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978-0-521-41083-0 - Shakespeare and the Mannerist Tradition: A Reading of Five Problem Plays

Jean-Pierre Maquerlot

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Introduction

The adjective *maniériste* was first coined by Robert Fréart de Chambray in his *Idée de la perfection de la peinture* (1662). Luigi Lanzi used the abstract noun *manierismo* a hundred and thirty years later in *La storia pittorica . . .* (1792). Thereafter, Mannerism finally became an accepted category in the history of art. Today, in spite of differences of interpretation, no one denies the usefulness of the concept to stylistic denotation and the definition of periods. Later and less boldly than in painting and other visual arts, the category entered the discourse of musical criticism. It is not unusual to read or hear it said today that a particular motet by Roland de Lassus, or mass by William Byrd, or madrigal by Claudio Monteverdi, Thomas Weelkes, John Wilbye or more especially Carlo Gesualdo betrays Mannerist characteristics. It is in literature and the theatre that the adoption of the category is encountering the most resistance. To call a piece of prose, a poem or a play Mannerist, or with more caution to say that it is reminiscent of Mannerism, still arouses suspicion – healthy suspicion according to some – in spite of much remarkable groundwork: the pioneering studies of the first generation (Ernst Robert Curtius back in 1948, followed by Gustav-René Hocke, Marcel Raymond, Arnold Hauser and Wylie Sypher in the fifties),¹ then the work of their successors in the sixties and seventies (Daniel B. Rowland, Cyrus Hoy and Claude-Gilbert Dubois),² not forgetting the art historian John Shearman, who also has concerned himself, albeit marginally, with Mannerist style in literature.³

More recently, the publication of the fifth number of the review *L'art du théâtre* in the autumn of 1986 revived the somewhat flagging interest of theatre lovers in a category that might have been thought to be slightly outmoded. In an examination of the work of the most prominent stage directors in France (particularly Antoine Vitez, Georges Lavaudant and Daniel Mesguich) the contributors to the review discern reactions not unlike those of the Mannerist artists of the Renaissance 'enamoured of

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detail and quotation, of extravagance and perfection' as if these great entertainers were intent on reviving 'a movement whose domain was culture and whose aim was artifice' (editor's foreword, p. 9).

Can it really be curiosity about the Mannerist period which is encouraging so many contemporary stage directors to become interested in Renaissance dramatists, more especially of the English Renaissance, which is the richest and the most varied, theatrically speaking? Is it not rather the fact that they consort so unremittingly with the playwrights of this period that fuels their curiosity about Mannerism? It is hard to distinguish between cause and effect. The fact remains that among those dramatists who are able to stir up the most creative energy in directors and actors, and arouse the ever-ready enthusiasm of playgoers, it is Shakespeare who holds pride of place. And no wonder. But the present fashion for Shakespeare among French audiences is due not only to the excellence of plays that continue to appeal to modern sensibility with their exotic mixture of sophistication and savagery, attractive to so many French people since Voltaire; it derives also from the immense ability of Shakespearian drama to engender the boldest innovations in stagecraft.

I wonder whether English-speaking audiences, and the theatrical professionals across the Channel and the Atlantic, fully realize to what extent Shakespearian theatre in France has ceased to be a run-of-the-mill theatrical object and has become, for better and for worse, a subject of research and an area of experimentation, things not permissible to nearly the same extent in French classical theatre (national heritage *oblige*) and even less in contemporary theatre, especially when the staging is supervised by the eagle eye of still-living authors. Is one to ascribe to Shakespeare the tendency in some adventurous stage directors ('the new Mannerists') to juggle with signs, to assemble provocative collages or clever montages that are often puzzling and sometimes enchanting or disconcerting? Or is it because today, at the close of the twentieth century, there is a side to our own culture (the Mannerist side?) that discovers in Shakespeare an ideal medium that can channel our own expressive energy? I merely ask these questions, aware that a lack of distance from the culture of the present day makes it premature to attempt a reply. One thing is certain, however: the Mannerist productions that Renaissance plays give rise to are in no way the result of a desire to reconstitute the style of performances of the period or, in more general terms, to restore the spirit of the age. Rather they attest to an uneasy and typically modern awareness of the significance of the word 'heritage' among those whose job it is to hand it down and keep it alive. To avoid

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the danger of seeing our heritage disappear from our cultural horizon, it is always necessary to stage again and again what has been staged many times before, but to stage it in another way in order to avoid the risk of its becoming fossilized in an official representation whose canon protects it from the cut and thrust of our own time. At a period when the signature on a painting, a text or a theatrical production guarantees its prestige and notice, another of the implications is that the show must flaunt its status as a work of art, demonstrate its visibility as a creation in its own right, at the risk of sometimes compromising the readability of the text.

