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## Settling for “something less”: J. M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man* and the Shakespearean Bed-Trick Motif

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### ABSTRACT

Coetzee’s novel *Slow Man* contains a puzzling episode in which the disabled protagonist is blindfolded before having a tryst with a blind woman. Afterwards he wonders whether another woman had been substituted during the double-blind encounter. As Zoë Wicomb has suggested, this episode alludes to the bed-trick scene in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. However, whereas Wicomb proceeds to read this episode as a metatextual commentary on the nature of substitutions in a fictional universe, we see it as an integral element of the novel’s ethical theme. The ageing protagonist is confronted with the inevitability of accepting substitutes in all domains of his life, including the sexual and familial, and ultimately even in his identity. Comparing the scene to its Shakespearean model, however, also reveals the degree to which Coetzee’s novel questions traditional views of acceptable relations between men and women.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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The works of J. M. Coetzee, like those of many contemporary writers, can best be understood in the light of the intertextual references they contain. By intertextuality we mean not the inevitable imbrication of any text with all other texts that preceded it; nor the mere use of sources; but rather the creative response to existing texts and the discourses implicit in them, through pointed allusions that suggest likeness as well as difference. As Andreas Höfele has argued, the term intertextuality should be used only for cases where the later texts “do not just absorb, and thereby erase, their pre-texts, but install them as a frame of reference”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Coetzee often alludes to pre-texts “as a frame of reference”, for instance to question their foundations; and a reader should be aware of these pre-texts to fully understand the debates that Coetzee is engaging in, and therefore the point of particular passages or episodes in his works. Such intertextual allusions may be signalled by direct if unacknowledged quotations (as in, for example, the italicised passages towards the end of *In the Heart of the Country*), but often also by the names chosen for some characters (such as David and Pollux in *Disgrace*).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Höfele, 225. Höfele goes on to say that “If the term intertextuality is reserved for the variety of ways in which such foregrounding is effected, the danger that intertextual study will merely reproduce the procedures of traditional source study under a trendy label will be obviated” (225–6).

<sup>2</sup>For the latter, see Franssen, “Pollux in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.”

As for the novel we focus on in this article, *Slow Man*, intertextual links have been established, amongst others, with the biblical story of St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, *Ulysses*, *Heart of Darkness*, and with the writings of Plato.<sup>3</sup> Jens Martin Gurr has identified a few dozen intertextual allusions in the novel, including to Plato's *Phaedrus*, Tolstoy's "The Death of Iván Ilích", as well as the autobiographical "1950 cult novel *A Voice through a Cloud*" by Denton Welch, about a man who is crippled when riding his bike.<sup>4</sup> Gurr also mentions Shakespeare: the allusion to *The Tempest*'s "sea-change" refers to the possibility that Paul has actually died during the accident, and there are echoes of *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline*.<sup>5</sup>

There is, however, one episode in the book that has puzzled critics, we believe because the intertextual dimension here has not been fully understood: Paul's tryst with blind Marianna.<sup>6</sup> After losing a leg as a result of a cycling accident, sixty-year-old Australian Paul Rayment enters a new phase in his life. Suddenly aware of his mortality and human frailty, this childless divorcee somewhat belatedly feels the need to acquire a wife and children after all. He sets his sights on his caregiver, Croatian immigrant Marijana Jokic, who has three children, but, sadly for Paul, also a husband. While pursuing Marijana, Paul receives a visit from a novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who knows a great deal about his life, and even appears to have scripted (parts of) it; and she engineers a meeting for him with another woman, a blind divorcee also called Marianna (same name but different spelling), who has been jilted by her husband after she turned blind. Once an attractive woman, Marianna now yearns for a man who will sleep with her and restore her self-confidence. This is, at least, the story Costello tells Paul, though there is no independent confirmation of these assertions. Costello's ostensible aim in proposing the match is to rechannel Paul's inappropriate desires for his married caregiver, Croatian Marijana, towards a worthier, more equal object, who is free of marital ties and disabled just like himself.

