
Shakespeare's Critique of Machiavellian Force, Fraud, and Spectacle in Measure for Measure

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1

Measure for Measure is a very odd play. Shakespeare juxtaposes the brothels and the prison of Vienna to the court and the church, and there is much doubt about which comes off best in the comparison. The intricate plot of the play, in an inevitably too sketchy summary, is this: Duke Vincentio leaves Vienna suddenly, deputizing Angelo to govern in his absence. Angelo sentences a young fellow, Claudio, to be beheaded for lechery. Isabella, Claudio's sister, a religious novice, attempts to convince him otherwise. Somehow, Angelo finds himself proposing a deal to Isabella: Claudio's head for her maidenhead. She refuses. The Duke, who has been wandering about town disguised as a friar, learns of it and readily persuades Isabella to go through with the play's notorious bed trick: a midnight switch, maidenhead-for-maidenhead, Angelo's jilted fiancée, Mariana, disguised as Isabella, substituting for Isabella herself. Mariana does it; but Angelo, none the wiser, does not release Claudio. The Duke then switches heads—another prisoner's for Claudio's—and makes plans for a spectacular return to town. Angelo is brought to justice, in a manner of speaking. And what with one thing and another, the Duke proposes to Isabella. If the

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demands of the genre are met, the two of them join the celebrations of three other happy couples in a perfectly symmetrical comic ending. All in all, very odd. Dark matters are brought to light—things usually presented by Shakespeare in the tragedies—and yet, despite our impressions to the contrary, no one seems to do anything terribly wrong, and no one seems punished in the end. Except for Angelo, that is. Allan Bloom claims that he is the only one to suffer “punishment and humiliation” (Bloom 1993, 330).

*Dark matters
brought to
light.*

2

It is conventional to describe *Measure for Measure* as a “problem play,” and to avoid the problem of its content by emphasizing the problem of its form. It begins as a tragedy, but half-way through it becomes a comedy. Northrop Frye, for one, considers this to be the most important question of the play. He writes: “*Measure for Measure* is not a play about the philosophy of government . . . [or] the social problem of prostitution . . . [but rather] about the relation of all such things to the structure of comedy” (Frye 1983, 24). Insofar as the play’s cross-dressed genre can be made to yield a content, it is often read as a sophisticated Christian allegory in which each character has a symbolic function in a plot based on a medieval Morality play: Angelo is Lucifer, the fallen angel; the Duke is the Lord, mysteriously absent or present, as it suits him; Claudio and Isabella are all Christian souls, tormented by the devil, but redeemed in the end; and thus, like Christianity itself, the play moves from dreadful threats to happy results. More recently, scholars familiar with modern psychoanalytic theories have charted what they see as the play’s darker undercurrents. Carolyn Brown’s several Freudian analyses of Shakespeare’s poetic imagery have uncovered hints of a homoerotic sexual relation between the Duke and Angelo, of a straight sexual attraction between the Duke and Isabella, and of masochistic beating fantasies in Isabella’s ostensibly religious thoughts (Brown 1986; Brown 1994; Brown 1997). Searching deeper, David McCandless’s Deleuzean reading finds that the punishments in the play have a sadopornographic quality, most clearly seen in the manner in which Angelo forces a series of feminized surrogates—Claudio, Isabella, and Mariana—to accept the status of his own mortified flesh; the man and two women, in other words, are to be understood collectively as a symbol of Angelo’s genitals; and Angelo himself becomes the Duke’s feminized

surrogate, suffering a kind of public emasculation at the end of the play (McCandless 1997).

In production, the Christian allegorical reading has been forgotten as companies outdo one another in attempts to shock or scandalize already world-weary audiences. It is now common, for example, to have Angelo attempt to rape Isabella. And yet, these thoroughly modern stagings have far more in common with the Morality play than they would admit. Susan Griffin argues: “the metaphysics of Christianity and the metaphysics of pornography are the same” (Griffin 1981, 14). Angelo is always the worst of the lot, no matter whether he is a prude and a dupe, or evil incarnate, or a rapist; Isabella is always an innocent, no matter whether she is a frustrated naïf or a saint; and the machinations of the Duke are largely overlooked, no matter whether he represents the Deus Absconditus or is only a fellow who enjoys creeping around town disguised as a monk.

In stark contrast, the contention is also made that the problems raised in *Measure for Measure* are the problems of political philosophy. The play has Shakespeare’s most explicitly political beginning—the Duke’s first words, “Of government, the properties to unfold . . .” (1.1.3)—and it continues to study government right through to its concluding political spectacle. And yet it is seldom read as political philosophy. Perhaps this is because, in order to do so, one must resist its many intriguing distractions and focus one’s attention on the Duke. Harry Jaffa and Allan Bloom are two political theorists who have attempted to match wits with him, with notable success. Jaffa finds that the Duke is a Platonic philosopher-king, like Prospero, whose political program is both the sublimation of “unbridled lechery and fornication” and the de-sublimation of religious celibacy into the everyday eroticism of family life (Jaffa 2000, 203-204; cf. Behnegar 2002, 168-169). For Jaffa, Isabella is a Pauline saint who becomes a Roman matron, the “very incarnation of the spirit of the family”; and her marriage to the Duke is the union of law and wisdom (Jaffa 2000, 205, 215, 224-225; cf. Lowenthal 1997, 253). Bloom is more suspicious than Jaffa, and less willing to celebrate the bourgeois virtues, but he nonetheless has a similar reading: the main problem in the play is the relation of nature and convention, sexuality and family. He corrects Jaffa by arguing that Shakespeare “combines a Machiavelian critique of the law and of those who use it with a classical . . .

love of justice.” However, his hermeneutic of suspicion is directed more at the sex than the politics of the play (Bloom 1993, 341). Jaffa and Bloom disagree in their final assessments of whether the Duke is more a philosopher-king than a Cesare Borgia. What is similar about their interpretations, and unexpected, is how little they discuss politics after raising the right political questions. Like most other commentators, they concentrate on exploring the psychological complexities of the characters and the clever subtleties of the plot devices.

