INTRODUCTION

"...We have not the same wholeness as Shakespeare, but a share in the same wholeness; we go to him still for new elucidations of our being." 1

Indeed Shakespeare's plays embody a most comprehensive vision of the total personality of man as he is in himself and in his complex and multi-faceted relationship with his fellow-men in the world and even with what is beyond the visible world. They attempt an elucidation of our whole being, of our place and status in a totality of perspectives.

With an unexampled insight into the human situation where a fairly stable structure of an old world view coexisted with the stirrings of the birth of a new order, Shakespeare provides an integrated picture of a whole range of problems - the problems of perception, of knowledge, of the limitations and capabilities of the human mind in a fluid and dynamic world.

Shakespeare's age was obsessed with the newly experienced problems of truth and error, of appearance and reality, of the ambiguity of experience and of an ambiguous and changing self. It was very much an age of revolution in the sense that the medieval way was collapsing and modernism was taking place in every

   John F. Danby.
   Faber paper cover edition.
sphere of life. Although there was prosperity at home and peace with the rest of the world under the reign of Elizabeth I, yet there worked a profound and agonised unrest in the individual mind of man which is vividly mirrored in the plays of Shakespeare and even in those of his immediate successor or contemporary, Ben Jonson.

"Theologically, in the later sixteenth century, divine providence seemed increasingly to be questioned, or at least to be regarded as more bafflingly inescrutable. New orientations between man and the heavenly power, disintegrating the medieval sense of security, were in the process of formation." 2

The old certainties about man's status and his knowledge guaranteed by medieval world view which was governed by Ptolemy who saw a fixed earth created by God for man, his chosen creature, were badly disturbed by the new philosophy which saw the earth moving as any other heavenly body, and visualised a plurality of worlds where the earlier comfortable relationship between man and God, was replaced by a dubious one of near unintelligibility. With this distancing of man and God, the very basis of human knowledge became open to question. To what extent, if at all, could man know himself, his fellow-men, the world around him and the divine? Doubt, questioning, cynicism, even pessimism began to gain ground. Where there had been certi--

2. A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies, p.188
Cambridge University Press. 1974
tude, there was a nagging uncertainty.

"While the Copernican revolution was only
only gradually accepted in England, its implications
regarding man's conception of his status could not have
been ignored in the Shakespearian climate." 3

Absolutism of belief gave way to a
relativism of perception and knowledge. The new Renai-
ssance relativism followed the transformation of the
traditional geo-centric and well-enclosed Ptolemaic
Universe.

"The Renaissance epistemological crisis
emphasised the notion of the relativity of perception
recalling the appearance-versus-reality motif recurrent
through Renaissance drama." 4

It is therefore not strange that Shake-
speare wrote such a number of plays based on the theme
of appearance and reality. The theme of supposed un-
 chastity, our main concern, is only one version of that
broader theme of seeming where a character, in his mis-
taken confidence takes the appearance of a thing to be
the reality of it. The problem of appearance and reali-
ty in itself is unique only to human beings. There are
no animals apart from human beings capable of deceptive
outward appearance. Shakespeare knew only too well that
a man can laugh and laugh while nurturing evil thoughts.

3. Ibid. p.195.
4. Ibid. p.190.
He also knew that if one could deceive others, one could be as easily deceived by others.

Of central importance is man's clouded reason. He is prone to error, to wrong judgement, wrong perception and wrong action. This is partly because of some privation or some other form of evil which is ever at work in the human psyche. Evil is innate in man and the operation of evil creates havoc in society as well as in the individual. Even more to the point was the increasingly realised dissociation between man and his world; between the human and the divine. If we are to know why Claudio temporarily seals the fate of Hero in the Church, we need to know what made him or prompted him to do so. In the play Don John is the villain and it is through his machination that Claudio judges Hero wrongly. Don John indeed plans his evil design cleverly and takes advantage of a natural phenomenon (darkness) to assist him. He, as a result, succeeds in casting a shadow on the chastity of Hero for a while, but since we are in the world of comedy, death has not been allowed to take a hand in the framework of the drama. The problem therefore is resolved without blood being shed.

Shakespeare is ever at work to emphasise the peculiarly fallible character of human knowledge,
and the nearly fatal contribution made towards it by the operation of evil. As we have said before, our main concern in this study is the problem of the supposed unchastity of Shakespeare's comic heroines. Three plays have been chosen for this purpose. These plays are: Much Ado About Nothing, Cymbeline, and The Winter's Tale.

In the following chapters we will try to show how the mechanism of supposed unchastity is an integral part of the dramatic scheme. We have already mentioned how Claudio is duped into believing that Hero is involved in a clandestine affair with someone. It is here and from this point onwards that the action of the drama begins. Every little action of the drama emanates from this point. And later on when the problem is resolved and Hero reinstated in her true stature, every other action of the drama subsides. There is no doubt therefore as to how the comedy arises from the theme of the supposed unchastity of Hero. Hero, it is true, has to suffer before the truth dawns. This is needed from the point of view of dramatic interest, and the complications arise solely from the point of view of heightening the final comic effect when the crisis is finally resolved through a burst of illumination.