If the plot so far, except for Costello's inexplicable omniscience, seems fairly plausible in realistic terms, it becomes really strange when Costello prepares Paul for the actual tryst. First, she instructs him that the encounter should take place in the dark (98). When the meeting is imminent, she announces a change of plan: Paul has to be blindfolded in an elaborate procedure, so that he cannot see his partner at all (102). The reason appears to be that Marianna does not want people to be put off by her blind eyes, which she ordinarily hides behind dark sun glasses, or so Costello has informed Paul earlier (96). Although some sexual act takes place between Paul and Marianna, it is not a success but mutually embarrassing. Paul suspects that Costello is spying on them, as if it were an experiment (103, 107, 111, 114). Afterwards, he even begins to imagine that, in an elaborate hoax, Marianna's place had been taken by someone else, perhaps a professional prostitute (115–16).

Derek Attridge cannot make much of this incident, that "strange episode ... that seems to lead nowhere", but he does see its treatment of the sexual encounter as evidence of the

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<sup>3</sup>Pellow.

<sup>4</sup>Gurr, 97, 99–100, 107. We are indebted to Anna Rasokat and Klaus Schneider of *Anglistik* for making this article available to us.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 100, 96n.

<sup>6</sup>Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 101–14. All subsequent references to the novel are cited parenthetically by page number.

influence of Beckett's style of describing sex as basically comic.<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Jolly also briefly discusses the adventure, asking herself whether possibly Costello has "substituted herself" for Marianna in the double-blind sexual encounter—"a moot point"—which might then explain the fact that Paul needs to be blindfolded.<sup>8</sup> Jolly rightly observes that Costello "believes that Marianna is an appropriate and realizable vehicle for Rayment's passion; Marijana is not", but does not take her analysis beyond this point.<sup>9</sup> Tim Mehigan is less convinced of Costello's good intentions, and even compares her pandering to that of Mephisto in Goethe's *Faust*, who helps the protagonist to seduce the innocent maiden Gretchen.<sup>10</sup> Costello, Mehigan argues, though she sometimes "prick[s] her host's conscience, ... is no crusader in the cause of morality and good behaviour".<sup>11</sup> As evidence for seeing Costello as "an evil spirit", Mehigan mentions the fact that she accepts the motto of "malleus maleficorum".<sup>12</sup> This, however, is not altogether convincing, as the "hammer of evil-doers"—the title of Heinrich Kramer's fifteenth-century guide to witchcraft—is rather a fitting title for a female moralist who uncovers Paul's self-delusions and tries to correct him.<sup>13</sup> One might further object that Costello is hardly a deliberate mischief-maker, and that one's judgement on her pandering all depends on how one sees sexual morality today, as different from that of Goethe's age. To a modern reader, the idea of two consenting adults, otherwise free of commitments and both physically challenged, finding some consolation in each other's arms, may not seem all that offensive compared to trying to wreck a marriage. The putative resemblance to Goethe's *Faust*, for which no particularly compelling arguments are provided, seems to lead nowhere.

A far closer analogue has been suggested by Zoë Wicomb: the bed-trick in Shakespeare's dark comedy *Measure for Measure*. In her discussion of the trope of substitution in *Slow Man*, "a concept which structures the novel", Wicomb notes that

The name Marianna recalls substitutions in *Measure for Measure* where Angelo, who substitutes for the Duke, pursues his illicit desire for Isabella. The Duke engineers the substitution of Isabella with the "dejected" Mariana (of one "n"), and the sexual act that takes place in the dark echoes Paul Rayment, blindfolded and manipulated by Costello, having sex with another dejected Marianna whose name with the double "n" points to substitution that is also the supplementary double of mimesis. As the Mari(j)an(n)as displace one mimesis into another, Paul's offer of money to the Jokics is shown to substitute for Angelo's mercy-for-sex.<sup>14</sup>

All this is quite pertinent, but Wicomb goes on to interpret the ubiquity of substitutions in Coetzee's novel merely in terms of its pervasive metafictionality: in her opinion, the book is mainly concerned with the genesis of fiction and the author's struggle with his/her

<sup>7</sup>Attridge, 86.

