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A Play of Human Frailty:
Shakespeare's Measure for Measure

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Introduction

William Shakespeare wrote most of his works toward the end of the sixteenth century, including tragedies, comedies and history plays. Nevertheless, toward the last part of his career, in the first years of the seventeenth century, his style changed, offering a range of plays which differ from the traditional canon. It's in this period that *Measure for Measure* (Fig.1) made its first appearance, seemingly on the 26th December 1604, as part of the Christmas royal entertainments, just shortly after the accession to the throne of England of King James I ¹. The following work deals precisely with *Measure for Measure*.

The nature of this play is quite ambiguous, because it cannot be listed among the tragedies or the comedies, nor is it a history play. So what? This dissertation is going to try to throw some light on this question.

First of all, an introduction to the world of comedy, and in particular Shakespeare comedy, will make clear what the main features of this kind of play are; furthermore, some considerations about the so called "problem plays" will be the frame of reference for the object of this dissertation, which is an analysis of the main characters and topics in *Measure for Measure*, along with some comparisons with other plays by Shakespeare, such as *Hamlet* and *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Thus, in defining what kind of play *Measure for Measure* is and what are its sources, also what Shakespeare's aim was and what he wanted his audience to perceive, will become clear.

In the chapter that follows, the main characters are taken into consideration, analyzing their behavior, their role and function in the play. The first section of the third chapter focuses on the disguised Duke of Vienna, Vincentio, who decided to leave his dukedom to Angelo, his Deputy, for a while, in order to let him mend the situation, which was getting out of hand. Indeed, the Duke had been too lax with his people up to that time and, as a consequence, Vienna had become a city of corruption and licentiousness. This topic leads us into the following section, which

¹ Kevin A. Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Farnham: Surrey, 2012, p.105;



MEASURE, For Measure.

Actus primus, Scena prima.

Enter Duke, Escalus, Lords.

Duke.

Escalus.
My Lord.

*Of Government, the properties to vs-
Would seeme in me t' affect speech & discourse,
Since I am put to know, that your owne Science
Exceedes (in that) the lists of all aduice
My strength can giue you: Then no more remains
But that, to your sufficiency, as your worth is able,
And let them worke: The nature of our People,
Our Cities Institutions, and the Termes
For Common Iustice, y' are as pregnant in
As Art, and practise, hath enriched any
That we remember: There is our Commission,
From which, we would not haue you warpe; call hither,
I say, bid come before vs Angelo:
What figure of vs thinke you, he will beare.
For you must know, we haue with special soule
Elected him our absence to supply;
Lent him our terror, drest him with our loue,
And giuen his Deputation all the Organs
Of our owne powre: What thinke you of it?
Esc. If any in Vienna be of worth
To vndergoe such ample grace, and honour,
It is Lord Angelo.*

Enter Angelo.

Duke. Looke where he comes.

Ang. Alwayes obedient to your Graces will,
I come to know your pleasure.

Duke. Angelo:

There is a kinde of Character in thy life,
That to th' obseruer, doth thy history
Fully vnfold: Thy selfe, and thy belongings
Are not thine owne so proper, as to waste
Thy selfe vpon thy vertues; they on thee:
Heauen doth with vs, as we, with Torches doe,
Not light them for themselues: For if our vertues
Did not goe forth of vs, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not: Spirits are not finely touch'd,
But to fine issues: nor nature neuer lends
The smallest scruple of her excellence,
But like a thrifty goddesse, she determines
Her selfe the glory of a creditour,
Both thanks, and vse; but I do bend my speech

To one that can my part in him aduertise;

Hold therefore Angelo:

In our remoue, be thou at full, our selfe:

Mortalitye and Mercie in Vienna

Liue in thy tongue, and heart: Old Escalus

Though first in question, is thy secondary.

Take thy Commission.

Ang. Now good my Lord

Let there be some more test, made of my mettle,

Before so noble, and so great a figure

Be stamp't vpon it.

Duke. No more evasion:

We haue with a leauen'd, and prepared choice

Proceeded to you; therefore take your honors:

Our haste from hence is of so quicke condition,

That it prefers it selfe, and leaues vnquestion'd

Matters of needfull value: We shall write to you

As time, and our concernings shall importane,

How it goes with vs, and doe looke to know

What doth befall you here. So fare you well:

To th' hopefull execution doe I leaue you,

Of your Commissions.

Ang. Yet giue leaue (my Lord,)

That we may bring you something on the way.

Duke. My haste may not admit it,

Nor neede you (on mine honor) haue to doe

With any scruple: your scope is as mine owne,

So to inforce, or qualifie the Lawes

As to your soule seemes good: Giue me your hand,

Ile priuily away: I loue the people,

But doe not like to stage me to their eyes:

Though it doe well, I doe not relish well

Their lowd applause, and Aues vehement:

Nor doe I thinke the man of safe discretion

That do's affect it. Once more fare you well.

Ang. The heauens giue safety to your purposes.

Esc. Lead forth, and bring you backe in happi-
nesse. *Exit.*

Duke. I thanke you, fare you well.

Esc. I shall desire you, Sir, to giue me leaue

To haue free speech with you; and it concerns me

To looke into the bottome of my place:

A powre I haue, but of what strength and nature,

I am not yet instructed.

Ang. 'Tis so with me: Let vs with-draw together,

And we may soone our satisfaction haue

Touching that point.

Esc. Ile wait vpon your honor,

Exeunt.

F

Scena

Fig.1. Photo of the first page of Measure for Measure from a facsimile edition (1996) of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623.

is dedicated to the character of Angelo; this man has received the hard task of ruling Vienna when almost no rules existed any more. Further on, another section is dedicated to the women of this play, especially to the character of the pure Isabella; then, also there are: the sweet Mariana, Claudio's mistress, namely Juliet and the lecherous Mistress Overdone, a brothel keeper. The last section of the third chapter focuses on the figures of the clowns and the way they differ from those we find in *Hamlet* or *Twelfth Night*.

Eventually, we shall come to learn that this play's finale is nothing but "a failed happy ending", because notwithstanding the apparent status of solved things through a series of marriages, the real truth is that beyond these fictional resolutions, there is something obscure, the gloomy significance of the play that Shakespeare may have wanted to convey to his audience.

In the end some conclusions are drawn that focus on the listing of the play, on its deep significance and its impact on the Jacobean audience.

1. The Genre of Comedy in Shakespeare's Time

The first thing that comes to the mind when we talk about comedy is something that makes people laugh. Yet, this is not enough, because the question that arises as a consequence is: what is it that makes people laugh? Laughter is generally caused by the familiarity of the situation; this means that the audience identifies with the character and thinks: "What would I do in that situation?". As Penny Gay points out,

"the community recognises its own passion for drama, and laughs, not in contempt like the on stage audience, but in delighted acknowledgement of that irrational need – and of the courage of the actors who would respond to it, whatever absurdity that may involve."²

Another reason can be found in the situation in which a snobbish character is taken down, punished by making him look funny. In general, we laugh at people who are in a difficult situation that the audience knows will be solved, and that makes them look funny. These are examples of what Penny Gay calls "visual comedy, that is, the undermining of seriously intended speech with bodily incongruities or indignity." In her essay "Comedy as Idea and Practice", she also refers to another reason people laugh, namely the so called "aural laughter-producing mechanism", that is set in motion "when a character mangling and misapplying the English language tickles the collective funnybone because of his departure from the norm" (such as Constable Elbow's malapropisms in *Measure for Measure*).

However, apart from laughter, comedy is a narrative form based on some precise expectations: notwithstanding the apparently tragic beginning of the story that is usually characterized by a situation of disorder, at the end, the denouement has to bring happiness, at least among the main characters. Indeed, its happy ending is precisely one of the fundamental features in a comedy; many things can happen during the unfolding of the plot; but whatever may happen, the result has always to

² Penny Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.3.

be the same: at the end, the audience expect an image of happiness, at least for some characters, generally achieved through marriage, family reconciliations, and/or feasts. Marriage is very important for the happy ending of comedy, since it gives the idea that harmony has been achieved, and the children begot as a result of this union constitute the certainty that society will develop and grow.

This consideration leads to reflect on an interesting point: comedy does not imply only laughter and happiness; comedies show that human life is nothing but a farce and even if we can have the impression that society has achieved a certain order, in the end, people are naturally inclined to overturn that order by acting stupidly.

In general, comedies are characterized by some fixed features that of course can change from situation to situation: the leading force of a comedy is clearly love; people in love, but not only them, usually do stupid things, act foolishly and often behave in a ridiculous way. The difficult situations the characters have to face are taken too seriously, showing how generally people react when in trouble; in other words, people tend to cross their bridges before they come to them. Another feature of comedy is the caricature, that is “a description of a person or thing that makes them seem ridiculous by exaggerating some of their characteristics”³. Caricatures in comedies are a means to show a society’s flaws.

The structure of comedy is based on three main moments: exposition, complication and then resolution. Exposition is necessary to show the audience what is going to happen. The complication phase is characterized by the development of the problems the characters will have to face throughout the story; this stage is generally the moment in which disorder prevails. At the end of the play, all the problems are solved in the denouement of the plot.

The three main models of comedy in England, before Shakespeare’s theatre, are something that is worth attention before moving to Shakespeare’s comedy in particular. The first one is Roman comedy, that included the plays of Terence and Plautus; their comedies were used in schools in order to teach the Latin language.

³ Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, edited by Sally Wehmeier, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Roman comedies were usually based on the love between two youths who, thanks to their witty servants' help, were able to stay together notwithstanding their vexed fathers' opposition. Some typical characters of Roman comedy are the boastful soldier, the doctor and the nagging wife (models that Shakespeare later used in his plays).

Later, in the sixteenth century, Italian comedy developed into two different branches: the *commedia erudita* and the *commedia dell'arte*. The first one was conceived for the higher classes and for academies, while the *commedia dell'arte* is not exactly a genre of drama, since the performance of the plot is not based on written texts, but on sketches or scenarios; as a matter of fact, it is an improvised comedy. These scenarios, Louise Clubb points out,

“memorialize several decades of experience in the Italian professional theatre and demonstrate much of its range. They attest to a continual mining of the kinds of fictive material also used by Shakespeare and to a method of selecting, combining and disposing stageworthy elements from a shared repertory.”⁴

She then explains that the most common scenarios have to do with:

“errors involving twins; the bed trick in a dark room; disguise of sex or social condition in order to serve a beloved, often entailing carrying messages to a new love and becoming the object of his or her affections; revelations of identity and reunions of separated families; tricks to fleece misers and to mock would-be seducers, presumptuous wooers and fortune-hunters; madness and pretended madness; supposed death.”⁵

Then, towards the end of the sixteenth century, the English writer John Lily starts to write literary plays intended for the court. The critic Janette Dillon points out that

⁴ Louise George Clubb, “Italian stories on the stage”, in Alexander Leggatt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37.

“it is with Lyly that the exploration of love and its effects on lovers begins. We find the musings of lovers on their own feelings, the mockery of their folly by others, the careful plotting of the game of love [...]. Lyly also anticipates Shakespeare in providing witty minor characters who indulge in extended repartee [...], wordplay and chop-logic.”⁶

At this point, as Penny Gay notices, “the stage was [...] set for Shakespearean comedy.”

⁶ Janette Dillon, “Elizabethan comedy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Comedy*, cit., p.51.

1.1. Shakespeare's comedy

Shakespeare wrote his plays in the period between the 1590s and the early 1600, carrying on the previous tradition of comedy, though introducing certain new features. Gay Penny affirms that

“writers and owners of the theatres were energetically availing themselves of anything that could be adapted and would sell to the audience.”⁷

Of course, not everybody agreed with this decision; for instance, Sir Philip Sidney complained in his *Apology for Poetry* that

“all their plays be neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained.”⁸

Here, Sidney is actually talking about decorum, but what he did not understand is that it was precisely those features that made the plays so popular and successful. The same success could be found “in the English vernacular tradition of drama that Shakespeare knew”⁹, that included the Mystery and the Morality plays. The former refer to the time when England was still Catholic, the latter date back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, when, alongside the typical allegorical figures that undertook religious and moral adventures, the figure of Vice became more popular. Vice could have different names and aspects in the various plays and it embodied “the attractive face of wrong-doing”¹⁰. It was and still is a fundamental feature since it allows the audience to know what it is going to do and how it is

⁷ Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, cit., p.6.

⁸ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or The Defence of Poesy)*, Third Edition, R.W. Maslen (ed.), Manchester University Press, 2002, p.112, 1-6.

⁹ Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*, cit., p.7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.8.

going to mock everyone. Clearly, it is witty and cunning, but in the end he is discovered, thus making the audience learn something, namely that “however clever or superior they think they are, ultimately goodness and righteousness will win.”¹¹ Examples of Vice in Shakespeare’s plays are Richard III, Iago in *Othello* or Iachimo in *Cymbeline*. All things considered, it is very likely that the figure of Vice highly influenced a typical Shakespearean character, a figure that we can find in almost all his plays, namely the clown, or the so called Shakespeare Fool.

First of all, it is important to make a distinction between the different types of fool existing on the Elizabethan stage: the servant, one of the most common kinds of fool, owes his origins to Roman comedy and to the sixteenth century’s *Commedia dell’Arte*. He is a witty character, able to cunningly chat with his master but also with other characters as well. However, he is physically flawed and his condition is not taken seriously enough, rather seen as merely comic. A double example of this kind of fool is seen in *The Comedy of Errors*, namely in the figures of the twin brothers Dromios: Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus. The former is the clumsy servant of Antipholus of Syracuse and the latter is the same kind of bumbling servant of Antipholus of Ephesus.

Another kind of fool is the country clown, a figure that comes from the English native tradition. He is a good-natured but not sophisticated character; as Penny Gay notices, “his view of the world is entirely restricted to his local activities.” Costard of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is an example of country clown. He is arrested at the beginning of the play because he flouted a rule the king introduced, namely that men have to avoid women’s company for a year. While in prison he is used by the courtiers who want to carry on their relationships; as a matter of fact, helped by Moth the page and a country wench, Jaquenetta, he makes fun of the courtiers by sending their love messages to the wrong women and by revealing their secrets.

The non-rural worker has a merely comic role instead, even if his function is another; indeed, his most important part in the play is that of satirical commentator

¹¹ Ibid., p.8.

of the life and behavior of the characters belonging to the upper class. Some examples of this kind of fool are the Constable of the village, like Elbow in *Measure for Measure*, the pimp, like Pompey in the same play, and the gravedigger, as in *Hamlet*.

Finally, there is the Fool, a professional jester, who earns money thanks to his jokes and songs. We usually find this kind of character in castles, even if he does not live in. Penny Gay says that

“His role is to deflate, through wit (at times obscure, perhaps deliberately so), the more pretentious attitudes of those in power.”¹²

An example of Fool is *Twelfth Night*'s Feste. He lives in the Countess Olivia's household, since he was her dead father's jester. He is probably middle aged, but this does not prevent him from being witty in his fooling and from singing like he was used to do.

Another important feature of Shakespeare's comedy is the meta-theatrical awareness. Indeed, Shakespeare wants his audience to bear in mind where they are, namely in a theatre, and that what they are watching is something fictional, namely a comedy. He wants them to identify with the characters of the play, but at the same time he does not want his audience to lose themselves in the story, the aim being that to remain meta-theatrically aware.

The structure of Shakespeare's comedy is worth attention as well, since it can be a guide-line for almost all his comedies. It is composed of three main moments: first, the opening scene, that must catch the audience's attention and set up the situation by anticipating what the story will be about. Then, the third act represents a sort of “pause”, where the development of the story slows down, a moment that allows the audience to make some reflections and considerations on the major themes of the comedy they are watching. Finally, the denouement is the moment in which all misunderstandings are solved, marriages or family

¹² Ibid., p.9.

reconciliations are celebrated and the bad punished, even if not too cruelly, so that their punishment makes the audience think about a future possible redemption.

Once the main features of Shakespeare's comedy have been shortly explained, a particular kind of comedy will be taken into consideration, namely the problem plays, works that are considered neither tragedies nor exactly comedies.

1.2. Introduction to the “Problem Plays”

Primarily, it is important to highlight that it was not Shakespeare who decided to call some of his plays “Problem Plays”.

In 1623, three of his “Romances” included in the first Folio (the first collected edition of Shakespeare’s works) were classified two as comedies, namely *The Tempest* and *The Winter’s Tale*, and one as a tragedy, *Cymbeline*. Later on, other plays were added to these two groups: *Troilus and Cressida* was classified as a tragedy, while *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* were included among the comedies.

The term “Problem Play” did not appear until the end of the nineteenth century; it comes from the theatrical movement of the 1890s that included figures like the playwright, poet and theatre director Henrik Ibsen and the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. In that period, William Witherle Lawrence, one of the major critics of the problem plays, gave his definition:

“The essential characteristic of a problem play, I take it, is that a perplexing and distressing complication in human life is presented in a spirit of high seriousness.”¹³

It is interesting to notice that only three of all Shakespeare’s plays are considered problem plays. The Irish critic Edward Dowden, in the preface to his work was the first one to group them together:

“*Twelfth Night* resumes all the admirable humorous characteristics of the group of comedies which it completes. Then the change comes; *All’s Well That Ends Well* is grave and earnest; *Measure for Measure* is dark and bitter. [...] *Troilus and Cressida* [...] was a last attempt to continue comedy made when Shakespeare had ceased to be able to smile genially, and

¹³ William Witherle Lawrence, *Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies*, rev. ed, Penguin Shakespeare Library, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969, p.21 (Quotation found in Vivian Thomas, *The moral universe of Shakespeare’s problem plays*, Croom Helm, London & Sydney, 1987, p.4.)

when he must be either ironical, or else take a deep, passionate and tragical view of life.”¹⁴

These three plays clearly constitute a significant change from all that Shakespeare wrote before. Dowden notices indeed that, in contrast with the Romantic comedies, something concerning mood and tone had changed: he thinks that *All's Well That Ends Well* is “grave and earnest”, *Measure for Measure* “dark and bitter” and *Troilus and Cressida* “ironical”; thus, no wonder that they are considered particular kinds of comedies.

In 1896, the English drama scholar Frederick Samuel Boas chooses to call them problem plays (though he included *Hamlet* as well), borrowing the term from Ibsen and Shaw’s modern theatre. His choice is made for two main reasons: first of all, he affirms that they are all difficult to classify, and then, they all have something in common, namely an artificial society with a rotten civilization. In addition, they are different from all other Shakespearean plays; Boas’ observations seem to be right, thus the question that arises is: why? What is that make them so similar among themselves and so different from the others? As Boas points out, it is precisely the kind of society they have, their problematic nature, but also a “failed happy ending”, such that the audience remains perplexed at the end of the play.

Nevertheless, the critic Vivian Thomas believes that Boas made a mistake in putting *Hamlet* in that group. She says that

“not only is the play manifestly a tragedy, but it is a particular kind of tragedy – the most popular kind of tragedy to occupy the stages of Elizabethan and Jacobean England – a revenge tragedy. *Hamlet* has its share of problems but they are effectively contained within the mode of tragedy. The genuine problem plays evade any such adequate classification.”¹⁵

In addition, Thomas is not the only critic who would remove *Hamlet* from the group of the problem plays. Notably, as we have already seen, it was Lawrence

¹⁴ Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, third edition, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1875, p.vi. (Quotation found in Thomas, *The moral universe of Shakespeare's problem plays*, cit., p.1).

¹⁵ Thomas, *The moral universe of Shakespeare's problem plays*, cit., p.4.

who in 1930 gave a precise definition of what a problem play is from his point of view, thus excluding a revenge tragedy like *Hamlet*; his definition distinguishes the problem plays from other kinds of drama,

“in that the theme is handled so as to arouse not merely interest or excitement, or pity or amusement, but to probe the complicated interrelations of character and action, in a situation admitting of different ethical interpretations.”¹⁶

Then he adds:

“The term ‘problem play’, then, is particularly useful to apply to those productions which clearly do not fall into the category of tragedy, and yet are too serious and analytic to fit the commonly accepted conception of comedy. Indeed, when the problem play becomes tragedy, it is, I think, best considered under that rubric; at all events, there is no difficulty in so classifying it.”¹⁷

After commenting the nature of this kind of play, Lawrence adds that they are also much inferior to the other plays Shakespeare wrote. We could hardly disagree with him, since it is true that the problem plays do not enjoy much popularity in respect to the other plays.

Later on, in 1950, another critic supports Lawrence’s view, namely the British scholar Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard. Nevertheless, according to his studies on Shakespeare’s problem plays, he substitutes “plays” for “comedies” and he also puts *Hamlet* in the group again. Tillyard divides the four plays into two groups, *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* form a group and *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well* another one; the critic shows what he thinks the difference between these two groups is:

“There are at least two kinds of problem child: first the genuinely abnormal child, whom no efforts will ever bring back

¹⁶ Lawrence, *Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies*, cit., p.21

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

to normality; and second the child who is interesting and complex rather than abnormal: apt indeed to be a problem for parents and teachers but destined to fulfillment in the larger scope of adult life. Now *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* are like the first problem child: there is something radically schizophrenic about them. *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are like the second problem child, full of interest and complexity but divided within themselves only in the eyes of those who have misjudged them. To put the difference in another way, *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are problem plays because they deal with and display interesting problems; *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* because they are problems.”¹⁸

Yet, the critic Vivian Thomas thinks that, even if Tillyard says something really interesting and probably true about the nature of these plays, he “fails to establish a meaningful framework for analyzing them as a group.”¹⁹

After Tillyard, Lawrence and Dowden, more or less ten years later, also A.P. Rossiter gives his opinion concerning the problem plays, though excluding *Hamlet* definitely and calling them “tragicomedies”. Despite he decides to call them with another name, he confirms some aspects these plays have in common: the presence of rotten societies, for instance; the revelation of something bad at a certain point of the plot; he says also that cynicism is usually a typical feature; generally, he notices that there is a kind of “shiftingness”, in other words, “all the firm points are not actually so firm”²⁰; and all plays have to do with appearance opposed to reality.

In 1963, the Shakespeare’s scholar Ernest Schanzer criticizes what the earlier critics, as Boas and Tillyard, affirmed about the problem plays. First of all he opposes Boas, who believes that these plays share moral problems; Schanzer states that they cannot share moral problems, since they lack a moral perplexity. In addition, he highlights that *Hamlet* cannot be considered a problem play, as Lawrence noticed before him, since it is one of the best examples of revenge tragedy. Furthermore, Schanzer recognizes that it is really difficult to label them in a single group, due to the fact that they all have problems, but different problems;

¹⁸ Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, Chatto&Windus, London, 1964, p.4.

¹⁹ Thomas, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, cit., p.7.

²⁰ Ibid., p.7.

nevertheless, he also believes that his predecessors have been too unclear and ambiguous, in particular Boas and Tillyard, in their definition of what a problem play is. As a consequence, he tries to give a more precise definition that can fit all three plays, but that has not to do with genre:

“A play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible or even probable.”²¹

The great difference of Schanzer in respect to previous criticism is the choice of plays: indeed, on the basis of the definition he gives, the three plays he considers problem plays are *Measure for Measure*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*. From his point of view, neither *All's Well That Ends Well* nor *Troilus and Cressida* can be considered to be problem plays. Therefore, Schanzer is not only rebuilding the common definition of problem play, but he is also creating a new group.