Jaffa and Bloom both mention that the Duke’s political use of Angelo is similar to Cesare Borgia’s use of Remirro de Orco, described by Machiavelli in Book VII of *The Prince*, but neither of them does much with the parallel. I think there is little doubt that Shakespeare modeled Duke Vincentio on Machiavelli’s Borgia, the man whose more popular name was Duke Valentino. My reading of the play will attempt to uncover the full significance of the resemblance.¹ How good, or perhaps it is better to ask, how thorough a Machiavellian is the Duke? And is there a critique of his political effectiveness underlying the play’s happy ending? I think that until the “old fantastical Duke of dark corners” (4.3.159) is brought entirely into the light, the profundity of Shakespeare’s insight into the workings of Machiavellian politics will not be appreciated.

Shakespeare is as good a political philosopher as Plato. I do not make this claim because I think that Shakespeare read Plato and worked him into his plays. It is most likely he did not. Shakespeare and Plato simply have comparable understandings of human nature, in both its comic and tragic aspects. More specifically, Shakespeare saw the largely corrupt erotic undercurrents of politics in much the same way Plato did. Is there sadopornographic imagery in the poetry of *Measure for Measure*? There is; and it is neither amusement for the groundlings nor a symptom of the playwright’s subconscious troubles. Shakespeare puts it in the play to show us just how nasty Machiavellian politics is.² And is

Shakespeare and Plato have comparable understandings of human nature.

¹ The resemblance was first spotted by Norman Holland. Although Holland is not convinced that Shakespeare read *The Prince*, he concludes: “interpretations of *Measure for Measure* that treat the Duke as a symbol of divine grace or the like must take into account his probable descent from Cesare Borgia” (1959, 20). One might add that interpretations of the Duke as Borgia must also take into account his appearance as the embodiment of divine grace.

² In a reading of the play claiming to represent the voices of its silenced

Measure for Measure challenges the audience's ethical judgment.

there also religious imagery in the play? Should the Duke be read as God and Angelo as Lucifer? The Duke would like us to think so. A complete Machiavellian politics requires religious fraud just as much as the force of arms; and effective rule is both political and religious spectacle.

Shakespeare's plays, especially the tragedies and problem plays, are mirrors held up to the audience; and *Measure for Measure* is his most deliberately contrived. Its title is a first clue to its ingenuity. It refers to the Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt. 7:1-2 [KJV]). The significance of the quote is internal to the drama: the Duke himself refers to the biblical passage while meting out justice in the play's concluding scene (5.1.414). However, by using the passage for the play's title, Shakespeare addresses his audience in a way that is uncomfortably similar to the Duke's meaning. He is not simply asking us to recognize our hypocrisy or to accept that human affairs are so complex that we must trust in an ineffable Providence or the benefits of democratic indifference; rather, he is challenging us to test our best ethical and political judgment in the relatively harmless setting of a theatre. By its nature, theatre is play with the distinction between appearance and reality. Shakespeare is particularly adept at compounding the confusion. Within the realm of appearances constituting a play, he often presents characters having their own difficulties seeing and understanding things clearly. *Measure for Measure* is an extreme case: the Duke shrewdly manipulates appearances in the political realm by staging a spectacle that succeeds in fooling people in several different ways simultaneously. During the final Act of the play, we, sitting in the audience, are in the same position as the spectators on-stage, the people assembled to witness the event. With one important difference: we have been back-stage, as it were, and have seen and heard enough to figure things out for ourselves. We have no excuse.

3

Before turning to the details of the play, a few remarks about the

characters, the prostitutes, Jonathan Dollimore argues, with some justification, that *Measure for Measure* dramatizes "disorder generated by misrule and unjust law . . . ideologically displaced on to the ruled" (Dollimore 1985, 78).

relevant parts of *The Prince* are necessary. Borgia is Machiavelli's favorite; and nowhere does he enjoy him more than in telling the story of how he consolidated his rule of Romagna. The province was insolent; and "to reduce it to peace and obedience," he put de Orco, "a cruel and ready man," in charge, giving him "fullest power." When the use of force was no longer necessary, Borgia, knowing that de Orco had become hated, convened a civil court in order to show "that if any cruelty had been committed, this had not come from him but from the harsh nature of his minister." Shortly afterwards, de Orco was found in the piazza, cut in two. "The ferocity of this spectacle [*spettaculo*] left the people at once satisfied and stupified [*stupidi*]" (VII; cf. XXII). In Romagna, cruelty well used was mercy; Borgia succeeded in making himself feared and loved, but not hated; and thus the people followed him in peace and in war (XVII; cf. 2.1.283-284, and 2.2.100-103). Borgia was not as fortunate in other circumstances, however. He made one mistake, according to Machiavelli, and it brought about his ruin. He chose to make the wrong man Pope, even though he was himself the son of a Pope and should have known better (VII). Machiavelli advises Lorenzo de Medici, to whom *The Prince* is addressed, to master religion. Use force and fraud, and the appearances of virtue and vice, as necessary, to make yourself loved and feared (XV); but, above all, master the appearance of being religious (XVIII), and turn the people's fear and love into a reputation for justice and mercy by "picking a mode of rewarding or punishing [people] of which much will be said" (XXI). Fortuna does not favor men who are cold and cautious; she allows herself to be won by the impetuous and audacious (XXV). And to master her in a Christian country, one must be audacious even in one's piety.

In *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio is Shakespeare's Duke Valentino.³ He knows that politics is always force and fraud. The "properties" of his government, in his own words, are the powers of "terror" and "love," "Mortality and mercy" (1.1.3, 19, 44).⁴

³ Duke Vincentio's assumed name, Friar Lodowick, is likely also taken from *The Prince*: Machiavelli discusses the history of the Sforzas, who seized, lost, and recaptured Milan, and the story of Duke Ludovico Sforza winning the city by "stirring up a commotion at the borders" (III) has some parallels to the Duke's performance as Lodowick in the play's final Act.