<sup>8</sup>Jolly, 109. In fact, Marianna's hand is described as "small, light", and therefore unlike Elizabeth's "plump" hand (Coetzee, *Slow Man*, 103, 80).

<sup>9</sup>Jolly, 109.

<sup>10</sup>Mehigan, 198–9.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 198.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 206 n. 11.

<sup>13</sup>In fact, the original's title is *Malleus Maleficarum*, suggesting that the evil-doers are females; the book has accordingly been blamed for restricting the concept of witches to women only. See *De heksen van Bruegel*, exhibition catalogue of Museum Catharijneconvent Utrecht [2015], no. 5. The alternative title, which is in fact suggested jokingly by Paul (263), suggests that Costello, a feminist, undertakes to punish the evil practices of men rather than women, and specifically his own misdemeanour.

<sup>14</sup>Wicomb, 12, 15.

characters. The fundamental substitution, for Wicomb, is that of the simulacrum for the real. In our view, however, the trope of substitution, and along with that the allusions to the Shakespearean pre-text, are not merely metafictional—though they are also that—but they also relate to the book's ethical concerns: images of substitution point at the need for Paul Rayment to accept substitutes, in this new phase in his life as a disabled and ageing man.

One example of this ethical layer that is independent of the *Measure for Measure* inter-text as such, but that does turn on substitutions, is the recumbent tricycle that Paul accepts as a gift from the Jokic family at the end of the novel. For Wicomb, this is a “substitute for a substitute”, namely for “the prosthesis that Paul refuses”, which in itself is a substitute for his leg.<sup>15</sup> We would argue, however, that the tricycle is a substitute for the bicycle which Paul was riding when he had his accident; and that his half-hearted acceptance of this gift might be a first sign that he is slowly beginning to accept his new condition in life, as a person of a certain age with physical limitations. In other words, it shows his as yet hesitant acceptance of his new identity. His bicycle is invariably linked to “the old world” and his nostalgic memories of his youth in France, when he used to rove into the Pyrenees with a friend (196); whereas in Australia, his pushbike ends up symbolising his decline, to the point where Paul refers to himself as “the absent-minded old geezer on the pushbike” (69). Accepting the tricycle, therefore, means giving up the idea of himself as a fairly young and healthy man, and accepting his role as a disabled, ageing person. It is here that the novel touches upon an underlying theme, that of identity and the acceptance of one identity over another. That Paul's acceptance is incomplete may appear from the fact that he refuses the offer of companionship from Costello, who is older than himself (and a perhaps more fitting partner when compared to Marijana), while seeing “Space for a child behind the rider . . . . But not for another grown-up” (262).

This is not to say that the metafictional element is irrelevant. In fact, it is one of the clearest pointers that Coetzee gives towards Shakespeare's play. As María López has argued, Paul often feels like a puppet in the hands of Costello, most clearly so in the tryst with blind Marianna. Interestingly, the metafiction is frequently described in terms of metatheatre: “The sense of dramatization . . . is heightened in this chapter, as Paul feels that they are ‘on stage,’ that they are ‘being watched’ (103), obviously by Costello, but also by the reader/spectator.”<sup>16</sup> Once we realise that Costello's actions are comparable to those of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, which acts as the novel's “frame of reference”, such generic cross-overs fall into place: “the old fantastical Duke of dark corners” is, after all, notorious for spying on the creatures that he manipulates in his play-within-the-play.<sup>17</sup> If, in her knowledge of Paul's history, Costello seems almost divine at times, we may remember that Angelo, when he realises he has been found out, compares the Duke to God: “I should be guiltier than my guiltiness / To think I can be undiscernible, / When I perceive your grace, like power divine, / Hath looked upon my passes”.<sup>18</sup> If Costello's plans regularly misfire, and the success of her educational programme is left in doubt at the end of the novel, the Duke also miscalculates Angelo's

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup>López, 259. For a similar remark, see Vermeulen, 68. Paul feels he is being watched on several other occasions, too: see pages 107 and 111.