Yet, he is not the only one who tries to change the concept of what a problem play is. Indeed, in 1983, the Canadian critic Northrop Frye, in his “The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies”, tries to explain why *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* can be considered to be Romantic comedies. In order to explain his view, he puts these two plays in opposition to *Troilus and Cressida*, which he defines an experimental play. From his point of view, *Troilus and Cressida* lacks deliverance and leaves a sense of frustration at the end; on the contrary, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* achieve redemption, offering a festive conclusion and a new society at the end of the story: this is what he calls “the myth of deliverance”. According to his considerations, Frye might be right, if he did not think that *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*'s endings represent a happy ending. Most critics and also an attentive spectator/reader can see that the finale of these two plays is absolutely not a genuine and unquestionable

²¹ Ernest Schanzer, *The problem plays of Shakespeare: a study of Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure and Cleopatra*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1963, p.6.

happy ending. As a matter of fact, we can easily presume that neither *Measure for Measure* nor *All's Well* are Romantic comedies.

Vivian Thomas's point of view is that the structure of these plays is very similar to a Romantic comedy, but the stories are based on completely different worlds. Indeed, she notices,

“There is a distinct feeling that despite the ostensible harmony that is achieved at the end of these plays there is a tension which precludes a whole-hearted belief in the joyful resolution.”²²

Thus, when the play's performance is finished, the emotion we are left with is not of capitulation, but of “mental agitation and questioning”.

Notwithstanding the various ideas and reflections about the problem plays, there are some important questions that remain; for example, what the relation between drama and life in these plays is; to what extent illusion and reality diverge; or how it is possible to understand such an upsetting end. These questions can be posed in regard to each of the plays classified as problem plays: *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*. In addition, there are some features that undoubtedly link the three of them. Thus, it is worth looking at them carefully.

First of all, while comedies end with a moment of deliverance and joy and tragedies leave the audience with a sense of loss, these three plays do not achieve either. Thus, Vivian Thomas chooses the word “incongruity” to define the kind of feeling the audience might experience at the end of these plays. Indeed, we cannot call their ending “happy ending”, because clearly it is not. In addition, it is such an ambiguous finale that the audience is left reflecting on the characters, their relationships and the institutions of their society.

Talking about society, all three plays present some major problems about their society. Vienna, for instance, has become a city where corruption and licentiousness abound; *Troilus and Cressida* sees the failure of both societies, the

²² Thomas, *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, cit., p.14.

Greek and the Trojan; and *All's Well's* society, represented by the French court, is quite obsolete.

Furthermore, the major theme of each one of these plays is debated more or less in the same crucial moment, namely in a scene of the second act. For instance, *Troilus and Cressida's* themes of value, worth and honour are discussed in the second scene of the second act; the same structure affects the third scene of the second act of *All's Well* and finally, *Measure for Measure's* second scene of the second act deals precisely with law and justice.

Another feature they all share is the relationship between human behavior and social institutions; in fact, the three plays are all “concerned with authority, hierarchy, decision-making with consequence of these decisions for the society as a whole and for particular individuals”²³.

Then, also the contrast between appearance, that Vivian Thomas calls “attractive exterior”, and reality, or “unattractive interior”, is a fundamental feature of these plays. For instance, at the beginning of the story, Achilles tries to defeat his enemy fairly, but after he understands that he is not able to do it, he decides to murder him; Bertram, who is a well-read and kind man, shows his real nature by behaving in a contemptible manner; Parolles acts in a strange manner not to show he is nothing but a coward; and Angelo the Deputy, a precise and relentless judge, finally shows to be a corrupt and depraved man.

In addition, these plays all “provoke a sense of detachment”, to use Vivian Thomas' words; in other words, the audience has difficulty identifying with the characters because they are continually subjected to irony, paradox and deflation.

There is then a peculiarity concerning clowns: in fact, Thersites, Parolles and Lucio are no fools or clowns, but “denigrators”, as Vivian Thomas calls them, since they make use of deception, have peculiar insights and are liars and abusers, in order to obtain what they want. Notwithstanding the major role they play in each story, they are and remain outsiders.

²³ Ibid., p.15.

A further point these plays have in common is an important theme, namely honour, that they all have to do with. Indeed, they are all concerned with honour, in a sense or another. Vivian Thomas points out that

“the plays all invite a probing of this concept and insist on separating its various strands.”²⁴

Furthermore, they are also all concerned with sex, and women are seen as symbols and sex objects:

“Love and lechery feature powerfully in all three plays and provoke serious questions about sexual attraction, sexual desire and repression and the extent to which institutions ought to impinge on these fundamental human drives.”²⁵

They are also connected in different ways to the theme of disillusionment. For instance, at the end of the play, Troilus’s disillusionment has to do with both love and war; the Countess and the King are disillusioned by Bertram because he shows not to deserve to take his father’s place; and Angelo is disillusioned about his supposed virtue.

Vivian Thomas identifies a further similarity between the three plays, namely “a passionate desire to believe in total integrity: a wholeness and beauty in life which cannot be tarnished”. However, she points out,

“The audience may experience a severe sense of disillusionment in all three plays while recognizing the force of the aspiration for wholeness or purity in a flawed sense.”²⁶

The matter of identity and kinship is something we can find in all three plays as well. In *Troilus and Cressida* every character seems to exist because he or she is related to someone else, or because he or she “loses” his/her identity, like in the

²⁴ Ibid., p.17.

²⁵ Ibid., p.18.

²⁶ Ibid., p.19.

case of Calchas. This mechanism works also for *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. *All's Well*, for instance, begins with a conversation about two dead fathers who nevertheless live in the minds of people. The Countess has an adopted child, Helena, who could be also her daughter-in-law marrying Bertram, who is seen as a son by the King's eyes. In *Measure for Measure*, instead, Isabella has to save her brother by pleading for mercy to Angelo, the Deputy; we also come to learn that Mariana was deserted by Angelo because her brother shipwrecked losing her dowry; and Lucio refuses to recognize his son in order to avoid marrying a prostitute, and so on.

Last but not least, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well* and *Troilus and Cressida* all have a peculiar language, characterized by many speeches that are not merely ambiguous, but even awkward:

“The verse occasionally exhibits a strain and a tension which reflects the stress of conflicting emotions within the characters who voice them.”²⁷

It is now clear that these three plays do share some problems that allow to group them together. However, this work will take into consideration only one of these so called problem plays; as a matter of fact, the following chapter will partly focus on the definition of *Measure for Measure* precisely in terms of genre, in order to decide if we can label it in some way, as a dark comedy like some say, or as a tragicomedy, or if we should merely accept the fact that it can be considered nothing more than a problem play.

²⁷ Ibid., p.21.

2. Labeling *Measure for Measure*

Once an overview about the problem plays written by Shakespeare has been given, it may be interesting to linger a little bit more on *Measure for Measure*'s classification, or at least on the various opinions of critics about it. No doubt that *Measure for Measure* is a problem play, since it cannot be classified either as a comedy or as a tragedy. Indeed, generally speaking, a comedy is a play that presents some complications and difficulties at the beginning of the story, but at the end they are all solved, there are marriages and reconciliations, allowing in this way the achievement of the so called happy ending; on the contrary, a tragedy generally begins with a stable situation that complicates with the unfolding of the story until a tragic ending that involves death and departures.

Measure for Measure does not correspond to either of the two descriptions; this play's beginning, and also its ending, might remind the audience of a comedy: an innocent boy is condemned to death by a ruthless deputy; the condemned's sister tries to move the deputy, who agrees to save her brother's life only if she gives herself to him. She refuses, but in the end, nobody dies and a series of marriages that make us think of the typical happy ending of a comedy take place. Yet, this is not a comedy, since the end of *Measure for Measure* leaves a series of doubts and perplexities that have nothing to do with the happy ending of traditional comedies. For instance, the various marriages are not celebrated as a consequence of love (except for Claudio and Juliet perhaps), but they are merely ordered by Duke Vincentio. The Duke orders Angelo to marry Mariana, and Lucio to marry the prostitute he got pregnant, something that Lucio compares to "pressing to death, whipping, and hanging!"²⁸. Last but not least, he himself proposes to Isabella, who gives no answer in return, but whom we think should not accept his proposal.

As a matter of fact, some critics consider *Measure for Measure* to be a tragicomedy. Kevin A. Quarmby, for instance, is one of them. He also thinks that the Elizabethan and Jacobean audience were well aware of the traditional

²⁸ William Shakespeare, *Measure for measure*, edited by Brian Gibbons, Cambridge University Press, 2006, V.1.514-515. Henceforward quoted as *Measure*.

Renaissance genre-system that included the forms of tragedy, comedy and *tragicomedy*. Quarmby bases his theory of the genre-system on the title-page of Ben Jonson's *Folio Workes* (1616). This frontispiece (Fig.2) shows the dominant figure of *Tragicomoedia* flanked by the personified figures of comedy and tragedy, who defiantly stare at each other. The personification of tragicomedy wears the traditional sock and tunic of comedy while holding the sceptre and bearing the crown, both elements of tragedy. Her sight is then firmly and proudly pointed towards the reader. Tragicomedy is also flanked by other two minor figures: a satyr and a shepherd. The satyr is portrayed with stave and panpipes, while the shepherd is holding the typical crook of shepherds and a pipe. Together, they demonstrate that tragicomedy finds its historical roots in Italian pastoral drama. In addition, the satyr has also a second connotation that Quarmby smartly points out:

“The ‘Satyr’ is also indicative, however, of a peculiarly English etymological confusion between the licentious satyr of pastoral comedy and the dramatic mode of ‘satire’, which originated in the Roman ‘medley’ poems and satiric dramas that ridiculed vice, immorality or folly in an individual or society. [...] Jonson’s 1616 title-page suggests a primacy for the tragicomic form that recognizes these English and Italian associations with both the satire and pastoral modes.”²⁹

It is obvious, though, that this peculiar kind of drama, namely tragicomedy, was much debated and also strongly contested. The debate on tragicomedy reached its acme in the North of Italy, during the so called Italian *Cinquecento*, especially in the absolutist ducal courts. Indeed, the vernacular and pastoral comedy respectively of Ariosto and Tasso were born precisely in the Dukedom of Ferrara, where also a form of tragicomedy was developing. The first experiments of tragicomedy have been made by the courtier, playwright, diplomat and professor of rhetoric Giovanni Battista Guarini. His *‘tragicomedia pastorale’* was written between 1580 and 1585.

²⁹ Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler*, cit., p.10.

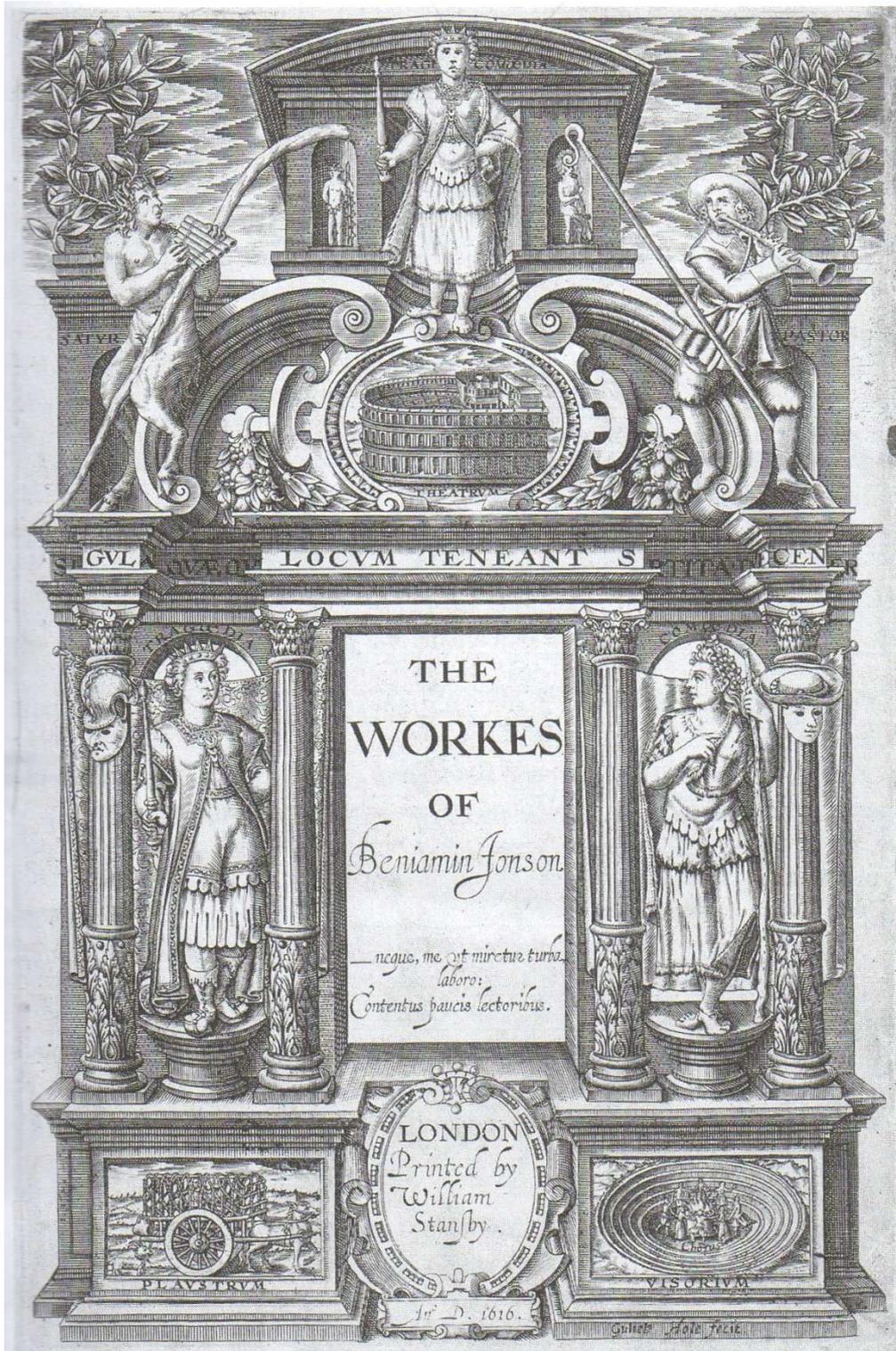


Fig.2. The personification of Tragicomedy, flanked by a satyr and a shepherd, on the frontispiece of Ben Jonson's *Workes*, 1616.

His play, entitled *Il Pastor Fido*, was published in Venice in 1590, but not performed until 1596³⁰.

Clearly enough, this was something that nobody had ever seen before and for this reason it was much criticised. As a consequence, Guarini felt the necessity of publishing a manifesto for the new genre tragicomedy. In 1601 the *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica*, containing a new edition of *Il Pastor Fido*, appeared. Guarini's attempt was to give a satisfactory definition of this "elusive" form of drama. He stated that

"Tragicomedy is not made up of two entire plots, one of which is a perfect tragedy and the other a perfect comedy... [nor is it] a tragic story vitiated with the lowliness of comedy or a comic fable contaminated with the deaths of tragedy. [It is a] third thing that [is] perfect of its kind."³¹

In other words, Guarini took something both from tragedy and comedy; from tragedy, he took "its danger but not its death", and from comedy, "its laughter [...] modest amusements, feigned difficulty [and] happy reversal."³² However, Renaissance criticism considered this mixing of rank as a lack of decorum. Guarini answered to this complaint by recalling Aristotle's allusion to tragicomedy in his *Poetics*.

What is interesting for us, for the labeling of *Measure for Measure*, is Guarini's insistence on a particular concept, namely that tragicomedy is characterized, from his point of view, by a mixing of comedy and tragedy, but in particular by its taking from tragedy "its danger but not its death". In other words, the characters of a tragicomedy are brought very close to death, but in the end they never die. This is exactly what happens in *Measure for Measure*, especially to Claudio, Angelo and Barnardine.

³⁰ Cfr. *Ibid.*, p.10-12.

³¹ Giovanni Battista Guarini, "The Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry", in Allan H. Gilbert (ed.), *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1962, p.507.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 511.

However, when Guarini's tragicomedy arrived in England in 1602, it was nothing new for the Jacobean audience. Indeed, as we have already explained in the previous chapter, English playwrights were looking for anything that could appeal to the audience, in this way upsetting the traditional canon of comedy and tragedy. Therefore, they created a complete new genre that someone called tragicomedy, like in Italy, and other simply referred to as problem plays.

A twisting of the traditional canon of drama could well upset someone. Indeed, there were many people who disagreed with this choice. Among them there was Sir Philips Sidney, who openly attacked the new-born genre of tragicomedy in his *Defence of Poesie* (1595), showing his dismay for a group of plays that were neither tragedies nor comedies, but a contemptible mixing of the two.

It may be possible that a play like *Measure for Measure* is generally merely classified as a problem play for this reason too, since not everybody agrees in labeling it as a tragicomedy.

Nevertheless, *Measure for Measure* has also been classified as a dark comedy, or more specifically as a satirical comedy. According to the study of the Shakespeare scholar Reginald A. Foakes, we can make a distinction between dark comedies and last plays, *Measure for Measure* belonging to the first group. After the 1600, he notices,

“Shakespeare seems to have been much influenced by, and to have developed in his own way, new techniques and possibilities for drama. [...] Shakespeare's most experimental plays at this time were the dark comedies, and the main line of development of his dramatic skills lay from these through the late tragedies like *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to the last plays.”³³

From Foakes' point of view, the satirical element of *Measure for Measure* is characterized from the beginning of the play by the power caused by the presence

³³ Reginald A. Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, Routledge Library Editions, London, 1971, p.4.

of a clown, Pompey the pimp, and by a “corrupting lover of words”, Lucio. Foakes points out that

“their liveliness, good humour, and freedom are important in establishing the tonality of the play.”³⁴

They appear on the stage for the first time in the second scene, together with Mistress Overdone, a brothel keeper:

“MISTRESS OVERDONE: Why, here’s a change indeed in the commonwealth. What shall become of me?

POMPEY: Come, fear not you: good counselors lack no clients. Though you change your place, you need not change your trade. I’ll be your tapster still. Courage, there will be pity taken on you, you that have worn your eyes almost out of service, you will be considered.”³⁵

What Foakes considers primary about their presentation is “not their nature as sinners, or their licentiousness, but simply their vitality, their zest of life.”

Angelo’s harshness, Claudio’s sentence to death for a sin he did not properly commit and Isabella’s desire for more discipline and restraint in the order of St Clare (“I speak not as desiring more, But rather wishing a more strict restraint Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare.”³⁶) are the elements against the vitality of the characters of the underworld and they constitute the contrasts to the natural unfolding of the comedy, making it a dark comedy. Foakes fittingly remarks:

“The juxtaposition of, on the one hand, freedom, common vitality, licence and lechery, against, on the other hand, Angelo’s urge to impose extreme penalties, and Isabella’s drive to inflict on herself the maximum discipline and restraint, provide the tonality of the play.”³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., p.18.

³⁵ *Measure*, I.2. 87-93.

³⁶ *Measure*, I.4.3-5.

³⁷ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.18.

The tone of *Measure for Measure* is indeed characterized by a series of ironic contrasts that have the power of mitigating the harshest scenes of the play. For instance, the second act starts with the trial of Pompey. This scene is quite interesting and the audience should wonder what its significance is. In fact, Claudio, who was unjustly arrested, is not seen in his trial, but he is presented as already sentenced. On the contrary, Pompey the pimp and Froth, a foolish gentleman, are judged by Angelo and Escalus. The scene is very funny and lively indeed: Pompey provided a mistress for Froth, this woman being precisely Elbow's wife, who anyway was much inclined in granting her favours. In addition, while Claudio is immediately sentenced to death, Elbow is merely sent away with a warning, since his story is so well told that Escalus cannot detain him. In fact, the whole scene is presented so comically that even Escalus is amused:

“ELBOW: [...] Prove this, thou wicked Hannibal, or I'll have mine action of battery on thee.

ESCALUS: If he took you a box o'th'ear, you might have your action of slander too.

ELBOW: Marry, I thank your good worship for it. What is't your worship's pleasure I shall do with this wicked caitiff?

ESCALUS: Truly, officer, because he hath some offences in him that thou wouldst discover, if thou couldst, let him continue in his courses till thou knowst what they are.”³⁸

Elbow's malapropisms in presenting Froth and Pompey as “two notorious benefactors”³⁹ instead of malefactors, together with Pompey's ability in “turning the evidence, filibustering, and introducing so much irrelevance that all sense gets lost”⁴⁰ and Escalus' amusement, are all elements that contribute to the mitigation of the following scene.

³⁸ *Measure*, II.1.152-160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II.1.47.

⁴⁰ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.19.

Indeed, after Pompey's trial, the atmosphere becomes darker. As Foakes notices,

“Shakespeare changes the key, so to speak, endowing the earnestness of Angelo and Isabella with religious colouring.”⁴¹

Isabella begs Angelo to be merciful with her brother, sparing his life; so, she humbly asks him:

“let it be his fault,
And not my brother.”⁴²

In order to do this, she appeals to God; nevertheless, Angelo does not seem to be moved at all. On the contrary, he feels a strange but really powerful attraction for the pure Isabella; however, his feeling has nothing to do with love or tenderness, what he feels is exclusively lust. Angelo is amazed and “temporary disgusted” of his feelings as well.

Still, the entire sequence is again tempered by the previous one. Foakes remarks that

“if Pompey's licence in sexual matters needs to be restrained, at least his instinct as “a poor fellow that would live” seems healthier than Angelo's and Isabella's shrinking from the demands of the flesh.”⁴³

There is also another figure in the play that tends to bring about a certain degree of havoc, namely Lucio. During the meeting between Angelo and Isabella, for instance, he stays behind, suggesting to Isabella what to say, like a sort of Mephistopheles. Though, he is not doing this because he is interested in virtue or he wants to save Claudio, but because this amuses him, he merely would like to see Angelo won over by Isabella's rhetoric and eloquence.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.20.

⁴² *Measure*, II.2.36-37.

⁴³ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.20.

The ironical contrasts continues. For instance, Angelo's firmness in applying the law with Claudio is followed by his outrageous proposal to Isabella to commit the same sin for which her brother has to die. Isabella is absolute in her answer, considering her chastity more important than her brother's life:

“Then Isabel live chaste, and brother die:
More than our brother is our chastity.”⁴⁴

However, after her brother begs her to give herself to Angelo so that his life be spared, her answer is even harsher and, in a sense, she irremovably rejects her brother:

“Take my defiance,
Die, perish. Might but my bending down
Relieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.”⁴⁵

In other words, both Angelo and Isabella are off balance, they do not have a sense of proportion, either of humour.

In the third act, another character starts messing things up, namely the Duke, disguised as a friar. He represents a further element that upsets the comedy as it should be.

“Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,
Dreaming on both: for all thy blessed youth
Becomes as aged and doth beg the alms
Of palsied eld; and when thou art old and rich,
Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb, nor beauty
To make thy riches pleasant. What's yet in this
That bears the name of life?”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Measure*, II.4.185-186.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, III.1.143-147.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, III.1.32-39.

Here the Duke is talking to Claudio in order to convince him that to die is better than living a life of afflictions and disease. His speech is splendidly rhetorical and

“it strikes plangently a chord to which all human beings respond, and [...] echoes Christian homilies on the vanity of this world, and on the art of dying well.”⁴⁷

However, as Lever notices in his introduction to *Measure for Measure*, the Duke’s account of the human condition “eliminates its spiritual aspect, and is essentially materialist and pagan”⁴⁸.

Claudio’s reaction to the Duke’s speech is deducible: he does not want to die. Nevertheless, he is not playing the part of the coward just because he wants to live and begs his sister to save him; Claudio loves life, and for him life is love; yet, his thought strongly contrasts with both Angelo’s “chill austerity” and Isabella’s “frigid chastity”. In addition, Claudio is frightened of death and dreads what comes after. As Foakes remarks,

“to be absolute for life in this way is as perverse as to be absolute for death in the Duke’s way.”⁴⁹

At this point of the story, it seems that there is no solution to the various conflicts and contrasts established until now. Here the Duke appears again, leaving behind his poetic speeches and turning to prose, in this way tempering again the atmosphere of the previous scene. With the entrance of Mariana and her role in the story, a happy outcome seems to be assured.

