FRIAR LAURENCE ON STUMBLING

Friar Laurence has two very wise statements about stumbling in Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*.

One of these statements about stumbling is at the end of Act II, Sc. 3. Romeo, who has suddenly changed from loving Rosalind to loving Juliet, has come to ask Friar Laurence to marry them. At the end of their conversation, Romeo says:

> O! let us hence; I stand on sudden haste.

And Friar Laurence replies:

> Wisely and slow: they stumble that run fast.[1]

Friar Laurence perhaps has in mind the words in the book of *Proverbs:*

> Where there is no knowledge of the soul, there is no good; and he that is hasty with his feet shall stumble.[2]

The advice and warning of Friar Laurence is true in all three different senses of the word *running*. It is good advice not only in the sense of *running* he has most in mind here, but also in the sense before and in the sense after this. We want most of all to unfold the wisdom of his exhortation in the third sense.

But before looking at the whole exhortation where we want to understand the connection between going forward wisely and slowly and avoiding stumbling, we should concentrate for a moment on the coupling in the first three words: *Wisely and slow*. Why should wisdom and slowness be coupled together?

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[1]Friar Laurence perhaps has in mind the words in the book of Proverbs, Chapter 19, v. 2: "Where there is no knowledge of the soul, there is no good; and he that is hasty with his feet shall stumble."
[2]*Proverbs*, Chapter 19, v. 2

At first, it might seem paradoxical to couple them. For it is the stupid we think who are slow of mind, not the wise. And there is also the foolish slowness of those who are slow to act where promptness is necessary to achieve some good or avoid some evil. It is necessary to see the distinction between a wise slowness and a foolish slowness and between the slowness of the wise and the slowness of the stupid or dumb. They are often confused because of their likeness. Gamow tells us how at Copenhagen Niels Bohr was the last one to understand a new idea, but the first one to understand it correctly. The fellow students of Thomas Aquinas mistakenly called the greatest mind of the Middle Ages "The Dumb Ox". Likewise, the slowness of deliberation should not be confused with the slowness to act after due deliberation.

But there is also a slowness associated with wisdom. Indeed there is a number of ways in which wisdom is rightly connected with slowness.

Perhaps the most obvious connection is that wisdom is acquired slowly in life, not quickly. Wisdom is not easily acquired, but with difficulty. Hence, the great philosopher Empedocles warns us not to try to move quickly to the heights of wisdom.[3]

A second connection of wisdom with slowness is suggested by the Latin word for wisdom, *sapientia*. Thomas explains the etymology or origin of this word as *sapida scientia,* savoury knowledge. Wisdom is about things to be savoured by the mind. Wisdom is chiefly about God, as even the great philosophers knew. And God should be savoured by the mind. When we savour something, we are slow to let it go from our attention. This is why the saints can spend so much time before Christ in the Eucharist. In his famous prayer after consecrating, the *Adoro Te Devote*, Thomas Aquinas prays that he might be able to *dulce sapere*, to *sweetly savour*, the Lord in the Eucharist. And in the original meaning of the word, as when we *savour* a wine or some delicious food, we do not quickly consume it. Everything else we can think about we think about so we can eventually think about God. As Thomas says, I think about the

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[3]Empedocles, DK 3: "But gods, turn away from my tongue the madness of those men, and from pious mouths guide forth a pure stream. And you, much wooed, white-armed, virgin Muse, I pray to hear such things as are lawful for creatures of a day to hear; send me from piety driving the obedient chariot. Nor shall the flowers of honor from mortals force you to say rashly more than is pious and to move quickly to the heights of wisdom..."

body so I can think about the soul. And I think about the soul so I can think about an angel. And I think about an angel so I can think about God. But I don't think about God for the sake of knowing anything else. This is the end of all our thinking. So when we reach God in our thinking, it would be absurd to turn quickly to something else. Our reason should slowly go over and dwell at length on the attributes of God. We cannot think of anything better to think of. Why therefore be in a hurry to think of anything else?