⁴ The phrase "force and fraud" is an excellent motto for the lessons of *The Prince*. Machiavelli uses it in *The Discourses* (2.XIII), although not in *The Prince*. Shakespeare uses the phrase several times explicitly—*The Rape of Lucrece* 1243, *1 Henry VI* (4.4.36),

They are necessarily deployed differently in peace and in war. For a generation (1.2.171; 1.3.21), Vienna has been at peace, and the Duke has cultivated a reputation for being a generous ruler by refraining from enforcing his own draconian laws against lechery, allowing his subjects to become increasingly indolent and licentious.⁵ The people mistake his lenience for justice and charity. But now the Duke is preparing to go to war against the King of Hungary (1.2.1-3, 84; *pace* Lowenthal 1997, 238). He needs foot soldiers and officers to command them. However, the men of the lower classes, made soft and indifferent by years of sexual indulgence and disregard for authority, will not do for soldiers; and the men of the bourgeoisie, who no longer act honorably, even toward their wives, will be unable to command respect from their troops. It is necessary to change their ways quickly; but if the Duke were to enforce the laws himself, he would only succeed in making himself hated. In private, he confesses: "Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,/ 'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them/ For what I bid them do" (1.3.35-37). Best to have Angelo do it, "Who may, in th' ambush of my name, strike home,/ And yet my nature never in the fight/ To do it slander" (1.3.41-43). From the first, Angelo is the Duke's de Orco; and when he has served his purpose, the Duke intends to make a public spectacle of him.

The plan is simple. During a contrived absence from Vienna, the Duke picks the "precise" Angelo to represent him instead of Escalus, the senior minister who has counseled indulgence for many years. Angelo and Escalus are both left with written commissions, which are not read on-stage: despite the suggestion that Angelo is fully the Duke in his absence, his commission is binding—he is only a deputy. From what follows, it is not difficult to determine that the Duke orders Angelo to enforce the laws against lechery, and in a most effective manner. The lower classes

3 *Henry VI* (4.4.33)—and paraphrases it strikingly in *Measure for Measure*.

⁵ Rumors of the Duke's own lechery are reported throughout the play. Shakespeare even has the Duke reply to one such accusation, surprisingly made by Friar Thomas, at the opening of his second scene: "No. Holy father, throw away that thought,/ Believe not that the dribbling dart of love/ Can pierce a complete bosom" (1.3.1-3). More surprisingly, the odd symbolism of this passage is reminiscent of a poem used by Machiavelli to begin a letter to Francesco Vettori in which he also discusses Duke Valentino's use of de Orco: "The youthful archer many times had tried/ To wound me in the breast with his arrows/ . . . Yet now they've struck an obstacle so strong/ It took little account of all their power" (Letter 247 [31 Jan. 1515], in Machiavelli 1996, 311-313).

are deprived of their whore-houses, but they are otherwise treated leniently, more threatened than punished. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, is left its whore-houses; and one young fellow is chosen for a summary execution. A single execution should snap the rest of them to attention; and it should also serve well as a spectacle to distract the poor. The Duke likely specifies that the man should be Claudio. The unsavory circumstances of Claudio's relationship with his fiancée are well-known; and his character is still sufficiently resolute and honorable to make for a stirring death. But there is another, darker reason. The circumstances of Claudio's engagement to Juliet—the wedding postponed through eight months of pregnancy to pry a larger dowry from her family—are similar to the circumstances of Angelo's broken engagement with Mariana—money was also involved, although no pre-marital sex. Indeed, they are similar enough that most people would assume Angelo and Claudio to be equally guilty of dishonorable conduct. As it happens, the Duke has been keeping Mariana in comfortable seclusion for five years, almost from the day Angelo dropped her; and he would not have done so without something in mind. So: Angelo is to enforce the laws and execute Claudio on command, though the people will think that he is acting freely. The town will quickly become disciplined, and Angelo will be hated for it. The Duke will return and feign dismay at what has happened. He will produce Mariana, accuse the hypocrite Angelo of being as guilty as Claudio, and have him executed in turn. Justice is served, the people are used to discipline and the sight of blood, the Duke is loved as well as feared, and all things are prepared for war.

With things so cleverly worked out, the Duke can allow himself the satisfaction of a smug irony from time to time. For example, when he leaves the court suddenly in the first scene of the play, he says he wishes there to be no public ceremony: "I love the people,/ But do not like to stage me to their eyes./ Though it do well, I do not relish well/ Their loud applause and aves vehement./ Nor do I think the man of safe discretion/ That does affect it" (1.1.67-72). He has every intention of staging himself on his return; and his discretion is far from safe for anyone who might obstruct his purpose. His charm, humor, and incisive intelligence should not lead anyone to assume that he is not ruthless. He will use the appearances of virtue and vice alike, as necessary, without any concern for being either virtuous or vicious; and he will dispense rewards

and punishments, execute and refrain from executing, without any concern for justice or injustice, or the guilt or innocence of those involved. He cares nothing for Claudio's life; whether he lives or dies is entirely an indifferent matter.

When the Duke first visits the prison disguised as a Friar, before Isabella's arrival, it is not to see why Angelo has imprisoned Claudio, but rather to make sure that nothing goes wrong before the execution. The religious comfort he gives Claudio is the soothing of the sacrificial lamb before its throat is slit. His speech on the discomforts of life—"Be absolute for death" (3.1.5-41)—is a pastiche of Stoic clichés without a single concern expressed for the condition of Claudio's immortal soul. It is so bleak and hopeless that Claudio admits he can find no reason to desire life. The plan calls for Claudio's head and it must be got as efficiently as possible. And the Duke knows all too well about severed heads. In a passing remark spoken to the Provost, he makes it plain that he has cold-blooded knowledge of how prisoners behave when pleading for mercy, and knowledge of how their shaven, penitent heads look after execution (4.2.178-181). During the years in which he fostered a reputation for leniency, in other words, he had been ordering prisoners executed, denying them mercy, and asking to see their heads afterwards as well.