<sup>17</sup>Shakespeare, 4.3.146–7.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 5.1.359–62.

behaviour, and has to improvise to prevent the execution of Claudio. When Paul feels that Costello's interference in his life is unethical, and compares himself to a test animal in a laboratory (114, 122), we might again be reminded of the misgivings of many critics at the Duke's far-reaching experiments with real people, beginning with his allowing Angelo enough rope to hang himself. If Paul imagines he may be part of Costello's double plot, with the parallel plot focusing on blind Marianna (118), we might be reminded of the sort of double plot Shakespeare is especially famous for.

All these parallels suggest that Wicomb's phrasing when she says that the episode in *Slow Man* "recalls" similar substitutions in Shakespeare's play, is if anything an understatement: this is not a fortuitous parallel, but part of a deliberate pattern of allusions by which *Measure for Measure* is, in Höfele's terms, "install[ed] ... as a frame of reference".<sup>19</sup> The near-identity of the names of Croatian Marijana, blind Marianna, and Shakespeare's Mariana is just one such pointer; others include the blind woman's bra, which to Paul is "the sort of thing he imagines Carmelites would wear" (106); a reference to Shakespeare's Isabella, who is a novice.<sup>20</sup> Related to this, both book and play are set in a predominantly Roman Catholic environment, with all that entails in terms of sexual morality, such as celibacy, sexual abstinence, and the ban on contraception.<sup>21</sup> We might also notice that Paul regards himself as "not a man of passion" (45), who yet falls deeply in love with his married nurse, an unsuitable object for his obsession. This parallels Angelo, "whose blood / Is very snow-broth", but who yet cannot contain himself when a nun stirs his desires.<sup>22</sup> Like Isabella, Paul's nurse Marijana is a chaste woman, or so Costello tells him (86). Whereas Angelo abuses his power as a judge to blackmail Mariana into spending the night with him, Paul uses the power of money to try and wrest his nurse Marijana away from her husband. A puzzling detail in Coetzee's novel is the reiterated suggestion that Paul had met the blind Marianna long before (97, 110), perhaps when taking her picture in his photo studio. This seems a gratuitous claim, and nothing much comes of it; but it can also be read as a deliberate pointer at *Measure for Measure*, where Angelo, too, knew his Mariana from before the beginning of the plot, as his jilted fiancée, which serves to make the bed-trick more acceptable in terms of sexual morality, at least where the Duke and Isabella are concerned.<sup>23</sup>

This brings us to our main point: what could be the purpose of all these manifold allusions to Shakespeare's play, and its substitutions, in particular during the bed-trick episode? As we shall argue, the substitution of Marianna for Marijana in Coetzee's novel serves a purpose both analogous and antithetical to that in Shakespeare's play. It is intended to manipulate a man who is obsessed with an unsuitable object of desire into settling for someone else, who is more fitting, instead, thus accepting the limitations that real life imposes on desire. At the same time, whereas Shakespeare's Duke can be seen as enforcing the ideal of bourgeois marriage, Coetzee's Costello deconstructs the modern equivalent of that very ideal.

<sup>19</sup>Höfele, 225.

<sup>20</sup>On page 104 Paul himself is called a "novice ... in the land of the blind."

<sup>21</sup>As for Shakespeare's play, some critics argue that Angelo is repeatedly seen as a Puritan. However, this is a moot question, as the presence of friars and nuns, and the issue of Isabella's celibacy, point in the opposite direction. At any rate, Coetzee seems to respond primarily to the ostensible Catholic setting of the play in also making his main characters lapsed Catholics rather than Protestants.

<sup>22</sup>Shakespeare, 1.4.56–60.

<sup>23</sup>See *ibid.*, 3.1.228–50.

In our reading of the novel, Elizabeth Costello, rather than an evil spirit, is in fact a sort of moral teacher who tries to guide Paul Rayment in the ways of love. As a substitute for the author, she teaches him lessons, not merely by preaching to him, but by making him experience the consequences of his choices. Costello is made into what Richard Northover calls a “Socratic figure”,<sup>24</sup> who seeks to guide Paul along the appropriate path and to dissuade him from rash actions with regard to the Jokic family, and actively urges him to “reflect” on his doings (82). It is she who unveils Paul’s mirror, forcing him to look at himself (163); and who manipulates his life so that he is confronted with the results of his own self-deceptions. When he wishes for a son, Costello manipulates the plot so that Marijana’s son Drago temporarily moves in with him, showing him the reality instead of the dream of having children; as the boy is noisy and leaves his rubbish all over the flat, Paul is relieved when he moves out again (205).