Evil which is a dominant force in the
human society has also been highlighted. This, as we have said before, is innate in human beings and it is accentuated by the new spirit of cynicism arising from the philosophic and religious distemper of the times. The operation of evil in the human situation creates havoc, and as a result not only the deserving but the undeserving also suffers. The theme of supposed unchastity in the three comedies chosen for our study is a dramatisation of a sense of perplexed precariousness and of the spirit of Machiavellian cynicism operating in the human situation. These heroines are not unchaste but they have been framed to appear so.

Although the stories of the three comedies differ, yet the theme of supposed unchastity is common to all of them. In Cymbeline, Imogen, a chaste woman and the heroine of the drama, is made to appear what she is not. In the first place, there is the queen who is a study in appearance and reality. Although her sole aim is to secure the throne for her son Cloten, cunningly she plays the role of the faithful wife and dutiful step-mother. By her cunning she wins the confidence of the king and thereupon succeeds in separating Imogen from Posthumus. Then we have Iachimo who also succeeds in convincing Posthumus, by parading an apparently incontrovertible proof, of Imogen's unchastity (although
he has stolen the bracelet by treacherous means). It is at this point again that the drama gathers momentum. The battle between the Roman conquerors and the Britons is also symbolic of the treachery by which Iachimo supposedly violates Imogen's chastity.

_Cymbeline_ is more true to life because of the fact that the agents of evil are allowed to die. On the other hand these deaths are symbolic of the regeneration of a new and more blissful life. The supposedly 'lost' princes are restored to their rightful places along with Imogen. The deaths of the queen and Cloten do not inspire pity as in the tragedies. They themselves are the cause of their own destruction. The comic effect, on the contrary, is heightened by these dispositions. The presence of these deaths might incline one to think that the play cannot exactly be grouped among the comedies. However, the point to be noted is that these deaths do not raise awe and pity. The deaths come in an unobtrusive manner and can be seen to be very much in their place.

In the case of Posthumus, he is the target of evil in the form of villainy—in the person of Iachimo. The fact of seeming plays a vital role in convincing Posthumus of the supposed seduction of Imogen by
Iachimo. For Posthumus there is nothing more to do but believe Iachimo who has returned from Britain with the proof (the bracelet) of his having seduced Imogen. Posthumus, in his mad fury, even goes to the extent of ordering Pisario to execute Imogen. This is the technique Shakespeare uses to heighten or prolong the comic effect to follow afterwards. The Shakespearean vision of life is highly complex, and the theme in question can be seen as a necessary element in this vision.

"...The close kinship of Shakespearean Comedy with Tragedy is apparent to every reader..." 5

This statement is the central core of every Shakespearean drama. The Shakespearean vision is as complex as life itself, for Shakespeare brings into his plays the varied complexities of life. Life is a mixture of both the tragic and the comic. And because of this most of the Shakespearean comedies have elements of the tragic in them. But the master mind of Shakespeare is ever at work to cleanse these elements at the end of each play and especially the plays we are dealing with so that the plays end happily. Even if some characters are allowed to perish, this does not in any way clash with the impregnated comic spirit. "It would seem difficult to resist the conclusion that, as Dogberry illustrates the ridiculous, and Benedick and Beatrice the shallow aspect of Messina society, so Don John is sketched in to suggest — in a comedy no more than a suggestion would be fitting — the tragedy it involves. Even the

5. Shakespearean Comedies and Other Studies.
George Gordon.
Ch. I. p. 12
Oxford University Press.
soundest and justest of societies rest ultimately on the exclusion, and if necessary the elimination of those who refuse to conform..." 6

Shakespeare is not a strict disciplinarian where stage craft is concerned. It is obvious that he does not conform to the dramatic rules laid down by the classical scholars. "Shakespeare always had a keen eye for theatrical fashion, but there is no evidence that he ever knuckled under to it. He took advantage of it rather to do it in a new way what he wanted to do anyway." 7 On the other hand, we have Ben Jonson who is the opposite of Shakespeare. His adhering to the 'unities' has rendered his plays devoid of that striking lifelikeness and variety that are the hallmark of Shakespeare's world. The complexities we spoke of earlier have made Shakespeare the contrary of Ben Jonson. The Winter's Tale is an example of this. "...It is a fairy tale - it is fact. It is romantic - it is realistic. It is tragic - it is comic. It is Christian - it is pagan. It is harsh and crabbed - it is simple and idyllic. It is this - it is that. It is a welter of anachronism." 8

This play is very different from the other two plays we have mentioned earlier. It is no doubt true that this play is also a study of the universal theme of

6. Shakespearian and Other Essays, Ch., II. p.42
   James Smith.
   Cambridge University Press.
7. The Meaning of Shakespeare, Vol. II.
   Ch., 34. (Cymbeline) p. 244.
   Arnold G. Goddard.
   Phoenix Books.
evil innate in man. But in *The Winter's Tale* the important point of difference is that the evil emanates from Leontes himself, the king of Sicily, who accuses his queen of unchastity. Unlike Claudio and Posthumus, the king here is self-deceived.

