more strikingly than it would in London, where it might be more expected.

The most detailed picture of city life, however, comes in one of the novel's three major digressions. Each of these digressions plays a role in the novel, illustrating another aspect of eighteenth-century English life that Fielding is satirizing. The first is the story of Leonora in chapters four through six of Book II, and the third is the story of Leonard and Paul in chapter ten and eleven of Book IV, but the longest of the digressions is the story of Mr. Wilson in the third and fourth chapters of Book III. The third chapter is by itself the longest chapter in the novel. Wilson's unhappy story, complete with sexually transmitted diseases as well as gambling, swearing, and drinking, can be seen as nearly the opposite of Joseph's story. More pointedly, it is the story of what might have happened to Joseph, or to someone like

Joseph, if he had remained in London. The story has a happy ending, but in the middle of this great comic novel, it presents a more serious vision of English society's seamier side.

Even so, we cannot forget that *Joseph Andrews* is a comic novel. I have tried in this chapter not to give away too much of the story and not to focus on too many of the humorous scenes. Readers of the novel should be able to enjoy both the plot and the humor for themselves. There are some wonderful scenes in the book that are worth savoring many times, but what is really striking is Fielding's understanding of people. Parson Adams, that most innocent and naïve of men, claims that he has learned about human nature from books: "Knowledge of Men is only to be learnt from Books, *Plato* and *Seneca* for that," he says (II.16). We know that Adams has indeed read his *Plato* and *Seneca*, but we also know how little he knows about people. Had he read works like *Joseph Andrews*—which, incidentally, someone like Adams would never have done because such people would have considered fiction a waste of time—he would have known much more about the human heart and about humanity.

So read *Joseph Andrews* and enjoy it. The language is two hundred years old and rather more formal than what we are accustomed to, but the reader will quickly feel comfortable with it. It is worth making the adjustment in order to meet Joseph, Fanny, Adams, Slipslop, and the whole Booby clan. And if you like these characters, tackle *Tom Jones*. And if you find that you like eighteenth-century fiction, take a look at *Pamela* or at Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker*. And then go to the masterpiece, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

# Chapter 8

## Jane Austen

I like to bake bread, but there is something about baking bread that I do not understand. I can assemble all the ingredients—the yeast, the flour, the salt, the sugar, the water—and I know how to mix them, how to knead them, how to let the dough rise, and how to bake it. But I do not feel that I totally understand how those ingredients and those processes combine to make bread. Somehow all those separate ingredients, each of which I can hold in my hand, combine to create something totally different and more delicious than each of them can be individually. I find the same “mystery”—if I can call it that—in literature. I think that I understand words and sentences, characters and plots, but I am not sure that I understand how an author combines those elements to create a world that I can visit and that comes to have a special reality for me. I have never actually lived in a world like the one that Jane Austen describes, and I am pretty certain that I would not particularly want to live there, but when I read her novels, I like visiting that world, and I enjoy being in the company of her characters, or at least of some of them. But I do not understand how Jane Austen, or any other great writer, actually achieves that effect.

I am also fascinated, as I said in the introduction to this book, at the feeling we have that we really “get into” a novel, especially the first time we read it. We read as quickly as we can, all the while knowing that the faster we read, the sooner we will have to leave the world of that novel. Our feeling that we have “gotten into” the novel is, of course, an illusion. The truth is that the novel “gets into” us, that the words on the

page enter our consciousness, where they are transformed just as the ingredients of my bread are transformed. An author creates a novel, but that novel only comes alive through its interaction with a reader's mind. And here we encounter another interesting problem, this time from physics. If I understand this point correctly it is very difficult to make empirical studies of electrons, because to do so we would have to bounce light off of the electrons, and the force of the light would alter what the electron is doing. In other words, in attempting to study the electron, the attempt itself alters the subject of study. The same phenomenon, though in different ways, applies to literature. There can be no such thing as an objective view of a work of literature, because the work must be affected by the mind that is perceiving it. The interactions among the author's mind, the reader's mind, and the work itself are complex, but they can be analyzed fruitfully. Nevertheless, I am still awed by whatever force there is that transforms the words written on a page into a world that we can imagine, that we can see, that we can feel ourselves be a part of.

Jane Austen created such worlds—or such a world, if we think of her six major novels as all part of a continuum. We will never know how genius develops in certain people. We will never know how Shakespeare became Shakespeare or how Jane Austen became Jane Austen. She was an unmarried, middle-class lady who lived with her family, as unmarried, middle-class ladies used to do. She was well read, but so were many people, and she wrote six wonderful novels that give us insight into how a particular class of people lived at a particular time and help to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a human being.

And it is significant that the Jane Austen who accomplished these things was a woman. Austen was hardly the first important female writer. There was the Greek poet Sappho, there was the Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu, there were Marie of France, Christine of Pizan, Margaret of Navarre, Mary Sidney, Mary Wroth, and many others whose works in recent years are becoming better known. But when we compare these names to the names of male writers, we can see that the pre-nineteenth-century female writers are far fewer and generally less well known. In many times and places, of course, women were either

not encouraged to get an education or were actually forbidden to be educated, which meant that there were likely to be fewer female writers. Furthermore, when women did write, it was more difficult for them to be published, since, in the days before literacy became common, male-dominated publishers were reluctant to publish the works of women for their male-dominated readership. And when women's works did find a publisher, they were often overlooked because, after all, they were only by women, the theory being that women's writing would only appeal to other women, while men's works have a universal appeal and applicability. The whole scheme sounds so silly when we say it, but this system prevailed for centuries and in some ways still prevails. I often ask my students how many of them have read Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and most of them raise their hands, because *Huckleberry Finn* is frequently taught in high schools. When I ask how many of them have read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, however, the only hands that go up are those of the women, because *Little Women* is not part of most curricula. (Recently, I must add, some of the men have been assigned the book in their college classes.) The lesson seems to be that in nineteenth-century American novels about adolescence, the adventures of Huck Finn apply to everyone, but the experiences of Meg, Jo, and their sisters apply only to other "little women."

Jane Austen lived in an age that showed this same attitude but in an even more pronounced form, as we can see from the experiences of two eighteenth-century novelists. One of these novelists was Fanny Burney, whose novel *Evelina* was published in 1778 to much critical acclaim. Although there were other eighteenth-century British female novelists, Burney is undoubtedly the best known for her serious work. Far more widely read in her time, however, was another eighteenth-century British female novelist, Anne Radcliffe (who is often known as Mrs. Radcliffe, though we would never call a writer "Mr. Fielding" or "Mr. Shakespeare"). Mrs. Radcliffe wrote a number of Gothic novels (or Gothic romances) such as *The Romance of the Forest* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. These works are still fun to read, and they were very influential in their time; but one of the reasons that Mrs. Radcliffe was able to publish so many of them is that they were regarded as "women's works," much the way that soap operas, at least in their early days, were regarded as programs for women. It is hardly a surprise

that Jane Austen relied on the popularity of such Gothic novels in *Northanger Abbey*.

Anne Radcliffe could publish her novels by ostensibly directing them to a female audience, though they were actually popular with men as well. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* listed Ellis Bell and Currer Bell respectively as their authors on their original title pages. As we will see, Mary Ann Evans published her novels under the name George Eliot. This situation must strike us as extraordinary. Under such circumstances, the success and popularity of Austen's novels—*Sense and Sensibility* cites as its author "A Lady," while *Pride and Prejudice* cites as its author "the Author of 'Sense and Sensibility'"—indicate that the reading public could perhaps find something valuable in the work of a female writer.

Of course, we know that Austen's works were written by a woman, and so we might be inclined to see those works as dealing with "women's concerns." Many male writers, however, have dealt with women's roles in society. We need only think of Samuel Richardson and his influence on the development of the English novel. But Austen has special insight into these matters, not only because she was a woman but because she was a genius. She was capable of looking at the complex societal structure in which she lived, with its rigid rules of behavior and expectations, and seeing beneath the surface appearances to the realities that supported the whole structure. Furthermore, she could convey what she saw with wit and in the most delicate language. I must confess that sometimes when I read Austen, I lose the sense of what I am reading and get caught up in the sound of her sentences, in the balances she creates and in her careful use of rhetorical tropes. Almost every one of her sentences could serve as an example, but here is a particularly nice one from *Sense and Sensibility*: "With regard to herself, it was now a matter of unconcern whether she went to town or not, and when she saw her mother so thoroughly pleased with the plan, and her sister exhilarated by it in look, voice, and manner, restored to all her usual animation, and elevated to more than her usual gaiety, she could not allow herself to distrust the consequences" (II.4). The way the sentence focuses on Elinor, with subordinate clauses devoted to Mrs. Dashwood and to Marianne, is wonderful. Austen is a

marvelous writer. I once bought a bumper sticker for a friend that read, "I'd rather be reading Jane Austen." A good deal of the time, that is an appropriate sentiment.

I have chosen in this chapter to look at two of Austen's novels, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. These were the first works that she published, though not the first she wrote, and there is evidence that, between writing and rewriting both works, their composition overlapped. *Sense and Sensibility* appeared in 1811 and *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813. Her later works, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, investigate in more depth some of the issues that she raised in her earlier novels, and it is interesting to wonder where she might have gone had she not died at the age of forty-one. Austen wrote during the period we think of as the Romantic Age (she died just four years before Keats), but her novels, although they betray the influence of Romanticism, seem more closely tied to the eighteenth century. She was not a revolutionary writer, nor did she "pour out her soul" on paper. Her novels lack the overt passions of the Brontës' novels, for instance. Instead, she took the novel form as it had come down to her and made it her own. She puts her characters, especially her female characters, in situations that are interesting and challenging but not extraordinary, and then she carefully watches them react. She has no Heathcliffs or Mr. Rochesters to terrorize or fascinate her characters. She has ordinary human beings, who must learn to negotiate the world, though the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* does imagine that she lives in a Gothic novel.

Austen's novels are not difficult to read. Her language is beautifully used, though not complex. Occasionally she writes something that may strike us as ungrammatical, but generally she is simply following the usage of her time. An important exception in *Sense and Sensibility* is the case of Lucy Steele, whose letters contain enough errors to confirm our suspicions about her vulgarity. It may seem unfair to base such a judgment on grammatical errors, but this phenomenon brings us to an important aspect of the novels. The most difficult thing about reading them is becoming accustomed to their heavy emphasis on the forms of proper behavior, of which correct grammar is only one small example. We must realize that while the contemporary United States has a class

system, that system fades to invisibility in comparison to the class system in Austen's England. In her novels, everyone belongs to a clearly defined class, and even within the classes there are clear distinctions of level. We may use terms like "upper-" or "lower-middle-class" and then argue about what they mean, but in Austen's England, such terms were clearly understood. Furthermore, those terms created expectations about behavior. We may bemoan the disappearance of manners in our society, but in Austen's society a code of manners dictated what could and could not be said. Occasionally in these novels the reader may be inclined to think, "If these characters could only talk to each other honestly and openly, the difficulty could be solved." But if we could say such things to these characters, they would not understand what we mean. There was proper behavior and improper behavior, and though there may be some instances of ambiguity, generally the lines between them were clearly drawn.

We must also remember that Austen is describing almost entirely a largely middle-class world. The families that she describes may not always be wealthy, but they always have servants—and we must not think of servants as slaves. They were paid employees from the lower classes. What is a bit remarkable is how seldom we see these servants in the novels. There are occasional references to cooks and maids and butlers and people who take care of the horses and carriages, but such people do not play a role in the stories. They keep the households running and their lives are not Austen's concern. Her focus is on the men and especially the women of a class that has rigidly defined roles and rules, whose men may once have been in trade but are now freed of that burden, though they may occasionally join the clergy, and whose women are never expected to be employed, though they must have such accomplishments as music and drawing. Occasionally we may feel that if these people had something more productive to do to fill their days, they would not have so many problems, but our own experiences can tell us how foolish that sentiment is.

Given what seems the financial independence of her characters, they spend a great deal of their time thinking about financial considerations. When we first meet characters, we are often told of their

financial condition—"Mrs. Jennings was a widow, with an ample jointure" (*S&S* i.8)—and characters talk about each other in the same way:

"Who is Colonel Brandon? Is he a man of fortune?"

"Yes; he has very good property in Dorsetshire."

"I am glad of it. He seems a most gentlemanlike man; and I think, Elinor, I may congratulate you on the prospect of a very respectable establishment in life."

"Me, brother! What do you mean?"

"He likes you. I observed him narrowly, and am convinced of it. What is the amount of his fortune?"

"I believe about two thousand a-year."

"Two thousand a-year;" and then working himself up to a pitch of enthusiastic generosity, he added, "Elinor, I wish, with all my heart, it were *twice* as much, for your sake."