As it turns out, nobody loses a head. But not because of any moral principle. The Duke changes the details of his plan to take changing circumstances into account. The plan's purpose remains the same: preparing the city for war. During the day immediately prior to the Duke's return to Vienna, a new happy ending for the spectacle already scripted, he meets with a select group of men: Flavius, Valencius, Rowland, Crassus and Varrus, among others (4.5.6-13), all of whose unAustrian names suggest unusual martial skills. These are his generals. They will likely be amused to learn that the Duke intends to appear in public wearing a dress. He had not initially planned to blow his cover as Friar Lodowick, but he has come to understand things differently in the interim. At the outset, he thought it sufficient to use Angelo as Borgia had used de Orco. He now understands how to use a Friar's habit as well. At the beginning of the play, the Duke set out to master Fortuna with Borgia's cunning; by its conclusion, he has succeeded where Borgia failed, because Fortuna, represented in the inspired meddling of Isabella, gives him an unforeseen opportunity to learn the ways

*Exploiting
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where Borgia
failed.*

in which public opinion can be manipulated with religion, and he seizes it.

4

When Isabella comes to Claudio's cell, she brings news that the Duke, eavesdropping nearby, finds surprising.⁶ The plan depends on Angelo's rectitude, but it seems that he has misjudged his character. If Claudio were to persuade his sister to accept Angelo's proposal and he were to escape execution, what then? This novice, as he supposes her to be, then shocks him again by mercilessly abusing her own brother the moment he shows a desire to be anything other than a martyr to her virtue. She cries out—these might be the darkest lines Shakespeare ever wrote—"Take my defiance,/ Die, perish! Might but my bending down/ Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed./ I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,/ No word to save thee. . . . 'Tis best that thou diest quickly" (3.1.143-151). They are the last words she speaks to her brother in the play. They inform the Duke that he need not worry: Claudio's head will roll. And yet, he reconsiders. Angelo has shown himself unpredictable. Furthermore, this sister has become involved and must be brought under control. Most of all, the Duke is annoyed at his own misjudgment. So he becomes cleverer still. He improvises a variation of the original plan; and he decides to use Isabella, whose ruthlessness has duly impressed him.

The Duke's second plan, involving the bed trick, is premised on the assumption that Angelo is a lecher, just as his first was premised on the assumption that Angelo is consistently upright. Let Claudio's head stay on his shoulders for the time being. Then Angelo can, at the very least, be guilty of insubordination. To give the people more to talk about, let Angelo have his way with a woman and then be exposed publicly. It will be easy enough for the Duke to bring the prude's secret corruption to light once a written pardon for Claudio is in his hands. Now, Isabella would not consider giving up her body for such sport. The Duke need not even consider persuading her. He knows that Mariana is still in love with Angelo, and would likely be quite willing to consummate their previous engagement in less-than-ideal circumstances if she could

⁶ Behnegar argues unconvincingly that "the Duke anticipated [Angelo's] attempt to force Isabella to have sex with him. From the very beginning he expected that Angelo would abuse his authority and reveal his nature as a man" (Behnegar 2002, 159).

be assured it would lead to marriage. Switching Mariana for Isabella is an obvious ploy, especially for someone who is as much a practical joker as the Duke. Then it could be arranged that Isabella and Mariana both confront Angelo with accusations of corruption. One question remains: can Isabella be made to go along with it? The Duke has little doubt. In this instance, his judgment is right, largely because it is based on sensing her affinities to his own character: she is deceitful, vengeful, merciless, and motivated by little more than a desire for recognition. If he knew more of her earlier conversations with Angelo, he would be even more certain of her willingness to participate in his plot: she had already attempted a bait-and-switch with a counterfeit Isabella herself.

*Isabella as
much a
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is a friar.*

The Duke first recognizes a kindred spirit in Isabella when she counsels Claudio to die a quiet, untroublesome death. If she is a Christian, her religion matches his politics perfectly. And then there is the skill with which she manages Claudio: first with comforting, empty pieties, and when they prove to be inadequate, with violent, abusive curses. She is no ordinary sister. Indeed, Shakespeare has made her an ideal match for the Duke, a female complement for his Machiavellian cunning and ruthlessness. The Duke comes to understand this, as she does, through their cooperation in bringing about Angelo's fall. The audience, however, should be able to see it coming sooner. Both of them are wearing religious disguises: Isabella is as much a novice as the Duke is a friar. Both of them have become similarly involved with Angelo and Claudio: the Duke set a trap for Angelo, and then went to prepare Claudio for execution; Isabella also attempted to ensnare Angelo, but when Angelo beat her at that deadly game, she too went to prepare Claudio for his death. Moreover, their traps are identical: each wants to catch Angelo in the same crime that Claudio committed and then turn it against him—something the Duke would do in public, but Isabella only in private. The Duke's plot is obvious once its political motives are understood. To see Isabella's intentions, however, a study of the nature of temptation and psychological weakness is necessary. And to that end, I digress to tell her story thus far.

5

In her first scene, Isabella seems about to become a novice. She has put on the habit; however, she has neither begun to live by

the Rule nor taken any vows. Her first words show her balking at how few “privileges” the novices are allowed (1.4.1), although she quickly covers for the gaffe. Lucio’s arrival with news of her brother’s imprisonment provides a convenient excuse to leave. She never returns to the nunnery, but she keeps the novice’s habit on; and she is quite willing to use the misleading impressions it causes to her advantage. When Isabella first confronts Angelo, she deliberately disregards the Rule of the Order, which specifies that a novice may only be in the presence of a man if the Mother Superior is also present, and that she might show her face or speak, but not both (1.4.9-13). Isabella takes Lucio, not the Mother, to see Angelo; and she speaks to him with her face unveiled. She is quite aware of what effect this might have. Claudio knows his sister well: “in her youth,” he has told Lucio, “There is a prone and speechless dialect,/ Such as move men; beside, she hath a prosperous art/ When she will play with reason and discourse,/ And she can well persuade” (1.2.186-190). Isabella understands, in other words, that if she is to move Angelo as a man, she cannot allow either her face to be covered or her voice to be silenced.