To turn to the subject of the present study, I aim to show that Shakespeare as a dramatist (leaving aside Shakespeare as an actor) had his Mannerist moment. Within this period, five plays, written between 1599 and 1604, are relevant to my argument: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Although these plays are very different in form and content, I hope to show that they have in common something which can be called Mannerism, an aspect that does not stand out so evidently in other works of the same period such as *As You Like it*, *Henry V*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or *Othello*; this indicates, incidentally, that I do not consider this span of five years in the playwright's career to be uniformly Mannerist. Where the dating of movements or styles is concerned, I belong to that school of thought which prefers to think of dates as drift-anchors rather than as watertight compartments, and it was no surprise to me to detect precursory signs of Mannerism in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596?). As it is probably not the only play in this situation, I leave it to more acute observers of the Shakespearian scene prior to 1599 to make their pronouncements. *The Merchant of Venice* is, however, a striking example of the direction Shakespeare was to work in throughout the Problem Plays. With some disregard for the chronological latitudinarianism that I have just professed, I tend to think, not without some feeling of unease, for it is not good to appear rigid in this area, that *Othello* represents a decisive end to Shakespeare's Mannerist period and opens the way to a new development. For, in my view, the mood of the tragedies (including the so-called 'late' tragedies) and the mood of the 'romances' are fundamentally incompatible with the continuance of the Mannerist experiment. This argument is worked out in detail in the closing chapter of my book.

But why, it will inevitably be asked, resort to the debatable concept of Mannerism to discuss plays which are generally referred to elsewhere as 'Problem Plays', a name that has gained a general consensus? Suggesting another label is always a risky business that one seldom comes out of

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unscathed. My belief is that the Mannerist hypothesis will allow us to take a fresh look at works that have been subjected to the same line of enquiry for too long, even if F.S. Boas' initial proposition of 1896,⁴ refined and explored in depth by W.W. Lawrence, E.M.W. Tillyard and E. Schanzer in particular,⁵ has yielded remarkable results. In simple terms, the Mannerist hypothesis throws an alternative light on these intriguing plays, allowing various unsuspected or hidden aspects to emerge.

Like the well-established concept of Problem Plays, the Mannerist hypothesis makes no claim to offer an exhaustive vision of its field of application. Indeed, the two terms are in no way mutually exclusive. As I make clear in the subtitle to my book, *A Reading of Five Problem Plays*, I even owe to the existence of this category and the perceptive commentaries stemming from it the origin of the idea that if there was Mannerism to be found in Shakespeare, it was probably to these plays that one should turn. But it is one thing to note, sometimes with surprise, that these works lay bare matters of conscience or moral, philosophic and political dilemmas with a previously unparalleled understanding of intellectual enquiry, or that, as plays to be performed, they represent a theatrical problem in themselves: it is quite another thing to maintain that Shakespeare deliberately adopted new techniques at this stage in his development as did certain Italian painters before him in anticlassical Mannerism around 1520, when the historic and cultural circumstances were extremely different to his. Clearly, there is no question of attributing this parallel development (I do not say identical) to any kind of direct influence or socio-cultural similarity. It would be absurd to suggest that by rubbing away the differences, Florence, Rome, Mantua or Parma of this date could represent in synthesis a preview of London around 1600. On the other hand, in spite of the apparent whimsicality of these matching scenes, it is not absurd to imagine Giulio Romano (to take the only painter mentioned in Shakespeare), who was invited by Pope Leo X in the year 1520 to decorate the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican, telling himself, brush in hand, that it was time for him to free himself from the style of his master, Raphael; or to imagine Shakespeare, pen in hand, at the start of *Hamlet* around 1599 or 1600, also telling himself that it was now necessary for him to show his difference from his predecessor, Thomas Kyd, the undisputed master of revenge tragedy.