(II.11)

This emphasis on fiscal health strikes us as crass, and Austen frequently satirizes her characters' obsessions with each other's "worth," but in this society, the actual earning of money was looked down on. A family whose level of wealth put them lower on the scale could not hope to increase their wealth through hard work because such work, if it were available and they were capable of doing it, would make them ineligible for the society that they desired to remain part of. Consequently, what seems like financial independence often verges on being an illusion. Most of Austen's families exist on relatively small incomes and it is no wonder that they frequently are obsessed by financial considerations. One of the major ways for such families to increase their wealth was to be sure that their children married wealth. That is why John Dashwood, thinking that Colonel Brandon wants to marry Elinor, congratulates her not for the possibilities of love or companionship or because Colonel Brandon is a fine man but because he has about two thousand a year. If she marries such a man, or, more precisely, such an amount of money, she, who has no other way of making money or ensuring her fiscal stability for the future, will be settled for the rest of her life. Of course, John Dashwood is also relieved, because if she marries Colonel Brandon, John Dashwood will not have any responsibility for helping to support her (not that he has taken that responsibility at all seriously up to this point).

An extended quotation from later in the same chapter provides an even better sense of how this society operates, and again the speaker is John Dashwood:

“I shall have a charming account to carry to Fanny,” said he, as he walked back with his sister. “Lady Middleton is really a most elegant woman! Such a woman as I am sure Fanny will be glad to know. And Mrs. Jennings too, an exceeding well-behaved woman, though not so elegant as her daughter. Your sister need not have any scruple even of visiting *her*, which, to say the Truth, has been a little the case, and very naturally; for we only knew that Mrs. Jennings was the widow of a man who had got all his money in a low way; and Fanny and Mrs. Ferrars were both strongly prepossessed that neither she nor her daughters were such kind of women as Fanny would like to associate with. But now I can carry her a most satisfactory account of both.”

(II.11)

Mr. Dashwood, of course, is not only a snob but a very shallow person (actually quite a common combination). Many of Austen’s characters are shallow and therefore willing to accept society’s judgments and conventions, as Mr. Dashwood does here. He is bound to like Lady Middleton just because she is “Lady” Middleton, and he is also willing to approve of Mrs. Jennings, even though her money was earned in “a low way,” that is, through her husband’s trade. Since she is “well-behaved,” however, she is good enough for his wife to associate with.

If Mr. Dashwood were alone in seeing the world in this way, he might be a caricature, but his attitude is all too typical, and while Elinor is often too polite to mention all of her judgments of such people, Austen’s narrator is not: “Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of cold hearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them; and they sympathized with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanour, and a general want of understanding” (II.12). When we read this statement after having met both Lady Middleton and Mrs. Dashwood, we know that it is completely accurate. These two ladies, along with so many other characters in the book, have mastered all the forms of what passes for courtesy but are totally devoid of substance. Just as Mr. Dashwood can speak of

nothing but money and hunting, so these ladies are restricted to the most superficial of topics. Nevertheless, they consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be arbiters of taste and behavior, while those who have real taste and discernment, like Elinor, are regarded as being far lower on the social scale.

Elinor is young, and she makes mistakes, but she is intelligent. Readers must be aware from the very beginning of the book of the difficult situation in which Elinor is placed. Her father has died and her only male relative is her half-brother John Dashwood. The consequence is that Elinor, her two sisters, and their mother must cope on a small income with no prospect of increasing that income except through advantageous marriages. The beginning of the novel is a bit confusing—even early readers found it confusing—because Austen has to establish the family relationships, but once they are established, we can see the difficulties of the situation that confronts these women. The options for women of their class are severely limited, and they do not merely bow to convention by acquiescing. They truly have no choice. Elinor may be more intelligent than virtually anyone else in the novel, but as a woman without substantial money, she is trapped, as she herself understands. She may rebel against her situation privately, but there is nothing she can do to change it.

In many ways, Elinor's mother has a clearer understanding of what is going on. We may laugh at Mrs. Dashwood, as we laugh at Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. They are both often comical characters. But, from their limited viewpoints, they also have legitimate concerns. Yes, it is funny that they are both so anxious to see their daughters married, that they measure the suitability of potential husbands on a monetary scale, that Mrs. Bennet especially cares so little about affection or compatibility. They are nags; they are frequently insensitive. But from another perspective, they are absolutely correct. They are concerned for their daughters' well-being. If the girls do not marry well, those girls will be in a terrible predicament, and from the mothers' point of view, even a bad marriage (like that of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet) is far better than no marriage at all. In a society that judges people, families, and relationships on the basis of money, these right-thinking mothers are doing the best they can for their apparently ungrateful

daughters. When we laugh at them, then, we should also keep in mind the serious issues they have to confront and the kind of society that has made them into the kind of women they are.

Still, from Elinor's point of view, the behavior of her family is often intolerable. She believes in some kind of decorum: there are proper and improper ways of thinking and behaving. The rest of her family shares that conviction, but they have different standards of what is proper and improper. This conflict brings us to a consideration of the novel's title, *Sense and Sensibility*. In the eighteenth century, "sensibility" had a very clear meaning, involving what we might call sympathy for anyone who was experiencing misfortune. Such sympathy might be shown for the realistic, if expected, misfortunes of Samuel Richardson's Pamela or for the very far-fetched and highly melodramatic misfortunes of Mrs. Radcliffe's Elena in *The Italian*. In fact, melodrama really lends itself to eighteenth-century sensibility. Elena spends a great deal of her time crying and fainting, and readers were expected to share her emotions. Austen was aware of this approach to sensibility, but she uses the word somewhat differently. It would be too simplistic to say that Elinor represents sense and Marianne represents sensibility, but through much of the novel those are their dominant character traits, and they each have to learn to adopt some of the other characteristic.

It is difficult to discuss this point without revealing too much of the plot, but I will try. Early in the novel, Marianne evaluates Elinor's prospective suitor Edward in revealing terms. He has been reading aloud to the family (a favorite pastime in pre-radio and pre-television days) and Marianne comments, "Elinor has not my feelings, and therefore she may overlook it, and be happy with him. But it would have broke *my* heart had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility" (I.3). One way of defining Marianne's notion of sensibility is as "feelings," or more precisely, as "feelings openly expressed." Marianne, in the fullness of her sixteen years, has strong feelings about everything and practically no hesitation about making those feelings known. Her complaint about Edward, even about Elinor, whom she loves deeply, is that they do not show sufficient feeling for things. Edward read poetry, but without the emotion that Marianne thinks it deserves, which

makes him, in her eyes, devoid of sensibility. The narrator explains the differences between the sisters in the first chapter:

Elinor...possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother...her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.

Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was every thing but prudent.

(I.1)

Elinor does indeed have strong feelings, but she keeps them under such strict control that we know about them only because the narrator can enter her mind. Occasionally she would be much better off, and readers would be much less frustrated, if she expressed her feelings. If she could be totally honest with Edward or with Lucy or with Mr. Dashwood, we would feel happier, though she would certainly not (and here we have an important distinction between her early nineteenth-century views and our early twenty-first-century views). Even Marianne, when she realizes how much Elinor has suffered silently for her sake, is both grateful and ashamed, grateful because she would not have survived without Elinor's aid and ashamed because Elinor's silence kept Marianne from seeing how deeply Elinor was affected by events.

Marianne, on the other hand, although she shares Elinor's kind and generous nature, would be better off if she learned to control her feelings just a bit. Her romantic ideas and her insistence on acting on impulse create problems for her and for her family. Fortunately I am not giving away much of the story when I say that Marianne and Elinor do learn this lesson. They do not become interchangeable, and they do not lose their individual characteristics, but they do grow up; and we see that "sense and sensibility" does not mean that the sisters are divided between these two qualities but that they must each learn to incorporate both qualities into their personalities.

I also am not giving away too much of the story when I say that the novel ends with marriages. Like Shakespeare's comedies, though often with a clearer rationale, Austen's novels often end in marriage. The trick is to decide who will marry whom. In Shakespeare, those weddings signal a wholeness. Problems are resolved and couples can be paired off with some assurance that they will live happily ever after. The case is a bit different in Austen. There are wholeness and resolution in her novels, but because of their greater sense of verisimilitude (what we might call representational realism), we have a stronger feeling that the current triumph over problems is temporary. At the end of *As You Like It*, everyone heads back to their proper places and we have a sense that there will be no more usurpations for a long time. At the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, though the proper characters are married and happy, we know that the society as a whole will continue to evaluate people in terms of their fortunes and that the venial characters have succeeded as much as the admirable ones. We may feel that the admirable characters are happier, but we are probably wrong: Lucy is and will be quite happy with the role she has chosen. Since she is not burdened with the sense of insight of an Elinor or a Marianne, she can share none of their perceptions. She lacks self-awareness and any possibility of self-criticism. She is convinced that she has triumphed over Elinor and Marianne, and much of the world would agree with her. Elinor and Marianne, and their small circle of true friends, are the oddities.

Austen's novels, in this way, remind me of Mozart's symphonies. They are exquisitely fashioned: the language is crisp and precise, the structure is elegant, the characters appear and function almost the way musical themes do. There is a sense of grace and sunniness in her novels, just as in Mozart's symphonies, and yet, also like the symphonies, there is a darker aspect to the works as well. Austen's sense of decorum is like Mozart's sense of harmony. It gives the impression of well-being, of perfection, but underneath that appearance of perfection there is incredible depth, in which the decorum and the harmony are called into question. Reading Jane Austen seems to be a delightful occupation—the scene in *Sense and Sensibility* in which Mr. Dashwood decides what his obligations to his half-sisters must be is beautifully and amusingly done—but there is more to reading Austen

than delight. Mr. Dashwood reveals his own selfishness, that of his wife, and that of a society that allows people like the Dashwoods to flourish. Jane Austen can be critical indeed, but like so many of her characters, she succeeds by understatement, and her criticism is never ill-mannered, which makes it even more devastating.

A good example of Austen's technique can be found at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose opening lines are almost as well known as the opening line of Melville's *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael." Of course, the answer to the question, "Who is the narrator of *Moby Dick* is not "Ishmael." We do not know his name. He just tells us to call him Ishmael, for reasons that the reader must discover in the course of the book. So, too, the opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* are not so simple as they seem:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

(I.1)

Is it, as the narrator seems to say, "a truth...that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"? Or is this "a truth universally acknowledged," that is, something that people have made into a "truth" simply because they think it is true, or should be true? Is it "a truth" at all—does a wealthy single man necessarily need a wife? What Austen does in this brilliant sentence is to state a commonly held view, assert that commonly views are treated as universal truths, question whether they ought to be so treated, and cast doubt on the truthfulness of this particular commonly held universal truth. Furthermore, the second sentence not only contributes to these implications of the first sentence but adds new implications of its own. When the narrator refers to these wealthy men as "the rightful property" of the local daughters, she adds irony upon irony. The men are wealthy because of what they own, but in the mercantile world of Jane Austen, where honest trade is regarded as a family blemish, courtship and marriage are approvingly regarded as commercial transactions.

And in a society where, as we will see, women had few legal rights, where their right to own anything at all could be very doubtful, the notion that wealthy men could be their property was as much an illusion as the universal truth that wealthy single men automatically want wives. As we saw to a lesser degree in *Sense and Sensibility*, there is no mention here of affection, of moral worthiness, of any of the higher qualities that one might desire in the spouse of one's child. People are property. They are commodities measured by the size of their financial attributes. Mr. Bingley could be an axe murderer, but Mrs. Bennet wants him for her daughter, because he would be a wealthy, single axe murderer, and the only reason she rejects Darcy as a possible suitor for another daughter later on is that he seems socially too far above the Bennet family. As I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Bennet has some legitimate cause for anxiety about the future welfare of her daughters and herself; but although her behavior in this regard occasionally seems humorous, in too many instances it verges on the monstrous. She is a constant source of embarrassment to her two older daughters and to her husband, though he has the power to remove himself from her and avoid the worst of her behavior.

The predicament of the Bennet family has a precise source. Mr. Bennet's estate, which means his income and his property, "was entailed in default of heirs male" (I.1). This situation is quite different from that in *Sense and Sensibility*, where Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters are in a predicament because of the elder Mr. Dashwood's sudden death. He has asked his son, Elinor and Marianne's half-brother, to help them, a charge that the son insufficiently fulfills, but in *Pride and Prejudice*, the women's potential problem is the result of deliberate planning. According to the terms under which Mr. Bennet has inherited the estate, it must pass to another male. Had the Bennets had another child, a boy, he would have inherited the estate and, presumably, have had some responsibility toward his mother and to any of his sisters who remained unmarried. But there was no boy, and so the estate is destined to be inherited by the pompous and foolish Mr. Collins. How were the girls expected to survive? They were expected to marry and become the responsibility of their husbands, and any of them who did not marry would become the responsibility of those who did, or of other relatives who would pity them and take them in. Since

so much of the novel's action results from this peculiar arrangement, it was obviously important to Austen. If we combine this thought with the fact that there are five Bennet daughters, we find something very interesting, because two of the daughters, Mary and Kitty, play almost no role in the novel and could easily have been dispensed with. But Austen had a reason for giving the Bennets five daughters.