Initially, Angelo is entirely unmoved. Isabella’s jumbled thoughts on the nature of the law, justice, and mercy are dismissed out of hand. Her persistence begins to have an effect, however. Not only does her sexual attractiveness, her “prone . . . dialect,” begin to assert itself, made more intense for Angelo by the confusion caused by the habit, but her barrage of opinions eventually hits upon Angelo’s own theological and ethical doubts about the nature of his recently acquired secular authority and makes him think again. When Angelo rises to leave, promising to reconsider Claudio’s case, Isabella misjudges his intentions and reveals herself: “Hark how I’ll bribe you; good my lord, turn back” (2.2.145). Angelo is shocked: “How? Bribe me?”, he says. And then her words become stunningly suggestive: “Ay,” she says—which can be heard as the pronoun “I”—“Ay, with such gifts that heaven shall share with you” (2.2.147). As Angelo wonders what it is he has just heard, she continues to tease and stroke his imagination: “Not with fond sicles of tested gold,/ Or stones . . . but with true prayers/ That shall be up at heaven, and enter there/ Ere sunrise” (2.2.149-153).⁷ Angelo

⁷ The suggestiveness of this seductive passage is underscored by its unique terminology and strained phrasing: “tested” and “sicles” are both words used only once in Shakespeare’s corpus, making the sexual connotation of “stones” explicit;

again dismisses her, telling her explicitly to return tomorrow for his decision.

Isabella does return, but not the following day. She returns the same day, only a short while after being dismissed. And she returns alone. Her first words: "I am come to know your pleasure" (2.4.31). Now obviously troubled, Angelo tries to reason with her. He repeatedly points out the contradiction in her pleas: she accepts that the law condemning Claudio is just, and even in accord with the higher standards of the Rule by which she ostensibly lives, and yet she also claims that the law is too harsh and that leniency toward Claudio would be just. To put her on the spot, Angelo states her contradiction as a hypothetical alternative: either Claudio is to be executed, or, to save him, she is to live as unchastely as he has done. It is rather imprudent for Angelo to call the question in this manner. Too much of the dark desire he is attempting to control is showing. Still, it is one thing to be tempted and another to fall. He is proving the point, and thus attempting to assert the authority of reason over his own passions. Isabella, however, cannot be made to understand. Angelo suspects something. He says: "Your sense pursues not mine; either you are ignorant,/ Or seem so, craftly; and that's not good" (2.4.74-75). When the contradiction is explained to her with greater patience, and she sees that she is losing ground, Isabella counters by attempting to enflame Angelo's passions with an astonishingly graphic description of how she would rather give up her body in martyrdom than to lust: "Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,/ And strip myself to death as to a bed/ That longing have been sick for" (2.4.101-104). In the end, however, she must admit that she has no case.

They have nothing left to talk about. And yet she lingers on, speaking about woman's vanity and frailty, which needs heaven's assistance, and a man's (2.4.125-130). Angelo is naive and inexperienced. Thinking that they have reached some agreement, Angelo takes the bait and asks her, not to disrobe, but rather to put on "the destined livery." He proposes marriage (2.4.134-138). Now, even if one's intentions are entirely honorable, in the worldly sense, it

in its verb form, to "fond" is either to dote or to fondle, making "fond sicles" evoke "fondled sicles"; and thus, being up and entering before sunrise will have much to do with "maids . . . delicate" (2.2.154), but little to do with a Christian heaven. As soon as Isabella leaves, Angelo shows signs of being sorely tempted by a "cunning enemy" (2.2.179), and Shakespeare has him unwittingly admit: "Ever till now,/ When men were fond, I smiled, and wond' red how" (2.2.185-186).

is a rather delicate matter to propose to a woman whose garments suggest that she is already married to Christ. Asking a religious novice to be a woman is scandalous, just as asking a woman to be a whore is scandalous. Both are demeaning, to say the least, in that they suggest the woman is less virtuous than she professes to be. But they are not the same suggestion. Angelo proposes, and he also offers something. If she is willing to renounce the authority of the Church, he offers to join her in a minor rebellion of love against the world by showing himself willing to renounce the authority of the Duke: he will act against his commission and not have Claudio executed (2.4.144).

Isabella asks Angelo to repeat his ill-advised suggestion three times. And then, feeling confident, she springs her trap: "Ha! ... Seeming, seeming! . . . a present pardon for my brother,/ Or . . . I'll tell the world aloud/ What man thou art" (2.4.149-154). Angelo is quite surprised, and instantly enraged. He traps Isabella with her own devices: the hypothetical case with mixed and questionable motives they had been debating is made real; and worse—he threatens to torture Claudio if she does not yield herself to him that same night. Angelo then leaves her alone in the room, not once having touched her. When there was not a shred of evidence that Angelo was doing anything other than acting according to the law and the Duke's instructions, Isabella threatened to denounce him publicly as a tyrant, even if it meant her martyrdom. But the moment he does threaten to do something tyrannical—torturing Claudio—Isabella immediately rationalizes the necessity of saying and doing absolutely nothing (2.4.171 ff). She is not after martyrdom, or even simple justice; she is after recognition. If she were not, then she would keep to her initial resolve to remain silent while Claudio is tortured and executed. However, recognition requires that the tale be told, if not in public or before the Duke, then to someone from whom something might be gained. And the one person she decides to tell of Angelo's intentions is the only person it would be best not to tell: Claudio himself. Why torture him with the knowledge? In order that her brother might not die a fornicator, but rather a martyr—a martyr to her virtue. But "Is't not a kind of incest" to gain a reputation for virtue from a brother's death (3.1.138-139)?

Despite the play's brothel scenes and the prominent parts given

*More honesty
and integrity
in a brothel
than in
politics or
religion.*

to two notorious bawds, Mistress Overdone and Pompey, the only scene in which we see pimping is the one in which the Duke and Isabella present the second version of the Duke's scheme to Mariana. All the appearances are to the contrary—a Friar and a novice acting lovingly in worldly affairs to save a marriage and a condemned man's life—and yet it is nothing but pimping with the usual sexes reversed. The point of Shakespeare's black comedy is obvious: there is more honesty and integrity in a brothel than in politics or religion. And what delicacy to have Isabella proposition Mariana out of earshot. How pious could it sound for Isabella, dressed in a habit, to put this scheme into words? We are allowed to overhear one line: "Little have you to say/ When you depart from him, but, soft and low,/ 'Remember now my brother'" (4.1.68-70)—"soft and low"!