The third act seems to convey precisely this message. In fact, Pompey is again conducted to jail as a bawd, this time in the company of Mistress Overdone. The prison represents in *Measure for Measure* a centre of life and remains also the centre of action until the denouement of the play in the fifth act. Therefore, we see Pompey in prison, who is a cheerful bawd who then, curiously, becomes a cheerful

⁴⁷ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.22.

⁴⁸ See J.W. Lever’s Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1965, p. lxxxvii.

⁴⁹ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.23.

hangman. There, we find also Lucio, who makes fun of Pompey and then slanders the Duke disguised as a friar. From his conversation with Lucio, even the Duke seems more human, appearing “a man of flesh, subject to common lusts and desires”⁵⁰. Another character we find in prison is Barnardine. Barnardine is a prisoner sentenced to death, thus he is in the same position of Claudio. Though, his crime is much worse, since he is said to have murdered someone. We do not know much about his story, but it is not necessary for the function he has in this play. Barnardine stands indeed for life in prison, since he has been in jail for nine years, already sentenced to death but still not executed. The reason is that every time he is to be taken to the block, he simply refuses. The Provost describes him as:

“A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep: careless, reckless, and fearless of what’s past, present, or to come: insensible of mortality and desperately mortal.”⁵¹

Whatever his behavior is, his intent seems clear: to stay alive. In this sense, he is very similar to Claudio, loving life almost desperately. Apparently, he is not frightened of death, but refusing to prepare himself for it, he succeeds in not being executed. Once more, Foakes points out:

“Again, it is the urge to live, not the resolution for death, that carries through the play’s action.”⁵²

The final act is almost surrealistic; everything is explained, everything is solved. Apparently. First of all, we come to learn what the meaning of the title is; when Angelo is discovered for his crime, the Duke condemns him, coming back to poetry:

“An Angelo for Claudio, death for death;
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.24.

⁵¹ *Measure*, IV.2.125-128.

⁵² Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.26.

Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure.”⁵³

Though, the story does not end here. Mariana, helped by Isabella’s support, begs the Duke to spare her new husband’s life. So Angelo is spared, Claudio appears to be still alive, Barnardine is spared as well, Juliet and Claudio eventually get married and the Duke proposes to Isabella, who remains silent as if she were petrified. The only one to be really punished is Lucio, and not because he impregnated a prostitute and then abandoned her, but because he slandered the Duke⁵⁴. Thus, the so called happy ending seems to be achieved: the bad are punished in a way or another, reconciliations and marriages take place; still, there is something that leaves the audience, or the reader, quite perplexed; the marriages are an example, since none of them, except perhaps for Claudio and Juliet’s, are celebrated for love. In addition, the serious issues of this play, such as law and mercy, chastity and honour and so on, are

“bound in by the action as a whole, and subdued by the intractable nature of life at large, by the inexplicable sense of a desire for survival, and by excitement in living, that breezy pleasure exhibited in the lovmakers, lechers, fools and clowns.”⁵⁵

Therefore, *Measure for Measure* appears not to be a comedy in the traditional sense of the term, because of the feeling of perplexity and bewilderment that it leaves us at the end. Some gaps remain, such as that between appearance and reality, act and belief, justice and mercy. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to say whether Barnardine deserved to be freed or not; we cannot decide whether Mariana and Angelo’s marriage is a reward or a punishment; the Duke’s proposal to Isabella is upsetting as well, like her silent response. These are the reasons for which Foakes, and other critics with him, decided to label *Measure for Measure* as a dark comedy. Some critics, like Lever for instance, even regard it as “limited in its

⁵³ *Measure*, V.1.402-404.

⁵⁴ See 3.3. “Comic characters”.

⁵⁵ Foakes, *Shakespeare: the Dark Comedies to the Last Plays: from Satire to Celebration*, cit., p.29-30.

achievement”⁵⁶, since “the ‘incarnation’ of ideas, principles, beliefs is not at all points consistent and complete.”⁵⁷

Whatever we call it: dark comedy, problem play or tragicomedy, *Measure for Measure* presents upsetting and contrasting issues that characterize it. Topics like justice and mercy, honour and virtue, corruption and slander, religion and licentiousness, are strongly perceivable in this play, though a real answer to the questions it poses is not given; in this way the audience is left with a sense of bewilderment and perplexity that Shakespeare may have wanted to leave. As one of his experimental plays, *Measure for Measure* is for some critics a failure, but it might also be that this was exactly the message Shakespeare wanted to convey.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.30.

⁵⁷ See Lever’s Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p. xciii.

2.2. Sources

The major sources for *Measure for Measure* are to be found in the ancient European folk-tales with their ethical and emotional stance. These tales tell stories about corrupt magistrates, disguised rulers, substituted bed-mates and so on.

When Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*, it is probable that he had already read the Italian *novelle* of Boccaccio and his followers. In fact, seven of these *novelle* provide the main sources for various plays by Shakespeare; for instance, he used Bandello as a source for *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1595); Ser Giovanni is a source for *The Merchant of Venice* (1597); *Othello* (probably written in 1603), like *Measure for Measure*, has Giraldi Cinthio as major source, and *All's Well What Ends Well* (possibly written in 1603 as well) uses Boccaccio. Still, from J.W. Lever's point of view, it is quite difficult to draw a clear line between "distinct fictional sources and a wide, alluvial tract of literary and historical influences in which the play was orientated."⁵⁸

The chief source for *Measure for Measure* is therefore G.B. Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565), Part II, *Década 8, Novella 5*, that tells the story of a corrupt magistrate and his infamous proposal. Nevertheless, there are also some interesting historical parallels that could be earlier than Cinthio; just to give an example for what concerns the story of the corrupt magistrate, Lever notices an analogy with an account found in a private letter from Vienna (1547) written by a Hungarian student, Joseph Macarius. In his letter, Joseph talks about the conduct of a Spanish count or captain, whose name we do not know, near Milan in the time of Ferdinand Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua and Monferrat. Shortly after, the story was translated into a neo-Senecan verse tragedy written by Claude Rouillet, called *Philanira* (1556 in Latin, 1563 in French). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the story was rewritten in prose more than once, with some differences each time. The synopsis of that story is essentially as follows: a man is in prison, waiting to be executed because he committed a murder in hot blood. His wife asks

⁵⁸ See Lever's Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.xxxv.

the magistrate for mercy, but what she is asked in return is quite difficult to accept for her. The magistrate's proposal is very simple: he will spare her husband's life if she gives herself to the magistrate. Reluctant, but determinate in her desire to save her husband, she agrees and lies with the magistrate. Nonetheless, the magistrate does not keep his word and orders to execute the prisoner. Overwhelmed by grief, shame and anger, the woman decides to complain to the ruler of the country directly. The magistrate is judged and punished in a double way: he has to marry the widow in order to restore her lost honour and after that, he has to be executed for his crime.

Clearly enough, the story has been changed throughout its diverse versions, adding and changing something here or there. Shakespeare probably knew more of these versions and took the cue for the characterization of his protagonists. Lever thinks that Lupton's version, in particular, could be a source for Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*:

“The lengthy dialogues between the Gentlewoman and the Judge contain several verbal parallels to Isabella's debates with Angelo in II.ii and II.iv. The Gentlewoman's plea and the Judge's replies, more developed than in any other rendering, follow broadly the same course. Lupton's time-scheme of three days is repeated, and his one-day intervals between each interview and the assignation correspond with the iterated ‘tomorrows’ of the play, including the dramatically anomalous ‘tomorrow’ proposed by Angelo in II.iv [...]. The ‘privie dore’ through which the woman passed to her secret encounter with the Judge is a further detail paralleled in Angelo's instructions to Isabella [...].”⁵⁹

However, Cinthio remains the major source for our problem play, whose story, though, is not very different from the previous versions; in fact, the main changes are the status of the heroine, from wife to sister of the condemned, and the crime committed by the magistrate, from murder to seduction of a virgin, in this way giving the plot a more romantic and human touch. Therefore, it would be

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.xxxviii.

interesting to make a comparison between the plot of *Measure for Measure* and Cinthio's *Novella*, in order to define how similar they are and in what they actually differ.

To begin with, Cinthio's fifth *novella* is set in Innsbruck, not in Vienna like *Measure for Measure* and one of the main characters is Juriste, the equivalent of Shakespeare's Angelo. Juriste, a close friend to the Emperor of Rome, Maximian, is sent to rule Innsbruck. Maximian's advice, though, is not to offend justice in Innsbruck, since if that happened Juriste could not hope for forgiveness. However, even if very proud of the office his friend bestowed on him, Juriste is not a man who "rightly knows himself"⁶⁰, like Angelo in a sense, who did not think his response to Isabella's speech would be so prurient. Nevertheless, Juriste does his job well for a long time in Innsbruck, differently from Angelo who does not give the impression of being a good ruler at all. Still, one day, Juriste orders to execute a young man, Vico, because accused of having raped a girl. The sixteen-year-old boy has a sister, like Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, who promptly goes in the presence of Juriste in order to ask him to be merciful with her brother. The girl's name is Epitia, a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl with a sweet voice, an eloquence that can be compared to Isabella's and who has also studied philosophy. She says to Juriste that her brother is very young, he has therefore a whole life to live ahead; she also pleads that he is in love with the girl he wronged and that he will marry her for sure. Finally, she tells Juriste that anyway the law is written in order to arouse fear rather than to be strictly applied and in practice, he should be merciful with Vico. Notwithstanding Epitia's ability in developing her thought, Juriste is struck only by her beauty. He says to her that he will defer the execution, but actually he is determined to satisfy his lust. Like Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, the young girl goes to her brother, who is now in prison and who begs her to insist with Juriste. Once Epitia and Juriste meet again, he tells her that Vico will die, unless she gives herself to him. Like Isabella, she answers that even if she dearly loves her brother, her honour is even more important to her. Juriste promises to marry Epitia

⁶⁰ See Brian Gibbons' Introduction to *Measure*, cit., p.7.

if she accepts and he concludes that she has to decide by the next day. As a consequence, she goes to her brother and tells him to be prepared for death, since she cannot accept Juriste's proposal. Like Claudio, Eptia's brother tries to move her by talking about their brotherly love, their blood kinship and by assuring her that Juriste will marry her because she is particularly pretty and talented. Therefore, Eptia decides to accept. From this point on, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* departs from Cinthio's story; in fact, the next day Eptia goes to tell Juriste her decision and as a consequence, he promises her brother will be spared. Notwithstanding what he says to the naïve Eptia, before fulfilling his appetite with her, he gives order to execute her brother. The next morning, he tells her she can go home, where her brother will be sent shortly after...in a coffin, with his head placed at the feet of his body. Eptia is therefore psychologically destroyed, having lost both her brother and her virtue. Now she wants revenge and so, recalling Maximian's reputation for justice, decides to secretly go to Rome to talk directly with the Emperor. While telling her story, she breaks down and cries, her eyes filling with tears, so that Maximian is moved to pity. As a matter of fact, Juriste is summoned to explain what has happened. His reason is that he was simply applying the law, acting according to justice. Eptia replies that Juriste committed two sins, while her brother committed only one. Juriste does not want to die, he shows to be contrite for what he has done, thus Maximian decides he has to marry Eptia in order to restore her honour, but shortly after he also orders that Juriste be executed because this is what he did to the young girl's brother. Unexpectedly, Eptia, who was so angry with Juriste just a few moments before, begs now for mercy; Juriste is her husband now, therefore she cannot accept to lose him. Maximian is moved by her kindness again and so decides to spare Juriste's life. Juriste and Eptia live henceforward "happily ever after".

Through Cinthio's major changes to the previous versions, the story has become a comedy, leaving behind the tragic plot with its sad ending; indeed, by combining mercy with justice and arranging a marriage rather than proceeding with bloodshed, it has been possible to achieve the traditional happy ending. Clearly

enough, the parallel between Cinthio's story and *Measure for Measure* is undeniable; the first scene of *Measure for Measure*, for instance, probably comes from the opening dialogue between the two friends, Juriste and the Emperor, when Maximian decides to send his friend to rule Innsbruck for a certain period of time:

“più lieto dell'ufficio... che buon conoscitore di sé stesso.”⁶¹

Another analogy between the two plays is to be found in Epitia's words when she shouts against the infamous proposal of Juriste,

“la vita di mio Fratello mi è molto cara, ma vie più caro mié
l'honor mio”⁶²,

that echo Isabella's

“More than our brother is our chastity.”⁶³

Anyway, there are other two *novelle* by Cinthio that are worth attention: namely *novella* 52, that tells the story of a governor who wants to blackmail the wife of a merchant but fails in his attempt and dies confessing his sin; and *novella* 56, that tells instead the story of a tailor's wife who is similarly pressed by a judge; the woman goes to the duke in order to complain and the judge is therefore condemned. In both *novelle* there is a woman who, unlike Epitia but like Shakespeare's Isabella, resists the uncomely proposals.

In 1573 Cinthio wrote another version of the story, a drama called *Epitia*, published posthumous in 1583: in this version Juriste has a sister, Angela, who at the end asks for mercy for her brother; in addition, Cinthio adds a man in the prison who disobeys Juriste's order to behead Epitia's brother, spares his life and substitutes his head with that of a murderer. This story is even more similar to

⁶¹ See Lever's Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.xxxix. For the English version see Lever, *Measure for Measure*, Appendix I, p.155.

⁶² Ibid., p.xl.

⁶³ *Measure*, II.4.186.

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in regard to the substituted head that permits to save the heroine's brother, the addition of the character of Angela, who can be compared to Shakespeare's Mariana and the dialogue between Angelo and Escalus at the beginning of the second act, which parallels the discussion between Cinthio's Podestà and his Secretary. It is also important to take into consideration Cinthio's play as a whole; indeed, the way law and justice are treated, the happy ending achieved notwithstanding the tragic beginning (and not only), and the characterization of the protagonists of *Epitia*, make it the nearest version to Shakespeare's play.

Nonetheless, Cinthio's is not the only possible source for Shakespeare's problem play. Another source for *Measure for Measure* could well be George Whetstone's version of Epitia's story, *The Right Excellent and Famous Historye of Promos and Cassandra* (1578), apparently very close to Shakespeare's play, at least for what concerns the general structure. Whetstone adds to Cinthio's *novella* a "tone of Puritan authoritarianism", as Brian Gibbons points out. What caught Shakespeare's attention was probably Whetstone's way of dramatizing and arranging the narrative; thus, no wonder that some of *Measure for Measure*'s scenes are highly influenced by *Promos and Cassandra*. Indeed, as Brian Gibbons suggests,

"in accepting the structural conventions of English stage comedy of the time, Whetstone transmits the effects of counterpoint between the main plot concerning noble characters and sub-plots of trickery and low comedy, so that the comic episodes not infrequently give an ironically critical reflection of events in the main plot."⁶⁴

An example of this device is the sexual proposal of Lamia, a courtesan who, supported by her servant Rosko (a sort of equivalent for Pompey), tries to bribe the corrupt magistrate Phallax with sexual favours; this scene parallels Promos' proposal to Cassandra, namely that he will spare her brother and marry her if she

⁶⁴ See Brian Gibbons' Introduction to *Measure*, cit., p.10.

surrendered herself to him. In addition, Promos, by commanding the execution of Andrugio, who is Cassandra's brother, is applying a law that was previously eliminated by a merciful magistrate. Andrugio, like Claudio and Vico, has not committed rape, since he is in love with his partner and is also planning to marry her. Shakespeare follows Whetstone's story also in the substitution of the head of the condemned, which is changed by a merciful jailer. Still, at a certain point, Shakespeare's story departs from *Promos and Cassandra*, since once his life is spared, Andrugio disguises himself as a hermit and hides in the forest; only when he comes to know that his sister is in trouble he decides to come back. Instead, Shakespeare removed the wanderings of Andrugio in disguise, since they seemingly distract the attention from the main issues. Yet, this is not the only difference: Shakespeare also decided to simplify the setting of his play and eliminated some of Whetstone's minor characters too. In addition, Polina, who is Andrugio's beloved, is represented by Juliet in *Measure for Measure*, with the difference that Claudio's partner is pregnant at the beginning of the play already; thus, if Claudio died, his child would be fatherless, unless Angelo changed his mind.

Anyway, the similarities between *Promos and Cassandra* and *Measure for Measure* are various and Gibbons highlights them, implying that

“Whetstone's visualization, in terms of Elizabethan staging, of these episodes of city life, prison and the Royal Entry, could well have influenced Shakespeare and may indicate the kind of detail with which *Measure for Measure*'s setting was realized in performance in 1604.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, for what concerns the narrative, Whetstone decides to use elements of surprise and melodramatic thrill, something that clearly caught Shakespeare's attention, especially now that it was gradually turning to tragicomedy. Another feature we find in *Promos and Cassandra*, that Shakespeare replicated, is the use of soliloquies, such as Angelo's; in particular those after the

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.10.

encounter with Isabella. The soliloquy is used by both authors to show the inner struggles of the main characters. Furthermore, Shakespeare adopted the sub-plot Whetstone created for his play, substituting the courtesan Lamia with Mistress Overdone, her servant Losko with Pompey the pimp and adding a series of comic characters like Constable Elbow and Froth, Abhorson the executioner and Barnardine, who shares the same fate as Claudio.

It is clear therefore that Shakespeare knew this play before writing *Measure for Measure*; so we may ask whether there are any events that brought him to write a play based on Whetstone's story exactly in 1603-1604. Clearly, the accession of King James I in 1603 may well be an answer to this question. Shakespeare was aware that the new monarch was interested in the themes of justice and temperance in rulers (his work *Basilikon Doron* witnesses this interest), thus his response to James I's tastes seems to have been precisely *Measure for Measure*. As a matter of fact, many critics think that Shakespeare created the figure of Duke Vincentio modeling him on the personality of King James⁶⁶. As a consequence, also *Basilikon Doron* (Fig.3), a treatise on government that gives advice about how to be an efficient ruler, can be considered as a possible source of inspiration for *Measure for Measure*. For sure, he was influenced by James I's book, at least for what concerns two issues. One, as Lever notices, is the "duty of rulers to display virtue in action"⁶⁷ and the other one is the concept of temperance, or "the Aristotelian mean"⁶⁸. Anyway, a more detailed comparison between Duke Vincentio and King James I of England, together with a discussion about the possible allusions to the new English monarch in *Measure for Measure*, will be taken into consideration further on in this dissertation in the section dedicated to the disguised ruler.

Furthermore, if we consider *Basilikon Doron* as a possible source of inspiration for *Measure for Measure*, we should accordingly consider Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532, translated into English in 1640) as well. This treatise on government, of course, could well have a kind of source for *Basilikon*

⁶⁶ See 3.1. "The Disguised Ruler".

⁶⁷ See Lever's Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.xlviii.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.xlix.

ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΟΝ ΔΩΡΟΝ.
OR
HIS MAIESTIES
INSTRUCTIONS TO
HIS DEAREST SONNE,
HENRY THE
PRINCE.

by King James I

ED



AT LONDON
Imprinted by *Felix Kyngston*, for *John
Norton*, according to the copie printed
at *Edenburgh*. 1603.

Fig.3. James I, *Basilikon Doron*, Frontispiece.

Doron too. Like James I, Machiavelli wrote his *Prince* in order to give a model to follow, without being too abstract, but rather giving practical advice. His goal is very clear already at the beginning of his work, since it is dedicated to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, Duke of Urbino and ruler of Florence in Machiavelli's time. The major themes he deals with are statecraft, goodwill and hatred, free will, virtue and human nature; it is also considered one of the most important works of modern political philosophy. Thus, the main aim of the book is to suggest how to obtain and keep political power. It can be divided into four main sections: in the first section the different kinds of states are discussed; the second part of the treatise analyses the various armies existing and there is also a discussion about the conduct a prince should adopt as military leader; in the third section, Machiavelli explains how a ruler should be and behave; and finally, he discusses the disastrous political situation of Italy in his time. What is interesting about Machiavelli's treatise for what concerns *Measure for Measure* is precisely the discussion about the character and personality the Prince should have to be considered an efficient ruler: from Machiavelli's point of view, it is better for a ruler to be stingy and strict with his subjects, rather than being too lax and thus let vice and crime penetrate the kingdom; instead of being merciful, and considered not enough determined and powerful, it is more convenient to behave cruelly; a ruler should also have the possibility of breaking the promises he made if keeping them meant acting against the state's interest; as a consequence, a ruler might also deceive his subjects if this is done for their own sake; Machiavelli firmly believes that it is important for the ruler not to be hated or despised by his subjects, since the love of the people is the best defence ever; last but not least, a prince should choose wise counselors and avoid adulators. Anyway, *The Prince* will be taken into consideration again when the character of the Duke is to be analyzed in the following chapter.

Furthermore, the interests of the new king probably made Shakespeare think about another work by Whetstone, namely *A Mirrour for Magistrates of Cyties* (1584). This time Whetstone concentrated his attention on the corruption in the city of London, in particular the situation concerning brothels and gambling. He also

compared London's corruption to Rome, in particular at the time of Emperor Severus. Indeed, *The Image of Governance* (1541) by Sir Thomas Elyot describes Severus' reform concerning corruption and explains that he sometimes disguised himself and walked among his subjects in order to observe them, their behavior and in particular his officers' conduct. Severus, Elyot observes,

“used many tymes to disguise hym selfe in dyvers straunge facions, as sometime in the habite of a scholer of philosophie ... oftentimes like a marchaunt ... And ... woulde one day haunte one parte of the citee, an other day an other parte ... to see the state of the people, with the industrie or negligence of theym that were officers.”⁶⁹

This work can also be considered a model for the characterization of the disguised ruler, a figure we find in many Elizabethan comedies thereafter. Thus, it seems quite acceptable to believe that Shakespeare found the model for the characterization of his disguised rulers, in particular the “Duke of dark corners”⁷⁰ of *Measure for Measure*, in these accounts. Apparently, he was also the first one to use the story of the disguised ruler as frame plot, namely in *Henry IV*, where Prince Hal, the future Henry V, disguised himself to observe his people and his officers, just like Emperor Severus.

Therefore, the figure of the disguised ruler slowly became quite popular on the Elizabethan and then on the Jacobean stage. Other two plays written by contemporaries of Shakespeare can be seen as sources of inspiration for *Measure for Measure* as well, namely *The Phoenix* (Fig.4) by Thomas Middleton and *The Malcontent* (Fig.5) by the dramatist and satirist John Marston. Clearly enough, they are both concerned with the figure of the disguised ruler who walks among his subjects in order to control them.

⁶⁹ Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Image of Governance*, 1541, quotation in Lever, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.xliv-xlv.

⁷⁰ *Measure*, IV.3.148.



Fig.4. James I, possibly the "phoenix" Middleton had in mind, from an engraving in John Speed's *A Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World*, 1631.



Fig.5. Mark Doerr and Adrian LaTourelle playing Malevole and Mendoza (*The Malcontent*) in Theater-Los Angeles.