In the biblical book of Numbers, we find the story of the five daughters of Zelophehad, who are about to lose their patrimony because their father died without a son. "Why," they ask, "should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he had no son? Give us a possession among the brethren of our father." Moses is in a quandary and takes the case directly to God, who tells him, "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: though shalt surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren; and thou shalt cause the inheritance of their father to pass unto them. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying: If a man die, and have no son, then ye shall cause his inheritance to pass unto his daughter" (Numbers 27:1-8). In short, the entailment that causes so much trouble in this novel violates divine law; and it is no accident that the man who is to inherit the estate, Mr. Collins, is a clergyman. He is a clergyman who advises Mr. Bennet, when one of his daughters is in trouble, "to console yourself as much as possible, to throw off your unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruit of her own heinous offence" (III.6). Apparently Mr. Collins has little regard for either Testament, and that is just Austen's point. Mr. Collins, the official representative of religion, is a hypocrite. He honors authority and mouths Christian pieties, but his actions are transparently selfish. So it is with many of the novel's characters, and so it is with a society that would allow a Mr. Collins to represent its religious interests. Again, in her understated way, Austen is satirizing what she sees going on around her, in this case the treatment of women as less than full people and the concurrence of religion in perpetuating social inequities.

There are, of course, other examples in all of Austen's works of the same attitude toward women. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, where so much of the action takes place in the city, Elinor and Mari-

anne are confined to the house unless an appropriate person, a man or an older woman, can be found to chaperone them. At least in the country the women can go out walking on their own, though their lives are circumscribed in other ways. Austen seems to present their lives in matter-of-fact terms, as though she is simply describing the way things are. She is, perhaps, too polite to criticize openly, but there is always a substratum of criticism. Like Elizabeth Bennet, whose words are almost always polite and proper, even when they are double edged, Austen manages to convey both senses at once, the sense of verisimilitude—this is how things are—and the sense of satirical criticism—the way things are is absurd and harmful. Every so often she slips in a comment that gets exactly to the point without disturbing the decorum of the narrative. My favorite example comes when Elizabeth is visiting Lady Catherine, who spends her time interfering in everyone else's lives, giving orders and making decisions for them. At one point, the narrator says, "The party then gathered round the fire to hear Lady Catherine determine what weather they were to have on the morrow" (II.6). This devastating and revealing attack seems to be just part of the narrative, but the attentive reader who has not been lulled by the matter-of-fact way that the statement is made may well be taken aback by the bluntness of the criticism.

A more serious example of the technique can be found when Charlotte Lucas agrees to marry Mr. Collins:

Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband.—Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservation from want.

(I.22)

What the narrator says here is what Austen demonstrates in so many places in the novel, but this is the clearest statement of the real meaning of marriage in her society: it provides security for the women but makes no guarantee of happiness for anyone. Such is surely the case for Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, neither of whom is terribly happy in

marriage. We can only hope that the happy couples at the novel's end will transcend the models that predominate in the book and in their lives. The narrator hints that they will.

The narrator's role in the novel stands in interesting contrast to the role of Mr. Bennet. I remember being told when I first studied *Pride and Prejudice* that Mr. Bennet is a satirist in much the same way that Austen's narrator is, but actually there are major differences between them. Like the narrator, Mr. Bennet has a well-developed sense of the absurd, and he knows that he does. As he says to Elizabeth toward the end of the novel, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?" (III.15). When he says this, he and Elizabeth are in his library, the private room to which he retires to avoid his wife and daughters and most of their visitors. This is the room where he spends most of the book. He removes himself from the action and then acts as though he is therefore above the action. For instance, early in the book Mrs. Bennet contrives to have Jane stranded at Netherfield, the home of Mr. Bingley. Because of Mrs. Bennet's scheming, Jane is caught in the rain and catches a cold. Mr. Bennet's comment is that "if your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders" (I.7). We must keep in mind that a cold in the early nineteenth century was nothing to sneeze at. Marianne's illness in *Sense and Sensibility* is quite serious, and George Washington died of complications from a cold (one of the complications being the medical treatment of the time). Jane does become quite ill, but Mr. Bennet, instead of taking a stand, instead of asserting authority over what he recognizes as his wife's foolishness (as a nineteenth-century husband might), does nothing to stop her from endangering the happiness and even the lives of their children. His wife's activities give him material to laugh at, but he never makes any attempt to stop her or to protect his daughters, not even the two he likes, Jane and Elizabeth. He has no hesitation about expressing his scorn for the other three. The combination of his scorn and his desire to remove himself from the action while he laughs at human follies very nearly has a catastrophic result. That matters work out satisfactorily is none of his doing. Like the narrator, he laughs satirically at particular behaviors, but unlike the narrator, he seems incapable of

seeing the whole picture. Of course, the narrator has the advantage of omniscience, but Mr. Bennet seems unaware that there is a whole picture. He does show some awareness of his errors during one of the novel's crises, but he knows himself well enough to know that he will not change his behavior.

What is remarkable is that Elizabeth does have that awareness. She is not content simply to laugh at follies, though she does that, too, but she draws conclusions and then acts upon those conclusions. "Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behavior as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook...But she had never felt so strongly as now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife" (II.19). We can see several remarkable points in this passage. First, we can notice how clearly Elizabeth sees most things. On some vital questions she, like Darcy, is blinded by her pride and her prejudice, and the novel describes how she must learn to overcome those factors, but generally she sees quite keenly. Furthermore, she is not afraid to be critical even of her father, whom she loves. And finally, it is interesting to notice how closely Elizabeth's thoughts match those of the narrator, who has expressed similar sentiments throughout the novel.

In fact, Elizabeth is very much like the narrator, except that the narrator already knows what Elizabeth must learn. In *Sense and Sensibility* it was often difficult to distinguish between the narrator's views and Elinor's, and here, too, we get the sense that Elizabeth is a young version of the narrator. This similarity between the two voices does not mean that the novel is autobiographical. Elizabeth is not Jane Austen, and neither is Elinor, but she is like Jane Austen in being an acute observer and a quick satirist. There is a wonderful passage where Jane, who seldom attributes bad motives to anyone, utters a critical remark, to which Elizabeth responds, "That is the most unforgiving speech... that I ever heard you utter. Good girl!" (III.13). I feel like I can hear

Austen's laughter as she wrote that line. Austen may have used herself partly as a model for these characters, but the most important impression that we come away with can be found in something Elizabeth says to Mr. Collins, who has just proposed to her and tries to explain her rejection of him as a form of feminine flirting. Elizabeth, trying to convince him of how serious she is, says, "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (I.19). That may seem like a fairly ordinary statement to us, and we may even object that elsewhere in the novel Elizabeth is not guided by rationality. We must realize, though, that in Austen's day (and even in our time), the claim that a woman is rational rather than emotional could be viewed as revolutionary. There has been a long history of denying rationality to women—the word "hysteria" comes from the Greek for "womb," and hysteria was long seen as an affliction of women—so that Elizabeth's assertion of her own rationality, especially to a tradition-bound fool like Mr. Collins, is far from ordinary. And if Elizabeth is extraordinary for saying it, how much more extraordinary was Austen for writing it!

If Elizabeth is such a rational creature, why does she make so many mistakes? Often she is the only person who "reads" correctly, whether we are talking about situations, people, or letters. When Jane receives a letter from Miss Bingley, she misreads it, while Elizabeth sees what it really says; and Elizabeth frequently, with the eye of a satirist, sees beneath the surface meaning of what people say to get to their full meaning. But in the cases of Darcy and Wickham, she is guided by both her pride and her prejudices and makes some dreadful errors. On the other hand, unlike so many of the novel's characters, she learns from her errors. After she learns the truth about Wickham and Darcy, she tells Jane, "One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it" (II.17). The task of the rational creature, the novelist, and of the satirist is to get beyond the appearance, and Elizabeth is still learning how to do so, how to read people and how to read the world, not looking for "hidden meanings" but looking to see what they really say. Both she and Darcy, the novel's most intelligent characters, make the same mistakes. Their early conversations, when they are, in effect, fencing with each other, are amusing. It is especially interesting to see how rude Elizabeth can be when, after accusing him of pride,

she behaves with far more pride than anyone. Part of her reaction is certainly justified by Darcy's condescension and by her loyalty to Jane, but part of it comes from her joy in being able to triumph over Darcy.

Naturally, since we are reading Jane Austen, the situation is more complicated than it at first appears. Elizabeth is not entirely wrong in her reading of Darcy. Darcy is proud, though part of his pride is the result of the class distinctions that characterized his society. Although he is beloved by his servants, he is not accustomed to socializing with people of Elizabeth's class. In addition, he is shy, a characteristic that is often mistaken for pride. Consequently, though he and Elizabeth share so many views, they have a great deal of trouble communicating. Furthermore, he is understandably put off by some members of her family, though she is often mortified by their behavior as well, and he is just as embarrassed by the behavior of Lady Catherine, his relative. There is so much for them to break through, their own pride and prejudice and the pride and prejudice of everyone around them, that it is surprising they have any success at all. Their success, however, is vital to Jane Austen's view of the world. Given the obsession of the world she describes with money, status, and power, it is vital that at least some of her characters show the possibility of escaping from those obsessions. Some characters like Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* rely on love to free them, though in Lydia's case especially, love is viewed as a means to raise her status. Marianne, however, learns from her experience, and what she learns is much like what Elinor, Elizabeth, Darcy, and Jane know almost instinctively: that living a truly engaged life requires a degree of selflessness. The societal obsession with money, status, and power requires an individual to think primarily of self—How can I achieve money, status, and power? Marianne, through much of *Sense and Sensibility*, behaves selfishly, and it is only when she realizes how much Elinor has suffered for her that she understands what is required of her. Elizabeth and Jane almost always think of others first, as, to everyone's surprise, does Darcy. The society they inhabit may be petty and venal, but as long as characters like these exist, pettiness and venality cannot be entirely triumphant. In their charming and decorous way, these characters are subversives, undercutting the beliefs and customs of their society and showing that there are other, better ways to behave.

It is marvelous, therefore, to watch how Austen creates these characters and sets them in motion. Everything that happens in the novels must happen the way it does. There is a feeling of inevitability about it. These are ultimately sunny books with just enough shadows to make them believable and to remind us that, despite appearances, the world is never a simple place. Jane Austen and her narrator saw the world clearly; Elizabeth learned to see it clearly. With their help, perhaps we can learn, too.

Readers who enjoy *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* might well want to look into Austen's other novels. I am partial to *Mansfield Park*, but *Emma* and *Persuasion* are wonderful books, too. These books take a somewhat darker view of the world, but they are enjoyable. *Northanger Abbey* is also fun, though it depends for much of its effect on a knowledge of Gothic romance, so read some of Mrs. Radcliffe's work first. It can also be instructive to read some of the works that are roughly contemporary with Austen's. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* is fun to read, and it is especially instructive to read the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Scott was exceptionally popular in his time, and through much of the nineteenth century, but except perhaps for *Ivanhoe*, he is not read much today. Comparing works like *Waverley* or *Rob Roy* to *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pride and Prejudice* can show us why. Scott writes fine adventures, but his characters do not approach the depth of Austen's characters. Scott's people are caught up in historical events, while Austen's characters, though they inhabit a society quite different from our own, have experiences to which we can more closely relate. At the same time, Scott's novels, like *Ivanhoe*, *Rob Roy*, *Kenilworth*, and others can be great fun to read. Many of his novels were transformed into operas by nineteenth-century composers. I particularly recommend reading *The Bride of Lammermoor* and then seeing what Donizetti did with it in his superb opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. And by all means, don't forget the great novels of Charlotte and Emily Bronte that we mentioned earlier. Again, they are quite different from Austen's works, but they are fun to read.

## Chapter 9

# Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

In the Introduction, I wrote that the works I have covered in this book were chosen purely on the basis of my preferences. As an academic, I am supposed to have an area of specialization, though I have always had trouble focusing on a single area of literature to the exclusion of others. Theoretically, however, my areas of specialization are the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I mention this point because the present chapter concerns one of my favorite writers, a writer remote from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Charles Dickens.

Dickens, who lived through the middle of the nineteenth century, has come to represent Victorian England for many readers. While Dickens does, indeed, describe certain aspects of nineteenth-century England, his portrait of the period should not be regarded as all-inclusive. Perhaps a better portrait of the period can be found in the many novels of Anthony Trollope. These are fine works, enjoyable to read, with good plots and interesting characters; but for me, at least, they lack the magic of Dickens' works. Trollope's novels have a far greater level of realism, of verisimilitude. Dickens' novels seem realistic, but his realism is an illusion.