Shakespeare also understands that wisdom is sweet and savoury knowledge as we can see from his use of their opposites to describe foolishness. When Romeo hears that Juliet has died, he rushes to get poison and to take his own life. His folly is compared to that of a ship-captain who crashes his ship upon the rocks. Listen to the words of Romeo just before he drinks the poison in the tomb of Juliet:

> Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!
> Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
> The dashing rocks thy sea sick weary bark!
> Here's to my love! [*Drinks*] O true apothecary!
> Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.[4]

The two metaphors applied to the foolish conductor and guide here (*conduct* here is a noun meaning *conductor*), *bitter* and *unsavoury*, also illuminate by opposition the contrary metaphors which we have seen before applied to wisdom when Thomas prayed in the *Adoro Te Devote* that he might *sweetly savour* Christ in the Eucharist. Wisdom is metaphorically called both *sweet* and *savoury* as folly is metaphorically called both *bitter* and *unsavoury* or *insipid*. We have seen before in part why wisdom is called *savoury* knowledge.

Why is wisdom called metaphorically *sweet?* Indeed why should it be called metaphorically, the *sweetest* knowledge?

The most complete explanation of the metaphor *sweet* that we have found is in Thomas' commentary on the Psalms.[5] There Thomas explains that

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[4]*Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Sc. 3

[5]*In Psalmos Davidis* , Psalmus Davidis XXIV, n. 7: "Dulcedo proprie est in corporalibus, metaphorice autem dicitur in spiritualibus. Unde oportet quod in spiritualibus dulcedo sumatur ad similitudinem corporalis. Habet autem hoc

metaphor is based on likeness and the likeness in the metaphor *sweet* is based on three things: the sweet is pleasant, refreshing, and restful. Hence, Shakespeare calls a beautiful form *sweet* because the beautiful is what pleases when seen and the beautiful refreshes the eye (it is a "sight for sore eyes" as the proverb goes) and it is restful (Hence, we often say of a beautiful view or scene, "How restful!".) Since wisdom is a knowledge of the most beautiful things (beautiful not to the eye of the body, but rather to the eye of the soul), it can be called metaphorically most sweet.

The metaphor *savoury* also has some of this same meaning, but also judgment. Taste is judgment and judgment belongs most of all to wisdom. Judgment here means the separation of the true from the false by some beginning in our knowledge.

A third connection of wisdom with slowness is seen in the words of the wise man. "Brevity is the soul of wisdom". The wise man says much more than other men, but in fewer words. Hence, we must read the words of the wise very slowly, meditating at length upon them. Speed reading is worthless when it comes to the words of the wise. The words of Friar Laurence say so much in so few words that we must be very slow in trying to digest them.

Let us now come back to the whole sentence of Friar Laurence:

Wisely and slow: they stumble that run fast.

The word *run* here is used in its second sense. But the sentence is true also in the first and third sense of the word. We want to elaborate mainly in the third sense. But before doing this, we must distinguish in order the three senses of the word *run*.

The first meaning of a word is always the most sensible. The first meaning of the word *run* is thus the well known act of our legs. And everyone can see how we stumble when running fast in this sense, especially when we run up or down a stairs or through a cluttered room.

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dulcedo corporalis, quod reficit gustum corporalem et quietat et delectat: similiter et spiritualis dulcedo quietat et reficit et delectat spiritualem gustum."

We then carry over the word *run* and apply it in general to our actions. We speak of a *course of action* and the word *course* comes from the Latin word for running. Our Declaration begins with this sense: *When in the course of human events.* It is this sense which Friar Laurence has in mind when we warns Romeo here against acting in haste. As the old proverb goes, *Act in haste, repent in leisure*. Those who act without due deliberation make many serious mistakes. They stumble. This is the problem with Romeo, as Friar Laurence rightly sees. The truth of Friar Laurence's statement in the second meaning of *run* is seen in the hasty actions of Romeo.[6]

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[6]But see also Thomas' commentary on the *Epistle to the Hebrews* , Caput IV, Lectio II, nn. 211-212 and n. 215 from the secondary commentator: "Deinde cum dicit **Festinemus**, inducit ad festinationem...Dicit ergo....**festinemus ergo ingredi in illam requiem.** Et signanter dicit **ingredi**, quia non est in bonis exterioribus ad quae est egressus, sed est in bonis interioribus...Matth. XXV, v. 21: *Intra in gaudium Domini tui*.