It is not certain if Middleton's comedy was written before or after *Measure for Measure*; nevertheless, there are many points suggesting it is earlier. The main analogy between the two plays can be traced in the frame plot: like Duke Vincentio, the Duke of Ferrara, protagonist of *The Phoenix*, confesses that, for what concerns corruption, he has been too lax with his subjects for the last seventeen years. His son, Prince Phoenix, who should take his father's place soon, is suggested to go abroad for a journey, in disguise not to be recognized, in order to see the world and its people; actually, he decides to remain in his father's kingdom, still in disguise, in order to study people's behavior, vices and costumes. In this way, he witnesses and takes part in a series of minor intrigue plots. It is interesting to notice that Phoenix' soliloquies send "a sombre moral meditation on what he observes". At a certain point of the story, Phoenix and some courtiers organize a plot with some courtiers against his father the Duke, with the aim of overthrowing his power. During the final trial, Phoenix reveals his true identity and confesses what happened; when he is going to be arrested, the same officers are "exposed by a document Phoenix had already handed to the Duke". This scene is clearly characterized by great tension and has also many points in common with *Measure for Measure*. Nevertheless, Brian Gibbons underlines that

"Shakespeare interiorises within his Duke elements that in the Middleton play are mainly of narrative consequence: the figure of authority is distinct from the disguised observer, who is young and whose schemes are wittily contrived to preserve his moral integrity, maintaining a distance from the somewhat compromised mature Duke. The ironic tone of the dialogue conceals that corruption is inevitable, through the upright maintenance of law is vindicated; but despite the serious nature of some of the issues, this play is more exuberant than might have been expected if Middleton were responding to *Measure for Measure*."⁷¹

⁷¹ See Brian Gibbons' Introduction to *Measure*, cit., p.16.

However, there are some differences between the two plays as well; for example, for what concerns the dramatic style, *Measure for Measure*'s is apparently much more complicated.

On the other hand, it is sure that Marston's *The Malcontent* is earlier than Shakespeare's problem play. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist Malevole, is already in disguise, thus the audience learns about his true identity only later, when he explains it in a soliloquy. He is also involved in a number of plots, like Phoenix. Brian Gibbons notices that in *The Malcontent*

“As in Shakespeare's version the action places stress on characters' attitudes to sex as a guide to their moral and social condition and psychological motivation.”⁷²

The main themes of this play are courtly ambition, tyranny and flattery. In fact, Altofronto is a deposed duke, who has disguised himself as Malevole, a discontented ruler, because he wants to try to obtain his lost kingdom again. Malevole, taking part in some plots of his court, attacks its corruption and decadence. It is not so difficult to see a parallel with the court of King James I and the immorality of his courtiers in this play. Still, once he comes back to power at the end of the play, Malevole refuses to punish too cruelly his enemies and he also recovers Ferneze, Aurelia and Pietro to virtue. The difference with *Measure for Measure* lies precisely here: indeed, this so called “happy ending” is achieved through a popular insurrection against his enemy, not thanks to the fact that Malevole has taken part in some of the major plots of his court.

The main similarity with *Measure for Measure* is traceable in the major technical aspects, namely the language, the structure and the narrative of the play. We have to bear in mind that Shakespeare's company of actors acquired Marston's play, and as a consequence, it was subjected to some changes before being performed by the King's Men. Clearly enough, Shakespeare may well have been involved in the process of change before performing *The Malcontent* at the Globe.

⁷² Ibid., p.17.

Therefore, no wonder that there are some echoes of this play in *Measure for Measure*. Brian Gibbons describes pointedly some of these similarities:

“The verb ‘touze’ [...] is used only once by Shakespeare in *MM* 5.1.307. The proverb ‘there goes but a pair of shears between us’, only once used by Shakespeare (*MM* 1.2.23), in *The Malcontent* [...]. For references to the ‘burr’ and ‘serpigo’ in *MM* 4.3.165 and 3.1.31, compare *The Malcontent* 2.3 in successive lines, 31 and 32. Isabella’s phrase ‘the heavy/Middle of the night’ (4.1.31/2) is parallel to Marston’s Mendoza in 2.5.88, ‘the immodest waist of night’.”⁷³

Furthermore, some traits of *Measure for Measure* can remind the audience of another play, namely Ben Johnson’s *Sejanus*. Like *The Malcontent* and *The Phoenix*, also *Sejanus* was performed by the King’s Men at the end of 1603, with Shakespeare playing a part in it. For what concerns the plot, like Angelo is confused by the letters he receives about the forthcoming return of the Duke, also Sejanus, an ambitious soldier, friend to the Roman emperor Tiberius, is quite surprised by the letters the latter sends him, leading the general scheme “directly to the catastrophe”, as Brian Gibbons points out. Duke Vincentio praises Angelo, in particular his honour, before destroying it completely; in Johnson’s play, Tiberius does the same thing through a letter. In addition, the trial scene of *Sejanus* has a structure that resembles very much the revelation scene (5.1) of *Measure for Measure*.

There is then an anonymous play (which is sometimes attributed to Shakespeare for its inclusion in his Apocrypha⁷⁴), whose publication date we do not know either, but whose plot can be well compared to *Measure for Measure*, namely *Fair Em*. Kevin A. Quarmby affirms that

“although not a direct source for *Measure for Measure*, *Fair Em* nevertheless contextualizes the Duke’s protestations, while

⁷³ Ibid., p.17.

⁷⁴ Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler*, cit., p.108.

demonstrating the conventionality of his subsequent disguised actions.”⁷⁵

Fair Em is a play that combines two stories that go on independently in alternate scenes; the two plots are similar but at the same time they contrast each other. The one plot tells the story of a man, William the Conqueror, who falls in love with the portrait of a woman he sees on the shield of the Marquess of Lubeck at a tournament. He therefore decides to look, in disguise, for that girl and when he finds her, he truly falls in love. The girl is Mariana, the Swedish princess, already betrothed to the Danish marquis Lubeck and held captive at his court. Nevertheless, Mariana is not interested in William, since she is faithful to her betrothed. Meanwhile, Blanch, princess of Denmark, is really impressed by the disguised William, falling in love with him. As a matter of fact, Mariana and Blanch arrange a plot in which William goes away with Blanch thinking she is Mariana. Here things complicate, since Blanch is the king's daughter and as a consequence, King Zweno wants to save her; at last, the true identity of the lady is revealed, and William finally accepts to marry Blanch; Mariana and Lubeck are left to their happiness.

The second plot of this story sees Em, the fair daughter of Sir Thomas Goddard, who is disguised as a miller from Manchester, wooed by three men: Lord Valingford, Mountney and Manvile. Her favourite is Manvile; thus, in order to get rid of the other two, she pretends to be blind with Valingford and to be deaf with Mountney. Nevertheless, Manvile is not a faithful man, and as a consequence he loses both the women he wooed; in the end, Em marries Lord Valingford, since he is the only one to be sincere and loyal to her.

Eventually, the two plots unite, with William revoking Goddard's banishment and Em making William understand that some virtuous women really exist, conviction that leads him to marry Blanch.

The similarity between the *Fair Em* and *Measure for Measure* is undeniable; Quarmby rightly points out that

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.108.

“Like the solemnly performed nuptials in *Fair Em*, solemn obligation overshadows the Duke’s offer to the silent Isabella in *Measure for Measure*: ‘What’s mine is yours, and what is yours is mine’ [...]. This standard husband’s pledge could suggest equality in marriage, but to the very end this *dues ex machina* duke manipulates Isabella.”⁷⁶

All considered, the two plays apparently share the same “failed happy ending”, since the marriages are not conceived as the actual crowning of a love story.

Last but not least, the obvious references to the Bible have to be taken into consideration as well. It is clear that *Measure for Measure* is a play that has to do with religious and moral issues, thus it is not difficult to believe that Shakespeare took inspiration from the Bible too. It is enough to think about the title of the play, that is recalled in the fifth act, in a scene in which Duke Vincentio echoes a particular passage of the Bible:

“The very mercy of the law cries out
Most audible, even from his proper tongue:
An Angelo for Claudio, death for death;
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure.”⁷⁷

The reference is here to the Old Testament and the notion of justice – “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” – but also to a passage we find in the New Testament:

“Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.111.

⁷⁷ *Measure*, V.1.400-404.

⁷⁸ Matthew, 7.1-2.

This reference is taken from the “Sermon on the Mount” that has to do with issues concerning retribution, justice and mercy, precisely the topics with which *Measure for Measure* is concerned.

All in all, the sources that Shakespeare could have chosen for *Measure for Measure* are various and of different nature. For sure, before writing it, he read both his contemporaries and previous authors, but he also used his own works, as we can see from the wide range of references to his plays, such as *Hamlet* to give an example. It is widely known that the English playwright had a great repertoire behind him and that he was well acquainted with the broad literary and cultural background of his own time⁷⁹. A discussion about Shakespeare’s readings is not the topic of this dissertation, but it will be enough to say that Shakespeare’s use of language and the various references to contemporary and past works, to his own plays, to historical and religious anecdotes, witness the greatness and keenness of the English playwright in writing a complex and intriguing play such as *Measure for Measure*.

⁷⁹ For further information about Shakespeare’s readings see Leonard Barkan’s essay “What did Shakespeare read?” in Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

3. The Characters

Once a possible classification for *Measure for Measure* has been given and its major sources have been taken into consideration, the main themes of the play are what the reader/audience really cares about. The main characters, their nature, their behaviour and also the dialogues in which they are involved, especially the soliloquies and the monologues, are the best representatives of the major topics of *Measure for Measure*. As a matter of fact, the best way to explain what the main themes are is to look carefully at the most important characters of this so called problem play.

3.1. The Disguised Ruler

Notwithstanding the moderate attention given to *Measure for Measure*, due to the difficulty in classifying it and to the various problems connected, Duke Vincentio is one of the most interesting characters in all the Shakespearean plays.

From the very beginning of the play, his actions seem rather ambiguous and questionable. In the first act his desire to leave his reign to someone else is not really convincing, since his intentions are not quite clear. The first question that arises is why he is doing this, and the answer can give birth to two different interpretations of the Duke.

From one point of view, his decision depicts him as an attentive and sensible ruler, who worries for his subjects and for this reason decides to withdraw for a certain period of time, at the same time staying on in order to give them support and advice.

On the other hand he manipulates his subjects for his own aims, taking advantage of the situation, namely his “divine” power and consequent absolutism. This interpretation of the Duke has been widely discussed and expanded, and it is considered the most viable.

Hence, it might be useful to ask some important questions. What makes a good ruler? Is it better to be virtuous and merciful or to strictly apply the law, dispensing justice even when this implies taking the life of the sinners? Should a man have the power to decide who can live and who has to die? What was Shakespeare's point of view about this? Clearly it is quite impossible to find an absolutely correct answer to these questions and, at the same time, we cannot know what Shakespeare really thought and meant by creating such a character. However, there are certain clues that throw some light on this issue.

The discussion about the sources of *Measure for Measure* in the previous chapter can be a good starting point. In fact, both *The Prince* (Fig.6) and *Basilikon Doron* are two treatises on government that try to be guidelines to follow by an efficient ruler.

During the Middle Age and the early Renaissance the idea of a good monarch was that of a man with certain virtues, such as sincerity, devotion and love toward his subjects. In Shakespeare's time, people hoped that James I would be such a ruler, probably because the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I had created some concern, since she did not have children nor wanted to name a successor until her death. With a new male monarch, the English people simply hoped for less trouble and a ruler who would love them.

However, when Machiavelli wrote his treatise, his political ideas were quite different, but not entirely so; yet, the plays of the time seemed to convey another message. Richard III of the homonymous play by Shakespeare is nothing but a tyrant, giving the idea that the political thought of Machiavelli was freely misinterpreted. Just to give an example, Sir Walter Raleigh described the Italian humanist's prince as "too light, inconstant, hard, cruel, effeminate, fearful and dastardly"⁸⁰, even if this is not what is written in *The Prince*.

⁸⁰ Walter Raleigh, *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh, Kt., Volume III*, Oxford University press, London, 1829, p.15.

Indeed, Machiavelli never wrote about cruelty or fickleness, his political idea simply implicating that a monarch should be prepared to deceive his subjects if this was the best solution for them; the difficulty lies in the question: *when* does it happen that the best thing to do is to act immorally? Machiavelli insists to say that the good prince should be religious minded in respect to his subjects, but this does not mean he has to be religious, in other words he can make false promises to them.

The essence of his political thought is that a good monarch should be *both* loved and feared, and here lies the second obstacle: to achieve both is a challenge, because in a certain sense the two conflict. As a matter of fact, Machiavelli suggests that if the ruler cannot obtain both, it is safer for him to be feared rather than to be only loved. Indeed, a monarch who is only loved, is not respected as one who is feared, because it is a well known fact that being too kind and permissive only leads to transgression of the rules. At that point the good ruler, Machiavelli quickly adds, “ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred.”⁸¹ The right balance has to be attained, because to be feared should not mean to be hated, as Richard III was.

What is really difficult to understand is whether or not this is the right way to behave, in other words if a deceitful action can be a solution for being a good monarch. Maybe also for this reason Machiavelli has been misinterpreted.

Notwithstanding this misinterpretation, the Italian humanist has been widely studied and clearly there is a reason for this: in fact, it seemed that, in a certain way, his political idea works. A striking example can be precisely found in *Measure for Measure*, in the character of Duke Vincentio, who seems to be very near the figure of the Prince.

Indeed, the critics Kamps and Raber⁸² see an analogy between the Machiavellian view that rulers should not behave, and consequently be seen as tyrants, and the Duke’s decision to put Angelo as interim ruler of Vienna with the aim of reestablishing order and justice. The expedient works for the Duke, because

⁸¹ Niccolò Macchiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532, translated into English by William K. Marriott, Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 2008, ch.xvii, p.158.

⁸² Ivo Kamps, and Karen Raber (ed.), William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure, Texts and Contexts*, Boston, 2004, p.134.

he succeeds in reaffirming his authority and at the same time he is eventually perceived as a just and merciful ruler by his subjects. Still, a question remains: is the Duke's a good strategy? Sadly enough, the doubt remains, the play does not give a response and neither the ultimate silence of Isabella when she is asked to marry the Duke is a helpful clue. As a matter of fact, the answer can only be subjective.

In the same way, *Basilikon Doron*, a handbook written by King James I of England specifically for his son, Henry, in 1598, covers topics which are basically the same as *The Prince's*. Like Machiavelli, King James offers some advice on how to be an efficient monarch. His theory is that a king is a sort of actor who plays on stage and as a consequence the people around him, namely his subjects, will judge him and his actions. However, like an actor, he tends to show only his public persona, leaving his inner virtues hidden. This is why he has to use his exterior behavior to show his inward benevolent disposition. The main virtues of a good king, James I asserts, are wisdom, kindness and wariness, he has to be firm in his decisions and he should not change his mind too often.

The good king described by James I resembles only in part the Duke of *Measure for Measure*, or at least, less than Machiavelli's Prince does; it is true that Duke Vincentio acts as if he was in a play, his own play, since he performs the part of the friar in order to control (or to manipulate?) his subjects. He does not reveal his plot to anybody, maintaining the complete control of the situation and, at the end, once he decides to reveal himself, he succeeds in appearing a benevolent, merciful and just ruler, supposedly his inner true self. Nevertheless, it is highly doubtful that his intentions may have been completely and solely good. Yet, this is not only why the Duke departs from the "good king" of *Basilikon Doron*. In fact, all the virtues James I talks about appear not to correspond to the actions of Duke Vincentio.

At first glance, the Duke may seem wise, since he has "on Angelo imposed the office"⁸³ in order to reestablish order and discipline in Vienna. But most critics

⁸³ *Measure*, I.3.41.

seem to believe that the Duke acts only for his own sake: he knows that probably Angelo will not be a good ruler when he says to Friar Thomas the words “Hence shall we see, If power change purpose, what our seemers be”⁸⁴. Apparently his only aim is that of giving his subjects a man to hate, so that he can return as a sort of savior, a God-like figure who solves the problems and actually reestablishes order. Essentially, he *is* manipulating his people.

Further on, James I does not suggest deception as a solution, while Machiavelli does. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Shakespeare probably read both *Basilikon Doron* and *The Prince* and, specifically, the first one was of particular importance for him, since it was written by the king of England just a few years before *Measure for Measure* was performed at Whitehall. It is impossible to know what Shakespeare had in mind when he created the character of the Duke; the question can rather be whether he wanted to praise the new king, namely James I, or not.

James I became king of England in 1603, after a woman had ruled the country for more than forty years. Elizabeth I was a great queen but her decision not to marry and have children and not to name a successor provoked a state of anxiety that, theoretically, James I could avoid. As a matter of fact, once he became king, James had the great task of not disappointing the English.

James I⁸⁵ (Fig.7) was born in 1566, a son of Mary, Queen of Scots and Henry, Lord Darnley. After the death of his parents (his father murdered and his mother beheaded by the same Elizabeth I), some tutors, such as the poet, dramatist and humanist George Buchanan, tried to instill in the young James the political thought that “the king is beholden to the people for his power”⁸⁶; however, once he ascended the throne, he made clear that he did not believe in this, rather he thought that kings have a divine right to rule and a consequent absolute power.

As a man, he was interested in poetry and he had a predisposition for learning, he was good at writing both poetry and prose (especially political

⁸⁴ Ibid., I.3.55.

⁸⁵ Cfr. John Butler, “The Life of King James I of England”, *Luminarium*, 22 Mar 2003, [19 Mar 2013], <<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/james/jamesbio.htm>>

⁸⁶ Ibid.



Fig. 7, Nicholas Hilliard, *Portrait of James I King of England*, Oval, 1603-1609.



Fig. 8, Mark Rylance as the Duke in *Measure for Measure* at the Globe, London, 2004. His costume consciously reminds the audience of the traditional image of James I in contemporary portraiture (See Fig. 7).

philosophy, since he was interested especially in the justification of divine right). He also appreciated the plays, but was particularly fond of the masque, a love he shared with his wife Anne of Denmark. Soon, he realized that literature could be an effective propaganda, “books, masques, sermons, and plays [...] were the media which could best disseminate his views of kingship and impress upon a large number of people its power and majesty.”⁸⁷ However, as a king he did not seem to be much successful; critics tend to say that he was a peaceful monarch but he actually did not enjoy much popularity in England. Clearly enough, the hopes the English bestowed on him were not deceived but neither fulfilled. This is one of the reasons why the Duke in *Measure for Measure* is often associated with King James. The Duke is not all that bad after all, but at the same time he does not act for the sake of his subjects.

The parallelism between Duke Vincentio and King James I has been widely discussed, producing different opinions on the matter. The debate has compared the two from various points of view and, as a result, some critics see a caricature of James in the figure of the Duke, while others claim that a connection between the two rulers is not possible.

For example, in 1987, the scholar Harold Bloom reported an interesting comment of Herbert Weil, Jr., who voices his position about this issue:

“To interpret the Duke as a tribute to James I, as the ideal Renaissance ruler, or as an allegorical figure for Providence requires that we ignore his angry and wonderfully funny reactions to Lucio.”⁸⁸

Weil is here referring to the second scene of the third act, precisely the moment of the quarrel between the Duke (disguised as a friar) and Lucio. The latter wants to praise the Duke as a ruler but also as a man, opposing him to the cruel Angelo. Nevertheless, he says something that provokes the wrath of the Duke: “He

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Herbert Weil, Jr., “Form And Contexts in *Measure for Measure*”, in *William Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure: Modern Critical Interpretations*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, New York, 1987, p.71-72.

had some feeling of the sport , he knew the service, and that instructed him to mercy.”⁸⁹ . What he wants to say is that the Duke knows the women just like he does, namely very well, and this state of things brings him to understand, and thus forgive, certain sins like the one committed by Claudio. Sadly enough, the Duke does not react well to this statement, rather he is “angered by the sexual allusion.”⁹⁰ As a consequence, Vincentio starts a praise of himself that soon becomes exaggerated, showing to have lost all self-control. He calls himself “a scholar, a statesman, and a soldier.”⁹¹ , and Weil has declared not to believe this description to be a reliable characterization of him or of James I.

The same scene is commented in 2004 by Kamps and Raber, who, on the contrary, see an intentional compliment to James in the words of the Duke when, discussing with Lucio, he portrays himself as a “scholar” and also Melvin Seiden asserts that he sees in him more a philosopher than a king⁹²; in fact, James I was considered both a philosopher and a scholar⁹³.

According to Kamps and Raber’s essay, this is not the only similarity with King James; indeed, the Duke says he loves his subjects but he does “not like to stage [himself] to their eyes”⁹⁴, just like King James, who often declared to love his people but was actually well aware that kings are like actors on a stage, in the sight of all the audience-subjects who are ready to judge them. Seemingly, “the Duke’s distaste of displaying himself in public displays refers to James’s well-known fear of crowds and large assemblies.”⁹⁵ Another association they point out is the disguise of the Duke, which recalls James’s grandfather, James V of Scotland, who moved among his people masked. The two critics noticed also another interesting parallelism dealing with anxiety produced on the subjects: according to a study made by Stephen Greenblatt on a fake execution ordered by King James in 1603 as

⁸⁹ *Measure*, III.2.104-105.

⁹⁰ Herbert Weil, Jr., “Form And Contexts in *Measure for Measure*”, in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.71.

⁹¹ *Measure*, III.2.126.

⁹² Cfr. Melvin Seiden, *Measure for measure: casuistry and artistry*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 1990, p.21.

⁹³ Cfr., Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.125-126.

⁹⁴ *Measure*, I.1.68.

⁹⁵ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.125.

a result of an apparently treasonous plot against him, Raber and Kamps observed that

“by putting the condemned and the onlookers through a fake execution, the king raised their anxiety and apprehension to a fever pitch, and, after holding them in this state of fear and torment for a couple of hours, he was also the agent who removed that fear and anxiety to the relief of all.”⁹⁶

The same conduct is adopted by the Duke, who uses Angelo to raise anxiety in his subjects and similarly, at the end of the play, does not reveal that he managed to save Claudio’s life from beheading, instead of saying it to Isabella, who is suffering for this loss. What is more, the Duke is acting deliberately, since he tells us that he “will keep her ignorant of her good to make her heavenly comforts of despair when it is least expected.”⁹⁷. With this explanation the Duke is saying that his behavior is necessary and, as Brian Gibbons points out, it “offers virtually a playwright’s view of the supreme importance of surprise reversal from despair to comfort.”⁹⁸ Still, it should be in the ruler’s interest to establish a balance between the anxiety and the mercy he affords his subjects.

Despite these examples, Kamps and Raber admit some striking differences between James and the Duke. James I got married quite young with Anne of Denmark (even though there are some doubts about his sexuality) while the Duke has always been a bachelor. As far as marriage is concerned, James I thought that a king should marry a woman of his same social class, while the Duke, at the end of the play, proposes to Isabella, who is nothing but a “commoner.”⁹⁹

In his political treatise, *Basilikon Doron*, James teaches his son that intended murder is an unforgivable crime; on the contrary, the Duke forgives Barnardine unconditionally. A further difference can be traced in their language: James uses a plain language, while the Duke’s speeches are quite poetic and rich, but this is quite

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.136-137.

⁹⁷ *Measure*, IV.3.100-102.

⁹⁸ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.173.

⁹⁹ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.126.

understandable since we must bear in mind that it is Shakespeare's hand that is writing.

All considered, the Jacobean audience probably saw some links between their new king and the protagonist of the play, also because the playwright and the monarch dealt with similar topics, namely political ones, at a distance of a few years, *Basilikon Doron* being published in 1599 and *Measure for Measure* making its first appearance at Whitehall in 1604 before King James I. As a matter of fact, it is possible that Shakespeare read James's treatise, but this is not so sure; what is more, Kamps and Raber remind us that James's political ideas on the "divine right of kings, absolutism, royal prerogative, and resistance theory, are hardly original."¹⁰⁰ In fact, there were many treatises circulating in Shakespeare's time, that dealt with these issues, thus, he could have read any of these (namely writings of historians such as Holinshed or Plutarch, political and religious thinkers like Cicero, Erasmus and Machiavelli of course). This is witnessed also by his previous plays, which deal with these issues as well. An example is *Henry V*, where we find another disguised ruler, but we'll talk about this further on.