Of course, any literary realism is an illusion, since the only reality in a literary work is the words on the page. If Gabriel Garcia-Marquez decides that one of his characters, Remedios the Beautiful, should

ascend to heaven while she is hanging out the laundry, then in the context of *100 Years of Solitude*, that is what is real; but when we talk about literary realism, we are usually talking about how closely the world of the novel corresponds to the world we inhabit. Since no one is known to have ascended to heaven while hanging laundry, and since the possibility of such an even seems remote, we can say that Garcia-Marquez does not use realism (or that he uses “magic realism”). Because no one now living was alive during Victorian times, it is difficult for us, even for those among us who have studied the Victorian era, to know for certain what everyday life was like then. In Trollope’s novels, we get the feeling that he is describing everyday life and everyday people. In Dickens’ novels, on the other hand, we often get that feeling, but when we look beneath the surface, we can see that Dickens has tricked us. Like all of the greatest writers, he is a magician, and the miracle is that he continues to cast his spell on us.

Naturally the question of literary realism entails many more complications. We might wonder about which American author best represents the reality of America. Is there a single novel written in twentieth-century America, or is there a single twentieth-century American author, whose collected works could represent twentieth-century America? Of course not. We are too diverse; and writers, however broad and inclusive their vision might be, are too limited to be able to depict an entire culture. For these reasons, there will never be such a thing as The Great American Novel, although there are many great American novels. In terms of verisimilitude, *Moby Dick* is a travesty. For one thing, much of the information about whales is incorrect, and it has always seemed to me that the owners of the *Pequod*, in their effort to make a profit, would have been unlikely to entrust their ship to a monomaniac like Captain Ahab. On the other hand, in terms of what it says about America and Americans of different kinds, what it says about human beings, and what it says about the difficulties of inhabiting this world, *Moby Dick* is a marvelous and much-maligned novel. Many readers are inclined to skip the passages about whales, but those passages, largely because of their fictionality, are vital to the novel. Melville makes them seem real. In terms of cetology, they are fictional; in terms of his novel, they are certainly real. They tell us something about the world as Melville saw it, about America as Melville saw it,

and as inhabitants of that world and heirs of that America, we should be interested in Melville's brilliantly presented vision.

So it is with Dickens. His novels are rooted in the particularities of nineteenth-century England, and they are full of the most outrageous characters and the most bizarre situations; characters and situations that could never have existed. In *Bleak House*, the novel we will be considering in this chapter, a character spontaneously combusts! Nevertheless, they show us important things about certain kinds of societies. They enlighten us about human relationships. They make clear the effects of industrialization on human beings, even for a post-industrial culture like ours. And they accomplish these things with humor and with humanity. They are remarkable achievements.

There are, however, three objections that are often raised against Dickens' novels. These involves the length of those novels, their sentimentality, and the extraordinary amount of coincidence that pervades them. These are serious objections, but there are ways of explaining each of them. Let me begin by noting that for most Americans, if they have read a Dickens novel, it was probably *A Tale of Two Cities*, and if they have read two Dickens novels, the second one was probably *Great Expectations*. The reason for these selections is easy to see: they, along with *Hard Times*, are Dickens' shortest complete novels, and given the amount of time that teachers have for teaching (with college semesters now at about fourteen weeks), our inclination is to use the shorter works. Furthermore, we tend to be in too much of a hurry in our everyday lives to read very long books. I have been using Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in one of my courses for years, and once the students get over the shock of having to read fourteen hundred pages, they discover that the book is not terribly difficult and that they actually like it. But before they begin reading it, they are not very happy with me. Since some of Dickens' greatest novels are closer to a thousand pages than they are to five hundred pages long, their sheer bulk tends to put readers off.

Unfortunately, *A Tale of Two Cities* is in many ways not typical Dickens. It is, to be sure, a wonderful book. The image of Madame Defarge and her knitting is priceless, and Sidney Carton's self-sacrifice, along with his concluding speech, can never be forgotten. Furthermore,

the novel does deal with themes that are present in other Dickens novels. Still, most of Dickens' works are about England, and most of them are about England at roughly Dickens' own time, while *A Tale of Two Cities* is about France in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, *Tale's* relative brevity works against its being typical Dickens. Because of that brevity, Dickens does not have the time to develop his usual panoramic view. *Great Expectations*, however, is about the same length as *A Tale of Two Cities*, and it most certainly is typically Dickensian.

There are, however, simple explanations for the length of Dickens' novels. One explanation is quite practical. Dickens wrote most of his novels to be published in monthly installments; and the more installments he wrote, the more magazines would be sold. That explanation is probably a bit too mercenary. Though Dickens was very much concerned with his finances (as who is not?), his novels do not contain "filler" put there to increase their length. But the fact remains that the longer a novel ran, the better it was for Dickens. *Bleak House* ran for eighteen months and was very popular. Of course, an eight-hundred page novel looks daunting to us, but if we were to divide it into eighteen monthly sections, each section would be about forty-five pages long. Just the psychological effect of eighteen forty-five-page sections rather than a single eight-hundred-page monster makes the work less daunting. (What always amazes me is that these long novels, in fact, everything we have discussed so far in this book, were written by hand. Imagine writing an eight-hundred-page novel by hand!) Of course, after their serialization, Dickens published his novels in book form, and they retained their popularity. Perhaps his readers did not feel as rushed as we do—we know from Austen, Trollope, and other writers that middle-class women and many middle-class men had very little that they were required to do—and were more willing to read long works while they sat around waiting for television to be invented. They certainly did not have all the distractions that we do.

If, however, we give these long novels a chance, we often find that they are captivating. Every novel creates a world, but the longer the novel is, the more developed that world can be. Dickens' finest novels, with their wide-ranging settings, their traversal of England's social classes, their focus on the problems of Victorian society, truly do feel

like they capture the whole of that society. And if we read these books at a leisurely pace, not rushing through them but savoring Dickens' language and enjoying his characters, we can enter what one of my teachers called the world of his novels.

Entering that world, naturally, entails accepting many of his conventions, including his sentimentality. We still like to have our emotions toyed with. Not only do soap operas flourish, but people often rush to movies where they can have "a good cry." The ability of the arts to affect our emotions in this way is not only important but potentially healthy. It lies behind Aristotle's doctrine of catharsis. Pure sentimentality, however, like pure oxygen, can be too much of a good thing. If sentimentality arises from natural situations, it may be fine, but if it arises from overt manipulation, many people object to it. I, for one, do not want to see a film whose sole purpose is to elicit tears, though I may be moved to tears by a particularly fine film. The question is whether this arousing of emotions is a means or an end. Sentimentality sees it as an end. Dickens certainly does have his share of sentimentality and of the melodrama that creates such sentimentality. My favorite example is *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a very long book, much of which is devoted to the death of Little Nell. Hundreds of pages are devoted to the death of Little Nell. It is the longest death scene in the history of literature. I am, frankly, relieved when Little Nell finally gives up the ghost, but Dickens' original audience loved the whole morbid thing. They waited for installment after installment, hoping, perhaps, that antibiotics would be discovered and Nell could be saved. Clearly, though I like *The Old Curiosity Shop*, I find that aspect overdone.

Dickens' sentimentality, however, is mostly better than that, and it is so for a specific reason. Dickens was highly sensitive to social wrongs and injustices. His feelings probably stemmed from his experiences as a child, but whatever their origin might have been, those feelings appear in novel after novel, as he explores problems in education, in the factories, in the financial system, in politics, in the law, and in the treatment of the poor. He is especially sensitive to the effects of social wrongs on children. He could have used those feelings to gather data and write sociological studies of child labor or corrupt politicians. He

undoubtedly would have done a fine job and then been forgotten. Instead, he wrote novels that reveal and explore these problems, that illustrate their effects on people to whom we feel close. It may seem foolish for us to weep over the death of a little boy whose only reality is as words on a page, but if we can be moved by fictional characters, perhaps we can be more sensitive to their real-life counterparts.

I suspect that some of the objections to Dickens' sentimentality come from people who object to being reminded of the social wrongs that we all tolerate all of the time. Rather than considering the important points that Dickens is making, they develop aesthetic objections, thereby relieving themselves of the guilt they might feel for taking part in a corrupt and oppressive system. In *Bleak House*, the death of Jo is not there for entertainment or to produce a gratuitous shedding of tears. Jo is a young boy on his own, with no one to watch out for him, to care for him, to love him. He does not even have a last name. He has nowhere to live. He survives on the scant charity of others, and the fact that he barely survives is a comment on the level of charity in Dickens' England. When he finally does receive the attention he deserves as a human being, it is too late, and his pitiful death, as he tries to learn the words of the Lord's Prayer, is a condemnation of the divine and human systems that made his life what it was. Dickens can be very funny when he wants to be, but he can also be bitter. Jo's death is not simply sentimental. It is social criticism, and if we shed tears when we read about it, we are mourning for him, for all the Jos that we know still exist, and for ourselves, because we live in a world where Jos can and do exist.

Dickens' sentimentality, then, stems from his concern with human relationships, and not all that sentimentality conveys tragedy. Nothing makes Dickens more happily sentimental than a loving family. The Bagnets in *Bleak House* are a wonderful example. Mr. and Mrs. Bagnet have their little peculiarities—she is all business, and he bows to her every opinion while pretending that they are his own—but they love and respect each other, they dote on their children, and they treat everyone they encounter with dignity. They are not financially well off, but they are among the richest characters in the novel; and when

Dickens focuses the story on them, we can almost see him smile at their eccentricities while he delights in their warmth.

Dickens' concern with human relationships brings us to the third of the criticisms often leveled against him, his reliance on coincidences. So much literature depends on coincidence that the charge against Dickens might seem specious. Romeo is in love with Rosalind when he just happens to see Juliet who just happens to be the daughter of his father's bitterest enemy. Sure. The Danish king builds his new castle in the neighborhood where Grendel and his mother just happen to live. Right. Huck Finn and Jim just happen to come across the body of Huck's father. Of course. But if coincidences abound in literature, they are everywhere in Dickens. His characters turn out to be related to each other at an alarming rate, or they know each other's secret histories with amazing accuracy. It may seem that Dickens too often takes the easy way out by suddenly revealing a relationship that no one expected, but for Dickens these coincidences are not merely plot devices. They express an important point about his view of the world. At one point in *Bleak House*, Mr. Jarndyce and Mr. Woodcourt, looking at the dying Jo, both think "how strangely Fate has entangled this rough outcast in the web of very different lives" (chapter 47). Dickens' point here is central to the novel: Jo is indeed an outcast in his society, poor, neglected, and dying, and yet he is intimately involved in the lives of all the major characters. The "web of very different lives" is an excellent image for the idea Dickens is trying to convey. Who would think there might be a connection between the haughty, rich, and pompous Sir Leicester Dedlock and a person like Jo? "What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!" (chapter 16). But the point is that social life is a web and that all these lives truly are connected. When we begin to read *Bleak House*, we seem to be reading several stories at the same time. A large number of characters are introduced relatively quickly, and the reader might well wonder what, if anything, they have to do with each other. As the novel progresses, however, the reader starts to see patterns of relationships. The characters themselves, like the reader, may be unaware of these patterns, which is perfectly natural. More problematical is their ignorance that such patterns are possible.

If Sir Leicester sees no possibility of a connection between himself and Jo, then he makes himself incapable of ever seeing such a connection and he forces the Jos of the world into the position of outcast. If, on the other hand, Mr. Jarndyce recognizes the possibility of such connections, then he includes rather than excludes people. The difference is that between generosity and selfishness. The web is there. The question is whether we can see it, or whether we want to acknowledge it. I may be my brother's keeper, but I also must know who my brother is.

So Dickens' novels may seem to be full of coincidences, but those coincidences are meaningful. They ask us to consider the "web of very different lives," to consider the connections, or even the possibility of connections, that exist among us. Those characters in *Bleak House* who see the world from this perspective are certainly far happier than those who do not. One element in the novel that helps us see this point is its dual narration. Approximately half of the novel's chapters are narrated by Esther Summerson, who necessarily sees the story from her own limited point of view. The other half are narrated by an unnamed, omniscient narrator. Both are writing long after the action of the story has taken place, but their approaches are, as we should expect, quite different. Esther tells the story in the precise order that she became aware of things, but since she is one of the people who is open to the possibilities of the web, she aids us in discovering those possibilities. The anonymous narrator, who knows everything, does not share Esther's sense of discovery. His presentation is more objective—"these are the connections that exist"—while Esther's is subjective—"there are the connections as I discovered them." Both narrators point to the connections, but they do so from different perspectives.