Costello’s efforts to educate Paul, however unsuccessful they are, symbolise the novel’s ethical concern with the substitution of one identity for another; as shown in the crises of identity all characters experience, either as immigrants, children of immigrants, or as ageing human beings, as that which defined them before falls away. This substitution of identity is most distinct in relation to the issue of the bed-trick and the need for ageing people to renounce their former self, and to accept their new identity with dignity. Rather than holding on to the privileges they used to have, which will only lead to misery, they should accept ageing and the limitations it brings with it. This novel is, indeed, less about disability than about ageing: as Paul realises, the loss of his leg is just “a rehearsal for losing everything” (15), or as Costello puts it, a “sign or symbol or symptom ... of growing old, old and uninteresting” (229). Analogously, Marianna has lost the light of her eyes, and Costello herself has a bad heart.<sup>25</sup> In that respect, the novel is closer to *Disgrace*, where an otherwise healthy but ageing David Lurie is also made to give up his privileges, than to *Diary of a Bad Year*, where the protagonist, J. C., has already come to terms with the limitations of being an elderly gentleman, and sublimates his desires for his pretty young secretary. Or perhaps one could say that the plot moves half-way between the two other books. Pieter Vermeulen has taken *Diary* and *Slow Man* together as examples of Coetzee’s late style, in which the end of the novel is figured by the end of desire: they “do not develop into anything resembling a traditional love plot, and instead offer the sad spectacle of unactualized desires in all their impotent barrenness ... [their] halted narratives ... decline to use desire as an organizing principle; in that way, they surrender what ... is often considered the key element in narrative interactions”.<sup>26</sup> We agree with this only partially, as in fact, *Slow Man* does use desire as an organising principle—only it is not desire on its way to fulfilment, but rather, on its way out. As Vermeulen notes elsewhere, *Slow Man* and *Diary* “radicalize an investigation already begun in *Disgrace*”, which “explores the gradual and halting shift from desire to care”.<sup>27</sup> The shift from sexual passion to care is also highlighted by Costello in *Slow Man*: she suggests that what Paul needs is not love, but care: “perhaps

<sup>24</sup>Northover likens Costello to Socrates in *Phaedrus*, acting as “God or daemon or conscience”, in the way she meddles in Paul’s private life, while at the same time placing Paul in the position of the “older male lover” in *Phaedrus* who seeks to trade sex for social “advancement” (Northover, 49–50).

<sup>25</sup>On the book’s representation of desire in the context of disability, see Quayson, Chapter 6.

<sup>26</sup>Vermeulen, 50.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

your quest for love disguises a quest for something quite different. How much love does someone like you need, after all, Paul, objectively speaking? Or someone like me? None. None at all. We do not need love, old people like us. What we need is care ... Care is not love. Care is a service that any nurse worth her salt can provide, as long as we don't ask her for more" (153–4). Paul, however, will have none of this, and refuses to give up his desire for Marijana.

Costello's lessons may have a degree of wisdom, yet they also seem to entail the acceptance of the modern state's health care system as described in the book's opening chapters: a social security network that does provide efficient and affordable support for the infirm and the elderly, but cannot fill their emotional needs. Paul yearns for something more than mere care, and one cannot altogether blame him for that.