In the same year (2004), another critic, Andrew Hadfield, tries to be objective about this parallelism. From his point of view the most striking similarity is "their confidence in their own powers to establish order and proper government."¹⁰¹ At the same time, he does not see a caricature of James I in the conduct of a man who leaves all his responsibilities to a deputy and who manipulates his subjects, making them believe he is someone else in order to find out what they think about him, all this before resolving the situation he created by himself at the end of the play.

Nevertheless, the slanders that the Duke is bound to hear during his conversation with Lucio can be linked to the rumours about James's sexuality, with the difference that Duke Vincentio was told to have "some feeling of the sport"¹⁰², while James I was thought to be homosexual because of the attentions he reserved

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.126.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Hadfield, "The reality of Jacobean Politics", *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, Thomson Ed., London, 2004, p.190.

¹⁰² *Measure*, III.2.104.

for his favourites¹⁰³. Another detail, that also Kamps and Raber noticed, is the Duke's reclusiveness that can be related to "James's dislike of public performance"¹⁰⁴; in other words, he sees in both of them a tendency not to stay in public, before the eyes of everyone, eyes that observe, murmur and judge.

As far as sexual liberty and restraint are concerned, Hadfield asserts that they act the same way, for him the parallelism lies in their common inability to understand the real ills of their court. The Duke thinks to be meting out true justice when he obliges Lucio to marry a prostitute; yet, to use Hadfield's words, "he is just punishing one of his courtiers for the sins of his courts" and as a consequence, he is not tackling the real problem. On the other hand, James's court is not so different, as Francis Osborne asserts in his description, where he compares it to a giant brothel.

Hadfield concludes his reasoning with a consideration about the kind of literature which *Measure for Measure* belongs to, namely what he calls "mirrors for princes literature." What he wants to say is that when at the beginning of the play the Duke passes his powers over to a deputy, it means that his way of ruling has become ineffective and he cannot do anything to change things. Hadfield sees the last years of Elizabeth's reign mirrored in this failure and, notwithstanding the expectation the subjects could have, James was feared to be much like Elizabeth, namely a moody and quick-tempered ruler. Seemingly, one of the greatest fears in *Measure for Measure* is that the sudden change of a ruler will not change things at all.

In 2012 another critic, Kevin A. Quarmby, gives his opinion in regard to the relationship between the Shakespearean character and the historical monarch. Quarmby is well aware that there are many critics who firmly believe in the parallelism of the Duke and James and many others who do not see a connection at all; yet, he notices that more often than not Shakespeare is thought to offer a negative version of King James.

¹⁰³ For further information about this subject, see Sir Anthony Weldon, *The court and character of King James* (London, 1650) and Francis Osborne, *Traditionall Memoyres on the Raigne of King James* (London, 1658).

¹⁰⁴ Hadfield, "The reality of Jacobean Politics", cit., p.190.

From Quarmby's point of view there are two passages where there can be a real allusion to the new king of England in *Measure for Measure*. The first one is at the very beginning of the play, when the Duke admits not liking to show himself publicly, a parallelism we have already seen previously. The second allusion to King James is probably traceable in Angelo's speech concerning his physical reaction to Isabella:

“So play the foolish throngs with one that swoons,
Come all to help him and so stop the air
By which he should revive; and even so
The general subject to a well-wished king
Quit their own part and in obsequious fondness
Crowd to his presence, where their untaught love
Must needs appear offence.”¹⁰⁵

In this passage, Quarmby and also Brian Gibbons notice that Angelo shows the same attitude to crowds that both the Duke, and seemingly James, displayed. However, the striking reference to King James seems to be in line 27, where Angelo refers to a “well-wished king”. Nevertheless, while Gibbons thinks it can truly be an allusion to the “visit of King James to the Royal Exchange in March 1604, intending to watch the merchants unobserved”¹⁰⁶, Quarmby thinks that Angelo's “King” does not necessarily correspond to the English monarch, since this can rather be a metaphor for Angelo's “incontrollable lust and unexpected passion.”¹⁰⁷

Notwithstanding the broad criticism about the Duke-as-James theory, this is not a topic that was taken into consideration at the first appearance of the play, but only half a century later. The first one to talk about it was Tyrwhitt, who in 1766 claimed that Shakespeare's intention was that of praising the new king; yet, this assertion seemed nothing but a “partisan hearsay”, rather than an historical fact, since Tyrwhitt's comment was not witnessed by a reliable source. Thus, this theory started with an amount of “half-truths, gossip, scandalous fictions and downright

¹⁰⁵ *Measure*, II.4.24-30.

¹⁰⁶ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.130.

¹⁰⁷ Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler*, cit., p.116.

lies” that took the name of Whig historiography. Quarmby offers an explanatory definition of it:

“Characterized by Herbert Butterfield in 1931 as a strategy ‘introduced for the purpose of facilitating the abridgement of history’, Whig historiography presented a grand historical narrative claiming an inevitable progression towards liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy.”¹⁰⁸

Whig historiography subsequently became also the principle people used to describe James and Tyrwhitt added to that the Duke-as-James theory. His main source was Sir Simonds D’Ewes who, in 1637, wrote his “Autobiography”, an account of his life including the last years of James’ reign. Due to the fact that this is a personal autobiography, we cannot take his report as reliable, rather, it is an example of hearsay and gossip and, moreover, a sign of anti-Stuart feeling; in fact, D’Ewes wrote about James’s flaws, rather than his qualities, making him seem weak and assuming he was homosexual.

On the other hand, there was someone who thought James was a wise and intelligent monarch, such as Sir William Sanderson. Sanderson was among those critics belonging to the pro-Jamesian polemic.

At the time, each one had his or her opinion about King James and the alleged similarity with the Duke of *Measure for Measure*. Then, in 1799, George Chalmers¹⁰⁹ finally affirmed that the Duke *is* in some way a caricature of James and, he thought, the real doubt is whether this caricature is offensive or complimentary. From Chalmers’s point of view, Shakespeare simply wanted to provide a general overview about James’s personality and ruling traits, his aim was not a praise nor a critic to the new king.

The debate about the Duke-as-James theory continued until and throughout all of the twentieth century. In 1963, for example, the Shakespearean scholar Ernest Schanzer said that the similarity of the character of the Duke with the English

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.117.

¹⁰⁹ Cfr. George Chalmers, *A Supplemental Apology for the Believers in the Shakespeare-Papers*, Thomas Egerton, London, 1799, p.408.

monarch cannot be a mere coincidence. In his study, he justifies his assertion stating his firm conviction that Shakespeare read *Basilikon Doron*, giving even more credit to the supposition that James's treatise is a source for *Measure for Measure*.

Schanzer interprets the Duke as an idealized image that presents all those qualities extolled by James in his treatise with, in addition, some traits of the king himself, such as the Duke's dislike to appear in public, the inclination to deceive and manipulate the subjects and also the description of himself. Schanzer deems these similarities not accidental and he also points out another trait of the Duke which, although negative, fits James: the failure to establish order and justice in his reign. James confessed in his work to have ruled a little bit too laxly at the beginning of his reign; similarly, the Duke confessed the same failure.

“Sith ‘twas my fault to give people scope,
‘twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them
For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done
When evil deeds have heir permissive pass
And not the punishment.”¹¹⁰

In the same period, also another critic declares to have more or less the same ideas Schanzer has. J. W. Lever marks the analogy of the failure as well, and he thinks the Duke cannot be an “exact replica”¹¹¹ of James, but at the same time he affirms that to say “any resemblance to any living person was purely accidental” is unsustainable all the same.

Having discussed the parallelism with the Stuart king, it would be appropriate to deal with another important issue concerning the Duke, namely his disguise. The Duke introduces his intentions already in the first act, scene three. This scene is very short, but is fundamental for the whole plot and also for the general understanding of his disguise.

¹¹⁰ *Measure*, I.3.36-40.

¹¹¹ See Lever's Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.1.

The disguised ruler tradition was nothing new for the Jacobean audience, since it has a timeless significance in literature, from the Robin Hood folk tales forward. The reason for this disguise is very conventional too, commonly dealing with romantic motives.

Nevertheless, in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke subverts the manner of convention. After leaving Angelo the hard task to reestablish order and justice in his reign, he goes to a monastery for his disguise. However, Friar Thomas misunderstands his intentions, just like everyone else who knows those conventions. Yet the scene does not start with the Friar's misunderstood utterance, but directly with the Duke's admonition to the Friar.

“No. Holy father, throw away that thought,
Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
Can pierce a complete bosom. Why I desire thee
To give me secret harbour hath a purpose
More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends
Of burning youth.”¹¹²

The Duke is trying to make Friar Thomas understand that his bosom is impenetrable, seat of his secret thoughts and emotions, a breastplate no one can pierce, not even the arrow of Cupid. His real purpose is “more grave and wrinkled”, he says, wiser and more mature than a naïf youth who disguises himself for romantic reasons. From these very first words we understand that *Measure for Measure* is not a romantic comical history.

At this point, Friar Thomas asks what is then the Duke's real reason for disguising himself. The Duke starts explaining that

“We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds,
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip.
Even like an o'er-grown lion in a cave
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers
Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch

¹¹² *Measure*, I.3.1-6.

Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use – in time the rod
More mocked than feared – so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And Liberty plucks Justice by the nose,
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.”¹¹³

With this speech the Duke explains what happened to his kingdom, namely the laws, using Gibbons words, “had slipped into disuse.”¹¹⁴ Duke Vincentio is apparently sincere with the friar, making the audience understand what he did and also what he is going to do is for his subjects' sake. Thus, Friar Thomas makes a discerning comment:

“It rested in your grace
To unloose this tied-up justice when you pleased,
And it in you more dreadful would have seemed
Than in Lord Angelo.”¹¹⁵

Friar Thomas is stating something that probably the audience is thinking about too, namely the Duke's complete fault for the situation of his reign. Now the expectation is great, since what would the Duke answer to this? His response is again absolutely sincere, he admits his faults and admits also to have put Angelo where he is with a certain purpose, that is not as legitimate as it seemed at the beginning. The Duke is going to test Angelo, and this is what he tells Friar Thomas; what he does not say is that he is going to manipulate his subjects as if they were puppets, just to heal his insecurities as governor, spy them to find out what is their opinion of him, play with them, organizing a play within the play, in order to make him appear a wise, just and benevolent ruler. Therefore, his good intentions are already fading away and at this point of the play, the audience, and the reader, have already noticed it.

¹¹³ Ibid., I.3.20-32.

¹¹⁴ See Brian Gibbons' footnote to *Measure*, p.103.

¹¹⁵ *Measure*, I.3.32-35.

Bear in mind, Duke Vincentio is not the first ruler to disguise himself in order to spy on his subjects and he will neither be the last one. Two striking examples are Henry V, another character of Shakespeare, and looking to the future inheritance, the Black Knight, namely King Richard I, a character we find in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.

Ivanhoe is a novel that dates back to 1819 but which is set in England around 1195, after the Third Crusade. It tells the story of the fight between Saxons and Normans, with the protagonist of the novel, Wilfred of Ivanhoe, struggling with his Saxon father for his allegiance to the Norman king, Richard I of England. The King is thought to be still a prisoner, since he was captured by the Duke of Austria. As a character in *Ivanhoe*, King Richard I seems to have a double personality; one is the historical person of the king, a man who ruled England from 1189 to 1199 and led the Third Crusade against the Muslims, spending most of his life fighting and thus building up a timeless reputation for chivalry. This face of King Richard is not much present in the book (like that of Duke Vincentio by the way), since he is thought to be held in captivity by the Germans and then on his way back to England. His other face is that of the Black Knight (Fig.9), a "guy who loves jests and drinking songs and hanging around with jokers like Wamba and Friar Tuck."¹¹⁶ He is not all that involved in the story, like instead is the Duke disguised as a friar, but once he gets into the fight, he seems invincible. In other words, the Black Knight is a man who knows how to have fun but also who, when the time comes, is ready to fight with all his strength. In this novel, the disguised ruler wanders among his subjects, without any doubt paying attention to what they say about him, but his intentions are only good and he is acting only for his people's sake.

Similarly, Henry V, protagonist of the homonymous Shakespearean play, wanders among his troops the night before the battle of Agincourt against the French, in order to find out whether his men are ready to fight or not, and also what they think about their king (Fig.10). Henry V, like the Duke, is a king, using M. C.

¹¹⁶ Shmoop Editorial Team, "King Richard I (Black Knight) in Ivanhoe" *Shmoop University, Inc.*, 11 November 2008, <http://www.shmoop.com/ivanhoe/king-richard-i-black-knight.html>, accessed March 25, 2013.



LE NOIR FAINEANT IN THE HERMIT'S CELL.

Out of the recesses of a dark closet, into which this aperture gave admittance, the hermit brought a large pasty, baked in a pewter platter of unusual dimensions.—PAGE 171.

Fig.9, J.Cooper, Sr., *Le Noir Faineant in the Hermit's Cell*, 1886.



Fig.10, Laurence Olivier performing Henry V in disguise, *Henry V*, directed by Laurence Olivier, 1944.

Bradbrook's words, who "can be extremely peremptory, [is] a born administrator and enjoys probing and investigating into the lives of the common people."¹¹⁷

All the same, Raber and Kamps think that Shakespeare wanted to "take the romance out of the comedy"¹¹⁸ with *Measure for Measure*, meaning that the Duke shows less feeling than Henry V, being in this way more evocative of the *realpolitik*. Still, they are not so different after all, since both the Duke and King Henry are trying to discover what their people really think about them as rulers. What Shakespeare did in the earlier play was just to "point out how narrow the gap was between subject and monarch, making [his] decision to repeat the plot a brave one that also expressed confidence in the freedom he could expect on the early modern stage."¹¹⁹

In a certain way, the Duke resembles also another Shakespeare character, namely Hamlet. Indeed, they both have a sort of introspective tendency, in other words, they look into themselves to discover who they really are. Also the Duke's "theatrical instinct," Harold C. Goddard highlights, "reminds us of the prince of Denmark."¹²⁰ Hamlet decides to use the representation of a tragedy, "The Murder of Gonzago", with some changes in the plot, in order to trap Claudius (his uncle, who murdered his father, the old King of Denmark) into revealing his guilt. This is the reason why the play is then called "The Mousetrap" (Fig.11), in fact the tragedy tells the events that happened at the Court of Denmark since the assassination of the king. Clearly enough, Hamlet witnesses the performance.

Likewise, the Duke stages a play to "catch the conscience of his deputy – and of the city."¹²¹ As Hamlet, he also will not miss the performance at all. In both cases, we have a play within a play, which is a typical Shakespearean feature, namely a metatheatrical device.

¹¹⁷ M.C. Bradbrook, "Authority, Truth, and Justice in *Measure for Measure*", in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.18.

¹¹⁸ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.3.

¹¹⁹ Hadfield, "The reality of Jacobean Politics", cit., p.190.

¹²⁰ Harold C. Goddard, "Power in *Measure for Measure*" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.25.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.



Fig.11, Kenneth Branagh performing Hamlet, *Hamlet*, directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Another Shakespeare trait is visible in the language used by the Duke, rich and poetic, penetrating and elegiac, like in a passage that struck also T.S. Eliot, who decided to use it as an epigraph for his “Gerontion”:

“Thou has nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner’s sleep,
Dreaming on both.”¹²²

This passage is part of the monologue of the Duke, who, disguised as a friar, gives confession and prepares Claudio for death. Bloom reports an interesting consideration made by Dr. Samuel Johnson on these three lines:

“This is exquisitely imagined. When we are young we busy ourselves in forming schemes for succeeding time, and miss the gratifications that are before us; when we are old we amuse the languor of age with the recollection of youthful pleasures or performances; so that our life, of which no part is filled with the business of the present time, resembles our dreams after dinner¹²³, when the events of the morning are mingled with the designs of the evening.”¹²⁴

Like Shakespeare, he thinks that men are not able to live the present moment of their life, since they are always thinking about their past or their future. Seemingly, *Measure for Measure* wants to convey this message: the main characters of the play are never completely happy or they defer their joys; the only two characters who appear to live the present moment are Lucio and Barnardine, the representatives of debauchery. As a matter of fact, “if the immediacy of the moment is available only to the dissolute,” comments Bloom, “then we see the malady that has crazed the Duke’s Vienna, a mad city indeed.”

Talking about Lucio and Barnardine, together with Pompey, they are those comic characters of the play who let the audience know that the Duke is not as noble a ruler as he thinks (and the audience is induced to think) he is. When

¹²² *Measure*, III.1.32-34.

¹²³ “Dinner”, for Shakespeare, but also for Johnson, was the main meal of the day, what today we call lunch.

¹²⁴ Bloom, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.4.

Barnardine refuses to collaborate with the Duke who wants to confess him before he welcomes death, a series of encounters with the other comic characters start. In succession he meets Elbow, Pompey, Lucio and Mistress Overdone, who represent the underworld of Vienna. These meetings have the function of making the audience understand what is the real nature of the Duke, since his reaction to them betrays his own character. For example, after the encounter with Isabella, the Duke shows his little compassion for Pompey, who is being taken to jail by Elbow, and he berates him:

“Fie, sirrah, a bawd, a wicked bawd!
The evil that thou causest to be done,
That is thy means to live. Do thou but think
What ‘tis to cram a maw or clothe a back
From such a filthy vice; say to thyself,
‘From their abominable and beastly touches
I drink, I eat, array myself, and live.’
Canst thou believe thy living is a life,
So strikingly depending?”¹²⁵

This hard reproof actually is appropriated to a friar, however the Duke’s planning for the bed-trick puts him in an equivocal position, since he acts like a sort of bawd too. In this passage his anxiety is betrayed by his outburst. Indeed, Pompey is a bit surprised by the hard reaction of the friar and tries to apologize, but the Duke interrupts him sharply and, apparently forgetting he is disguised, he orders Constable Elbow: “Take him to prison, officer, correction and instruction must both work ere this rude beast will profit.”¹²⁶

Another comic character that makes the audience think over the real nature of the Duke is Lucio, a fantastic. Weil, in his essay *Form and Contexts in “Measure for Measure”*, astutely remarks that “the audience knows that Lucio cannot win, that the Friar is really the Duke, but even with all his advantages, the Duke appears foolish.”¹²⁷ In fact, it is impossible not to laugh at the Duke’s

¹²⁵ *Measure*, III.2.16-24.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, III.2.28-30.

¹²⁷ Herbert Weil, Jr., “Form and Contexts in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.70.

selfishness as he turns Lucio's intended compliments both as a ruler and as a man, into insults. Lucio says that the Duke is a better man than Angelo in every sense, but the sexual allusion he makes, "He had some feeling of the sport...that instructed him to mercy"¹²⁸, makes Vincentio get angry with Lucio. He loses his self-control and, as we already noticed previously in this chapter, he explodes in an exaggerated praise of himself.

Unsurprisingly, especially in the fifth act, the Duke turns himself into a comic dramatist. The elaborate play-let he stages lets him show his subjects Angelo's sins, reestablish the order the Deputy could not impose and appear to all of them as a savior, a God-like figure, who arrives at the right moment to save the situation.

Nevertheless, he fails as comic dramatist in at least two points: the unsatisfactory happy ending reached through marriage and a lack of sensitivity. The marriages at the end of the play have nothing in common with the traditional happy ending of a comedy, since they are induced, with Isabella being the most striking example, asked in marriage by the same Duke, who apparently does not leave her any choice (even if the final scene seems incomplete, with an ambiguous silence on her part). In the same way he obliges Lucio to marry a prostitute and Angelo his old betrothed Mariana. The only two characters who seem to really want to marry are Claudio and Juliet, the actual triggers of the plot. In addition, he also tries to achieve the happy ending through marriage in a completely wrong way, proposing a bed-trick and acting with excessive self-interest. Thus, the Duke represents the denial of family bonds, in other words, he is here denying the essence of comedy. Paradoxically, the protagonist of *Measure for Measure*, namely the Duke, is also its antagonist, the savior is the same person who hinders the resolution of the traditional plot. With *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare overturned the traditional romantic pole of comedy into an ironical one, inducing

¹²⁸ *Measure*, III.2.104-105.

some critics like Marcia Riefer to think that he created “not a poorly written play, but, to some extent, a model for poor playwriting.”¹²⁹

Although he completely fails as a comic dramatist, seemingly the Duke succeeds in manipulating his subjects; his manipulations are precisely theatrical and amoral, with largely inscrutable motivations. The Duke, in a way, is experimenting on human beings like a sort of scientist. Yet, his fiddling is clever, so that the reader and the audience are induced to wonder whether he is a divine-right ruler or rather a hypocrite who spies his subjects in order to entrap them. This question shifts the focus on another issue concerning the Duke which is worth spending some words about: the supposed divine power of Duke Vincentio.

Obviously, we can ask ourselves whether Shakespeare’s audience caught a certain irony in the Duke’s *imitatio dei* role. Louise Schleiner certainly did:

“The play’s chief antagonists are an ascetic, self-righteous Puritan and a naïve papist proud of her good works (a novice nun); a benign, “temperate” ruler (III.2.204) intervenes to save them, as James I always hoped to do for the Puritans and Catholics not only of his own realm but of all Europe. The more thoughtful in the audience would have seen subtle ironies in this treatment of the ruler as imitator of God in judgment and mercy.”¹³⁰

From Schleiner’s point of view this is the only way to see the Duke in a positive light. If he is seen as a God-like figure who sees and knows everything and everybody, it would be easier to accept him from a moral point of view.

His divine power, indeed, is highlighted in one passage in particular; towards the end of the play (fifth act), when the Duke gets rid of his disguise, Angelo cries

“Oh, my dread lord,
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness
To think I can be undiscernible
When I perceive your grace, like power divine,

¹²⁹ Marcia Riefer, “Instruments of Some More Mightier Member” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.143.

¹³⁰ Louise Schleiner, “Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.107.

Hath looked upon my passes.”¹³¹

Angelo depicts him as an omniscient ruler, thus attributing to him the divine right of monarchs. It is difficult, if not impossible, to say why Angelo is acting this way; maybe he is in awe of the Duke, but it could also be that he is “playing the Duke’s game to save his neck”¹³², like Kamps and Raber suggest. This probably remains one the mysteries of *Measure for Measure*, a doubt that could only be solved by asking Shakespeare himself.

However, what is possible to guess is that Shakespeare is here dealing with the divine right theory from two different points of view; on the one hand, he wanted to show his audience how mighty and God-like Duke Vincentio can appear to his subjects. At the same time, though, he shows also that this impression is “the product of stagecraft”¹³³ for the most part.

The Duke’s attempt to imitate God can be seen in another passage of the play, namely when he proposes the bed-trick.

“Craft against vice I must apply.
With Angelo tonight shall lie
His old bethrothèd but despised;
So disguise shall by th’disguised
Pay with falsehood false exacting
And perform an old contracting.”¹³⁴

Here we can perceive the image of a “God in disguise as man”¹³⁵, rather than a ruler. Schleiner in her essay *Providential Improvisations in “Measure for Measure”*, claims that “the theological overtones cannot be accidental [here], cast as they are in the play’s pattern of biblical allusions.”

A last passage that is worth attention is the moment when the Duke projects himself as a God-like ruler; this time the victim is the poor Isabella, who is induced

¹³¹ *Measure*, V.1.359-363.

¹³² Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.130.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.130.

¹³⁴ *Measure*, III.2.239-244.