*The Winter's Tale* is, among other things, a psychological study of evil innate in man. In man, both good and evil are present simultaneously. And the human constitution is such that one never knows when there will be an eruption of evil i.e. the passion within. And this is what underscores the precariousness of the human situation. And this is what exactly happens in *The Winter's Tale*. Hell is let loose and the innocent queen suffers. And not only she; but her young son who dies and her daughter who in her infancy is an exile.

"The Shakespearian play shows a texture of personal thinking - woven with some objective and pre-existent story. Philosophy is entwined with action and event. Shakespeare's philosophy is infinitely variable not static, as Dante's; *King Lear* may be Senecan, but *Macbeth* is Christian. His philosophy may vary with each play, we cannot find by abstraction Shakespeare's own philosophy of life: his massed statement includes many philosophies, but is subject to none." 9 We are not exactly dealing with the philosophy of Shakespeare in our study of the three comedies. Although our interest

is focussed upon the theme of the supposed unchastity of the heroines of the three comedies we cannot overlook the layers of themes imbedded in them just as varied philosophy is.

The Winter's Tale is highly philosophical but, as G. Wilson Knight says, the philosophy is not static but varied. It is on the whole a psychological study of evil innate in man who is hypnotised and madly possessed by it and of its ultimate destructive power. The master genius of Shakespeare is again seen at work in this play. With varied themes all brought together, the play among other things, deals with the suspected faithlessness of Hermione. This problem is the direct outcome of evil in the form of jealousy in Leontes. He himself is the one who asks Hermione to persuade Polixenes to prolong his stay. But when she succeeds in her task, the king is angry and charges her with disloyalty. For the action that he commits, Polixenes has to suffer for some sixteen years, along with Hermione who has been branded unchaste. The action of the king has far reaching effects. He loses his best friend, his only son, and his daughter who is exiled.

The crisis is resolved only after Perdita the daughter of Leontes, has grown up. She is the instru-
ment that brings about the resolution of the crisis in the end. Almost one third of the play is clouded with fear and apprehension. But Shakespeare manoeuvres the action in such a way that the comic spirit is there all the while lurking in the background and enlarged and enhanced at the end of the play.

Thus, as we have pointed out earlier, the object of this study will be to bring out how Shakespeare makes use of the theme to show, how even within the framework of comedy, human happiness can be clouded, however temporarily, through the clouding of reason and the operation of evil, whether within or without. This becomes a potent means of unveiling character and situation and also of deepening the realisation and vision that the characters are blessed with at the end. From this angle, the theme in question can be seen as a necessary element in Shakespeare's highly complex vision of life. In his hands, the manipulation of this theme also serves the all too important purpose of cleansing the turbid atmosphere engendered, by the frailties, so unforseen and so inevitable, to which man is subject. Victims of distorted vision or insuffiecent knowledge or complete ignorance, the dramatic characters often look most assured when there is least assurance for their attitudes and behaviour and make a muddle of their
situation from where they emerge not by their wits for they have none but by a merciful providence acting through the least likely individuals and situations. This reminds one of Isabella's summing up of life at the higher levels of society.

"...But man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep, who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal."

(Measure for Measure. II.ii.)

Every Shakespearian comedy is an imaginative exercise in social reconstruction. To begin with and for quite a while society is bogged down in a morass and it is the men rather than the women who by their blunderings born of lack of knowledge and a preponderant measure of arrogance were bring society on to the brink of an abyss. When things have reached the climax, it is some near miracle that brings about a change in the situation where much of the accumulated evil is purged. Knowledge dawns and there is the emerging picture of a relatively cleansed society.

Again and again, Shakespeare exploits the motif of appearance and reality; exhibits the working
out of the forces of evil, and shows how by an unexpec-
ted turn of events (mostly, thanks to the people who
would not be much thought of) follies are exposed and
bonds of understanding are freshly and more enduringly
cemented. In the process, he sheds an illumination on
the nature of the mingled drama that is this sub-lunar
life.

As stated earlier, our object will be to
analyse this process in the three comedies in question.

It must be pointed out that the reason why
we have chosen not to include Othello for a detailed
study is our basic concern which is to see how the alarm
caus'd and dark shadows cast by the working of human ig-
norance and follies are countered and finally absorbed
in a deeper understanding of life which brings joy and
illumination.