The tryst with blind Marianna is part of the educational programme devised by Costello. No longer must Paul expect to have the sort of relationship he took for granted as a younger man, with uncomplicated sex, unconditional love, loving care, and companionship all shared with the same partner. As for sex, if Paul cannot do without, Costello suggests, he will have to make do with a blind person, who will be less likely to be turned off by his deformity; besides, they will then mutually accept each other's shortcomings and console each other for them, as in the old emblem of the halt leading the blind (97, 111).<sup>28</sup> Paul, however, finds the idea of a blind woman less than attractive, and asks himself: "Eros. Why does the sight of the beautiful call eros into life? Why does the spectacle of the hideous strangle desire?" He even wonders whether "that [is] why the Costello woman has brought the two of them together ... in order that, once the sexual business has been got out of the way, they can hold a philosophy class, lying in each other's arms discoursing about beauty, love, and goodness?" (108). Marianna, whose blind eyes Paul has never even seen, just imagined, is the same woman whom he had erotic dreams about before he knew she was blind (39). The logical conclusion he should arrive at is that by his accident he himself has become just as unattractive to other people as Marianna has by her blindness; however, he stubbornly refuses to give up his dreams of the other Marijana, his nurse, who does have eyes to see his deformity. Whereas his biblical namesake regained his sight after three days, Paul Rayment's blindness is not shed so easily. At this point, his literal blindfold may also allude to that worn by Cupid in many Renaissance paintings and emblems, as a sign of the folly of worldly desires.<sup>29</sup>

Paul's encounter with Marianna is disappointing, even deeply disturbing, also because he feels, with some justification, that he has been manipulated by Costello. This awakens almost paranoid fears in Paul that the substitution of Marijana by Marianna has been followed by another substitution, that of blind Marianna by a prostitute, the more so as he has been instructed to leave a considerable sum of money behind for her. Apart from heightening the reader's awareness of the bed-trick allusion, this makes another point: he should not expect love to be unconditional, but to come as part of an exchange. As Costello points out to Paul, he must expect "No more free love," but will have to pay for everything in some way, in cash or by presents (152). If Paul wishes to use his money to buy love—or perhaps more properly, sex—as he does with his Croatian nurse

<sup>28</sup>See Franssen, "Lame and Blind."

<sup>29</sup>Panofsky. St Paul is blinded on the road to Damascus, but does not wear a blindfold, and the bed-trick in *Measure for Measure* takes place in darkness, but does not involve a blindfold either.

Marijana, he should do so up front and honestly: there is always “tit for tat”, as Costello tells him (152). If he wants a family, he will have to pay in the currency that is valid there: in putting up with the adolescent behaviour of Drago, with his noise, his sloppiness, his pranks, and with his sister Blanka’s shoplifting. Thus, he may finally earn the right to be regarded as a godfather.

As a sort of compromise, Costello has something else up her sleeve: what she calls “companionate marriage”. That is to say, she invites Paul to live with her, in a sexless but mutually supportive companionship, in which she can offer him “affection” (232, 236). Although Paul is briefly tempted by the offer, having lost his prospects of winning Marijana, he yet refuses: “this is not love. This is something else. Something less” (263). Costello, therefore, offers Paul a number of alternatives for his unsuitable passion for Marijana: he can have sex, he can have companionship, he can have care; as a distant godfather, he can even have a substitute parenthood. Yet Paul refuses to accept these alternatives because, in his estimation, this is “something less” than love.

This raises the question of what precisely Paul understands by love. The answer, it appears, is the integration of all the aspects he projects upon Marijana into a singular person: sexual partner, caregiver, mother of one’s children, companion. In other words, what Paul longs for is the modern equivalent of the bourgeois ideal of romantic love and marriage. Although marriage “till death do us part” as such has been replaced by serial monogamy, within or outside of wedlock, fidelity and total dedication to one’s partner in all these aspects of a relationship are still key. Ironically, Paul’s dreams of such a relationship with Marijana could only come true at the cost of wrecking her existing marriage to Miroslav. Therefore, replacing Marijana, on whom Paul unrealistically projects his dreams, by blind Marianna, for whom he originally only felt sexual desire, is part of Costello’s plan to deconstruct that notion, by separating it out into its various constituent parts. When this plan fails, Paul comments that you cannot expect “two strangers together, neither of them young, one positively old ... to behave like Romeo and Juliet” (112–13). *Romeo and Juliet* is the Shakespeare play that epitomises the bourgeois ideal of romantic love culminating in a close-knit marriage; a love that is so unconditional and intense that for both partners, ultimately, life without the other is pointless. Such love, it appears, is only for the young and beautiful, who enter into the relationship willingly and without reservation.