¹³⁵ Louise Schleiner, “Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.101.

to believe that her brother has been beheaded, since the Duke deliberately decides not to inform her. The most striking thing is that he also tells us why he is doing this:

“She’s come to know
If yet her brother’s pardon become hither:
But I will keep her ignorant of her good
To make her heavenly comforts of despair
When it is least expected.”¹³⁶

Thus, what he wants to do is to intensify her anxiety (with no apparent reason) and then to ease it when it is the best moment for his purposes (Fig.7). This suggests that he really wants to appear as a God: he is going to “resuscitate” Claudio, something that only God can do, just like the possibility to bring heavenly comfort when all hopes have vanished.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the medieval ideas of the divine right of kings to rule, still strong in the early seventeenth century, were widely accepted by most people. The reason why the king should derive his power to govern from God is the inability of human beings to govern themselves. Thus, they need to be guided by a monarch with divine powers. In Shakespeare’s time, this idea was even more important for a king like James I, who, in order to explain royal absolutism, first tested his godly powers in Scotland as James VI. This theory implies not only that the king’s powers derive from God, but, as a consequence of this, also that the king is above the law. Once king of England, James I made a speech to the Parliament declaring his firm convictions that he had no legal or moral obligation to explain himself to his subjects, but that he would do it sometimes.

However, though the Duke of *Measure for Measure* incessantly pretends to act like a God, actually he is not God, he is nothing but an inadequate ruler, whose “efforts to imitate God in justice and mercy (as rulers were theoretically supposed

¹³⁶ *Measure*, IV.3.98-102.

to do) produce comic results.”¹³⁷ The only strong feeling he succeeds in arousing in his subjects is anxiety. Still, the Duke appears as the representative of heavenly justice, since he fixes things up at the end of the play (even if he does it in an unorthodox way): he dismisses the tyrannical ruler, he saves Claudio’s life and Mariana’s reputation, apparently reestablishing order in his reign but actually not changing things at all, since all the crimes connected with fornication remain unpunished.

All in all, Shakespeare created a paradoxical character with a thousand facets but, in the end, it is not clear if, in doing so, he wanted to make a direct allusion to King James I, or if he wanted to simply upset the entire Shakespearean canon of characters. What is sure is that he wanted, and succeeded in this, to make the figure of the Duke questionable, almost surely wanting to challenge his audience once again, arousing a critical attitude towards this ambiguous ruler, a kind of criticism that has survived in the years and which is still productive.

¹³⁷ Louise Schleiner, “Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.96.

3.2. The Duke's Surrogate

Another character who has an important role in the play but also, at a deeper level, among Shakespeare's characters, is the Deputy, whose name is Angelo. His charge is very clear from the first act of the play: he has to reestablish order and justice where the Duke of Vienna failed; the only doubt is why Duke Vincentio chooses Angelo and what he really represents for him. Apparently, at the end of the play, we perceive that Angelo is nothing but a puppet in the Duke's manipulative hands. Looking at him allegorically, Angelo stands for Authority and Justice, yet it is a false one: indeed, he also "stands for Seeming or False Semblant"¹³⁸, M. C. Bradbrook suggests in his essay. Bear in mind that both Justice and Law should be based on truth, and that perfect truth can be found only in God. Vice versa, falsity resides in the devil, who has a particular skill in disguising lies into virtues as a weapon to destroy man. Hence, this issue is clearly central for *Measure for Measure's* plot: the main contrast between falsehood and truth is to be found in the "precise"¹³⁹ Angelo, "a man of stricture and firm abstinence"¹⁴⁰, to say it ironically. The Duke's comment at the beginning of the play seems a further teasing:

"There is a kind of character in thy life
That to th'observer doth thy history
Fully unfold."¹⁴¹

With these words, and having in mind the previous questions the Duke posed to Escalus in the first act, we perceive that Angelo has already some faults in his past history. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of the play, Angelo can be seen only as a "seemer" and he demonstrates it throughout the whole play.

The strange thing is that, apparently, the Duke still prefers Angelo to the merciful Escalus. Thus, the question arises again: why does he choose a person like

¹³⁸ M.C. Bradbrook, "Authority, Truth, and Justice in *Measure for Measure*" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.9.

¹³⁹ *Measure*, I.3.51.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I.3.13.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I.1.27-29.

Angelo? Is it possible that he did not know anything about the very nature of his Deputy? It is actually hard to believe it, since by this time it is clear what kind of man the Duke is. According to a study made by Jonathan Goldberg, it seems that Angelo remains astonished by Vincentio's choice as much as the audience does, not been able to understand "how far Angelo can represent the Duke"¹⁴². Goldberg points out that all we know is that both political as well as dramatic power depend upon the "enactment of substitutions whose analogical force remains mysterious"¹⁴³.

Furthermore and going deeper into Angelo's character, we come to know that this man is also vile, worthless and mean. In fact, in the third act the Duke devises a bed-trick to save Isabella's reputation, using for his aim the fair Mariana; we soon learn that this lady was once Angelo's betrothed and then she has been deserted by the same man after her poor brother shipwrecked losing all her dowry.

Another trait of Angelo's character is traceable once he starts ruling Vienna, precisely when he decides to condemn to death Claudio for fornication, even if the girl he impregnated was consenting and in love with him. Escalus, whose nature is kinder than the Deputy's, suggests to Angelo to consider what he would have done in Claudio's place, to think whether he would have acted the same or not. In answering Angelo shows to be a great debater, turning the situation to his own benefit:

"Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall. [...]
When I that censure him do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death
And nothing come in partial. Sir, he must die."¹⁴⁴

Seiden defines this attitude nothing but "arrogant self-praise"¹⁴⁵, leaving the audience no chance to like him, except for one instance: in fact, in the fifth act,

¹⁴² Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler*, cit., p.134.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.135. For further information about Goldberg's point of view on this subject see Goldberg, Jonathan, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983.

¹⁴⁴ *Measure*, II.1.17-18, 29-31.

when he is discovered for the “forsworn”, “adulterous”, “hypocrite” person he is, Angelo reveals something of his personality that catches the attention of the audience. He admits that he deserves “immediate sentence” and “sequent death”, and asks for it, a request that is at least honorable. In other words he admits that his behavior has been shameful; still, this is not enough to absolve him, since his arguments seem dictated by self-interest, smelling “of corruption not yet exposed; they are just what one would expect of a “seemer”, never mind that they express a hard common sense.”¹⁴⁶

This ambiguous character of *Measure for Measure* can be studied best analysing of his own words, that is, the dialogues involving him, the soliloquies, the monologues and the asides. Once some interesting extracts have been analyzed, it will be possible to make a synthesis of Angelo’s personality, to trace one of the main and most important topics of the play and as a consequence, to learn something more about Shakespeare’s intentions in writing such a play.

From the very first act, it is possible to guess the reason why Shakespeare decided to call the Deputy with such a “heavenly” name. Clearly enough, he wanted to make some irony, since Angelo is not an angel or a saint in any way. However, if we analyze his words more closely, something more emerges:

“Now good my lord,
Let there be some more test made of my metal
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamped upon it.”¹⁴⁷

In this passage, Angelo is talking with the Duke using a metaphor, typical Shakespearean device, that refers to assaying gold, in order to test the character, in this case, Angelo’s. In other words, the Deputy knows he is going to be tested and, even if at first he was quite astonished by the Duke’s choice, now he seems to be

¹⁴⁵ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.27.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.28.

¹⁴⁷ *Measure*, I.1.47-50.

proud of it. Furthermore, the critic Brian Gibbons explains this metaphor in relation to the Deputy's name:

“The assayed gold is stamped with the royal image and perhaps there is an allusion in ‘noble’ to the fact that the English gold coin was originally called the Angel-noble, ‘having as its device the archangel Michael standing upon, and piercing, the dragon’ (*OED Noble sb*).”¹⁴⁸

The same reference to the coin is to be found in the second act, during the dialogue between Angelo and Isabella:

“‘Tis all as easy
Falsely to take away a life true made
As to put metal in restrained means
To make false one.”¹⁴⁹

Here Shakespeare wanted to convey his audience the idea that “Angelo is a false coin because of his metal, not the stamp it bears”¹⁵⁰, that is to say, he is mean not because of the role he plays, but as a consequence of his nature.

Back to the first act, Angelo's way of referring to the Duke inevitably places him as what he really is in the play, namely a puppet in the manipulative hands of Duke Vincentio. Statements like “Always obedient to your grace's will”¹⁵¹ and “the heavens give safety to your purposes”¹⁵², confirm his state of submission to the Duke, who of course takes advantage of it. What is not so clear is instead the reason why Angelo praises the Duke and submits to him; he acts this way also at the end of the play, when he is discovered for the false man he is, and he admits the divine power of the Duke. There may well be a simple reason for this of course, namely the attempt to save his own neck playing Vincentio's game. Still, we cannot say whether this is the right way to interpret his actions, but we will come back to this later.

¹⁴⁸ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.91.

¹⁴⁹ *Measure*, II.4.45-48.

¹⁵⁰ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.131.

¹⁵¹ *Measure*, I.1.25.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, I.1.73.

The second act is the most important one for the analysis of the character of Angelo, since he appears in almost every scene and it is here that the audience understands what his real nature is, namely that of a “seemer”. In the first scene, there is a certain perception that Angelo is going to do well his job as surrogate of the Duke; indeed, he appears to be strict and staunch and to have borne in mind what he has to do in order to reestablish order and justice in Vienna:

“We must not make a scarecrow of the law,
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,
And let it keep one shape till custom make it
Their perch and not their terror.”¹⁵³

Another metaphor here recalls those at the beginning of the play concerning costume, and it shows also the contrast between what Gibbons calls “outer appearance and inner reality”¹⁵⁴. Indeed, with this metaphor Angelo explains to Escalus that now it is fundamental for Vienna that the Law be respected, so that the sinners will not make fun of it any more. Still, Angelo is never appreciated by the audience, because he is always perceived as a criminal even if he still is not one. The next passage clarifies this feeling, since the Deputy shows an attitude of superiority with Escalus that he probably could avoid. In fact, the merciful Escalus was simply asking the Deputy what he would have done if he had been in Claudio’s place. Hereupon, Angelo arrogantly answers:

“’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall. I not deny
The jury passing on the prisoner’s life
May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two
Guiltier than him they try: what’s open made to justice,
That justice seizes. What knows the laws
That thieves do pass on thieves? ‘Tis very pregnant,
The jewel that we find, we stoop and take’t,
Because we see it; but what we do not see
We tread upon and never think of it.

¹⁵³ Ibid., II.1.1-4.

¹⁵⁴ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.108.

You may not so extenuate his offence
For I have had such faults; but rather tell me,
When I that censure him do so offend,
Let mine own judgement pattern out my death
And nothing come in partial. Sir, he must die.”¹⁵⁵

With his first words, Angelo starts to show his real nature, as we have already seen in this section, apparently attacking Escalus for no real reason. He seems to be offended by the old Lord’s words, but at the same time he appears too sure of himself, in such a way that he might convey another message, namely that he actually could be tempted and once that happened, he would react just like Claudio did. Indeed, when someone attacks someone else in that way with no apparent reason, one almost always has something to hide, and is conscious of being wrong. At this moment of the play, Angelo has done nothing wrong actually, but clearly this is an anticipation of what will happen later. First of all, he admits that among the judges there can be someone who has been wrong, but this does not mean that the current sinner should not be punished. What is interesting is his further comment, namely the promise that if he transgressed the law just like Claudio did, his own judgment should be applied also to himself, “and nothing come in partial”. In other words, he is anticipating his deserved death sentence, even if he has not sin yet.

Once Angelo has instructed the provost that Claudio has to be executed “by nine tomorrow morning”¹⁵⁶, other characters enter the scene, namely Elbow the constable, Froth, who is a foolish gentleman and Pompey the tapster and pimp. The rest of the scene has the purpose of easing a bit the moment of sadness after Angelo has decided not to spare Claudio’s life. In fact, Pompey shows evident difficulty in speaking, making much confusion with words and, so, Angelo finds it difficult to question him. Here the Deputy is supposed to do the Duke’s job, but actually it is Escalus who takes the trouble to listen to them all and solve the situation, since

¹⁵⁵ *Measure*, I.1.17-31.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II.1.34.

Angelo does not consider the matter worthy of his attention; the only thing he suggests is “to whip them all”¹⁵⁷.

The second scene of the second act, together with the fourth one, is central to the analysis of the character of Angelo, but also to the whole play, since it is now that the Deputy meets Isabella (Fig.12). The girl, sister of the poor Claudio, is in the presence of Angelo in order to prey him to be merciful with her brother. Angelo seems to be unmovable, sure of his decision of sentencing the sinner as soon as possible, his aim that of using Claudio as an example for all fornicators. In this way he wants to show that the law is returned to prevail in Vienna and no one can escape it now.

“The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept.
Those many had not dared to do that evil
If the first that did th’edict infringe
Had answered for his deed. Now ‘tis awake,
Takes note of what is done, and like a prophet
Looks in a glass that shows what future evils –
Either now, or by remissness new conceived,
And so in progress to be hatched and born –
Are now to have no successive degrees,
But here they live to end.”¹⁵⁸

Although we know that he is acting in order to reestablish order and justice in the city, it is impossible to like him or at least sympathize with him by now, because Isabella’s asking for mercy is so moving that it seems impossible to think that the Deputy is untouched by her prayers. Her sisterly love and her scruples as novice nun give her strength even if her position is undoubtedly weak; still, he is cold when he utters the words “Be satisfied. Your brother dies tomorrow. Be content.”¹⁵⁹. Furthermore, he has his skills of “canny tactician” by his side. Seiden points out his ability in this: “he knows when to wait and when to press forward, when merely to block his opponent’s best points, when to attack through an

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., II.1.121.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., II.2.93-102.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., II.2.107-108.



Fig.12, Robert Smirke, *Isabella and Angelo* (Act II, Scene 4), 1797.

opening.”¹⁶⁰ At a certain point Isabella gets angry, after he merely asserts “He’s sentenced, ‘tis too late.”¹⁶¹ and she comes out with an eloquent attack that should touch him in some way, but surprisingly does not. Then she asks him to think what he would have done, “If he, which is the top of judgment, should but judge”¹⁶² him as he is, clearly repeating Escalus’ question. Angelo knows well what his answer would be, but he is not touched.

Isabella’s rhetoric carries on and on, and her desperate urgency leads to the first hesitation from Angelo. In fact, before sending her away, he utters in an aside:

“She speaks, and ‘tis such sense
That my sense breeds with it.”¹⁶³

The verb in particular, “to breed”, which means “to rise, to grow”, has a connotation of tumescence, that Gibbons calls “sexual arousal”, and also of fertility. Gibbons points out that “perhaps there is also the sense of rising as in pregnancy – the associated senses of ‘breed’ all awakened in Angelo’s turbulent mind.”¹⁶⁴ The idea is that something has happened in Angelo’s mind and body, a psychological but also physical reaction that upsets him rather a lot. In that moment Isabella stops Angelo, warning she will bribe him, and probably these words are interpreted by the Deputy in a wrong sense; however, it is clear for the audience that she means nothing but “true prayers”¹⁶⁵, “prayers from preservèd souls, from fasting maids whose minds are dedicate to nothing temporal.”¹⁶⁶

After asking her to come back the day after, “at any time ‘fore noon”¹⁶⁷, and once he is alone, Angelo analyses his reaction that left him so astonished. In order to show his confusion, Shakespeare makes use of a complex play on senses that Gibbons explains very well:

¹⁶⁰ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.34.

¹⁶¹ *Measure*, II.2.56.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, II.2.78-79.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, II.2.146-147.

¹⁶⁴ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.124.

¹⁶⁵ *Measure*, II.2.156.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II.2.157-160.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, II.2.165.

“‘season’ means ‘time of the year, weather, when plant-life is stimulated by the sun to grow’, and ‘preservative’; ‘virtue’ means ‘efficacious power’ and ‘moral goodness’. Hence the interpretation: because of his moral corruption Angelo reacts, unlike the healthy plant, by becoming putrescent. [...] The syntax may produce ambiguity from the expectation that [...] ‘nor doth she tempt: but it is I’ implies a matching transitive verb, so that ‘Corrupt’ seems transitive (as if the carcass Angelo ‘infected’ the virtuous violet) rather than intransitive, itself going rotten while the flower grows more fragrant. The ambiguity testifies to Angelo’s state of inner turbulent confusion.”¹⁶⁸

Angelo understands that she did nothing on purpose to make him feel this way; yet, he desires her, he comes to think he loves her, because he craves to “hear her speak again and feast upon her eyes”¹⁶⁹. However, we have to bear in mind that he only desires her physically, since it was her eloquence that led him to feel so lascivious; we cannot talk of a thunderbolt, in fact, he has no intention of marrying her. For Angelo, the problem is that the saintlier Isabella is, the more he wants her; as a matter of fact, the critic Harriett Hawkins asserts that perhaps “any sincere refusal from her might arouse him still further.”¹⁷⁰ Here Angelo makes a shocking discovery: his desires are nothing but pathological; clearly enough, the Deputy has never had any experience with any woman, no one ever attracted his attention, except for Isabella. We could argue that if he wanted, he had a lot of possibilities in a city like Vienna, where prostitution and brothels abound; still, he did not seem interested in them, only Isabella caught his attention. So the question arises: why her? What does she have that is so exciting for him? Seiden gives his interpretation concerning this by stating:

“Angelo’s self-diagnosis is that an erotic frisson arises out of the anticipated pleasure of spoiling, dirtying, “raz[ing] the sanctuary, and

¹⁶⁸ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.125.

¹⁶⁹ *Measure*, II.2.182-183.

¹⁷⁰ Harriett Hawkins, “‘The Devil’s Party’: Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.85.

pitch[ing] our evils there,” (II.2.175-176) of leveling, that is, the proud and noble temple that Isabella has made of her life.”¹⁷¹

Angelo craves to have this girl because of her spiritual beauty, but the disease in his mind is that what he feels has nothing to do with love; it is rather hate, like Seiden remarks in his analysis. From the critic’s point of view, Angelo has the psychopathology of the rapist. Actually, looking at his soliloquy, he is angry with himself and at the same time with the novice nun, since he would prefer not to feel tempted in a way he cannot control. In fact, he is “both depraved and pitilessly honest in diagnosing his own disease.”¹⁷², like for example another famous Shakespearean character, that is Hamlet. In Angelo’s agony, indeed, we can see Hamlet’s self-cursing; in his soliloquy “Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!”¹⁷³, the prince of Denmark punishes himself and after that, paradoxically, curses himself for cursing himself:

“Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by Heaven and Hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A scullion!
Fie upon ‘t, foh!”¹⁷⁴

Like Hamlet, Angelo is cursing himself because once he has discovered his erotic response, he has also found out that his erotic desires are morbid. Seiden at this point concludes that we should grant him a compassionate understanding for his moral strength, and also for having recognized that something in his mind is rotten when he says

“[...] but it is I

¹⁷¹ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.44.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁷³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 2006, II.2.485.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, II.2.517-522.

That, lying by the violet in the sun,
Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,
Corrupt with virtuous season.”¹⁷⁵

Notwithstanding his greatness in recognizing that he has a diseased mind, during his second meeting with Isabella Angelo cannot resist suggesting for her to offer her body for her brother’s life. The fourth scene of the second act is indeed full of elements useful to trace Angelo’s real nature, from his ambiguity to his tyrannical attitude, to his inability to curb his passions. Even before she enters, he is astonished by the reaction of his body:

“Oh, heavens,
Why does my blood thus muster to my heart,
Making both it unable for itself
And dispossessing all my other parts
Of necessary fitness?”¹⁷⁶

Angelo has just discovered that, contrary to what Lucio asserted, his blood is not “snow-broth”¹⁷⁷, in other words, real hot blood flows in his veins, just like any other man of whatever rank or name, since basic instincts and emotions cannot be ignored. He simply admits, resigned, “Blood, thou are blood.”¹⁷⁸. Seiden makes an interesting parallelism with another Shakespearean play, in order to explain this concept; in order to do this he substituted Angelo for “a jew” in Shylock’s speech:

“Hath not [Angelo] hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? (*Merchant of Venice*, III.1.61ff.)”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ *Measure*, II.2.169-172.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, II.4.19-23.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, I.4.58.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II.4.15.

¹⁷⁹ A.P. Rossiter, “Measure for Measure” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.47.

In fact, Angelo after all is constituted no differently from any other men, even if his “symptoms” are difficult to accept. The comparison with Shylock’s words helps us understand that human frailty belongs to everyone, not only to the weakest or to the poorest.

When he starts talking with her, Angelo hopes that she understood his desire as carnal without saying it explicitly, but Isabella is too naïve and she sincerely believes that the Deputy changed his mind and will be merciful sparing Claudio’s life. Indeed, his words mislead her: “Yet may he live a while [...] yet he must die.”¹⁸⁰. Of course she does not understand what Angelo has in mind, and as a consequence the Deputy gets nervous and he reaffirms the seriousness of her brother’s sin, namely fornication, comparing the act to that of minting false coins; still, this time it is far more difficult for him to maintain his firm position, since his will is to induce Isabella to commit together the same sin, in order not to condemn Claudio for it. He tries to convince her explaining that this has nothing to do with her soul, after Isabella naïvely affirms that she “had rather give [her] body than [her] soul”¹⁸¹. So he speaks of charity, claiming that if she consented, “were equal poise of sin and charity”¹⁸², giving the idea of equilibrium, like in the scales of Justice. Isabella stays deaf to his attempts and as a matter of fact, Angelo wonders if she is pretending not to understand or if she actually cannot get the point of his proposal.

In the end, he decides to be “more gross”¹⁸³ and the virtuous Isabella, shocked, immediately and irremovably answers negatively to this shameful proposal:

“Better it were a brother died at once,
Than a sister by redeeming him
Should die for ever.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ *Measure*, II.4.35-36.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II.4.55.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, II.4.68.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, II.4.82.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, II.4.107-109.

In other words she would prefer to die or watch her brother dying, rather than to compromise her purity. Clearly enough, Angelo is not satisfied by her response, but this does not stop him from insisting and pressing her, since his desire is now at the acme. His tactic is making her believe that she is now acting as cruelly as Angelo, but Isabella remains irremovable. Furthermore, Shakespeare put in her mouth certain words and expressions that appear to him even more erotic. This provokes and even stronger lust in Angelo.

His following argument is frailty, which is the main topic of the play; at first, he declares that “we are all frail”¹⁸⁵ and then he insists on women’s frailty and on their role in particular, showing in this way his misogynistic side as well:

“Be that you are,
That is, a woman; if you be more, you’re none.
If you be one, as you are well expressed
By all external warrants, show it now
By putting on the destined livery.”¹⁸⁶

Through Angelo’s words we understand two things: first of all that he desires her carnally, that is to say he does not love her or have any intention of marrying her; secondly, we learn something more about his society, or better Shakespeare’s. Gibbons explains in a few words the significance of “destined livery”, namely the “role of woman which [Isabella was] born to (i.e. as opposed to the nun’s rule of chastity).”¹⁸⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary adds also that “livery” has a connotation of “distinctive badge or suit worn by a servant”. In other words, Angelo is highlighting the low consideration women have in his society, their condition of submission to men, obedience and silence. For this reason, he speaks of her “destined livery” in opposition to her decision to become a nun.

Quite interesting is also his further declaration, that immediately seems false and only a last desperate attempt to convince her:

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., II.4.122.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., II.4.135-139.

¹⁸⁷ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.134.

“Plainly conceive, I love you.”¹⁸⁸

A very short line, but full of desperation. It is now that Isabella understands he really means what he says, that is, he really wants to commit the same sin for which her brother has to die. Truly irate, she blackmails Angelo, assuring that she will tell everyone what he did if he does not forgive her brother. At this point, Angelo shows his tyrannical nature taking advantage of the position of power the Duke gave him.