Est ergo multiplex ratio, quare festinandum est intrare.

Una est, quia longinqua est via. Prov. VII, 19: *Abiit via longissima.* Luc. XIX, 12: *Homo quidam nobilis abiit in regionem longinquam*. Dicitur autem longinqua propter distantiam status, quia ibidem plenitudo omnis boni, et immunitas ab omni malo; est enim desideranti perfecta visio et tentio, hic autem omnia contraria istis.

Item festinandum est, quia tempus est valde breve. Iob. XIV, 5: *Breves dies hominis sunt.*

Item, quia istud tempus, cum hoc quod breve et modicum, est etiam incertum. Eccle. IX, v. 12: *Nescit homo finem suum*.

Item propter urgentem vocationem. Interior enim vocatio urget nos per stimulum charitatis. Is. LIX, 19: *Cum venerit quasi fluvius violentus, quem spiritus Domini cogit*, etc. II Cor. V, v. 14: *Charitas Christi urget nos*. Ps. CXVIII. v. 32: *Viam mandatorum tuorum cucurri.*

Item, propter periculum tardantis, sicut patet de fatuis virginibus, Matth. XXV, 1ss. quae tarde venientes intrare non potuerunt.....

The third sense of *run* is the discourse of reason. *Discourse* which comes from the Latin word for running, signifies coming to know or guess something through knowing or accepting other things. In this discourse, reason often stumbles when it does not proceed *wisely and slow*.

When the old man in *King Lear* wants to guide the cruelly blinded Gloucester lest he stumble, Gloucester notes that he stumbled when he saw. His reason was deceived about his sons and he acted to the great harm of his good son when he could still see with his eyes. Here is a bit of their conversation:

Gloucester: Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone:
Thy comforts can do me no good at all;
Thee they may hurt.

Old Man: You cannot see your way

Gloucester: I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;
I stumbled when I saw.[7]

The old man is concerned that Gloucester will stumble with his legs because he is blind, but the despairing Gloucester (who does not want to live) can only think of how he stumbled in his thinking and actions when he still had his eyesight. Metaphorically, we could say he was then mentally blind.

In the third sense of *run*, we can distinguish seven places where the wise are slow. The wise man proceeds slowly:

where many things must be considered before a judgment can be made

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Sed contra Prov. XIX, v. 2: *Qui festinus est pedibus offendet.*

Respondeo. Duplex est festinantia, scilicet praecipitationis: et haec est reprehensibilis; alia tenuitatis et celeritatis; et haec est laudabilis. Nam, sicut dicit Philosophus, omnes homines oportet consiliari diu, operari autem consiliata festinanter; quando ergo festinantia tollit consilium, tunc praecipitat, et est vitiosa, et secundum hanc verificatur obiectio; sed festinantia, quae est in executione consiliatorum, est virtuosa et laudatur, et ad hanc hortatur hic Apostolus."

[7]Shakespeare, *King Lear,* Act IV, Sc. 1

where a thing is difficult to understand

where there is a beginning small in size, but great in its power

where there is knowledge over a road and knowledge of the road to follow

where there is general knowledge and particular knowledge

where there is a word equivocal by reason

where there are the words of a wise man

Each of these seven can be considered briefly.

Perhaps the most obvious place in which a wise man goes forward slowly is where many things must be considered before a judgment or decision can be made. This reason for proceeding slowly can be found even in geometry, perhaps the easiest form of reasoned out knowledge for us. Thus, the proof of the Pythagorean theorem in the first book of Euclid's *Elements* has forty six theorems before it to be learned, most or all of which must be understood before the Pythagorean theorem can be judged. Euclid told the king that there is no *royal* road to geometry when the king asked for a shorter and quicker road

But in the second book of wisdom by Aristotle, we learn other reasons for going forward slowly in natural philosophy and in wisdom. We learn that the difficulty in knowing something can be in us or in the thing we are trying to know.