The assignation goes as planned, but a problem arises. Angelo does not hold up his end of the deal. Perhaps this is not actually a problem. No matter what Angelo might think, Isabella did not hold up her end either. And in any event, on what understanding of justice is Angelo obliged to release Claudio? The bourgeois notion that anything agreed upon contractually is binding? Machiavelli might say that, for some people, an equitable exchange of injustices thereby excuses everything. The Duke and Isabella cannot imagine that Angelo is capable of not going through with the deal because they both similarly misconstrue the nature of justice and imagine that everyone else is less clever at manipulating its appearances than they are. When the Duke first proposes the idea to Isabella, she says, "The image of it gives me content already,/ and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection" (3.1.264-265); and while the Duke loiters about the jail waiting for Claudio's pardon to arrive, he is several times heard to chortle in self-satisfaction (4.2.96-97, 109-115). An order does arrive from Angelo, but it prudently specifies that the execution must take place regardless of what the Provost hears from anyone else (4.2.122-129). Once again, the Duke is forced to deal with the consequences of his misjudgment. Claudio must lose his head. However, it is no longer possible to return to the original plan without risking that his machinations will come out in public. Things must become murkier still.

Angelo has become unpredictable, neither entirely incorruptible nor entirely corrupt. If only he could be condemned for being both; if only the Duke could think of a way to confuse the legal and ethical issues a bit more. It is at this point that he decides to make the spectacle of his return a religious as well as a political event. To do it properly, he must act alone. Isabella has shown herself willing to be complicitous in his schemes; and the Duke does have something in mind that will deepen her involvement; however, at the moment, she is also someone to be mastered. The aspect of her character that makes her most easily manipulable is her desire for recognition from the highest authority: the Duke himself, whom she expects to meet on his return. And the one thing she has to draw herself to his attention is the trouble she can make for Angelo. If Claudio were executed, how would she react? Much as the Duke does when Angelo's letter arrives: less with concern for Claudio than with outrage and shaken self-assurance. Later on, thinking Claudio dead, she first says: "O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes;" and then, after a brief "Unhappy Claudio," she continues, "wretched Isabel, / Injurious world, most damnèd Angelo!" (4.3.121-124) To master Isabella, it suits the Duke best if Claudio dies. However, to control Angelo, it now suits him best if he lives. Why not have it both ways? Let him seem to be dead, but actually be alive. Not only does this arrangement give the Duke the greatest range of alternatives for effective improvisation on his return, and thus the greatest power over everyone involved; it also makes possible a new theatrical effect: at the right moment, the Duke will be able to restore Claudio's head miraculously, leaving the people, and Isabella, bewildered.

If the plan is to work, the Provost must be brought part way in. This proves to be more difficult than might be expected. It is another of the play's many ironies that the Provost is the only character with unsullied honesty and integrity. The Duke wins him over by appealing to his humanity. If the plan is to work, there must be a head, since Angelo has asked to see one; and anybody's head except Claudio's will do. The Duke picks Barnardine's for the purpose. Alas, Barnardine, finally condemned to be hanged after ten years in prison, will not consent to die today. Barnardine is a thoroughly debauched character: a confessed, convicted, and entirely unrepentant murderer. After an attempt to shrive him which

fails disastrously, the Duke—a rather poor Friar—orders him forcibly beheaded, even though this might damn his soul eternally (4.3.65-70). The Provost graciously intervenes and offers the head of a prisoner who recently died of natural causes. One cannot help comparing the Provost favorably with the Duke. Indeed, one cannot help liking Barnardine more.

With the head dispatched, the Duke has time to prepare his return. Most of *Measure for Measure* takes place within twenty-four hours, from the morning of Claudio's arrest (1.2) to the following morning, the time specified for his execution (4.3); and we see a great deal of what occurs. However, almost nothing of the twenty-four hours or so from this moment to the morning of the Duke's return is shown to us. We know that the Duke organizes a meeting that evening at Mariana's grange, assembling everyone involved in the plot. But what does he say to them? and does he reveal himself as Duke to the few there who do not yet know his identity? Given what follows, it makes most sense to assume that he does come out, and that he prepares everyone carefully for the roles he wants them to play. In much the same way that Shakespeare is said to have given his actors scripts consisting only of their lines and appropriate cues, the Duke tells everyone only what they need to know. It cannot be scripted to the letter since the unwitting parts played by Angelo and Escalus—not to mention the unexpected comic disruptions of Lucio—will require some improvisation. The Duke's spectacle, like all spectacles, is a performance; but this one is several performances happening simultaneously. Shakespeare is said to have written plays-within-plays; the concluding scene of *Measure for Measure*, however, has plays-within-a-play-within-a-play, and several of the actors imagine themselves to be participating in rather different productions.

The Duke's show has only two Acts. It opens with his public "return" to Vienna. The celebrations are interrupted by shocking testimony against Angelo given by Isabella, Mariana, and the Duke himself as Friar Lodowick, all of which testimony is initially dismissed as nonsense. Angelo is thus set up for the fall. The concluding Act begins with the Duke's "second coming"—the planned discovery, that is, of his disguise as the Friar, and his resumption of political authority while still wearing the habit. The second Act is divided into two scenes by yet another revelation. Initially the Duke acts as the personification of the strictest possible Justice. All

are condemned for even the smallest misdemeanor; Angelo is sentenced to death after a forced marriage to Mariana; and the pleas of Mariana and Isabella for mercy to be shown him are denied. But then everyone, except the Provost, is surprised when Claudio proves to be alive. After staging the miracle of restoring the head of a beheaded man—a resurrection of sorts—the Duke changes. He becomes the personification of the most lenient possible Mercy. All are forgiven everything, regardless of their guilt or innocence. When it is over, everyone leaves the show satisfied and stupefied, but without being quite certain why. And the Duke has succeeded in establishing himself as both a political leader and a religious figure: the embodiment or incarnation of the most ineffable Justice and Mercy; an unpredictable power and a miracle-worker; someone to be loved and feared, both in peace and in war.