By contrast, as we have seen, the plot that Paul finds himself in is a version of Shakespeare’s problem play *Measure for Measure*. The play is set in a Vienna which has been thoroughly corrupted and where the element of desire, either carnal desire or desire of another kind, is no longer connected to the social institute of marriage.<sup>30</sup> Brothels are flourishing, syphilis is running rampant (as noted by the many awkward jokes made by various characters), Isabella’s brother Claudio will not officially marry his Juliet before the dowry has been paid, even though she is already pregnant; and Angelo longs for sex outside of wedlock, with Isabella, a novice who does not return his desires at all, but whom he blackmails with her brother Claudio’s life. As Katharine Eisaman Maus points out, this contrasts with Shakespeare’s earlier comedies, where marriage is intrinsically connected to heterosexual consummation, so that the couples’ desire for each other

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<sup>30</sup>See, amongst others, Wheeler, 1–33, and Maus, *Inwardness and Theatre*, 157–81.

coincides with “their community’s demand for clear kinship structures and for orderly means of transferring property to ‘legitimate’ members of a new generation”.<sup>31</sup>

In *Measure for Measure* the Duke acts as the chief mover, who strives to remedy the chaotic and amoral situation, first through allowing Angelo’s violent repression, later through imposing marriage. Through the bed-trick, he turns the tables on Angelo, by showing him how disguising his true nature can be countered by disguising the woman’s identity, thus restoring a degree of equilibrium, measure for measure: “So disguise shall by th’disguised / Pay with falsehood false exacting”.<sup>32</sup> However, he also teaches Angelo the lesson that he must find his satisfaction within the bounds of marriage with Mariana, whom he once jilted on account of a lost dowry, but who still loves him. Marriage is quite literally forced upon Angelo, and it is only after he has solemnised his wedding off-stage that his death sentence is lifted by the Duke. Likewise, Lucio is made to marry the whore he got pregnant, on pain of death, and in the final scene, the Duke himself proposes to Isabella, who really wanted to become a nun and does not reply to his on-stage proposal. In line with Protestant thinking in the period, therefore, the Duke seems to regard marriage as the panacea for a host of social ills, even if one of the partners (Lucio, Angelo, perhaps Isabella) is less than willing. Predictably, modern doubts about the play, regarded as a problem play rather than a straightforward romantic comedy, often centre on the question of how successful such enforced marriages as that between Angelo and Mariana are likely to be; much as in Shakespeare’s other bed-trick play, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, where the restitution of an unwilling Bertram to his wife Helena may not spell the happy ending that the title suggests.

This is where Coetzee’s novel both resembles and deviates from the Shakespearean intertext. As the Duke’s bed-trick manipulates Angelo into giving up his extramarital desire for Isabella, unwilling and unavailable because of her monastic vows, and settling for the more suitable and willing partner, Mariana, so Costello tries to cure Paul of his obsession with an unsuitable love object, Marijana, reluctant and unavailable through her marriage to Miroslav, and to make him accept blind Marianna as a more suitable and equal partner instead. Besides, by insisting that Paul should pay blind Marianna, Costello teaches him the true nature of his interest in Croatian Marijana: by no means an unselfish desire to help her, but an attempt at buying her care, her love, her body, and her son. The equilibrium is thus restored, or should one say revealed, between what Costello later on calls, in a rude pun, Paul’s offer of the “tat”, to which he expects Marijana to respond with “the right tit, the appropriate tit” (152): “tit for tat”, then, is a modern version of *Measure for Measure*.

So far the analogy. Yet the differences between Shakespeare’s Austria and Coetzee’s Australia are no less important. If in the play, the problem springs from a severed link between desire and marriage, in Coetzee’s novel there is the additional problem (or so Paul experiences it) that the once self-evident connection between sex and offspring has disappeared. As a result, the younger generation can no longer always be counted on to take care of the older. Although Paul was married, he has deliberately failed to produce any children; and because of his divorce, he has no wife to fall back on either. As a consequence, when he loses his leg, he has to take his recourse to an efficient but basically

<sup>31</sup>Maus, “Introduction,” 2022.