The reason why natural philosophy is so much more difficult than geometry is in the things we are trying to know there. Matter and motion and time are hardly real, they barely exist. Descartes hastily gives up trying to understand the definition of motion and the modern world has followed him in his haste, saying with Locke that it is impossible to define motion and with Mill that it is impossible to define any thing. The consequences of not proceeding wisely and slowly in defining motion leads not only to the modern stumbling over motion, but also to their stumbling over nature and God. Since nature is defined by motion, ignorance of motion is, of course, ignorance of nature. And since the first proof for the existence of God is based in part on the definition

of motion, the modern mind also stumbles at the threshold or doorstep of theology.

But we also learn in the second book of wisdom that the difficulty in knowing can be due to the weakness of reason. And this Aristotle says is the chief difficulty in knowing God. Our reason easily stumbles in thinking about God. The whole of philosophy is presupposed to thinking about God. And even this is not enough. St. Augustine speaks in the *De Trinitate* of an immature and perverse love of reason which is found in those who do not appreciate the difficulty of understanding God and the Trinity.

Thus, it is wise for reason to go forward slowly where there are many things to be considered and where there is a special difficulty in knowing something due either to the weakness of our reason or to the thing itself not being very understandable. Where else is it wise for reason to proceed slowly?

There are beginnings in our knowledge which, although small in size, are great in their power. They are like seeds which are also small compared to what they give rise to. But one should not judge the importance of such a seed or beginning by its size, but by its consequences. The wise man will consider these beginnings slowly, not only because this is necessary to share the power of these seeds, but also because even a small mistake in these beginnings will be a great one in the end. Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas compare a little mistake in the beginning to taking the wrong way at a fork in the road. Although the mistake is small in the beginning, it becomes greater the further one proceeds. Hence, one who does not consider a powerful beginning *wisely and slowly* will stumble more and more throughout all his subsequent thinking which is dependent on that beginning. Thus, the distinction of nature & reason and the distinction of nature & will underlie all or most of our knowledge. Hence, the misunderstanding of these beginnings in the modern philosophers has led to chaos in logic and in ethics, in our thinking and in our living.

Edgar Allan Poe, in *The Purloined Letter*, compared minds to bodies. The great mind, like a large body, is slow to get moving, but it is difficult to stop once it starts to move; while the small mind, like the small body, is easily put in motion, but also easily stopped. Why was the student with the greatest mind of the Middle Ages called *The Dumb Ox?* Because he proceed with a wise slowness in the beginning and his fellow students thought Thomas was slow out of stupidity. Gamow tells a similar story about how at Copenhagen Niels Bohr, the

great physicist, was the last man to get a new idea, but the first one to get it right.

The wise man thus sees the necessity of going forward slowly, not only where there are many things to be considered or where there is a special difficulty in knowing something, but also in those beginnings which are the seeds of all the rest of our reason's knowledge. Is there anywhere else that the wise man proceeds slowly?

Philosophy is knowledge over a road, knowledge that follows a road. Before one can acquire such knowledge well, one must know the road to follow. The wise man seeks knowledge of the road to follow and the way of going forward along that road before trying to acquire the knowledge which is over that road. Many thinkers seek knowledge over a road before they know sufficiently the road to follow.

But there is more than one road which reason must follow to reasoned out knowledge of anything. The wise man sees the need for distinguishing the roads in our knowledge and thinking out their order and understanding each road. Empedocles and others had begun to understand the first road in our knowledge which is the natural road therein. This is the road from the senses into reason. But the natural road is not enough. In addition, we must also follow the road of reason as reason which is the road from reasonable guesses toward reasoned out knowledge. And if this were not enough, each reasoned out knowledge has its own private road which also must be discovered. When paving the way for logic which is about the second road in our knowledge, Thomas Aquinas points out that logic helps reason to go forward *orderly, easily and without error* in its acts. The order of these three words here is significant. As in any art, knowing the order or road to follow enables one to proceed with greater ease and without error. It is not by chance that the Latin word for *error* comes from the Latin word for *wandering*. (The Greek word also has the same origin.) But this could be said of any road in our knowledge. Ignorance of any road to follow leads to wandering and thus to stumbling repeatedly.