Isabella's role in the proceedings raises disquieting questions for most commentators. It is undeniable that she is knowingly putting on a performance, but how much of what she says and does is an act? and does she perform already knowing that the Duke is Friar Lodowick? I think it is evident that there are only two things she does not know: the fact that Claudio is still alive and the Duke's ultimate intentions. She presents herself in public, before the Duke, and charges Angelo with—well, what exactly? "Angelo's forsworn . . . / a murderer . . . / an adulterous thief . . . / An hypocrite, a virgin-violator" (5.1.38-41). He is innocent of all these charges except the irrelevant one of being a hypocrite. More specifically, she says that she gave Angelo her maidenhead for Claudio's head, and charges him with not keeping his word (5.1.21, 92-103)—a charge the Duke rightfully dismisses, although for the wrong reasons. Given what we know of her, it is difficult to imagine that she would bring such utter humiliation on herself before the assembled people and the Duke if there were even the smallest risk that the lie would not work out to her advantage. She must have had the strongest possible assurances from the Duke himself beforehand.⁸ If Isabella thus recognizes the Duke throughout and knows most of his script, she also likely knows that the Duke has assured Mariana of the pay-off for her participation. Mariana is in

⁸ A minor comic point: the Duke, as Duke, explicitly prompts her denunciation of Angelo. Lucio is present in the crowd, and has the charming comic function of constantly disrupting the carefully scripted proceedings, much to the Duke's annoyance. Lucio even flusters Isabella, whose performance is then corrected by the Duke, behaving like an exasperated imperious director (5.1.84-91).

a similar situation in that she must also risk her reputation publicly by accusing Angelo, and it seems evident that she would not do so if she did not have assurances from the Duke that Angelo would end up her husband. If Mariana knows that Angelo will be humiliated before being let off, then Isabella knows it too; and thus the touching words spoken by both women to persuade the Duke to pardon Angelo are not entirely sincere.

8

To look more closely at the first Act of the Duke's spectacle: When Isabella claims that Angelo deflowered her, the Duke dismisses the charges for lack of evidence and has her arrested—for sexual harassment, we would call it. A search is begun for Friar Lodowick because of her claim that he could support her testimony. In the interim, as evidence against Isabella, another woman is brought forward: Mariana, but anonymous and veiled. She testifies that Angelo was sleeping with her at the time Isabella claims that she was being violated. Angelo, who has been made to serve as judge in his own case by the Duke, must deny that he is her husband, as she also claims. On this cue, she reveals herself as Mariana. There is now obviously a conspiracy afoot. Angelo describes it perfectly, and better than he knows: "I do perceive/ These poor informal women are no more/ But instruments of some more mightier member/ That sets them on" (5.1.235-238). Before the confusion caused by Isabella's charges can be dispelled by following up the implications of Mariana's remarks, the Duke—who has slipped away in the meanwhile—appears as Friar Lodowick and causes further disruption with a broadside of slanderous and seditious statements, for which he too is arrested. And in the scuffle to detain him, his cowl is pulled off, revealing him for who he is.

The Duke appears in disguise in this scene; Mariana and Isabella do as well. Disguises are lifted, but are they lifted all the way? and what is revealed underneath? Are we sure that we see everything? or are we duped into thinking that what is revealed to us when one disguise is lifted must therefore be the truth and not another lie? In his Deleuzian analysis of scenes earlier in the play, David McCandless detects genital imagery in Angelo's treatment of Claudio, Isabella, and Mariana: the three stand for Angelo's mortified flesh, the sexual desires he represses. His observations are astute, but would the diagnosis not be better applied to this episode? Two women

and a man, their true natures covered, are exposed in public; two giving testimony, driven by a "mightier member." What else could this be but Shakespeare's bawdy lampooning of the Duke's Machiavellianism? One need only listen to Lucio as he struggles with Friar Lodowick, finally pulling off his cowl: "Come, sir; come, sir; come, sir; foh, sir! Why, you bald-headed, lying rascal, you must be hooded, must you? Show your knave's visage, with a pox to you. Show your sheep-biting face, and be hanged an hour. Will't not off?" (5.1.354-358). And when it is off, there he stands, showing himself for all to take his full measure: every inch a Duke.

9

After his second coming, the Duke dispenses Justice and Mercy in mysterious ways, consecrating the impression that he is a God-like ruler with a miracle. The measure he holds up for others is perfection: "Be perfect," the Duke warns, citing the Sermon on the Mount (5.1.82; Matt. 5:48). First all are punished by a cruel and jealous Lord, before whom all are sinners; then all are forgiven by a benevolent and loving Lord, who recognizes that the law is impossible to fulfill. In other words, Shakespeare has the Duke stage a brilliant Machiavellian parody of the extremes of the Christian apocalyptic expectation of rewards and punishments by demonstrating their political usefulness.⁹

During his humiliation and punishment, Angelo is caught up in the portentous religious mood the Duke has created. He addresses the Duke fittingly as the "dread lord," who, "like pow'r divine," has seen and understood everything. He confesses not so much to a crime as to having a sinful intent; and he knows that the penalty for any unredeemed sinner is death. The Duke so sentences him, "Measure . . . for Measure." Angelo's death is ostensibly payment for Claudio's death; actually, it is necessary only to demonstrate the awesome providential workings of the Duke's rule. Before he dies, however, he must make Mariana a proper widow by making her a proper wife. Mariana pleads for his life most fairly; and in her last speech in the play, Isabella joins her (5.1.446-457). Some commen-

⁹ Though often intrigued by Shakespeare's insight, Friedrich Nietzsche did not have the fifth Act of *Measure for Measure* in mind while writing *Antichrist* (§61): "I envisage a spectacle so ingenious, so wonderfully paradoxical at the same time, that all the deities on Olympus would have had occasion for immortal laughter. *Cesare Borgia as pope*. Am I understood? Well then, that would have been the victory which alone I crave today: with that, Christianity would have been *abolished*."

tators believe Isabella's speech to be the most sincere expression of mercy in all of Shakespeare's writings.¹⁰ But they assume that she knows nothing of the Duke's intentions, that Angelo's sentencing of Claudio was unjust and a violation of his promise, and that her willingness to forgive the death of her brother is evidence, not of a lack of concern for his fate, but rather of the transcendence of Christian charity over worldly matters.¹¹ On the contrary. Her words absolve Angelo of all guilt, though she does not intend them to do so; and she goes so far as to say that "A due sincerity governèd his deeds/ Till he did look on me" (5.1.449-450).