One important distinction between the narrators is that Esther is less likely to be overtly critical of characters or situations. Esther tends to look for the good in people, though she is not simply a Pollyanna. She cares for the people around her and finds it difficult to believe that people can intentionally behave badly. When she is confronted with evidence, however, as in the case of Harold Skimpole (about whom we will have more to say), she does not hesitate to state her opinion. She recognizes, too, the absurdity of Mrs. Jellyby, whose concern for Africa outweighs her concern for her own children, and the selfish-

ness of that antiquated dandy Mr. Turveydrop (and doesn't Dickens create wonderful names?), but since there would be nothing gained by confronting these characters with their failures, she does not bother. She is critical of the educational system that taught Richard "to make Latin Verses of several sorts, in the most admirable manner" but that never prepared him to do anything practical in life (chapter 13). Her response to evil and suffering is to try to relieve them, and she, along with characters like Mr. Jarndyce and the Bagnets, engages in many acts of kindness and charity. She is certainly aware of the actual conditions around her, though she is perhaps too polite to harp on them directly. Her use of indirect comment can be seen in one of her conversations with Miss Flite:

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great; unless occasionally, when they consisted of the accumulation of some very large amount of money.

"Why, good gracious," said Miss Flite, "how can you say that? Surely you know, my dear, that all the greatest ornaments of England in knowledge, imagination, active humanity, and improvement of every sort, are added to its nobility! Look round you, my dear, and consider. *You* must be rambling a little now, I think, if you don't know that this is the great reason why titles will always last in the land!"

I am afraid she believed what she said; for there were moments when she was very mad indeed.

(chapter 35)

Only a madwoman, Esther says, would believe that good deeds in the service of humanity are rewarded by a grateful England.

The anonymous narrator, on the other hand, is openly critical. His attitude toward the Dedlocks and their circle, which can be seen from the second chapter onward, is one of scorn and criticism. His references to "the fashionable intelligence," that sector of society that cares about the activities of a moribund but still oppressive upper class, reveal his attitude to both the upper classes and to those who support them. His constant references to the Dedlocks' footmen as "Mercuries" or "powdered Mercuries" betray a hostility to a society that admires ostentatious shows of wealth in the midst of crushing poverty. Some-

times his criticisms are merely implied, as they are when he mentions as part of a larger story that Mrs. Rouncewell, the Dedlocks' housekeeper, felt obligated to report to Sir Leicester her own son's participation in activities that, while harmless, were not to Sir Leicester's liking. The implications of the story are clear: so powerful is the hold of the Dedlocks, the rich, that parents, out of a misplaced sense of loyalty, are willing to inform on their children. At other times the narrator is bitter in his comments, for he is outraged at what he sees around him. When Jo dies, the narrator says, "Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day" (chapter 47). The narrator, and by extension Dickens, implicates the whole of British society in Jo's death. From the queen through the nobility and the religious establishment down to all those people who profess compassion but do nothing, all are guilty of Jo's death and of the deaths of so many others. The narrator understands and proclaims the implications of what he sees.

It is instructive to compare Esther's and the narrator's comments on poverty. When Esther is visiting one of the poor families that she helps, she says,

I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and God.

(chapter 83)

A little while later, in describing the burial of Nemo (which means "No one" and is another testimonial to the dehumanizing effects of this society), the narrator says,

With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate—with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life—here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption,

to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together.

(chapter 11)

Esther sees the problem in terms of human relationships, while the narrator sees it in the more objective terms of moral judgment. Both views are correct, from their different perspectives; and by giving us both narrators, Dickens allows us to see clearly both perspectives.

Those perspectives raise another problem. We do not know why Esther is writing her account of the story. She has been asked to write it, but we do not know by whom or for what reason. Although it contains much that is critical, it is a highly personal story and recounts many acts of individual kindness. Such acts will not reform the system, but they do bring some relief to individuals. The anonymous narrator, on the other hand, is writing to tell a story, but he does so, we feel, in order to challenge the system. Lest anyone think that I am using a twenty-first-century concept of “the system,” let me cite the words of one of the novel’s unfortunate characters, Gridley:

The system! I am told, on all hands, it’s the system. I mustn’t look to individuals. It’s the system. I mustn’t go into Court, and say, ‘My Lord, I beg to know this from you—is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed?’ My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there, to administer the system.

(chapter 15)

Gridley recognizes that the system is composed of individuals, each of whom consents to being part of the system and therefore bears responsibility for it. At the same time, the system seems to have a life of its own, a life which someone like Mr. Jarndyce can avoid or in which someone like Richard can become fatally entangled.

What, then, is the system? It often happens that readers, in trying to pin down what a book is about, will isolate a particular theme and declare that that theme is the subject of the book. Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* is supposed to be about selfishness, while *Bleak House* is supposed to be about the law. There is indeed a law case at the center of *Bleak House*, the infamous case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a case

that has dragged on for so long, involved so many documents and so many lawyers, and ruined so many lives that no one can keep track of it. Lawyers, as we all know, have been the target of much criticism and humor, from Shakespeare's "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers" (2 *Henry VI*, IV.ii) to "What's brown and looks good on a lawyer? A Doberman." Certainly the lawyers who populate the pages of *Bleak House* are less than admirable, from Mr. Tulkinghorn, who is always in the shadows, always appearing out of the dark, to Mr. Vholes (a vole is a burrowing rodent), who looks like Death. While Jarndyce and Jarndyce drags on year after year, legions of lawyers make a living from it. In fact, it is not in their interest for the case to be settled, and so for them, the system is wonderful. As Mr. Kenge says to Mr. Jarndyce, "My dear sir, this is a very great country. Its system of equity is a very great system, a very great system. Really, really!" (chapter 62). So the law is certainly one of Dickens' main targets in *Bleak House*, but this is not a novel about legal reform in the sense that Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is a novel about reforms in the meat-packing industry. Dickens makes not a single practical suggestion for reforming a single clear flaw in the legal system. That system, as we see over and over in the novel, is awful for everyone besides the lawyers, but that system is symptomatic of larger problems in England that are Dickens' real targets. When Gridley comments on "the system," he is commenting specifically on the legal system, but he is also commenting on a larger, more amorphous system that entraps almost everyone.

The openings of novels are very important. They often not only set a tone for the rest of the novel but they may indicate the novel's thematic concerns. A good example is Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*, which opens with a long chapter describing Egdon Heath, the novel's physical setting. On a first reading, the reader may wonder why the chapter is there, but if the reader returns to that chapter after having finished the novel, it becomes clear how that chapter prepares us for the rest of the book, how it incorporates the setting and the themes of that highly uncheerful novel. The first chapter of *Bleak House*, too, serves this function. This chapter, entitled "In Chancery," introduces us to the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, but it does far more. One of the oddities of this novel is that the place called Bleak House is one of the least bleak locales in the book. The bleakest settings are in London,

and it is no accident that the novel opens, “London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather.” The beginning of this chapter not only describes bleakness, it is itself bleak. In fact, the novel’s first grammatically complete sentence does not occur until the fourth paragraph. The first paragraph, consisting entirely of sentence fragments, describes mud, smoke, and soot, as well as the faceless crowd: “Foot passengers, jostling one another’s umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their footholds at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding more deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.” The paragraph begins with “London” and moves directly to the area of the law courts, after which it describes “tens of thousands” of individuals, their individualism emphasized by their individual jostling umbrellas that hide their individuality, all adding to the mud and filth that characterize the city.

The second paragraph, again consisting entirely of fragments, describes the fog: “Fog everywhere.” The people of this great city live in a perpetual fog, a fog that is both literal and metaphorical. Literally, London was a foggy city, largely because of the smoke generated by factories and fireplaces. Metaphorically, the people of London, all of those individuals adding to the filth, lived in a moral fog, as the rest of the novel illustrates. Every character, no matter how venal or self-serving, can justify his or her behavior. Almost no one seems to see the misery that surrounds them, the poverty, the injustice, the suffering; and even fewer take responsibility for it. The legal system, which professes its concern for equity but which is horribly flawed, becomes the perfect metaphor for England and for the “system” that treats human beings like objects, grinds them down, and then disposes of them. This novel is no exposé of the legal system. Instead it uses the well-known flaws of the legal system to comment on the failings of the society. We see it in the Dedlocks and we see it in the most poverty stricken of the poor.

Sir Leicester bears an especially heavy responsibility because he is wealthy and because he is in the government, where he worries

about political intrigues involving Lord Booodle and Lord Coodle, Sir Thomas Toodle, the Duke of Foodle, Goodle, and so on through the alphabet, or on the other side, Buffy, Cuffy, Duffy, and so on. If instead of playing such political games, the Sir Leicesters of England devoted their time to solving the country's real problems, they might be able to do some good, but Sir Leicester cannot devote himself to solving problems of whose existence he is unaware, problems about which he chooses to be unaware. Dickens' scorn is obvious. But the poor are not automatically good either. The husbands of Jenny and Liz beat their wives, and Krook is a crook.

On the other hand, there are numerous individuals who address the problems that Dickens points out in their own private ways. Esther and Mr. Jarndyce are clear examples, as are George, the Bagnets, Mr. Woodcourt, Jenny and Liz, and ultimately even Lady Dedlock; but they all operate as individuals, seemingly powerless against a system that appears to run on its own energy. Perhaps the most telling example of individual charity is Mr. Snagsby. The other charitable characters are openly charitable and gain some satisfaction from their good deeds; but poor Mr. Snagsby, who is meek, who is kind to his servant Guster (like Jo, a character without a last name), who is afraid of Tulkinghorn and of his own jealous wife, is frequently engaged in a kind of covert charity. Whenever he encounters someone who is poor or in need, he surreptitiously gives the person "half-a-crown, his usual panacea for an immense variety of afflictions" (chapter 22). Mr. Snagsby is neither a clever man nor a brave man. He trembles before anyone who behaves authoritatively. But he is a good man who, if he thought about it, would realize that he cannot change the system but who does the best he can to be generous and kind. In fact, if more of those "tens of thousands of other foot passengers" were less concerned with themselves and more like Mr. Snagsby, the oppressive system that dominates the novel might well break down.

There is yet another class of philanthropists in *Bleak House* who provide some of the novel's comedy. Dickens' novels, even the most critical, like *Bleak House*, tend to have humorous passages. In *Bleak House*, much of the humor is provided by Mrs. Jellyby and her colleagues. Mrs. Jellyby is something of a professional philanthropist,

whose entire interest is focused on an African locale called Borrioboola-Gha. Her project is “to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borrioboola-Gha” (chapter 4). Not only is her project imperialistic, but her vision is so firmly focused on her futile mission in Africa that she does not, or cannot, see the real misery around her that she could actually help to alleviate. In fact, she cannot see the misery of her own children, whom she neglects, or of her husband, who at one point is downstairs trying to take care of his bankruptcy while she is upstairs dictating letters to Borrioboola-Gha. Mrs. Jellyby and her circle, with their ability to ignore the suffering that surrounds them, are no less a threat to England than the Dedlocks and their circle.

It is essential to realize, however, that as clearly as Dickens points out the evils of the system and of the individuals who allow or encourage the system to run, he is not creating simple stock figures. Esther may be a bit too self-righteous occasionally, but then the reality is that she is a good person to whom people turn in times of trouble. What is most interesting, though is the way the narrator is terribly critical of Sir Leicester through almost the whole book, but toward the end, when Sir Leicester is taken ill and suffers another misfortune, the narrator becomes sympathetic to him. The narrator is not looking for vengeance or just deserts. He is looking for justice, and he is dismayed at any instance of human suffering. It is tempting to identify this narrator with Dickens, but doing so would be an error. The narrator is as much a character as any of the novel’s other characters, and his behavior—his outrages, his sympathies—are as important as Esther’s

The way Dickens creates his characters is extraordinary. Commentators frequently refer to the large number of memorable characters in Dickens’ novels. Actually Dickens created a number of different kinds of characters. Some, like Esther, Mr. Jarndyce, and Lady Dedlock, are highly realistic. They are people who might have existed. Others have different degrees of verisimilitude. Some are plausibly real, like perhaps Mr. Guppy, and some are collections of eccentricities, like awful old Mr. Smallweed (and the rest of the Smallweeds). The fantastic part is that they all work so well together.

Dickens also has a habit of providing his characters with identifiable markers. Just as we may recognize a friend by his gait or by her posture, so Dickens endows each of his characters with some highly personal trait. If a character speaks emotionlessly out of the shadows, we know it is Tulkinghorn; if a character talks about the direction of the wind, we know it is Mr. Jarndyce; if a character qualifies his remarks with the comment “not to put too fine a point upon it,” we know it is Mr. Snagsby. This use of leitmotifs could become purely mechanical and even annoying, but Dickens is so skillful that he uses them to make his characters even more memorable. Each of their eccentricities fits their characters so well that rather than seeming mechanical, they seem perfectly natural.