“Who will believe thee, Isabel?
My unsoiled name, th’ austereness of my life,
My vouch against you, and my place i’ th’ state,
Will so your accusation overweigh
That you shall stifle in your own report
And smell of calumny.”¹⁸⁹

Angelo has just lost any remaining chance of obtaining any sympathy from the audience. With these words and the following, the Deputy shows to be no better than any other bawd in Vienna. His job to reestablish order and justice thanks to his alleged firmness, has just failed, since he shows to be ready to pardon a fornicator in order to commit himself fornication. What is more, later in the play we learn that he is even worse than this, since after sleeping with Isabella (or at least this is what he thinks), his order to behead Claudio is not changed. As a matter of fact, that awful self-praise he made at the beginning of the play in front of Escalus, proves to be absolutely false and it confirms his nature of “semer”. His frailty leads him to act this way, making us think that even the firmest person, the most convinced in honest principles, can be tempted and thus can sin just like anyone else.

After sending Isabella away to think about his proposal, Angelo disappears from the dialogues for more than one act. In this span of time the Duke helps Isabella to save her honour and her brother, staging the bed-trick in which Mariana is to take Isabella’s place. After that, Claudio should be saved but soon after we

¹⁸⁸ *Measure*, II.4.142.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II.4.155-160.

learn that Angelo's orders are different. Harold C. Goddard in his essay *Power in "Measure for Measure"*, points out that

"Angelo's blackest act is not his sin of sensuality against Isabella, which he commits in wish and as he thinks in fact. Nor is it even prostitution of his office that that involves. It is his acceptance of Isabella's sacrifice of herself and his then sending Claudio to death nevertheless. [...] his are the typical sins and crimes of unlimited authority."¹⁹⁰

Before carrying on, there are three remarks worth attention. The first one is a reference to *Basilikon Doron* traceable in one of Angelo's speeches; indeed, "heaven in my mouth"¹⁹¹ reminds us of "Keepe God more sparingly in your mouth, but aboundantly in our harte"¹⁹². According to the 1606 Statute to Restrain the Abuses of Players, the word "Heaven" was substituted for "God".¹⁹³ Another interesting remark is a similarity with the Duke that we can trace in Angelo's words when he says

"So play the foolish throngs with one that swoons,
Come all to help him and so stop the air
By which he should revive."¹⁹⁴

In other words, Angelo shows the same attitude to crowds that Duke Vincentio does. The difference stands in the context, namely that Angelo is here reflecting about his physical reaction to Isabella. Quarmby explains it very well: "Like the subjects who rush to greet their king, Angelo's blood rushes uncontrollably to his swooning, and lusting, heart, stifling the metaphorical 'air' that could aid his moral recovery."¹⁹⁵ Last but not least, Angelo's ambiguity can be seen all throughout the play, but in particular in this scene, in the grammar.

¹⁹⁰ Harold C. Goddard, "Power in Measure for Measure" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.35.

¹⁹¹ *Measure*, II.4.4.

¹⁹² James I, *The True Law of Monarchies and Basilikon Doron*, Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (ed.), CRRS Publications, Toronto, 1996, p.112.

¹⁹³ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.128.

¹⁹⁴ *Measure*, II.4.24-26.

¹⁹⁵ Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler*, cit., p.116.

Shakespeare, in fact, decided to upset the syntax and the grammar of Angelo's speeches, in order to convey the idea of ambiguity also through his words. An example is "Could I with boot change for an idle plume which the air beats for vain"¹⁹⁶ where the grammar is quite ambiguous, since it is not very clear whether the subject is "air" or the "idle plume"; another example, this time concerning syntax, is in the fourth act, in Angelo's speech about his repentance: "A deflowered maid, and by an eminent body that enforced"¹⁹⁷; here the line-end seems to link "enforced" and "maid"; the ambiguity is also in the words "eminent body", "enforced", "tender shame", "credent bulk", "touch", "dangerous sense"; indeed, Gibbons points out that "the unconsciousness of the sexual play in the language witnesses to Angelo's deep disturbance"¹⁹⁸.

After Angelo ordered Claudio's beheading, the Duke decides to come back to Vienna in his real clothes. This decision upsets Angelo, who after talking about it with Escalus, and once he is alone again, bursts into a soliloquy in which he confesses all his guilt for Claudio's death and the rape of Isabella, showing the best part of himself (the only one), namely sincerity. This is the only time that he says something about his reaction to the bed-trick in which he loses his virginity by committing rape. As Gibbons notices, "The speech expresses his sense of the inseparability of his political potency, as Deputy, and his sexual potency, both no sooner discovered than lost through the crime of ransom and the betrayal."¹⁹⁹ The second part of his speech is quite interesting for his condition of penitence:

"He should have lived,
 Save that his riotous youth with dangerous sense
 Might in the times to come have tane revenge
 By so receiving a dishonoured life
 With ransom of such shame. Would yet he had lived."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ *Measure*, II.4.11-12.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.4.19-20.

¹⁹⁸ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.177.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.177.

²⁰⁰ *Measure*, IV.4.26-30.

The last sentence is significant, since Angelo knows that he deserves death and as a matter of fact, he half wishes to be punished but at the same time he is scared by the consequences. Indeed, for him now, death is equivalent to hell.

From the very beginning, Angelo has been his own “prosecutor, judge, and jury” and he really meant what he said:

“When I that censure him [Claudio] do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death
And nothing come in partial.”²⁰¹

Phoebe S. Spinrad is very illuminating on this point, stating that

“When he does “so offend,” then, he convicts himself utterly, leaving no room for a repentance that he, as a reprobate, cannot expect to be granted. Consequently, although he dreads the damnation that he knows will follow death, when his sins are exposed during the judgment scene, he twice demands his right to die – almost, we feel, with a touch of relief that the flight from death is over.”²⁰²

His self-judgment seems quite admirable, but we should bear in mind that someone who is sincerely penitent does not refuse mercy; as a consequence, he is not actually accepting death, what he feels is something worse: it is despair.

The fifth and last act is the revealing one, when Isabella exposes Angelo for what he really is, and Mariana makes her appearance and tells of the bed-trick. With the first one, Angelo simply plays his part, explaining to the Duke that “her wits I fear me are not firm”²⁰³, and for what concerns Mariana, he utters what we can call a half-truth:

“My lord, I must confess I know this woman,
And five years since there was some speech of marriage
Betwixt myself and her; which was broke off,

²⁰¹ *Measure*, II.1.29-31.

²⁰² Phoebe S. Spinrad, “*Measure for Measure* and the Art of Not Dying” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.124.

²⁰³ *Measure*, V.1.33.

Partly for that her promised proportions
Came short of composition, but in chief
For that her reputation was disvalued
In levity. Since which time of five years
I never spake with her, saw her, nor heard from her,
Upon my faith and honour.”²⁰⁴

The half-truth is that they actually had a sort of pre-contract, called *sponsalia per verba de futuro*, a sworn declaration that a marriage was going to take place in the future, but with no real bond. Gibbons explains that “failure to furnish agreed dowry would justify a unilateral breach”²⁰⁵. Thus, Angelo, if he was sincere, would have been justified for breaking the contract. Yet, it was him that deserted Mariana because of her brother’s death and actually, even if he does not know it yet, they came again together during the bed-trick.

Sure that the Duke would believe him blindly, Angelo pronounces against the two ladies, calling them “poor informal women”, “instruments of some more mightier member that sets them on”²⁰⁶; this other “member”, even if Angelo does not know it, really exists in the person of the Duke disguised as a friar. Once the Deputy asks to “find this practice out”²⁰⁷, events happen quickly and the disguised ruler reveals his true identity. It is now that Angelo bursts into his famous speech in which he recognizes the divine-right power of Duke Vincentio (or is he just playing the Duke’s game to save his own life?):

“Oh, my dread lord,
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. Then, good prince,
No longer session hold upon my shame,
But let my trial be mine own confession:
Immediate sentence then, and sequent death,
Is all the grace I beg.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Ibid., V.1.214-222.

²⁰⁵ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.189.

²⁰⁶ *Measure*, V.1.234-236.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., V.1.237.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., V.1.359-367.

Angelo knows he deserves death, and in some sense, we could say that he is relieved, maybe he wanted to be discovered, since the guilt was too strong. Still, we have to bear in mind that his self-condemnation is not enough for pardon: indeed, Mariana can forgive and marry him, just like Isabella, who, together with Mariana, prays the Duke to spare his life and also the Duke himself and all the laws can forgive him; but it is highly probable that Angelo will never forgive himself, “once a sinner, forever damned”, and this trait is what makes Angelo a sad character.

All throughout the play Angelo demonstrates to be an ambiguous figure. Surely, he plays the role of the ruler quite well at the beginning, even if from the point of view of the audience he does not show any mercy. Then, in the second act we come to learn his real nature, when he proposes to Isabella to lie with him and eventually he reveals himself to be a true tyrant in ordering to kill Claudio all the same. Still, he repents, in the fourth act he admits his faults to the audience alone and he expresses his desire to change the course of events. As a matter of fact, we can say he shows just this trace of humanity; but in the end he deliberately speaks against the two women. Once discovered, he begs for pardon, seemingly really sorry for what he has done, conscious to deserve death and convinced of the Duke’s divinity. All in all, we cannot say he is much worse than the Duke; Angelo is nothing but a mortal, with hot blood flowing in his veins, and with his behavior he shows to be the best representative of the main theme of *Measure for Measure*, namely human frailty.

3.3. Women in *Measure for Measure*

The female characters of this play are four, but only two of them have an important role for what concerns the plot and some space in the dialogues. Isabella and Mariana are in fact the primary victims of the manipulations of Duke Vincentio. Their condition of submission is one of the main features that make the difference between this play and the traditional Shakespearean comedy. In *Measure for Measure*, only men are able to resist the orders of the Duke, while women are “directed”²⁰⁹, “advised”²¹⁰, or “ruled”²¹¹ by him. As a matter of fact, powerlessness, especially women’s, is one of the main topics of this dark comedy. As Marcia Riefer points out,

“*Measure for Measure* serves to reveal contingencies that make it difficult for women, even strong-willed women like Isabella, to assert themselves in a patriarchal society like Vienna – contingencies that do not impinge in the same way on the men.”²¹²

For instance, analyzing Isabella, we have to bear in mind that she feels constantly threatened by a sort of sexual degradation, commonly contrasted by women’s wit in traditional comedies; unfortunately, this is not enough in this play. Isabella is a naïve girl but at the same time she is well aware that the society she lives in lessens her effectiveness as a woman; as a matter of fact, Vienna, where there are brothels at every corner and where people really in love like Claudio and Juliet are considered fornicators, is not the right place to live in for a person like the virtuous Isabella. Her greatest fear, together with the loss of her virginity, is to lose respect completely, and as a consequence, she decides to take refuge in a convent as a nun, in order to flee a society where women are exploited by men.

²⁰⁹ *Measure*, IV.3.128.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.6.3.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, IV.6.4.

²¹² Marcia Riefer, “‘Instruments of Some More Mightier Member’: The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.135.

Mariana is denigrated as a woman as well, since when she introduces herself to the Duke, Lucio and the same Duke make fun of her situation, concluding that she must be a whore, like many other women in Vienna:

“DUKE: Why, you are nothing then: neither maid, widow, nor wife?
LUCIO: My lord, she may be a punk, for many of them are neither
maid, widow, nor wife.”²¹³

Indeed, even wives, like Elbow’s for instance, are treated as whores:

“Marry, sir, by my wife, who, if she had been a woman
cardinally given, might have been accused in fornication,
adultery, and all uncleanness there.” (II.1.71-73)

Still, apart from Elbow’s wife, who nevertheless has no spoken part in *Measure for Measure*, there are no wives in this play. There is only a betrothed, Juliet, who is accounted a “fornicatress”²¹⁴; a formerly-betrothed who has been deserted by her future husband, Mariana; a novice nun who is trying to escape this “lust-infected Vienna”²¹⁵, Isabella; and an actual whore, Mistress Overdone, whose name tells more than her job.

This is why women’s authority, or better, the lack of it, that is to say, women’s powerlessness, is one of the main topics of *Measure for Measure*; and while Juliet, Mariana and Mistress Overdone apparently accept their condition of submission, Isabella feels that she cannot stand it, that her skills are wasted in such a society where most women are considered whores and those who really are professional prostitutes are believed to turn this trade out of a natural vice, not because they need money or for a lack of job options. In fact, convinced that Vienna is nothing but a representation of early modern London, the critics Kamps and Raber observe that

²¹³ *Measure*, V.1.177-179.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II.2.24.

²¹⁵ Marcia Riefer, “‘Instruments of Some More Mightier Member’: The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.136.

“women had far few legitimate trades open to them in early modern England. The closing of monasteries and convents under the reign of Henry VIII had left a disproportionate number of women unemployed and without options [...]. As a result, the period in which Shakespeare wrote may have seen a real increase over previous times in the numbers of women who turned to the streets for a living via both theft and prostitution.”²¹⁶

In this section, the women of *Measure for Measure* will be analysed, leaving more space for a discussion about the virtuous Isabella, since she is one of the main characters of this play and the only one who tries, at least for some moments, to contrast male power.

Isabella is representative of mercy, chastity and truth, seemingly the very opposite of Angelo, of the Duke and in general, of every man in Vienna. On her first appearance, we see her talking with nun Francisca, who is instructing our aspiring novitiate about the order she is going to join, namely the Poor Clares.

Saint Clare (Fig.13) is known for her determination in pursuing a religious life despite the strong opposition of her family; as a sister, she loved St. Francis of Assisi, she defended the convents at St. Damiano from the Saracens and she lived in absolute poverty notwithstanding the opposition of the Church. She was born in 1194 from a noble family and soon she became a Franciscan devotee, at the age of seventeen. Her noble parents knew nothing about this, since they would not have accepted her vocation, in favour as they were of a traditional path in which she should have married and begotten children. She was instead the first woman to create a religious rule and shortly after her death she was made a saint. Her ideas involved a certain autonomy from the order, devotion to poverty and a series of practices that the Church sometimes disagreed about, just like its low consideration of female orders. Indeed, when the Church threatened their independence, Clare protested and finally convinced Pope Innocent IV to confirm the status granted by his predecessor Pope Gregory IX, who recognized the order of Saint Clare.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.261.

²¹⁷ Ibid., p.195. For further information about this visit the site <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04004a.htm>. The sources of the history of St. Clare at our disposal are few in number. They include a *Testament* attributed to



Fig.13, Andreas Collaert, *Icones Sanctae Clarae*, Antwerp, 1630. St. Clare on her deathbed sees a company of virgins wearing crowns.

the saint and some charming *Letters* written by her to Blessed Agnes, Princess of Bohemia; the *Rule of the Clares*, and a certain number of early *Pontifical Bulls* relating to the Order; a contemporary *Biography*, written in 1256 by order of Alexander IV.

The importance of Saint Clare in *Measure for Measure* lies in her rejection of the snares attached to young women's lives and their role in society. Isabella's desire to join the order of Saint Clare is indeed a rejection of the characterization of women in this play as maid, widow, wife or "punk". Clearly enough, choosing the monastic life Isabella makes a subversive decision of substituting "the patriarchal authority of God and Church for the worldly patriarchy of marriage, family and the state."²¹⁸ As a matter of fact, when the Duke asks her in marriage at the end of the play, we perceive that he proposing a critical choice, since he is asking her to accept all that the order she was going to join repudiated. Apart from the Duke's offer, another proposal makes her feel distraught and horrified, namely Angelo's. While we do not know what is her answer to the Duke, we are well aware of Isabella's reaction to Angelo's sexual appetite. At first, she seems also not to understand his intentions and simply affirms:

"Let me be ignorant and in nothing good
But graciously to know I am no better."²¹⁹

Isabella expresses here "orthodox Christian humility: men are sinful and do not understand or hold their virtue."²²⁰ Her religiosity is clearly very strong; in addition, Isabella does not completely agree with the restrictions of the Poor Clares, seemingly desiring a more thoroughly restraining order, as we can perceive from her discussion with nun Francisca:

"ISABELLA: And have your nuns no farther privileges?
NUN: Are not these large enough?
ISABELLA: Yes, truly; I speak not as desiring more,
But rather wishing a more strict restraint
Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare."²²¹

²¹⁸ Ibid., p.196.

²¹⁹ *Measure*, II.4.76-77.

²²⁰ See Brian Gibbons' footnote to *Measure*, p.132.

²²¹ *Measure*, I.4.1-5.

Her principles are very clear, she would like a society of martyrs for herself, thus it is not difficult to believe her words when she offers to give her life for her brother, since this is what a “saintly hero” would do. Phoebe S. Spinrad wittily points out that

“Isabella has found the world too disappointing – yes, even too messy – and wants only to return as soon as possible to her ideal world where there are (she thinks) no loose ends and no human frailties.”²²²

Notwithstanding her strong religiosity, we should also consider another aspect of the pure Isabella, namely her ambivalence, a feature that can be perceived especially in the debate with Angelo and then with Claudio.

“Hark how I’ll bribe you - good my lord, turn back.”²²³

The verb she uses, “bribe”, is completely inopportune in Isabella’s mouth. It is as if the devil, intruding into her innocent body, suddenly came out; another example of her ambiguity is traceable in the scene between Claudio and her, when she explains to her brother why he has to die. Criticism here splits into two different interpretations: some think that Isabella should be admired for her determination to stay chaste, considering her almost divine in her virtue; others despise her, since they perceive her self-righteousness rather contemptible. In other words, they seem to talk about two different Isabellas and actually, this is what happens in *Measure for Measure*. Any other Shakespearean heroine, like Cordelia, Desdemona or Rosalind, would have decided to act the same way. No one would doubt it. Still, her decision upsets many critics. The conversation between the two siblings shows the many facets of Isabella’s ambivalence: the virtuous, the chaste and pure, the determined, the self-righteous, the selfish and the ruthless.

²²² Phoebe S. Spinrad, “*Measure for Measure* and the Art of Not Dying” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.126.

²²³ *Measure*, II.2.150.

In general, the character of Isabella can be studied better through an analysis of the relationship with the other male characters of the play, in particular with Angelo, Claudio and finally the Duke. Angelo brings the analysis onto the issue of eloquence and sexuality, Claudio onto the heart of the question of ambivalence, while the Duke introduces the decline of Isabella, as a result of his patriarchal authority over her.

The first character Isabella has a conversation with is Lucio, who begs her to approach Angelo in order to convince him to spare Claudio's life. Once she is in the same room with Angelo, we perceive that something is going to happen. In fact, the reason why Angelo is captured by Isabella is her eloquence, together with a sexually suggestive language that, clearly, she uses unconsciously (Fig.14); in a certain way, Angelo sees in this novice nun his feminine counterpart, because they both are good debaters, they both want to convince the other of their own ideas and, most of all, he thinks she is using such a language because she feels what he feels for her. As we already know, it is not the case, even if he could make us ask something interesting: can it be that, as Angelo is obsessed with her when once he was immune to women, the same thing may happen to Isabella? In other words, is there a desire to flee her passions when she asks for more restriction in the convent at the beginning of the play? We cannot be sure of that and we cannot know which idea Shakespeare wanted to convey, but certainly it is clear that, like Harriett Hawkins suggests,

“the borderline between angelic and demoniac extremes of virtue and vice is indeed a very narrow one, and all too easy to cross. At this moment of the play, the psychology, the characterization, and the poetry alike raise all sorts of impious and lurid question.”²²⁴

The first sexual allusion is already at the beginning of their conversation, when Isabella is trying to convince Angelo that if she was him, she would act differently:

²²⁴ Harriett Hawkins, “‘The Devil’s Party’: Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.87.



Fig.14, Francis William Topham, *Isabella*, 1888. (In the series *Shakespeare's heroines*)

“I would to heaven I had your potency,
And you were Isabel: should it then be thus?”²²⁵

With “potency” Isabella means power, executive authority; still, the sexual connotation of the word cannot be ignored since she “identifies Angelo’s use of power as an expression of his libidinous nature”²²⁶. The following allusion is to be found toward the end of their first conversation, when Isabella naively suggests:

“Go to your bosom,
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That’s like my brother’s fault.”²²⁷

She clearly does not know that in this way she arouses in him a double ironic effect: first of all, she makes him recall of what he did to the poor Mariana, and at the same time, she unconsciously increases his desire for her. After Angelo’s confession in an aside, “She speaks and ‘tis such sense that my sense breeds with it”²²⁸, Isabella’s words seem to be increasingly ambiguous, with a series of sexual allusions that cannot escape the audience’s ear; the first one is the use of the verb “to bribe”, and then,

“Not with fond sickles of the tested gold,
Or stones whose rate are either rich or poor
As fancy values them;”²²⁹

Both “tested”, meaning “pure”, and “stones”, can contain a reference to “testicles”, the first one with a pun, and the second having that as one meaning (Oxford English Dictionary). Gibbons sees this allusion clearly, affirming that there “may be a sign of the subconscious pressure of the situation on Isabella, which thus

²²⁵ *Measure*, II.2.68-69.

²²⁶ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote to *Measure*, p.121.

²²⁷ *Measure*, II.2.140-142.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, II.2.146-147.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, II.2.154-156.

betrays itself in her language.”²³⁰ The allusion goes further; during their second meeting, namely when Angelo finds it necessary to “speak more gross”²³¹, Isabella’s language fills with sexual references that provoke Angelo’s sadistic lust:

“[...] were I under the terms of death,
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, ere I’d yield
My body up to my shame.”²³²

The erotic suggestion of such words, “whips”, “rubies”, “strip”, “bed” and “longing”, is overpowering for Angelo who is firmly determined not to talk about her soul but of her body, the only thing he wants being that. From this moment on, Angelo becomes more direct and violent in his passion. The expression “rubies”, in particular, has a double meaning; the ruby is one of the most precious stones and its colour, a deep crimson, might be a symbol for martyr’s blood (that is the meaning Isabella would like to convey) or else woman’s desirability (namely the message she actually conveys). This speech is particularly powerful and it relates death with sex; in fact, as Harriett Hawkins notices,

“Everything in it is associated with death, yet Isabella’s references to whips and rubies of blood, to stripping herself as to a bed that she had longed for, are charged with an erotic power that might well evoke a gleam in the eye of the most depraved marquis in the audience, to say nothing of a saint-turned-sensualist like Angelo.”²³³

Though, Angelo’s reaction has the only effect of increasing Isabella’s determination to remain chaste and pure; indeed, we have to bear in mind that she is not only a woman, but a novice nun, thus his proposal to lie with him is even

²³⁰ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote to *Measure*, p.124.

²³¹ *Measure*, II.4.82.

²³² *Ibid.*, II.4.99-104.

²³³ Harriett Hawkins, “‘The Devil’s Party’: Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.83.

more scandalous to her ears. Nonetheless, her chastity together with her eloquence is precisely what makes Angelo fall for her. Kamps and Raber point out that her chaste body combined with her lovely speech are “an important part of the play’s treatment of chastity and lewdness from the outset”. Indeed, when Francisca explains the rules a nun should follow in presence of a man, we perceive the power of seduction that women’s eloquence can have on them. However, the two critics explain the positive side of this skill as well:

“Women’s eloquence can be transformative, its power capable of converting souls to Christianity. Where virtuous speech is combined with a strong and pure body, women seem undefeatable. [...] Isabella’s eloquence in *Measure for Measure* is likewise directed at educating Angelo in merciful Christian behavior.”²³⁴

After her encounter with Angelo, Isabella is to meet her brother, one of the crucial moments of the play in which her ambiguity is apparent. While it has been easy to appreciate Isabella and her virtuousness until now, at present, it is a hard task to sympathize with her, since her harshness emerges at the moment her brother shows his weakness as a man. Isabella’s anger toward Claudio is witnessed by her “violent rush of words”²³⁵; when she goes to Claudio, “religiously exalted by a consciousness of the righteousness of what she has done”²³⁶, Isabella confesses to her brother that even if she is ready to die for him, this is not enough for Angelo, because the latter wants something she is not prepared to give. Claudio, who is less inspired than his sister, is overtaken by fear and cries that “Death is a fearful thing” to which Isabella replies “And shamed life is hateful.”²³⁷ After Claudio’s Hamletic discourse about death, the sweet Isabella seems to leave space to the other Isabella, namely the harsh, ruthless and self-righteous one.