<sup>32</sup>Shakespeare, 3.2.227–8.

heartless health care system, and he resents this. So, whereas Shakespeare's Duke presents the enforced integration of desire, procreation, and companionship in marriage as the only viable solution to the severing of love and marriage—in fact, quite literally the condition on which the philandering men are allowed to live on—*Slow Man* turns this scenario around: here it is Paul Rayment, the Angelo-equivalent in the substitution plot, who (on second thoughts) would like to integrate love, care, companionship, desire, and progeny in a relationship with Marijana and her children, even at the cost of breaking up her fairly successful marriage to Miroslav; but he is shown by Elizabeth Costello, the Duke-like impresario figure, that at best he can have these ingredients in isolation instead: uncomplicated recreational sex with Marianna, or possibly with a prostitute; care from a professional nurse; and companionship in a sexless “companionate marriage” with Costello herself. Even a kind of parenthood is possible, Costello suggests, as long as Paul keeps his distance from his adopted family, and restricts contact to a postcard at Christmas and paying for the children's tuition (260).

Besides, all of these facets of love will be contingent on Paul's willingness to enter into an exchange of some kind or another. Thus, whereas Shakespeare's Duke sees marriage as an antidote not just to lawless lust but also to prostitution, Costello blithely suggests that unconditional love is no longer available to older people like Paul, but that love, in its various forms, must be bought in some way or another, by tuition fees, presents, or a nurse's salary; in sum, by “tit for tat” (152).

Nevertheless, Costello's teaching of an honest exchange, too, might be connected to *Measure for Measure*, in particular with its concern with equity. According to Eric Spencer, the idea of balanced judgement (equity), just reward for just action or just punishment for just infringement and in connection to that the measuring of one value against another, is brought to the forefront in Shakespeare's comedy by virtue of its absence. All characters evoke the image of justice and balance, but only in cases where it suits them. In *Measure for Measure* the severity of the crimes can be hotly debated. Where Angelo compares the act of premarital sex to murder, Isabella disapproves of it, yet pleads for mercy, and Lucio sees it as a “game of tick-tack”.<sup>33</sup> Spencer points out that there is a constant struggle to determine this “balanced judgment”, and whether or not one thing, or act, or person is equal to another. It is in the very name of the play, which refers to the line from Matthew 7:1–2 “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye meet, it shall be measured to you again.”<sup>34</sup> This Bible passage contains in equal measure the threat of heavenly retaliation (do not judge yourself, it is God or the Heavens who will judge), and the promise of just reward and compensation (judgement by judgement, measure for measure). This obsession with equality, equal worth, is echoed in the passages of *Slow Man* where the value of Paul's ideal of love (affection, desire, care, and family) is measured against that which is currently on offer (companionship, prostitution, paid help, and godfatherhood), and where, by Paul's measure, the latter is always found wanting, as “something less” than the love he desires.

Thus, if the novel does not really spell the end of desire as an organising principle, as Vermeulen has argued, one can say that it is concerned with redefining the nature of love

<sup>33</sup>Shakespeare, 1.2.167.

<sup>34</sup>*The Holy Bible*.

for the modern age, and in doing so opening the door to look beyond the initial analogue with *Measure for Measure* and examine the issue of identity, and the substitution of one identity for another. The elderly, in particular, or so Costello suggests, should accept the limits of their possibilities. The allusions to Shakespeare's bed-trick, then, foreground not only, as Wicomb suggests, the metafictional conflict between author and character, but also that between the iron laws of reality and a person's ideals of an all-encompassing love, or of living on in one's substitute progeny. Coming to terms with real life and abandoning one's dreams is far from easy; and if we have our doubts about the machinations of the Duke of Vienna, with his belief in the indubitable good effects of marriage, we may also sympathise with Paul's objections to Costello's ideas, the doggedness with which he refuses to give in to the inevitable and settle for "something less".

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