Another technique that Dickens employs is the recurrence of particular images. Among the most important images in *Bleak House* are the fog and smoke that we have already seen, the Ghost Walk at the Dedlock estate, birds, and halos. The last two are especially interesting. Miss Flite, the pleasant old woman who has been driven mad by her interest in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, keeps a collection of caged birds in her squalid apartment. They are named “Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want” and more. Caged birds are a perfect image for the effects of the law courts and of all that those courts represent. In contrast to these birds is the pet of Mr. Jarndyce’s friend Mr. Boythorn. This pet is “a very little canary, who was so tame that he was brought down by Mr. Boythorn’s man, on his forefinger, and, after taking a gentle flight around the room, alighted on his master’s hand” (chapter 9). The contrast between those poor caged birds, artificially constrained, and the tame canary perched on Mr. Boythorn’s hand is the contrast between the effects of an uncaring, inhumane, oppressive system and a system that might create harmony among its members.

Dickens uses the image of the halo in a similar way. His first description of the Lord High Chancellor shows this august person “with a foggy glow round his head” (chapter 1), and it is no mere coincidence that the Chancellor’s full title here has religious overtones. Shortly after, Sir Leicester is described as being “surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences” (chapter 2). This image appears a number

of times in the novel, always in relation to some of the book's less admirable characters. At one point, Esther even applies it to London:

In the north and north-west, where the sun had set three hours before, there was a pale dead light both beautiful and awful; and into it long sullen lines of cloud waved up, like a sea stricken immovable as it was heaving. Towards London, a lurid glare overhung the whole dark waste; and the contrast between these two lights, and the fancy which the redder light engendered of an unearthly fire, gleaming on all the unseen buildings of the city, and on all the faces of its many thousands of wondering inhabitants, was as solemn as might be.

(chapter 30)

The contrast that Esther points out between the “beautiful awful” light to the north, where there is relative peace, and the appearance of “unearthly fire” over London makes us think about those halos that are seen around the Chancellor, Sir Leicester, and Tulkinghorn, as does Mr. Snagsby's impression when he sees a poor baby by the light of a lantern: “Mr. Snagsby is strangely reminded of another infant, encircled with light, that he has seen in pictures” (chapter 22). What we have here is a contrast between true halos and false ones. The Lord High Chancellor basks in his own light, while shedding misery around him, as do Sir Leicester and the city of London. Were they more aware of that other “infant, encircled with light,” perhaps their behavior would be different. But even Mr. Snagsby has only seen that infant in pictures. That infant is not a real presence in Dickens' London, where the only representative of religion that we see is the fraudulent preacher Mr. Chadband, about whom Jo says,

“He prayed a lot, but I couldn't make out nothink on it. Different times, there was other gentlemen come down Tom-all-Alone's a-prayin, but they all mostly sed as the t'other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t'others, and not talkin to us.”

(chapter 47)

So much for the role of establishment religion in helping to alleviate suffering in *Bleak House*.

One of the stranger characters in the novel is Harold Skimpole. Skimpole is perhaps as frightening a character as exists in the novel. The major villains (and I will not reveal who they are) are clearly villainous, and the good characters are equally clearly good. Even the characters who mix good and evil can be appreciated and understood, but Harold Skimpole is so clever and so effective at what he does that he even fools those characters who are the best judges of character. Skimpole succeeds by denying the applicability of moral criteria to himself. He is determinedly amoral. He claims to have no understanding of money matters, though clearly he does, and he deceives even Mr. Jarndyce. He assumes no responsibility for his actions, though he does take credit, through a twisted kind of logic, for certain good deeds. What makes Skimpole so frightening is the extent to which his denial of his own responsibility for any of his actions frees him to do whatever he desires. He does not argue, as other characters might, that evil is really good. He claims that the categories do not apply to him at all. This defense of immorality is one we have seen too often in our time. Harold Skimpole, with his smile and his jocularly and the harm he does, represents a horrifying variation on the evil that plays such a large role in *Bleak House*.

Like so many great writers, then, Dickens focuses our attention on the problems of the individual, the problems of society, and the problems of the individual in society. He raises questions that we, as human beings living in society, must try to answer. That we have not so far come up with satisfactory answers in no way relieves us of the responsibility to try. There are some people as I write these words who believe that we should try to recapture the values of the Victorian Era. There are some people who are trying to reestablish those values. Such people should read Dickens more carefully. The problems that he describes are the problems that are still with us. The major difference, perhaps, is that thanks to Dickens, we should know better. Whether we are talking about the poor, the law, gender relationships, education, or any number of other topics, we should take advantage of Dickens' genius in our considerations.

Dickens, however, was not just a simplistic do-gooder. The wonderful thing about Dickens—what is wonderful about any great

writer—is what the writer does with words. Dickens creates characters, situations, moods, and images that are unforgettable. I have read all of Dickens' novels, many of them more than once, and I have never grown tired of reading him. I have tried to be selective in my recommendations for further reading in other chapters, but I find that I cannot be so selective here. Read Dickens—read all of him. Just try to find editions that have at least some of the illustrations by Hablot K. Browne, who was known as Phiz. They are such perfect illustrations of the scenes and characters that Dickens created that there should be a law (shades of *Bleak House*!) mandating their inclusion in any edition of Dickens' works.

There are, in addition, other Victorian novelists whose works are both enjoyable and instructive. Close to Dickens is William Makepeace Thackeray, especially his wonderful *Vanity Fair*. Also of interest are the novels of George Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *The Egoist*, and *Diana of the Crossways*. The novels of Anthony Trollope, as I mentioned earlier, provide a somewhat different perspective on Victorian England. And finally, for people who are too happy and want to bring their mirth under control, I recommend the novels of Thomas Hardy. His is an important, if depressing voice. At the same time, he is a fantastic writer, who excelled at writing both novels and poetry. Among his most important novels are *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Jude the Obscure*, but anything he wrote is well worth reading.

When novels first came into existence, there were people who thought that reading them was a frivolous way to waste time. We know that opinion is incorrect. There are time-wasting novels, and there are novels that have made a difference to individuals and to nations. There is nothing wrong with reading the former sort, though a steady diet of such works cannot be healthy. What I hope my readers will see is that reading the latter class of novels is neither a chore nor a waste of time. It is one of the valuable pleasures of life.

# Chapter 10

## George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

I want to begin this chapter with a combination of a confession and a warning. As I said earlier, every work that I discuss in this book is one of my favorites and one reason I have chosen these works is because of the basic impulse to share what we like. The subject of the current chapter, George Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch*, indeed one of my favorite works and, along with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Dickens' *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, is one of the greatest novels ever written. In truth, I really like all of Eliot's novels, as I will describe later in this chapter. At the same time, I must in all honesty admit that when I read Eliot, it always takes me a little while, perhaps even a hundred pages or so, to really get into the works. I am always happy that I have persevered, and I urge you to persevere if you find yourself having the same reaction.

Now, to be fair, let me present a counterbalance to what I have just said. As we will see, this counterbalance is particularly appropriate for this chapter, because George Eliot frequently offers such counterbalances in discussing her characters. She presents a character in the most convincing terms, but then she allows us to see the character from a completely different perspective. A couple of years ago I taught a course in which I included both *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch*, two long and demanding novels. I worried that students might be over-

whelmed, especially because I find *Middlemarch* so demanding. I was surprised and delighted not only that they liked *Bleak House* but that many of them actually preferred *Middlemarch*. Most of them, in fact, had completely different experiences than my own—that is, they got right into the novel, with no break-in period at all.

My conclusion, therefore, is that I can come to no conclusion except to say that you ought to read *Middlemarch* and as many of Eliot's other novels as you can. Although Eliot (1819-1880) was an almost exact contemporary of Dickens (1812-1870), their works are quite different—wonderful in their own ways, of course, but quite different. Eliot tends to avoid Dickens' melodrama and her plots are less fantastic, but she has such insight into the human heart, into the ways that people think and behave, that reading Eliot can help us negotiate our own relationships and understand ourselves more clearly.

Just in case anyone was confused by that “she” in the last sentence, George Eliot was the pseudonym used by Marry Anne Evans, a brilliant and non-conforming woman who, like some other women in the nineteenth century, decided to write under a male name so that her writing would be taken seriously. Eliot refers obliquely to this situation in *Middlemarch* when Rosamond says that her brother's studies “are not very deep” since “he is only reading a novel” (chapter 11). Eliot's forerunner, Jane Austen, uses a similar motif in *Northanger Abbey*, where characters in a novel debate the value of reading novels. Novels were often considered the province of women and were therefore not taken seriously, though the hero of *Northanger Abbey* finds great value in them. In fact, however, this motif goes back even further. In the introduction to his fourteenth-century collection of stories, *The Decameron*, Boccaccio seems to dismiss the stories he is about to tell by saying that he intends this work just for women. The irony, of course, is that unlike Boccaccio's many scholarly works, *The Decameron* is his only work that is still read by general readers rather than being the province of scholars. Similarly, in the eleventh-century Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji* by the woman Murasaki Shikibu, novels like *Genji* itself are referred to slightly as being of interest only to women, though the narrator tells us that in private men also loved to read them. They just could not admit that they did. So at the beginning of

her career, Mary Anne Evans knew that if she wrote novels under her own name, they would not be taken as seriously as they deserved to be, both because they were novels and because she was a woman. Hence George Eliot, the pseudonym she stuck with throughout her career.

As we will see, one of the most interesting characters in *Middlemarch*—and the same can be said for Eliot’s other novels as well—is the narrator, the person telling us the story. In many of the novels, the narrator’s gender is indeterminate, which means that by the usual default system, the narrator seems to be male. That is not the case in *Middlemarch*, though that judgment is also highly subjective. Regardless of the narrator’s gender, however, what all of her narrators have in common is their sensitivity, their awareness of the characters’ intricate thoughts and feelings, of the implications of their thoughts and feelings, of their positive and negative qualities, and of their reality as complex examples of how human beings think and behave. The narrator of *Middlemarch* in particular also displays a sense of humor as she comments on the characters’ activities. One of my favorite lines in all of Eliot’s works occurs as she reflects on Mr. Casaubon’s realization that he is not well-liked: there was, she says, “a strong reason to be added, which he had not himself taken explicitly into account—namely, that he was not unmixedly adorable. He suspected this, however, as he suspected other things, without confessing it...” (chapter 42). The mere use of the word “adorable” in a sentence about the pedantic and egotistical Mr. Casaubon is funny, as is her comment that Mr. Casaubon was not fully aware that he was not adorable.

Eliot also has a satirical bent, but we must realize that there are a number of different kinds of satire. Satire can be sharp and even cruel, often deservedly so, as when Dickens names the tormentors of children Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. McChokumchild in *Hard Times* or in some of the scenes we examined in *Bleak House*, where Dickens’ anger shows through his narrative. But satire can also be gentler, a way of acknowledging and smiling at human foibles. This latter is more Eliot’s style in *Middlemarch*, even when she raises issues that are central to human well-being. In this connection, it is essential that we consider the novel’s full title, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. Middlemarch is a provincial town, and while the novel focuses on a

variety of specific characters, its announced subject is “Provincial Life,” so while we care about those specific characters, we also have to keep our gaze on the wider concerns of Middlemarch itself.

The phrase “Provincial Life,” of course, implies a lack of sophistication, though it also implies that the narrator is sophisticated enough to detect that lack of sophistication in her subjects. “Provincial” can indeed be used in an insulting or dismissive way—“That is *so* provincial”—and Eliot does use it that way occasionally. For example, Eliot incorporates a great deal of current political debate in the novel. (By current, I refer to the time of the novel’s action, the late 1820’s and early 1830’s, not the time of the novel’s appearance in the early 1870’s.) Among the developments of that time was the creation of the British railway system, a development that caused great consternation in certain parts of the population, sometimes because of its economic effects but also because of people’s ignorance. Thus, when a group of fieldworkers in a place called Frick think they see agents of the railroad surveying land, they react violently, and the narrator explains that “In the absence of any precise idea as to what railways were, public opinion in Frick was against them; for the human mind in that grassy corner had not the proverbial tendency to admire the unknown, holding rather that it was likely to be against the poor man, and that suspicion was the only wise attitude with regard to it” (chapter 56). This sentence demonstrates the narrator’s attitudes and her subtlety. Yes, the people of Frick really are provincial. They do not know what trains are and therefore they are against them. Such an attitude betrays provincial ignorance. On the other hand, the provincial folk of Frick live in poverty and drudgery, and their experience has taught them that new developments tend to work against them, poor men and women that they are, and so perhaps their suspicions have some justification. Nothing is as simple as it seems.

