

The Quality of Mercy

For W. H. Auden and Erika Mann m. 15/06/1935

Malvern Link and Great Malvern,
Two stations both alike
In dignity - alike enough
To confuse the hurried refugee,
Already bemused by England's
Downcast skies, depressive eyes
And missing teeth - but gallantly
Resolved to be enchanted -
Escaping the glamorous Hell
Of capsizing late-Weimar Berlin
And the Nazi-shadowed lands.

She came to be married
To an Englishman,
Sight unseen - a gay poet
Who offered his name
For her visa as one might
Offer a seat on a train
To a stranger. But she,
Stepping out at the wrong
Malvern station -
Cabaret star, short-haired
And trousered, clutching
A sepia postcard -
Greeted the one man waiting
With impetuous gratitude
(In a thick German accent):
So good of you to marry me!

All this, methinks, is pure
Shakespeare: a problem play
Or a late play. The usual
Mistaken identity, gender confusion,
Sudden snatched redemption,
Ending in marriage. And the bride,
Of course, with the eyes
Of a heroine and the courage -
Nightly sticking her pin
In the hide of the *schweinhund* -
Nightly dancing on the pinhead's
Bright ironic point of light.

(When they raided the building

She met them on stage,
Dressed in their uniform,
Played them for laughs
While the audience fled.)

As for the bridegroom-hero,
He too knew what it was
To be illegal. Understood
The looming tragedy beneath
The furtive comedy of a life
Lived partly in corners. Cultivated
A careful eccentricity; useful
Insouciance. At the posh school
Poetry became his alibi
For nights spent in the garden shed
With the gardener.

Poetry makes nothing happen,
So he said. But when
The obscene Reich bellowed
And he saw the space
Beside him in the lifeboat-island
Where a wife might sit,
Was it not poetic to do as he did:
What are buggers for?

Everyone in this story is slightly
Heroic - that's why I like it:
Even the man on the platform,
Whoever he was,
Backing away so politely
From the strange foreign lady
And her seeming proposal -
Not forgetting to thank her.
And later, the bored registrar,
Whose sublime indifference
To the groom's suspicious ignorance
Of the bride's full name, age and place of birth,
Made everything easy. *He would
Have married me to the poker.*
Did not this betoken a noble
Resistance to the claims of Authority?
(Or maybe, of course, he was lazy.
No matter!)

Poetry makes nothing happen,
Perhaps - but how strange that

Goebbels in his sound and fury
Should choose the very day
Of the makeshift ceremony
In sleepy Ledbury, in rainy England,
To tear out her name from the book
Of the saved. Not knowing
By what slight of hands, of rings,
His prey had escaped. The loophole
Big on her finger. His vengeance
Undone (for once) - displaced
By the quiet laughter of three
Almost friends: the poet; his wife;
And his lover, the gardener,
Drinking champagne
In the rain.