The idea of the High Renaissance is an invention of art historians, designating and dating the short-lived period in Italy at the end of the Quattrocento and during the first two decades of the Cinquecento

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during which there flourished a form of artistic expression that was classical, balanced and harmonious (although in fact less harmonious than is often believed). This label is unsuitable for the English Renaissance. On the other hand, the phenomenon that I call 'rhetorical formalism', as it appears in Spenser, Lyly, Kyd, Marlowe and the young Shakespeare (although here too the formalism is less formal than might appear), seems to me to have played a comparable role, *mutatis mutandis*, in forming the Mannerist reaction. It is the style and mood of Montaigne's *Essays*, the anti-Ciceronianism of certain writers of prose such as Lipsius in Holland, Thomas Nashe and Francis Bacon in England; it is the appearance in the 1590s of so-called 'metaphysical' poetry, the fashion for satire and the attraction of melancholy, the taste for philosophic speculation against a background of insecurity ('And new Philosophy calls all in doubt'); all these give glimpses of certain orientations followed in the Mannerist experiment. But an inventory of the causes or concomitances of literary and theatrical Mannerism in England at the end of the sixteenth century would take up a book in itself, and the same is true of the cataloguing of evidence of Mannerism in the later Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline theatre.

The present work is more modestly ambitious. Leaving aside all comprehensive socio-cultural generalizations in the manner of Hauser and all breathtaking stylistic panoramas in the manner of Sypher, this book offers a reading of five of Shakespeare's plays, subjected to Mannerist scrutiny, or rather to my understanding of Mannerism. One thing at least brooks no argument: any definition of Mannerism must first be founded on the visual arts before any attempt is made to apply it to works of language. It is not, after all, the first time that the vocabulary of the fine arts has been used in the description of written texts. In its own way, the Mannerist hypothesis links up with the belief of the ancients in the Concord of the Muses ('ut pictura poesis'), a topic revived during the Renaissance. But nowadays it is no longer good enough to produce facile analogies based on strings of metaphors or superficial inferences about examples of different art forms simply because they originate in the same *Zeitgeist* or share a common *Weltanschauung*. As a belated disciple of Etienne Souriau, who is today recognized as a seminal mind in the semiotics of the theatre, but who is still underestimated as an active proponent of the 'correspondance des arts',⁶ I believe that the only satisfactory comparative language, respecting as far as possible the specificity of the arts forms studied, is one which is based on structural analogies (Souriau used the term *figures*). This subject is dealt with in the second chapter,

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which contains a number of reflections on methodology that I have tried to keep to a minimum.

Concerning the actual analysis of each play, my aim has been to make it readable as an entity, although each obviously fits into what I have to say about Mannerism. There is not perhaps all that much harm done, after all, if eager readers go straight to Shakespeare and avoid the more circuitous paths that I invite them into. Nevertheless, I do hope they will want to turn to my commentaries on the paintings once they have read the essays on the plays, in order to discover other parallels perhaps, or else reasons for scepticism.

In conclusion, I should like to make a few remarks upon the reproductions illustrating my argument: I have chosen, as will be seen, some of the major works of Italian Mannerism. I was motivated in my choice by the desire to show readers who still associate Mannerism with decline or a degenerative process that among the practitioners of this style are artists of the first magnitude and that the term is in no way pejorative when applied to Shakespeare. It is obvious that black-and-white reproduction can only give a very limited idea of painting; this is why my commentary often tends to overlook colour in favour of composition. It is necessary to view the originals, as I myself have done (all are quite easy of access), or at least to consult a good anthology that in all probability will include the works because of their celebrity. The explanatory notes adjoining the reproductions make no claim to be exhaustive. Generally speaking, little attention has been paid to the circumstances in which the works were produced, nor has any attempt been made to situate them in the overall output of a given artist. With so little documentation, the notes would be unworthy of a history of art with any pretension to seriousness. They are not the work of an expert, but stand as the individual testimony of an enlightened amateur – at least I hope so – or of a visitor to museums watchfully detecting certain analogies of a stylistic nature between two different modes of representation, an approach that involves the taking of risks.