That lack of simplicity leads us to another point about the narrator, the complexity of her language. There are, of course, writers whose complexity of language is meant to disguise the simplicity of their thought, but Eliot is not such a writer. The complexity of her language complements the complexity of her thought. As we read her and realize that we have not fully grasped a sentence or a paragraph and we

must reread it, we are not seeing a flaw either in Eliot or in our ability as readers. We are, rather, being forced to contemplate in more depth things which we might be inclined to take for granted. Reading Eliot is a slow process, but as I have said several times in this book, none of the works we are considering were meant to be read quickly. They were meant to be read slowly, often aloud, and they were meant to be thought about. Sometimes it is fun—and I do not think that this is just an English teacher talking—to consider individual sentences in a writer like Eliot, to look at how they are constructed. What you see, as you can see in that sentence about the people of Frick, is how Eliot's narrator balances her judgments. She is not afraid of making critical statements, but she insists that making such statements is not enough. We must also try to understand the ideas and behaviors that we criticize.

Such understanding, of course, does not imply approval. We may understand why those workers reacted violently, but we cannot condone their behavior. Even more, toward the end of the novel, when scandal seems to be brewing, both the ladies and the men of Middlemarch, in their highly gendered gathering places, take great delight in the unhappiness and sins (whether real or imagined) of the central characters. By simply reporting on their behavior and conversations in chapter 71, she exposes their meanness, their spite, their ignorance, and their self-righteousness. She barely has to comment on it for us to see her point: "But this gossip about Bulstrode spread through Middlemarch like the smell of fire." It spread not like fire, as we might expect, but like the smell of fire, something that we cannot see, that irritates our throats and eyes, that makes breathing difficult. These citizens of Middlemarch think of themselves as upright, religious people, but, she says, their behavior stinks. She never makes an explicit reference, but the whole scene recalls the end of Book IV of *The Aeneid*, when Dido kills herself on a funeral pyre and Rumor spreads news of the event so very quickly.

So who is this narrator? We cannot say with precision, but we can characterize her from hints that she gives. She has, first, the ability to move inside and outside of the characters' minds. Her perspective varies as she tells us different aspects of the story. She knows the

whole story from the moment she begins to tell it, but she tells us only what she wants us to know as the story proceeds. This is, of course, a venerable technique. Dickens uses it to great advantage. Frequently in Dickens, a central mystery lies behind the plot—who *Oliver Twist* or *Esther Summerson* really is, for instance. The narrator knows, but rather than telling us from the outset, the narrator allows the mystery to be solved gradually, thereby turning a simple fact into a complex story. If all we read for is to solve the mystery, we might feel cheated: “I had to read seven pages to discover that?” Of course, that is not why we read, not even actual mysteries.

Eliot’s narrator is thoroughly aware not only that she is using this technique but that it puts her in a particular literary tradition. She explicitly puts herself into that tradition at the opening of chapter 15:

A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English.

Our narrator is here raising the ghost of Henry Fielding, whom we met several chapters ago in this book, and her allusion to that early novelist ties her to the novelistic tradition that he began. But it is not only the allusion that has such an effect. The very style of these lines recalls Fielding. She begins by referring to Fielding as a historian, which is how his narrator referred to himself. Fielding, of course, was not more a historian in the usual sense than is Eliot, but he was a historian in the sense that his fictional world, in which his narrator played a part, still gives us a picture of what life and people were like in his time. So, too, is Eliot a historian, for she is also giving us such a history, “*A Study of Provincial Life*.” Like Fielding’s histories, hers is a comedy, both in the sense that it is amusing and, perhaps even more significantly, in the sense that it ends happily, if by happily we recognize that it ends with an affirmation of life and an acceptance of the human tendency to be flawed. Thus she can say that Fielding had the “happiness” to have died one hundred twenty years earlier, an

odd kind of happiness unless we keep in mind that death is inevitable, that Fielding could not have lived until the age of one hundred eighty, and that Fielding is still remembered for his novels. In fact, with a glancing allusion to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, she describes Fielding as a colossus beneath whose legs contemporary writers proceed. In short, she cites Fielding as her great predecessor, puts herself in his tradition, links her work to his, and does so in a comical way, citing his good fortune in being dead and referring to him as a colossus, which undoubtedly would have amused him to no end. Furthermore, by citing Fielding, she recalls the tendencies of his narrators to have private chats with his readers, particularly in *Tom Jones*.

Eliot's narrator continues this paragraph by mentioning how Fielding wrote about a more leisurely time, when people were not so rushed as they are in the present, by which she means 1870. Our reaction might be, "If she thought people in 1870 were rushed, she should see us now," but I suspect that her point is again satirical, because people always seem to operate under the impression that the past was better, that people operated under less pressure then, which is not the case. But then she continues with an important statement:

I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.

Here the narrator's interests intersect with those of Eliot herself, because this passage describes what Eliot, and most other novelists, do in their works. Whether the particular image that Eliot uses here is deliberately chosen from the sphere of "women's work" is unimportant, because the image of unraveling in order to see how the threads are "woven and interwoven" is so perfectly appropriate. Eliot does something like what she describes here in all of her novels, but she does so in especially exquisite ways in her two last novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, where, like Shakespeare in *King Lear*, she combines several strands of plot.

In *Middlemarch*, for instance, we follow a number of important relationships—Tertius Lydgate and Rosamond Vitry; Fred Vitry and

Mary Garth; Dorothea Brooke and first Mr. Casaubon, then Will Ladislaw—as well as a number of secondary relationships. Each of these relationships is thoroughly examined. We learn who the individuals are, how they came to be who they are, how they met, how their relationships developed, and finally how those relationships intertwine, creating the tapestry that is the “provincial life” of the novel’s subtitle. Ordinary people see the world around them in superficial ways. The novelist identifies and traces the individual strands, takes them apart and puts them back together so that we can better understand the life around us.

Eliot makes this point clear as she continues her introduction to chapter 15:

At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to any one interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch. For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown—known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours’ false suppositions.

The narrator here makes clear what she sees her job to be. Although we have already encountered the character Tertius Lydgate, we are not about to meet him in a way that we cannot meet people in ordinary life, for when we meet people in the ordinary course of things, we do not know their histories, we do not know their thoughts or concerns or interests. We know only what Eliot calls “a cluster of signs” from which we can try to draw conclusions; but more often than not, our conclusions are incorrect or, at best, incomplete. The novelist, on the other hand, can give us a complete picture of her characters. She can tell us their histories and their thoughts, so that we may well know the character in *Middlemarch* better than we know people we come in contact with every day. If the novelist is sensitive to human beings with all of their peculiarities and specialness, she can give us deep insights not only into her fictional characters but into life itself. Reading literature, then, is not an escape from life, nor is it a substitute for life. In many ways it is a distillation of life that can help make readers into more sensitive human beings.

Eliot's narrator clearly feels close to her characters, as she reveals in a number of ways. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 40, she comments on the importance of perspective, noting that sometimes we have to look at things up close rather than from a distance, and then she says, "The group I am moving towards is at Caleb Garth's breakfast-table..." What an interesting expression! In what sense is she "moving towards" this group? Is the group really there so that she is actually moving toward them? Is she moving toward them in her imagination? And is there a significant difference between those two possibilities? I will leave it to the reader to decide among those and other options, but the reader must decide. And each reader's decision will say a great deal about that reader's relationship to literature and to reality, whatever that may be. Eliot is raising questions similar to those we saw Shakespeare raising in *As You Like It*.

If I may digress for a moment, let me note that contemporary critics are fond of pointing out that earlier writers use cinematic techniques. What we see here, however, is not that Eliot is using a cinematic technique, in which the camera moves closer to the subjects it is recording. Eliot preceded cinema. If cinema is using a technique that is similar to Eliot's, then cinema is being novelistic, not the other way round.

Eliot also injects herself into the narrative later on in chapter 54, when she writes, "Will never quite knew how it was that he saved himself from falling down at her feet...He used to say that the horrible hue and surface of her crape dress was most likely the sufficient controlling force." What does she mean by "He used to say"? To whom did he say it? To her? At this single point in the novel, the narrator refers to a moment between the time of the action and the time of writing, thereby making it seem as though she actually knows these characters, as though in that forty-year interval she had contact with them. And of course at the conclusion of the novel she tells us the fates of many of the leading characters. By using all of these techniques, Eliot underlines the truth of fiction, which perhaps sounds like a strange thing to say. Fiction is, by definition, not true, and yet, as storytellers from Aesop to Jesus to Philip Sidney to the most contemporary writers know, fiction can be the best teacher of truth.

But the narrator is not afraid of passing judgment either. We have already seen how harsh she is with the gossipmongers in Middlemarch, though elsewhere she is more indulgent, often in a satirical way. For instance, when Mr. Brooke states two opinions that contradict each other, she comments, "To think with pleasure of his niece's husband having a large ecclesiastical income was one thing—to make a liberal speech was another thing; and it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view" (chapter 7). So Mr. Brooke, who is presented throughout the novel as simultaneously good-hearted and foolish, is also inconsistent. A person might be tempted to treat that inconsistency with derision: "Look, he pretends to be a liberal but he is willing to let his niece benefit from the very corruption that liberals decry." Not so Eliot. She points out the inconsistency, which some might call hypocrisy, but her concluding comment, that only a narrow mind sees things from a single perspective, encompasses the reader, because people tend not to be totally consistent when their self-interest is involved. So the narrator laughs at Mr. Brooke, but she also laughs at the reader and presumably at herself as well, for she recognizes her own inconsistencies.

Yet another aspect of the narrator must be considered, a characteristic that pervades all of Eliot's work. As we read her works, a phrase from one of them, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, might run through our minds. One of the characters, Esther, had thought she had a pretty good understanding of things, but her acquaintance with Felix had "raised a presentiment of moral depths that were hidden from her." That phrase, "a presentiment of moral depths" is so important to understanding Eliot, for as we read her novels, all of them have that presentiment. She does not weave and unweave all those strands of the tapestry just out of curiosity. She does so in large part because our understanding of what people do and why should help us understand what *we* do and why, and that understanding might lead us, as Philip Sidney said, to more virtuous actions. Dickens, for all his interest in individual characters, looked at large issues like poverty, education, child abuse, and the courts. Eliot loves her characters, flaws and all, and looks closely at what makes them tick and at the moral implications of their thoughts and actions. She is interested in larger issues as well, of course. In *Middlemarch* and in *Adam Bede* she shows us from a variety

of perspectives the problematic relationships between landlords and tenant farmers, for instance. But her focus is on individual characters and the moral or ethical challenges they face.

Tied very strongly into these moral and ethical issues are religious issues, which figure so largely in many nineteenth-century British works. Many people in nineteenth-century England felt that traditional religious belief was fading and they wondered and worried about what would replace it. One of the most famous statements on the subject comes from Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach":

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.

Religion plays a huge role in Eliot's novels, from *Romola*, which is set in the religious turmoil of Renaissance Florence, through her remarkable focus on Judaism in *Daniel Deronda*, and to the politics of Catholic emancipation in novels like *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*. Always, however, Eliot's central point about religion remains consistent. Ordinary readers—as opposed to Victorian literature specialists—do not have to worry about the often arcane doctrinal arguments that shook Victorian Christianity, though Eliot herself was interested in them. But Eliot's main point is that those doctrinal arguments are largely a distraction from the most important aspect of Christianity, which involves the ways people treat each other.

For example, Eliot's novels contain a fair number of clergymen. Many of them are just ordinary men who happen to work in churches. They conduct religious services and they oversee their congregations, but being a clergyman is little more than a job for them. They do their external duties adequately, but they clearly have no vocation. This is the type of clergyman that Fred Vitry would become in *Middlemarch* if he pursued his studies, as Mary Garth recognizes, which is why she says she will have nothing to do with him if he enters the church. Such

clergymen may do little harm, but they also do little good. Others among Eliot's clergymen are outright charlatans, who pervert the teaching of Christianity for their own benefit. Fortunately there are few of these. Unfortunately, there are also few at the other extreme, those clergymen who embody the teachings of Christianity, which, for Eliot, means worrying less about doctrine and more about the needs of other people. In *Middlemarch*, Mr. Farebrother (a significant name) is such a clergyman. He shows little interest in doctrine or dogma, and early in the novel he even seems to have a gambling problem, but he is kind to everyone, as a naturalist he glories in God's creation, and he offers a moral center to the ordinary moral chaos that afflicts the lives of Middlemarchers. Perhaps the most obvious instance of his charitable outlook comes when Fred asks him to assess Mary Garth's feelings towards him. Farebrother, who also loves Mary, does not set himself up as a rival to Fred. Rather, he approaches Mary, sees that she is open to Fred's affection, and reports back, selflessly, to the younger man. It would have been easy for Mr. Farebrother to manipulate the situation, show Fred to Mary in a bad light, and capture her affections for himself. Similarly, toward the end of the novel, when certain villainous behavior is revealed (and again, I am trying hard not to give away the plot), Mr. Farebrother, while not condoning the villainy, offers support to the suffering human being. In short, he embodies Christianity, or, perhaps more precisely, he embodies the good that religion can do in a world that often views religion as a means toward gaining power by way of oppression. Other characters in *Middlemarch* can be assessed by how much they resemble or are influenced by Mr. Farebrother.

