

George Whetstone,
The morality of comedy (1578)

GEORGE WHETSTONE (1544?–87?), author and soldier, served in the Low Countries against the Spaniards in 1572–4 and 1585–6, taking part in the action at Zutphen; in 1578–9 he sailed in Sir Humphrey Gilbert's Newfoundland voyage. A friend of Gascoigne, he wrote commendatory verses to his *Posies* (1575) and a *Remembrance* on his death (1577). His publications include several obituary panegyrics; *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses* (1582, prose tales adapted from Giraldi Cinthio); and two accounts of conspiracies against Queen Elizabeth.

TEXT. From *The right Excellent and famous Historye, of Promos and Cassandra: Devided into two Commicall Discourses. In the fyrste parte is showne, the unsufferable abuse, of a lewde Magistrate: The vertuous behaviours of a chaste Ladye: The uncontrold leawdenes of a favoured Curtisan. And the undeserved estimation of a pernicious Parasyte. In the second part is discoursed, the perfect magnanimitye of a noble Kinge, in checking Vice and favouring Vertue: Wherein is showne, the Ruyne and overthrowe, of dishonest practises: with the advauncement of upright dealing* (London, 1578). This play, in rhymed versed, never acted, was based either on the Latin tragedy *Philanira* by Claude Rouillet (1556), or on the eighty-fifth tale of Cinthio's *Heccatomitthi* (1565), and provided the main source for Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. See G. Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, ii: The Comedies, 1597–1603* (London, 1958), pp. 399–514.

[DEDICATION TO WILLIAM FLEETWOODE,
RECORDER OF LONDON]

Sir, desirous to acquit your tried friendship with some token of good will, of late I perused diverse of my imperfect works, fully minded to bestow on you the travail of some of my forepassed time. But, resolved to accompany the adventurous Captain Sir Humfrey Gilbert¹ in his honourable voyage, I found my leisure too little to correct the errors in my said works. So that, enforced, I left them dispersed among my

¹ Gilbert (1539?–83), the navigator, was stepbrother of Sir Walter Raleigh.

learned friends, at their leisure to polish if I failed to return; spoiling by this means my study of his necessary furniture.* Among other unregarded papers I found this discourse of *Promos and Cassandra*; which for the rareness and the needful knowledge of the necessary matter contained therein, to make the actions appear more lively, I divided the whole history into two comedies—for that, decorum used, it would not be conveyed in one. The effects of both are good and bad: virtue intermixed with vice, unlawful desires, if it were possible, quenched with chaste denials: all needful actions (I think) for public view. For by the reward of the good, the good are encouraged in well doing, and with the scourge of the lewd,* the lewd are feared from evil attempts: maintaining this my opinion with Plato's authority.² Naughtiness comes of the corruption of nature, and not by reading or hearing the lives of the good or lewd (for such publication is necessary), but goodness, says he, is beautified by either action. And to these ends Menander, Plautus, and Terence, themselves many years since entombed, by their comedies in honour live at this day.

The ancient Romans held these shows of such price that they not only allowed the public exercise of them, but the grave senators themselves countenanced* the actors with their presence: who from these trifles won morality, as the bee sucks honey from weeds.³ But the advised devices of ancient poets, discredited with trifles of young, unadvised, and rash-witted writers, has brought this commendable exercise in mislike. For at this day the Italian is so lascivious in his comedies that honest hearers are grieved at his actions; the Frenchman and Spaniard follows the Italian's humour; the German is too holy, for he presents on every common stage what preachers should pronounce in pulpits. The Englishman in this quality is most vain, indiscreet,* and out of order. He first grounds his work on impossibilities;⁴ then in three hours' runs he through the world, marries, gets children, makes children men, men to conquer kingdoms, murder monsters; [he] bringeth gods from heaven, and fetcheth devils from hell. And, that which is worst, their ground is not so imperfect as their working indiscreet: not weighing, so the people laugh, though they

² A vague statement which apparently ignores the fact that Plato wanted poetry and drama banned from his ideal state, except for texts praising the gods or virtuous men.