*The Duke's
mercy utterly
bankrupt.*

The Provost is charged with procedural irregularities, and in his defense, according to script, he produces two prisoners whom he says he saved from Angelo's cruelty. The Duke takes this occasion to switch from dispensing Justice to dispensing Mercy for all; he pardons them both. Barnardine is the first. The Duke commutes his death sentence, not to life imprisonment, but rather to time served. Now, although Barnardine has his moments, he is so vile and wretched a man that allowing him to walk free is appallingly unjust. The mob might be pleased by the decision, or baffled by its inscrutable irrationality; however, it shows the utter bankruptcy of the Duke's mercy. After Barnardine, there is the miracle of Claudio's resurrection. It silences everyone, even Isabella. One might wonder what brother and sister have to say to one another, given the last words they exchanged, but they do not speak. The Duke then impatiently rushes things by attempting to seize the moment of Isabella's confusion to propose to her: "If he be like your brother, for his sake/ Is he pardoned; and, for your lovely sake,/ Give me your hand, and say you will be mine,/ He is my brother too" (5.1.494-495). Her maidenhead for Claudio's head. When the Duke's deputy made this proposition in private it was not good enough. Now the Duke makes it himself, and in public.

The silence lasts a moment too long. With Claudio alive, people

¹⁰ None is more extravagant in praise than Wilson Knight, for whom Isabella is "a spirit of purity, grace, maiden charm." Her pleading for Angelo's life is a spiritual "trial" that she passes gloriously: "she bows to a love greater than her own saintliness" (Knight 1957, 93).

¹¹ If Isabella is not a Christian saint, or the secularized, humanistic equivalent of one, what then is she? The question drives Harold Bloom to write despairingly: "Nothing is alive in Isabella, and Shakespeare will not tell us why and how she has suffered such a vastation. . . . I do not know of any other eminent work of Western literature that is nearly as nihilistic as *Measure for Measure*" (Bloom 1998, 379-380).

can begin to figure things out, so the Duke continues. Angelo is pardoned before anyone realizes that he has committed no crime. In a comic parody of Angelo's fate, Lucio is also condemned to marry Kate Keepdown before being executed; and then he too is pardoned. Angelo is commanded to love his wife; and Claudio, to love his. All is quickly forgiven in order that it be just as quickly forgotten. And finally, to complete the spectacle, the Duke turns again to Isabella: "Dear Isabel," he says, "I have a motion much imports your good,/ Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,/ What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (5.1.537-540). A dazzling coup de théâtre. The Duke's audacity allows him to succeed gloriously where Angelo's misjudgment had caused him to fall in ignominy. He proposes marriage to a nun and gets away with it.

Freudian analyses of *Measure for Measure* have found symptoms of homoeroticism in the Duke's relation to Angelo and masochistic beating fantasies in Isabella's words, but they overlook Shakespeare's much more revealing symbolic depiction of a violation of the incest taboo. A "brother" propositioning a "sister"? or is it a "father" propositioning a sister in front of her brother? And the sister accepting the advances of her "good brother father" (3.2.14)? For the Duke, the proposal is primarily a necessity of the times, the political usefulness of which he has come to recognize, though it is also, to some extent, a private indulgence in the ironies of the circumstances now that he has got them in hand again. For Isabella, accepting the proposal, as it seems evident she does,¹² is a necessity if her quality is ever to receive the recognition she thinks appropriate. A public act of submission today makes her the Duke's equal; what's to come is still unsure.

Throughout the play, Isabella has accepted no authority. She has often invoked higher authorities—many different, conflicting, and tellingly absent higher authorities—but only as a means to acquire power over others immediately present. She dressed herself in the authority of the Church in order to be able to refuse all worldly authorities; however, the moment she realized the extent

¹² Since John Barton's 1970 RSC production of *Measure for Measure*, it has become the norm to read the absence of an explicit consent to the Duke's proposal as an indication that Isabella rejects it, the length of the silence in which she deliberates varying according to the interpretation of the significance of her rejection. The point of such staging is commendable: the Duke's spectacle must be called into question, and the audience made to recognize something of the play's ambiguities. However, a last moment doubt on Isabella's part is much too little and much too late.

to which her “privileges” would be limited by the authority of the Mother Superior (1.4.1), she seized the first chance she had to leave the nunnery, citing the pressing authority of her brother’s worldly concerns—and taking the habit with her. Isabella’s natural mother is even less significant to her than the Mother Superior. When Claudio proves himself less of a man than she would have him be, Isabella invokes their dead father’s authority and makes her mother an adulteress by denying Claudio’s legitimacy. To use her own words, “Is’t not a kind of incest” to kill the mother in order to have the father to herself? (3.1.139-143) The dead father, her absent Lord, returns in the flesh soon enough. She proves herself worthy of him by refusing all those who say they represent him. When Isabella first confronts Angelo, she says, “I would to heaven I had your potency,” to which Lucio adds, “Ay, touch him; there’s the vein” (2.2.67, 70). Isabella is not impressed by Angelo’s borrowed authority; she sees past his seeming power, touches what he is (*Prince XVIII*), and finds him inadequate. In the end, she allows herself to be won only by her true Lord, the man who can “command her with more audacity” (*Prince XXV*). Today, the woman who personifies Fortuna allows herself to be taken by this prince. The Lucrezia Borgia of the play allows herself to be taken by her brother Cesare. But wait: is her “good brother father” still Cesare, or has he become their father, Pope Alexander VI?¹³

As the assembled notables retire to the palace, leaving the people satisfied and stupified by the incestuous union of politics and religion, the Duke promises to reveal “What’s yet behind, that’s meet you all should know” (5.1.542). If they do not know already, they will learn soon enough; and if their humanity rebels, the sanctuary of the theatre might be all that is open to them.

¹³ It is surprising that Marc Shell’s study of incest and *Measure for Measure* has only one passing reference to Lucrezia Borgia, and none at all to Cesare Borgia, the Borgia papacy, or Machiavelli. He writes: “For Lucrezia Borgia, the union that Isabella as sister fears and Isabella as Sister desires was an outrageous reality” (Shell 1988, 229, fn. 44).

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