Most thinkers hasten to consider interesting questions without knowing the road to follow. St. Augustine has a dialogue on this subject called appropriately *De Ordine.* The wise man must slowly go over the roads to follow. Men who do not do this either wander or adopt the road to which they are accustomed, or to which they are individually inclined, rather than the road they should follow.

Is there any other notable place where the wise man goes forward slowly? Man knows things in a confused way before distinctly. This is why he knows the general before the particular. Most men try to go forward from a confused knowledge of the general to a distinct knowledge of the particular. The wise man, however, moves from a confused to a distinct knowledge of the general before seeking a distinct knowledge of the particular. The moderns seek a distinct knowledge of the particular before having a distinct knowledge of the general. They stumble frequently in the particular because they do not understand the general sufficiently. They try to understand someone's reasoning distinctly before they understand distinctly what reasoning is. Or they try to understand what human virtue is, or even some particular human virtue is, before they distinctly understand what virtue is. Or they try to understand what is good or better for man before they understand good and better in general distinctly.

A sixth place in which the wise man goes forward slowly is where there is a word equivocal by reason. The words used most of all in wisdom and in the axioms (and also to some extent everywhere because wisdom and the axioms are about what is most common) are all equivocal by reason. Since the most common mistake in thinking is from mixing up the senses of a word and this is done much more with words equivocal by reason than with words equivocal by chance and the most common words are the most difficult of these, the wise man for this and other reasons slows down when he meets such a word. We see this in the fifth book of wisdom and elsewhere in Aristotle's works. It is necessary to distinguish the central senses of these words and to think out their order or connection.

The seventh place in which it is wise to slow down is where there are the words of a wise man. Since "brevity is the soul of wisdom", and the wise man says more in fewer words than other men, it is necessary to read the words of the wise carefully, frequently, and with reverence. Otherwise, we shall stumble over their words.

A second statement of Friar Laurence about stumbling is found in these words also from Act II, Sc. 3

For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give,
Nor aught so good but strain'd from that fair use
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse

Shakespeare here says that what revolts from true birth, stumbles on abuse.

We must first understand the words *true birth*. Shakespeare has carried over the English word *birth* here from its first meaning to its last meaning. Aristotle had studied the movement in the Greek word for birth which is *phusis* in the fifth book of Wisdom. And Thomas Aquinas had followed the same carrying over of the Latin word *natura.* The first meaning of the word is, of course, in the generation and coming of the baby out of its mother. The word is then carried over to the inward source of the baby in its mother and then carried over to the inward beginning of any change that is within the changing (this is the sense which is used in defining the subject of natural philosophy, things whose cause is nature); and then to matter and form in the genus of substance; and, at last, to what a thing is. It is in this last sense that Shakespeare is using the word here. But we must never forget to come to this last meaning through the meanings before it all the way back to the birth of the baby. Friar Laurence (or Shakespeare) is saying that when a thing revolts from its true nature or from what it truly is, it stumbles on abuse. The word *birth* or *natura* is a word equivocal by reason. But as often happens in English, the word equivocal by reason is not carried over much to its later meanings because we have adopted the later meanings of the Greek or Latin word. This gets the modern mind out of order and it cannot function well until it either goes through in order all the meanings of the Greek or Latin word it has borrowed in a later sense or until it moves the English word forward (as Shakespeare as done here with *birth*) to its later meanings.

What does it mean *to stumble on abuse?* It is to make a mistake or error in the use of something. But when do we misuse something or abuse it? What is it to misuse something?

We misuse or abuse a thing when we use it against its nature and the end (or purpose) of that nature. The end or purpose of a thing is tied to its nature. Hence, the revolt from the nature of a thing and its end causes us to stumble on abuse of that thing.

There is a revolt from the natural end of man and from the natural ends of his parts in modern thought. This leads to the moral chaos in which we find the contemporary world.

The application of this truth to the body should be well known.