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CHAPTER I

The problem of Mannerism

Since Mannerism in painting is not the main subject of my book, I have taken the liberty of excusing myself from two pieces of normal procedure: my argument is not prefaced by any preliminary remarks on the etymology and semantic evolution of the word *maniera* from which the concept derives. Although important, it is a point that has been amply discussed by Georg Weise, Eugenio Battisti, Craig Hugh Smyth and John Shearman among others, so that it is unnecessary to return to the topic.¹ It would be a superfluous ritual to repeat what has already been written on the subject without the certainty of adding something new. The second procedure adopted by a good number of art historians, especially when writing for the general public, consists in overlooking the fact that Mannerism is largely problematic and there is as yet no unanimity over the interpretation to be given of this particular style. I myself feel that in this case it is imperative to mention this fact and to take a stand in the debate because my views affect the whole development of my study of Mannerism as applied to the theatre.

To state a complicated problem in rather simple terms, without, I hope, misrepresenting the issues: it can be said that the problem is still to be addressed today roughly in the same terms as thirty years ago at the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art (whose *Acts* were published in Princeton in 1963), when two brilliant papers, one by C.H. Smyth and the other by J. Shearman, cast doubt on Walter Friedlaender's theories, without, however, undermining them completely.

Chronologically speaking, while Friedlaender was not the first to react against the discredit attached to Mannerism as a pejorative term used by the nineteenth century to stigmatize the decline of Italian and European art from the 1530s to the 1590s,² it was, however, Friedlaender who was the first to conduct a thorough examination of the subject and to secure a rehabilitation of the style. This bold step was taken in his 1914

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inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg upon ‘the anticlassical style’. However, it was no creation *ex nihilo*; the time was ripe, previous critical directions had already been explored, but Friedlaender then set them in a radically new focus. This great German scholar, who was influenced by the aesthetic and intellectual climate of the early twentieth century, with its desire to emancipate itself from academic and naturalistic tenets, saw more cause for hope than despair in the attack launched by Giovanni Bellori in his well-known *Le vite de’ pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni* (1672) against the artists of the generation after Raphael, accusing them of having ‘abandoned the study of nature, corrupted art with *la maniera* or if you prefer fantastic idea (*o vogliamo dire fantastica idea*) based on *pratica* and not on imitation [of nature]’; to Friedlaender this showed *phantasia* taking its revenge over *mimesis*. Similarly, positive signs of a desire for independence and originality were discerned in the criticisms voiced by Carlo Cesare Malvasia, a few years after the publication of Bellori’s book, in the equally famous *Felsina pittrice* (1678), in which the author placed blame on certain artists who, ‘seeking another mode and a different way of doing things’, had been so remiss as to turn their backs on the example of their masters.

Friedlaender and other art historians clearly were encouraged by the emergence of the expressionist, stylized and abstract art of the early twentieth century to take a favourable view of the dissident art of the early Mannerists. It can also be surmised that Vasari’s condemnation of Pontormo, in which he accuses Pontormo of having ruined his own style by indiscriminately imitating the German manner of Dürer, may well have encouraged Friedlaender to give careful thought to the work of the then relatively unknown Florentine painter and to become convinced that Pontormo was one of the boldest pioneers of the new style.

While Friedlaender’s reinterpretation of Mannerism is partly accountable to the spirit of his age, it is obvious that his assessment is based upon an extremely careful reading of the works he examined. When consulting the transcription of the Freiburg lecture, subsequently published in 1925, and the essay that completes it on ‘The Anti-Mannerist Style’ published a few years later in 1930,³ one has to admire the niceness and thoroughness of the analysis. It is the exceptional quality of Friedlaender’s descriptions of paintings which mainly explains why his theories are so convincing and why they are still popular today. It is no accident that André Chastel, a great connoisseur of the Italian Renaissance, should have adopted this outlook in his important book *L’art italien*, published in 1956.

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In Friedlaender's view, *creative* Mannerism, the Mannerism that overturned the canons of the High Renaissance, was the anticlassical art that appeared in Florence roughly between 1515 and 1520 and then spread to central Italy until the middle of the Cinquecento: the work of Pontormo and Rosso, of Beccafumi, Parmigianino and Bronzino, not forgetting the towering and marginal figure of Michelangelo, 'hovering above them and reaching beyond them'; Michelangelo, whose anticlassical inspiration achieved its fullest expression from the 1530s onwards with the Sistine and Pauline frescos in the Vatican, was to influence mature Mannerism much more considerably than did the Florentine painters.