This religious motif, which, as I said, appears in all of Eliot's novels, is particularly important in *Middlemarch*, as we can see from the novel's very first page, for *Middlemarch* begins with a Prelude that at first glance seems totally unrelated to the novel that will follow. After all, the novel tells a story set in early nineteenth-century England, while the Prelude very briefly tells and then comments on the story of Saint Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish reformer of the Catholic Church. What can these realms, separated by time and geography as well as religious belief, have to do with each other?

Eliot begins by telling a story from Saint Teresa's childhood, how she set out with her little brother to seek martyrdom in the land of the Moors. Eliot cites this story not only as evidence of Teresa's desire for martyrdom but of her idealism, of her "passionate, ideal nature." Though the little Teresa's quest was stopped by her family, she nevertheless did go on to be a religious reformer and to achieve sainthood. But, Eliot tells us, Teresa was not unique. "Many Teresas have been born," she says, though few of them have achieved public recognition, often because of social conditions—"they were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul"—and they were hindered by the usual condescending attitude that society demonstrated toward women, making their idealism seem like little more than whims. But even so, she says, "Here and there is born a Saint Teresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognisable deed." Such women are prevented from spreading their idealism, from seeing it flower, because of the hindrances that are put in their way, because their idealism is so quickly dismissed.

Then we turn the page and read, "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress." What, we might justifiably wonder, does Saint Teresa have to do with Dorothea Brooke, the leading character of *Middlemarch*, but the answer rapidly becomes apparent, though we will have to finish the novel to see the answer worked out in detail. For instance, in the first chapter's second sentence, Dorothea is compared in an offhanded way to the "Blessed Virgin," but more than four hundred pages later, when we have gotten to know Dorothea, when Dorothea has gotten to know Dorothea, Lydgate thinks, "This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary" (chapter 76). By the time Lydgate comes to this realization, we have seen enough evidence to know that he is right. In fact, throughout the novel Eliot makes numerous religious references—Dorothea reads the French philosopher Pascal, she has "Puritan energy," she refuses to wear religious jewelry because "A cross is the last thing I would wear as a trinket," she poses for a painting as Santa Clara (chapter 22), she is compared to St. Catherine (chapter 45) and the *mater dolorosa* (chapter 80). But her religious associations

go beyond mere allusion, because she really, truly, feels the pull of what Eliot saw as the essence of religion: selflessness, service to others. Even in the first chapter, almost in passing, we learn about “the infant school which she had set going in the village,” and we soon learn that her great project is to have new cottages built for the poor of Middlemarch. When she marries Mr. Casaubon, as the narrator makes clear from the very beginning of their acquaintanceship, she does so out of a mistaken idealism, thinking that he is a great scholar, far beyond her understanding, and that she will selflessly be able to help in his important work. And even when she realizes that everything she thought about Casaubon was mistaken, she still tries to live out her idealism. Even later, she uses her money for good causes—to help Lydgate, to support the hospital. And finally she discovers that religious love may include romantic love as well. So just as the novel opens with the story of Saint Teresa, it ends with this beautiful passage: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive; for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (Finale). Dorothea did not attain the fame of a Saint Teresa. Her accomplishments were neither public nor earthshaking. But they most certainly were accomplishments, for she affected everyone who knew her, either by making their lives better or by making them better. To illustrate this point, I will cite one of the most remarkable scenes in the novel. Dorothea thinks that she has been terribly hurt by Rosamond, but she knows that Rosamond herself is in considerable distress. Putting aside her own hurt, she visits Rosamond to set the foolish girl’s mind at ease, and in their conversation, both women discover vital things about themselves and they achieve a level of communication and fellow-feeling that is as rare in literature as it is in life. As the narrator tells us, “Pride was broken down between these two” (chapter 81).

Now a careful reading of the novel will show that many of the problems that confront the characters derive from their inability to communicate, whether because of societal strictures that limit what people can say to each other or because of a normal human inability to speak the truth plainly and openly. But as Dorothea and Rosamond speak, as they begin to see into each other’s souls and into their own,

they come together as human beings who sense their common humanity. Their feelings go beyond words, and even Rosamond, whose outlook and behavior have been largely based on self-centeredness, transcends herself in a wordless gesture:

Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck.

(chapter 82)

As Rosamond kisses Dorothea's forehead and they clasp each other, they have a true communion. While they naturally cannot remain in such a state, both are transformed by the experience, and each of them understands what she must do next. And all of this results from Dorothea's special variety of kindness, her willingness to put aside her own hurt in order to comfort another.

So Dorothea may not attain the fame of a Saint Teresa, but remember that *Middlemarch* is, after all, "A Study of Provincial Life." If Dorothea is a provincial Saint Teresa, there should only be more like her. The "effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive," the narrator says. All that means is that her goodness affected many people, which is a pretty good legacy. It certainly fits into one of the goals that Dorothea sets for herself early in the novel: "I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody's life" (chapter 22). That may not be a very practical goal, but it is a laudatory goal. If we aim at such ideals even knowing that we can never achieve them, we may achieve much more than we would with more modest goals. This is what Dorothea means when she defines her "religion" for Will: "by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower" (chapter 39). Dorothea makes several such pronouncements, but none sums up her philosophy so well as what she says to Lydgate late in the novel: "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?" (chapter 72). It is that simple. And that difficult. There is that "Presentiment of moral depths" that

we discussed earlier. We can study all the doctrine and dogma, but until we internalize what Dorothea tells Lydgate, we will make no progress. This brief discussion of Dorothea can be summed up by one of the great lines in the novel. At one point, Dorothea tells Will that she doubts her ability ever to write a poem, and he responds, “You *are* a poem” (chapter 22). She is indeed. Both literally and figuratively, Dorothea is a poem.

Of course, Eliot is not telling us anything that we do not already know. Nor does Tolstoy teach us anything new when he presents the character Karataev near the end of *War and Peace*. Almost everyone knows, or claims to know, the truth behind what they say. We just do not live as though we really believe it. Books like *Middlemarch* and *War and Peace* not only tell us things, they embody those things. Characters like Karataev and Dorothea are vivid reminders of the things they say. If we can relate to these characters and others, perhaps they can make those “moral depths” more vivid and more urgent, so that we will incorporate them into our lives. As I noted back in the Introduction, one of the functions of the humanities, a function that has been largely ignored in recent years, is to improve our lives, at the very least by making us think about how they might be improved.

Another theme that runs through *Middlemarch* and Eliot’s other novels should hardly surprise us. As a woman writing under a man’s name, Eliot pays a great deal of attention to gender roles, not in a doctrinaire way but with a certainty that current attitudes and practices are incorrect and unfair and therefore require change. She includes an occasional cutting remark: “A man’s mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine” (chapter 2), which is either a backhanded compliment or a much qualified insult. Generally, however, her comments are more subtle and thought-provoking. It is fascinating to see how she illustrates the engrained sexism of her culture, the way both men and women acquiesce to its structures, while at the same time she shows how foolish and unfair it is. Perhaps the high (or low) point for such attitudes comes toward the novel’s end, when Dorothea’s sister Celia, who is married to James, says to the widowed Dorothea, “‘And I think it is a mercy now after all that you have got James to think for you’” (chapter 72). This line states in per-

haps its most forthright form a principle that runs through the novel, that a woman's role is to be "polished, refined, docile" (chapter 16). Women are allowed to think, occasionally, but men make the decisions and women are expected—and expect themselves—to abide by those decisions. Lydgate, the narrator says, relies on the principle of "the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander" (chapter 36). Even between Mr. and Mrs. Garth, who have probably the best marriage in the novel, the principle holds. Mrs. Garth is highly intelligent and thinks through problems. Mr. Garth is equally intelligent, but he is often swayed by his good-hearted tendencies. However we may rate these two approaches to dealing with problems, the principle stands that once Mr. Garth has arrived at a decision, that decision stands, and no one defends the principle more devotedly than Mrs. Garth.

Thus Eliot shows us the practice, shows how people support that practice, and yet undercuts it at the same time. An education in trifles rather than in real matters, for instance, has made Rosamond incapable of understanding Lydgate's work or of thinking, until near the novel's end, of anything beyond her own small domestic comforts. Her lack of understanding, in fact, leads her to violate her husband's orders in a potentially destructive way, but then she lacks understanding because, as a woman, she never learned that she had to understand things. Men would do her thinking for her. Her brother Fred, on the other hand, does learn, and in the Finale we see how really well things turn out for him and his wife.

Without a doubt, however it is Dorothea's story that implicitly challenges the treatment of women. By marrying Mr. Casaubon, she voluntarily and quite consciously consigns herself to a life of subservience. She thinks that he is brilliant and that she will be able to help him. As she discovers that he is not brilliant and as her perceptions become more accurate, she becomes, almost against her will, more assertive, until at the end she behaves as an independent woman should. And the world does not fall apart.

I hope this discussion of *Middlemarch* gives some idea of how wonderful the novel is. As I hinted earlier, it is a long, slow read, but it is worth every moment invested in it. Eliot has such a beautiful way

with the language and such insight into the complexities of human existence. It would have been easy for her to portray Mr. Casaubon as something of a villain, but at one point she even allows us to see the story from his perspective. We will not agree with it, but she makes us aware that he does have a perspective. So enjoy *Middlemarch*, and then give her other novels a chance, particularly *Silas Marner* ( a very brief book), *Adam Bede*, *Felix Holt*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. *Romola* is a bit different than the others, since it is set not in nineteenth-century England but in Renaissance Florence, but it is a great book. And whatever you do, save *Daniel Deronda* for last.

# Afterword

In his magnificent novel *Dr. Zhivago*, as translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Boris Pasternak writes, in the voice of his title character, “And to me art has never seemed a subject or an aspect of form, but rather a mysterious and hidden part of content.... Works speak through many things: themes, situations, plots heroes. But most of all they speak through the art contained in them” (334-335). Readers and teachers should pay attention to these words. Too often, particularly in teaching, we ignore questions of artistry. Perhaps the reasons are understandable. It is, for instance, almost impossible to teach artistry. You can point out how well characters are described, how well the language is used, how intriguing structure may be, and all those other factors that make up artistry, but people can only learn about artistry by being exposed to it, by living with it. The other factor, of course, is that we cannot test a student’s perception of artistry with a multiple-choice question:

Dorothea Brooke is an artistically drawn character because

- a.) she likes painting
- b.) she has pretty hair
- c.) she dresses well
- d.) she is described in life-like terms that make us feel as though we have come to know on a personal basis someone whose experiences we can share and learn from (and so on)

It just won’t work, and if we can’t test things, and if we can’t test them in standardized ways so that we can report the scores and prove that we are doing our jobs, well, then we’ll just ignore them. We can, of course, have students write about such issues, thereby encouraging

them to think about such ideas, but essays take time to read and consider, and the scoring cannot be standardized, so the system works against such methods.

Furthermore, reading literature seriously often means seeing that what it says is subversive, that is, that it undercuts accepted truths. If *The Iliad* truly is, as I presented it, an anti-war poem, it went against some basic principles of the society in which it developed. It goes against some of the basic principles that people in our society still hold. If *Pride and Prejudice* contrasts a part of society that values things and another part that values people, then Jane Austen is undercutting a basic principle of her society, and of ours. These are, certainly, superficial examples, but they indicate what I mean. Reading literature means challenging oneself, one's beliefs, one's actions. These are vital issues that human beings must consider to prevent themselves from becoming dehumanized and from becoming dehumanizers.

And finally, at least for purposes of this book, literature teaches us how to read—how to read books, how to read people, how to read situations, how to read the world. These are basic skills. Again, I don't know how we can test them, but I find over and over that when I present these skills, as well as artistry, as well as the subversive nature of literature, in class, students respond. Literature becomes not just another school subject, another hurdle on the way to their degrees. It becomes something important to their lives. I have no way of knowing if my students continue to read literature after they graduate. I hope they do. But at least they know that they can read it, that they can benefit from it, and that they can enjoy it. Like Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, all the teacher can do is point the way. Dante, the student, has to be willing to go where the teacher points—and then go even further.

# Selected Bibliography

When we read works in translation, it's vital to remember that every translation is also an interpretation. Every translation has weaknesses, but many also have great strengths, and the choice of a translation is, in many ways, a matter of taste. While I certainly have not sampled every translation of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*, the following are both excellent and easily accessible. I want to stress that there are other fine translations, though readers should be sure to find a poetic rather than a prose translation. And as is always the case with poetry, readers should read as much of the text out loud as possible.

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