We have hands to take care of our body & to take care of our children. but when we use our hands to drink to excess or to take harmful drugs or to abort our own children, we stumble on abuse. When our hands, which are for the sake of feeding ourselves and providing for our material needs and those of our children and others are *strain'd from that fair use* and used to kill or harm them, one *revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.*

We misuse our vocal chords and tongue when we lie or blaspheme. For speech is given by nature to man to communicate in life together with other men and to honor and praise God.

And men and women often misuse their sexual organs, revolting from true birth, stumbling on abuse. The sexual organs are by nature for the sake of very great goods: the reproduction of oneself, the perpetuation of the species and the generation of new members of the city and the Church. But, using Shakespeare's words, when these organs are *strain'd from that fair use* of them for those many goods, someone *revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.*

It is important to understand that nature makes things for an end and an understanding of that end is necessary before we can judge whether something is being used fairly, or being misused or abused. If man and his parts are by nature, but did not have any natural end or purpose, one could not be said to be misusing or abusing a man or some part of him. If I ground you up and used you for fertilizer in my garden, would I be abusing you or misusing you? Since you are among the things that are by nature, if you had no higher end or purpose by nature, I could not be misusing you to fertilize my garden (assuming that you would make a good fertilizer).

The modern world and modern thinkers seem often to be characterized by a revolt from nature. The most glaring example of this is, of course, the *revolt from the natural love of one self and one's offspring* seen in abortion and contraception. But in modern thinkers there is a more hidden, but multiple revolt from nature in the life of the mind

At the threshold of the life of the mind, we find a revolt from the imitation of the natural in our fiction and art. Since imitation is natural to man, this involves a twofold or double revolt from true birth.

The life of the mind rises from or depends upon three natural things. And many modern thinkers have revolted from more than one of these.

First, there is a revolt from wonder, the natural desire to know what and why, in the modern philosophers. This is very explicit in Hobbes and Marx, but it is implicit in most of them, starting from Descartes and Bacon. Werner Heisenberg, in his Gifford Lectures, sees a connection between this revolt from wonder and the union of natural and technical science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is this desire, as both Plato and Aristotle note, which gave rise to philosophy and eventually led human reason to a knowledge of God. Plato had already seen how this wonder leads our reason in the end to God. Christian belief and Christian theology are in harmony with this natural wonder as the definitions of belief and theology indicate. St. Augustine's definition of belief and St. Anselm's definition of theology indicate this harmony of belief and theology with natural desire.

There is also a revolt from the natural road in our knowledge in the modern world from the time of Descartes. The natural road in our knowledge is the road from the senses into reason. Since this is the first road in our knowledge and presupposed to all the other roads and enters into them, the revolt from this road leaves the modern mind to wander in illusions, not knowing the road to follow. And when reason wanders, it stumbles into error. It is not by chance that the Greek and Latin words for error come in both languages from the verb for *wandering*.

There is moreover a revolt from our *natural understanding* or *natural knowledge* of the statements (and their parts) known by all men. There are some statements and their parts which we naturally know or naturally come to know. And it is through these statements and their parts that we come to know eventually whatever other statements that we know. When a thinker revolts from this natural knowledge, he can no longer use his reason to know anything. Since all other statements are known through the statements we naturally come to know, it is commonly thought now that no statements are known. (See Mill *On Liberty*) Everything becomes arbitrary. This way of thinking dominates our thinking today. If nothing is truly known, one man has as much right as the next man to think whatever he wants to think.

The complete dependence of philosophy upon the natural can be considered in these three statements:

> There are some statements and their parts which our reason naturally knows or naturally comes to know.
>
> There is in our will a natural desire to understand and know what our reason does not naturally know or naturally come to know.
>
> Our reason comes to know what it does not naturally know through what it naturally knows.

Hence, a revolt from true birth, a revolt from the natural, leads to a complete collapse of philosophy. This is what we find in the history of modern philosophy. The above threefold revolt from nature or true birth is why we have stumbled into a bastard philosophy in modern times.

In conclusion, we can see more clearly the truth in the advice of Polonius to Laertes:

> This above all: to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.[8]

No one can be true to himself if he is not true to his own nature.

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[8]Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. 3