³ This important metaphor for the process by which the reader should select the wholesome parts of literary texts and ignore the immoral ones goes back to classical antiquity. See Elyot, p. 67, and Heywood, p. 478.

⁴ Cf. Sidney, pp. 381–2, and Jonson, p. 527, for similar catalogues of improbabilities in contemporary drama.

laugh them, for their follies, to scorn. Many times, to make mirth, they make a clown companion with a king; in their grave counsels they allow the advice of fools. Yea, they use one order of speech for all persons—a gross indecorum,⁵ for a crow will ill counterfeit the nightingale's sweet voice: even so, affected speech does misbecome a clown. For, to work a comedy kindly,⁶ grave old men should instruct, young men should show the imperfections of youth, strumpets should be lascivious, boys unhappy, and clowns should speak disorderly: intermingling all these actions in such sort as the grave matter may instruct and the pleasant delight; for without this change the attention would be small, and the liking less.

But leave I this rehearsal of the use and abuse of comedies, lest that I check that in others which I cannot amend in myself. But this I am assured, what actions soever pass in this history, either merry or mournful, grave or lascivious, the conclusion shows the confusion of vice and the cherishing of virtue. And since the end tends to this good, although the work, because of evil handling, be unworthy your learned censure,* allow (I beseech you) of my good will, until leisure serves me to perfect some labour of more worth. No more, but that almighty God be your protector, and preserve me from danger in this voyage, the 29 of July, 1578.

⁵ On decorum see also Sidney, p. 383, and Puttenham, pp. 228–30.

⁶ That is, according to 'kind' or genre, obeying the principle of decorum, and achieving the traditional goals of *docere* and *delectare*. The moral function of comedy was asserted by the early commentators on Terence, such as Aelius Donatus and Evanthius, to whom were ascribed the influential essay 'De tragoedia et comoedia' printed in many early editions of Terence; cf. the translation by O. B. Hardison, Jr., in A. Preminger et al. (eds.), *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism* (New York, 1974), pp. 299–309; M. T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1950), pp. 57–60, and M. Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison, 1954), pp. 105 ff.

Edmund Spenser and E.K., Pastoral poetry revived and explained (1579)

EDMUND SPENSER (1552?–99), son of a clothmaker, was educated at the Merchant Taylor's School in London, under Richard Mulcaster (a noted humanist scholar whose other pupils included Thomas Kyd, Lancelot Andrewes, and Thomas Lodge), and Pembroke Hall Cambridge (between 1569 and 1576). In 1579 he obtained through the influence of his college friend, Gabriel Harvey, a place in Leicester's household, and became acquainted with Sir Philip Sidney, experimenting (together with Edward Dyer and Thomas Drant) in writing English verse in classical metres.

E.K., the author of the Preface and Glosses, has not been surely identified. Some scholars identify him as E[dmundus] K[alendarus], i.e. 'Edmund [Spenser] the calendar-maker': cf. R. Rainbuss, *Spenser's Secret Career* (Cambridge, 1993). Others believe that he was either Spenser's Cambridge contemporary, Edward Kirke (1553–1613) of Pembroke, or even Gabriel Harvey. His annotations are printed in italics.

TEXT. From *The Shepheardes Calendar. Conteyning twelve Aeglogues proportionable to the twelve moneths* (1579). Modern editions: William A. Oram, et al. (eds.), *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser* (New Haven and London, 1989); Douglas Brooks-Davies (ed.), *Edmund Spenser: Selected Shorter Poems* (London and New York, 1995): I am indebted to them both for some of the following notes.

THE SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

E.K., EPISTLE TO GABRIEL HARVEY

'Uncouth unkissed', said the old famous poet Chaucer,¹ whom for his excellency and wonderful skill in making,* his scholar Lydgate (a worthy scholar of so excellent a master), calleth 'the loadstar of our language';² and whom our Colin Clout³ in his Eclogue calleth 'Tityrus the god of shepherds', comparing him to the worthiness of the Roman

¹ Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 809: 'Unknowne, unkest'.

² Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, prol. l. 52.

³ Spenser himself, as identified in the argument to 'January'.