But if Mannerism is to be understood as the bold, innovating style (Friedlaender calls it 'revolutionary') of those disciples who had achieved at least partial liberation from the tutelage of their High Renaissance masters (Raphael, Correggio, Andrea del Sarto etc.), how then is the style of the following generations of mid and late sixteenth-century artists to be referred to, for whom anticlassicism had long ceased to be a living issue? The question has to be asked, especially as it is precisely these painters that Malvasia accuses of giving themselves up to the vice of *la maniera*, and he lists their names: 'Salviati, the Zuccari, Vasari, Andrea Vicentino, Tomaso Laureti' as well as his fellow citizens from Bologna, 'Samacchino, Sabbatino, Calvaert, the Procaccini and the like'. Friedlaender reacts to the problem by remaining faithful to traditional criticism: these second-rate painters, who were powerless to counteract the waning of the anticlassical trend, were the conformists of this new style, the sometimes ingenious, often skilful, but always repetitive practitioners of a watered-down Mannerism that had become academic through over-use of the same figurative conventions. Friedlaender writes that Mannerism 'became *di maniera* by repetition, cleverness and playful exaggeration on the one hand, by weak concessions on the other'.⁴ Lacking in true inspiration, these artists overemphasized available models, over-refined existing forms and cultivated virtuosity of execution. Anticlassical Mannerism had become 'mannered', not in the sense of affectation or preciosity, but in the sense of the domination of a manner of doing things which had become mechanical. It was the attempt to find a way out of this impasse, seen by the theorists of the 1580s, especially Lomazzo and Armenini, as the sign of a decline,⁵ that explains the emergence of a movement of reform led principally by the Carracci brothers in Bologna and by Caravaggio, who came from Lombardy but who worked in Rome. Their aim was to return to a simpler, more natural, more intelligible way of painting and in particular

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to revitalize the human figure – the local habitation *par excellence* of *la maniera* – which had turned into something impersonal and almost unsubstantial through excessive idealization. The formation of this trend and the description of the new tendencies appearing at the end of the Cinquecento are dealt with in Friedlaender's second essay, entitled 'The Anti-Mannerist Style'.

On the other side of contemporary thinking on Mannerism stand C.H. Smyth and J. Shearman, who query Friedlaender's leading idea that the anticlassical trend can legitimately be described as Mannerist. Both critics point out that it has only been possible to link anticlassicism to Mannerism (a combination which has no precedent in the criticism of previous centuries) by including among the characteristics of *la maniera* the idea of the primacy of the imagination (*la fantastica idea* as mentioned by Malvasia) over the imitation of nature and the masters. They object, and rightly so, that this is a theme which belongs to seventeenth-century criticism; there are no hints of it anywhere in sixteenth-century treatises contemporary with what we now call Mannerism; it is drawing belated and unwarranted conclusions from the opinions delivered by Cinquecento theorists upon *la maniera*. The value of C.H. Smyth's and J. Shearman's contribution has been to return the original concept of *maniera*, with the diverse meanings that it had during the Cinquecento, to the heart of present-day reasoning. Contrary to Friedlaender's somewhat schematizing beliefs, *la maniera* does not merely imply a routine method producing an automatic and stereotyped performance; although it is true that Dolce does give it only this meaning in his *Artetino* (1557), as a term used by painters, probably from Venice and therefore outside the sphere of Mannerism, to refer to a deplorable practice tending to give the human figure and face always the same air. But Dolce is an isolated instance. Vasari, quoted by Friedlaender, gives this meaning along with others in both the 1550 and the 1568 editions of the *Lives*, and the same applies to the *trattatisti* writing at the close of the century in the wake of the Vasari tradition.⁶ Although Vasari and his successors did not fail to see the risk of uniformity and artificiality that Armenini's *sola maniera* could create, or the dangers of working purely *per forza d'arte* (as Lomazzo put it), yet more often than not they thought of *la maniera* as a desirable quality when acquired by selecting and imitating the finest specimens of nature and art, including the art of antiquity, and cultivating personal talent. Generally speaking, sixteenth-century aesthetic thinking saw *la maniera*, used in the absolute sense, as a prerequisite to the creation of ideal beauty, unhampered by the accidental or the con-