²³⁴ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.202.

²³⁵ Phoebe S. Spinrad, “*Measure for Measure* and the Art of Not Dying” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.120.

²³⁶ Harold C. Goddard, “Power in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.29.

²³⁷ *Measure*, III.1.116-117.

“Oh, you beast!
Oh faithless coward, oh dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?”²³⁸

Hearing a supposed virtuous girl uttering such things is quite astonishing, also because Claudio actually did not say anything to deserve to be called “beast”. Surely he is frightened and weak, but not a “beast”. Isabella reacts just like her brother did, in other words, she “dropped from saintliness to beastliness”²³⁹, to use Harold C. Goddard words. Her conclusion is angry and mean:

“Die, perish. Might but bending down
Reprive thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I’ll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.”²⁴⁰

After all, Claudio and Isabella are not so different: they are both selfish.

Her ambivalence is here at the acme, turning a religious discourse into something hellish, but after their encounter Isabella meets the Duke, the character who most challenges her determination and sense of self. He is also one of the best representatives of patriarchal authority. Indeed, at the beginning of the play, when she discusses with Angelo, she demonstrates to be authoritative and to be able to think with her own mind. At first she is hesitant but with Lucio spurring her, she shows her ability, developing an argument and contrasting Angelo in order to save her brother’s life. Nevertheless, we should notice that already at this point Isabella is acting under the direction of a male character, in this case Lucio’s. Still, she is able to maintain her integrity. At the end of the conversation with Angelo, some of her convictions fall and she feels less sure of her skills of persuasion. Indeed, her crying

“To whom should I complain?”²⁴¹

²³⁸ Ibid., III.1.136-138.

²³⁹ Harold C. Goddard, “Power in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.30.

²⁴⁰ *Measure*, III.1.144-147.

²⁴¹ Ibid., II.4.172.

is evidence of her exasperation; her only hope is her brother, but we saw that Claudio entreats her not to let him die, echoing in this way Angelo's requests. Now she feels really "isolated, hurt, terrified, enraged"²⁴². Clearly, her vulnerability is very high now and no wonder the Duke makes his appearance precisely at this moment. Although it may seem that he is acting for her sake, with honorable intentions, actually he is replicating the indifference of other two male characters to "Isabella's desire to remain true to herself"²⁴³. In fact, the Duke only needs her as a means to achieve his goals, and his perception of Isabella, traceable in his words:

"The hand that hath made you fair hath made you
good: the goodness that is cheap in beauty makes beauty brief in
goodness; but grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall
keep the body of it ever fair."²⁴⁴,

says something about him as a manipulator, rather than about her; the critic Marcia Riefer observes indeed that

"What the Duke sees at this moment is the ideal woman that Hamlet never found: a woman who combines beauty and honesty; a woman who doesn't need to be told to get herself to a nunnery; a woman who represents the opposite of frailty. Unfortunately [...] he fails to see the woman she really is – a woman in distress, who fears the very thing he will eventually require: the sacrifice of her autonomy."²⁴⁵

With the meeting with the Duke and her consent to cooperate with him, Isabella begins her role of submission to the patriarchal authority of Duke Vincentio, becoming a puppet in his expert manipulative hands. In addition, she is even more inclined to obey him, since he presents himself disguised as a friar; thus, as a nun, she cannot refuse his authority. The Duke is asking her to do something that goes

²⁴² Marcia Riefer, "'Instruments of Some More Mightier Member': The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.138.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.139.

²⁴⁴ *Measure*, III.1.176-179.

²⁴⁵ Marcia Riefer, "'Instruments of Some More Mightier Member': The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.139.

against her principles but still she obeys without questioning, seemingly because she has no alternative; sadly enough, what she previously considered her protection, namely the religious order and the Church, is now her dictator. This is also the reason why, while she could resist Angelo's lewd proposal and Claudio's attempt to convince her to yield to the Deputy's will, she does not have the strength to oppose a friar. This is for Isabella the beginning of her decline; she submits to the Duke completely, also in the bed-trick plot, merely answering "Show me how, good father"²⁴⁶. Also her language reveals that she has lost her integrity, her "prosperous art"; in fact, in her last speech she shows a scanty capacity for mercy:

"Most bounteous sir,
Look if it please you on this man condemned
As if my brother lived. I partly think
A due sincerity governed his deeds
Till he did look on me. Since it is so,
Let him not die. My brother had but justice,
In that he did the thing for which he died.
For Angelo,
His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
And must be buried but as an intent
That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects,
Intents but merely thoughts."²⁴⁷

In other words, Isabella is here claiming that Angelo's action about her brother was just, she is saying that Claudio deserved to die. What happened to Isabella's mercy? According to Gibbons's considerations,

"it might be argued from Isabella's weak pleading here that she once again lacks personal, inner strength of conviction, accepts strong pressure from others in cases where an independent moral adult needs no prompting."²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ *Mesure*, III.1.225.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, V.1.437-447.

²⁴⁸ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Mesure*, p.198.

Once subjected to the Duke, all her convictions are negated, and “the gradual loss of personal voice during the course of the play has become, finally, a literal loss of voice.”²⁴⁹ Indeed, Isabella utters no word from line 447 to the end of the play, approximately one hundred lines. She actually reaches the acme of her decline at the end of the play, after her brother reappears alive and the Duke asks her in marriage. This last proposal is absolutely and completely opposed to what her ideas for her future were. Maybe the Duke wants “to redeem her reputation”, Reifer suggests. All considered, it is hard to believe that the Duke is not merely playing the part of the manipulator as he has done throughout the whole play. The question now is: what is Isabella’s answer to the Duke’s proposal? Actually we cannot know, since Shakespeare decided to leave her decision unexpressed, for some reason or other. Some critics think she would never have accepted, since marriage is not conceivable for a nun, even less for Isabella, who thought that the restrictions of the order of Saint Clare about men were not strong enough. Others simply conclude that she could only accept, because this is what the end of the play seems to suggest. Still, the question remains. It is true that a proud Isabella, who eventually refuses to submit to the Duke’s will is preferable to a conventional and traditional acceptance on her part, but this is quite hard to believe. Indeed, the conventions of comedy want Isabella to accept the Duke’s proposal, in order to achieve a supposed happy ending; still, there are some elements of the play, some choices she makes that lead to believe she might answer “no”, since she often chooses the harder and less pleasant option. Shakespeare wittily does not allow her an opinion about this issue, but in the end we can say that he was simply sure that his audience would perceive the silent consent of this virtuous lady. Once the character of Isabella and its development throughout the play is considered and analyzed, we may eventually conclude that *Measure for Measure* can really be read as a tragedy, namely Isabella’s.

The other female characters work the opposite Isabella does; while at the beginning of the play our virtuous maid is going to flee a patriarchal society and

²⁴⁹ Marcia Riefer, “‘Instruments of Some More Mightier Member’: The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.142.

start her ideal life, but in the end all her plans are challenged and then negated, Mariana, Juliet and Mistress Overdone have to endure a hard beginning, but they eventually reach a sort of “happy ending”: Mariana marries her old betrothed, the man she is actually in love with, Claudio does not die, so that he can marry Juliet and be the father of her child, and Mistress Overdone, who at the beginning saw all her business decline because of Angelo, once the Duke comes back, probably does not have to worry any more.

No doubt that Mariana (Fig.15) is a completely different character from Isabella, since she immediately gives the impression of a weak woman, someone who is not able to say “no” to anyone. She is also the representative of “eros”, as opposed to “agape”. The passionate Mariana is the former fiancée of Angelo, who deserted her once her brother shipwrecked, losing her dowry. Her character is introduced in the third act of the play, after the discussion between Isabella and her brother. The Duke, who was eavesdropping on their conversation, proposes a solution to their problem, so that Isabella can save her virtue, Claudio live and Mariana have the man she loves. A question may arise: why is the Duke doing this? Is there any benefit for him? Clearly, there is. As we have already seen in the section entitled “The Disguised Ruler”, Duke Vincentio is “playing” with his subjects in order to appear in the end a sort of savior. But Isabella, Mariana and Claudio do not know it and carefully listen to his apparently precious advice. It is precisely the Duke who tells us the story of Mariana:

“She should this Angelo have married – was affianced to her oath, and the nuptial appointed; between which time of the contract, and limit of the solemnity, her brother Frederick was wrecked at sea, having in that perished vessel the dowry of his sister. But mark how heavily this befell to the poor gentlewoman: there she lost a noble and renowned brother, in his love toward her ever most kind and natural; with him the portion and sinew of her fortune, her marriage dowry; with both, her combinate husband, this well-seeming Angelo.”²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ *Measure*, III.1.204-212.



Fig.15, Valentine Cameron Prinsep, *Mariana*, 1888. (Pre - Raphaelite painting) “There, at the moated grange, resides this dejected Mariana.” (Act III Scene I).

The story of Mariana reminds the audience to what extent *Measure for Measure* is concerned with marriage, money, vows and bodies in love. The point is that a similar thing happens to Juliet and Claudio as well: they postponed their official marriage because Juliet did not have her dowry yet, so that Angelo decides to punish them as fornicators. Also the act of begetting children illegitimately becomes in this play a question of money, or better, of counterfeited coins, like Angelo points out in his discussion with Isabella.

After the description of Mariana's situation, the Duke proposes to Isabella the bed-trick, in which Mariana would take Isabella's place in satisfying Angelo's lust. They do not even take into consideration the possibility that may Mariana disagree, since the Duke says to Isabella that he knows she is still madly in love with him.

The character of Mariana appears for the first time in the second half of the play, at the beginning of the fourth act. The meeting between the Duke and her is introduced by a peculiar opening, namely a boy singing a melancholy song. Some commentators think that the song was added later and others claim that it is incomplete, still others, like Gibbons, believe things. What is sure is that this kind of melancholy introduction reveals something about Mariana, giving the idea of a moment of "peaceful sweet sadness"²⁵¹. Certainly, Shakespeare wanted to show her as a passionate and honorable lady, not a whore. This scene, the atmosphere and the melancholy girl, are a foil to Vienna's licentiousness, and even if Mariana can be considered the representative of "eros", she is not the representative of brothels, because her love for Angelo is true and passionate at the same time. Her role in the play is very important because she is the solving element of all the problems created by the Duke's decision to leave Vienna's running in the hands of a tyrannical, self-righteous man.

The first thing Mariana does is to apologize to the Duke:

"I cry you mercy, sir, and well could wish

²⁵¹ Louise Schleiner, "Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*" in Bloom's *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.104.

You had not found me here so musical.
Let me excuse me, and believe me so,
My mirth it much displeased, but pleased my woe.”²⁵²

Some commentators suppose that with the last sentence Mariana is not “indulging melancholy, [...] she is tempering her grief”, Gibbons points out, “yet in explaining that she is not committing one fault, unseemly merriment, she admits another, as the plain sense ‘pleased my woe’ indicated.”²⁵³ Already after the first lines, it is clear that what she is suffering for is love melancholy. The explanation Robert Burton gives in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* about love sufferers fits like a glove in the case of Mariana: for some of those who suffer for love, “the melody of musick, merriment, singing, dancing doth augment the passion”, thus “these things must be warily applied, as the parties’ Symptoms vary”; but for others, like Mariana, music is beneficial, since even if it brings melancholy, “it is a pleasing melancholy that it causeth; and therefore to such as are discontent, in woe, fear, sorrow, or dejected, it is a most present remedy; it [...] easeth in an instant.”²⁵⁴ This is exactly what Mariana does, she finds help in music and she feeds her obsession with it.

The Duke’s proposal of the bed-trick seems to awaken her, so that she decides to renounce her seclusion and accept the challenge. The idea of seeing her beloved again, to hold him in her arms, excites her to such an extent that she appears to be ready to do anything. Clearly enough, she has great expectations about this secret encounter. Her relationship with Angelo has a moral and legal significance that the Jacobean audience could well understand. In terms of civil law, Angelo is still her “combinate husband”²⁵⁵ because of the kind of marriage contract they have. English common law provided two kinds of ‘spousals’: *sponsalia per verba de presenti* and *sponsalia per verba de futuro*. The first one implied that the two lovers took each other as spouse at the present time, it was legally recognized as full marriage, whether the union was consecrated or not.

²⁵² *Measure*, IV.1.9-13.

²⁵³ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.157.

²⁵⁴ Louise Schleiner, “Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.105.

²⁵⁵ *Measure*, III.1.211-212.

Sponsalia per verba de futuro, instead, implied that the lovers swore to marry in the near future, but this time there was no absolute bond. Indeed, if certain conditions failed to materialize, such as the lack of a dowry, the contract could be broken. Angelo and Mariana's situation concerns this second contract, and in some sense Angelo, even if cold-hearted, was not completely wrong, since the girl actually lost her dowry. There was however one circumstance in which a *de futuro* contract became absolute marriage:

“If a man contract spousals conditionally with a Woman [...] and [...] in the meantime he have access to her, as to his wife, these doubtful spousals do thereby pass into Matrimony.”²⁵⁶

Deserted by her betrothed, Mariana's only hope is that after sleeping with him she might become his legal wife *ipso facto*. Still, as a weak woman, Mariana cannot take such a decision all alone, but the Duke's authority and Isabella's encouragement help her in taking this step.

It is now clear that the question of marriage is one of the main topics of *Measure for Measure*; the point is that it is not a simple institution here, but we have to bear in mind that in this play marriage implies a series of complexities, like the one we have just seen. For what concerns “spousals”, English law changed a lot by the time Shakespeare wrote this play. *Sponsalia per verba* existed in England since the twelfth century, but under the reign on Henry III this law was repealed; clearly, he disagreed with this tradition, in favour of public announcements “placed weeks in advance so that marriages might be approved by the larger social group.” After that, “a ceremony with witnesses was necessary to guarantee that the marriage was legal.”²⁵⁷ However, church law had different origins and at the time *Measure for Measure* was written, marriage was a matter between God and the marrying parties only.

²⁵⁶ See Lever's Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.liv. For further information about this subject see Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals* (1686).

²⁵⁷ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.182.

However, this does not explain why *Measure for Measure* presents so many unmarried women. And the situation of men is not all that better: Angelo wants Isabella's body instead of legally marrying Mariana; the Duke, who is thought to have "some feeling of the sport" has never married; nor Claudio or Lucio have. This is the odd feature of *Measure for Measure*, since in a typical Shakespearean play, marriage is fundamental for achieving a happy ending; indeed, Kamps and Raber notice that in this play the focus is on the ways "sexual desire or its absence interrupts and defers marriage rather than promotes it"²⁵⁸.

Mariana is also subjected to another slander; in fact, control over women is here achieved through a labeling of their status in relation to marriage. Thus, when the Duke asks her if she is a wife, a maid or a widow, and Mariana answers she is none of these, the ruler concludes "Why, you are nothing, then"²⁵⁹; even worse, Lucio suggests that she could be a prostitute, since so many women in Vienna practice that job.

The denigration of women in this play clearly reflects Shakespeare's society; indeed, in the Renaissance women were believed to be the weaker sex and that they could not restrain their passions; as a matter of fact, marriage was the solution in order to control their tendency; husbands were the "head" of the family, they had the task of educating their wives, master them and keep them on the straight and narrow. In exchange, women received protection and the "relief from the sins of [their] body, to which [they were believed to be] naturally inclined"²⁶⁰. Thus, marriage seemed to be the best solution for every woman, and in a certain sense, men did nothing but save them. However, we have to bear in mind that the site for reproduction is to be found in women's body; so, another anxiety men had was that if a woman had sexual intercourse before marrying she could give birth to illegitimate children, who would become a burden for the state. For all these

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p.185.

²⁵⁹ *Measure*, V.1.177.

²⁶⁰ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.188.

reasons, there was a certain tolerance for “pregnancies incurred *while* a marriage was being contracted”²⁶¹, as in the case of Juliet and Claudio.

The problem of *Measure for Measure* is that marriage is used for containing fornication, but by the end of the play it is clear that it failed dramatically. All considered, it can be seen as a problem but at the same time as a solution to the ills of Vienna’s society.

In general, marriage and the trick of substituting one bed-partner for another was not new for the Elizabethan audience, since it was a common device used in folklore and romance. However, Mariana’s role in particular can be compared with that in another Shakespearean comedy, namely *All’s Well That Ends Well*. In fact, Diana claims that Bertram is her husband according to the vows:

“If you shall marry,
You give away this hand, and that is mine;
You give away heaven’s vows, and those are mine; [...]
For I by vow am so embodied yours
That she which marries you must marry me.”²⁶²

Similarly, Mariana asserts:

“This is the hand which with a vowed contract
Was fast belocked in thine. This is the body
That took away the match from Isabel [...]
As there comes light from heaven, and words from breath, [...]
I am affianced this man’s wife, as strongly
As words could make up vows.”²⁶³

Another analogy is to be found in the word-play on the verb “to know”:

“You give away myself, which is known mine, [...]
He knows I am no maid, and he’ll swear to’t;
I’ll swear I am a maid, and he knows not.”²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Ibid., p.189.

²⁶² William Shakespeare, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, edited by J.K. Hunter, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1967, V.3.170-172, 174-175. Henceforward quoted as *All’s Well*.

²⁶³ *Measure*, V.1.206-208, 223, 225-226.

“Why just, my lord, and that is Angelo,
Who thinks he knows that he ne’er knew my body,
But knows, he thinks, that he knows Isabel’s.”²⁶⁵

In both plays the men try to repudiate their old betrothed, Bertram asserting that Diana was “a common gamester to the camp”²⁶⁶ and Angelo declaring that Mariana’s “reputation was disvalued in levity”²⁶⁷. Notwithstanding the greater complexity of a play like *Measure for Measure*, it is also clear that Shakespeare was working with material from his earlier plays.

Still, like there are many analogies between the two plays, there are also some differences that concern precisely Mariana and Diana. Diana actually remains a virgin, since what she claimed was only a theatrical complication before it came out that Bertram’s wife, Helena, was the substituted bedmate, while Mariana in the end slept with Angelo, in order to substitute Isabella, who instead wished to remain virgin. All considered, the role of Mariana in *Measure for Measure*, is that of remedy, the solution of the problems that were caused by a series of events started by the Duke’s withdrawal.

While Mariana is the corrective of this play, Juliet, as a pregnant but not married woman, can be considered its trigger. Juliet, together with Claudio (Fig.16), is the representative of human nature, in a positive sense, since she is happy for her child, but at the same time she knows that what she did is against the law, and for this reason she feels ashamed:

“I do repent me as it is an evil
And take the shame with joy.”²⁶⁸

Her pregnancy is also what saves her from execution, even if she prefers to be condemned as her beloved is (“Oh, injurious love”). The character of Juliet clearly

²⁶⁴ *All’s Well*, V.3.173, 295-296.

²⁶⁵ *Measure*, V.1.199-201.

²⁶⁶ *All’s Well*, V.3.190.

²⁶⁷ *Measure*, V.1.219-220.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, II.3.35-36.

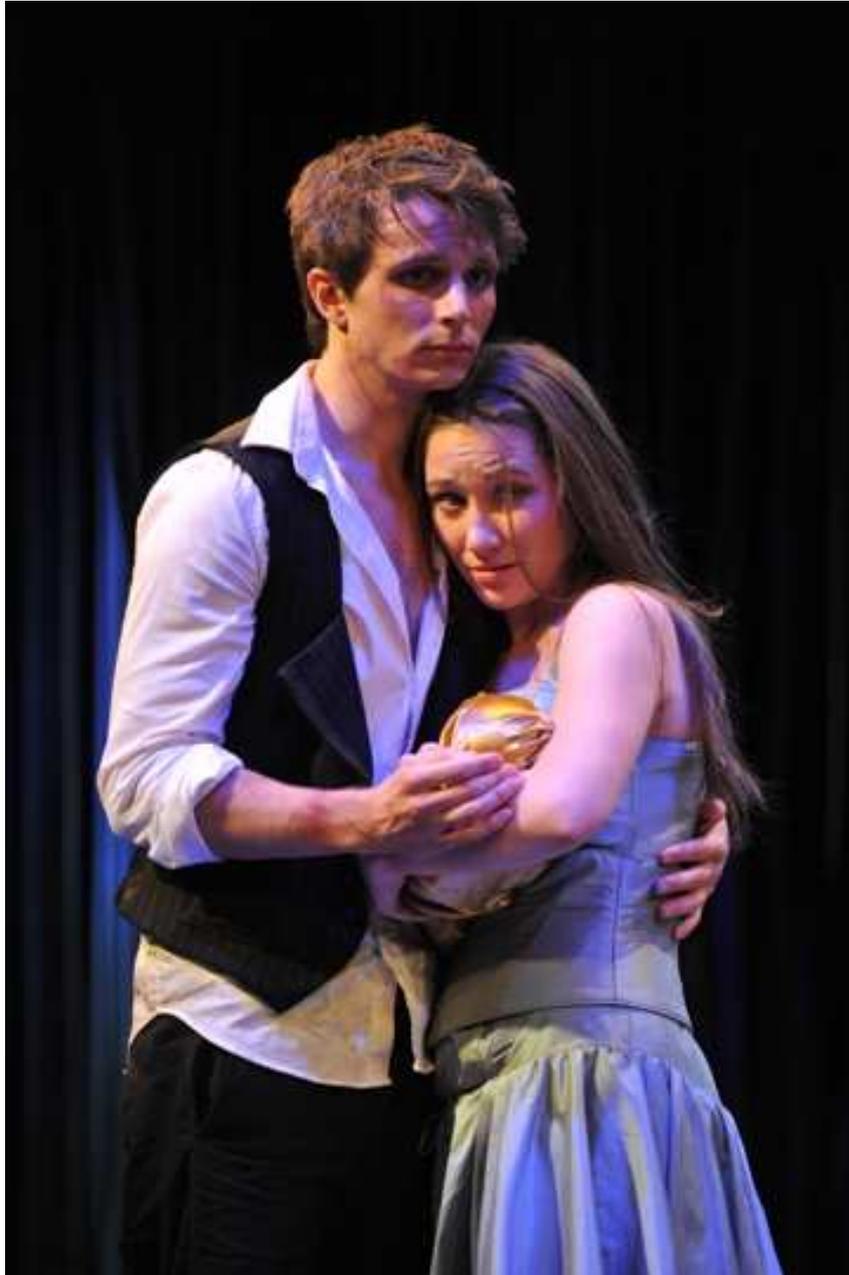


Fig.16, Claudio and Juliet played by Mark Quartley and Sarah Ovens in *Measure for Measure*, directed by RSC Associate (Roxana Silbert), 2011. Photo by Hugo Glendenning.

heightens the pathos and gives more pleasure to the final *dénouement* precisely because she has so little space in the play. She is on stage three times, in the second scene of the first act, in the third scene of the second act and in the fifth act, but she speaks only once, that is in act two. She is introduced by the Provost and then she exchanges a few words with the Duke, but nothing else; her only presence seems to be sufficient. Her most important role is that of being Claudio's beloved. Indeed, the two of them are the only representatives of true and requited love in this play, the only ones who actually want to marry and stay together, and paradoxically they are also the only ones to be punished for it. Claudio and Juliet simply want to get married and stay together, but a series of events hinder their union. Previously in this section we have seen that their marriage was delayed because Juliet's dowry was not ready (for financial reasons). As a matter of fact, Angelo takes the opportunity to show his power as surrogate of the Duke and decides to punish Claudio for fornication; precisely Claudio, not Pompey, Lucio or Froth or any other bawd in Vienna, but the only man who is truly in love with a woman. Thus, the question of marriage arises again; indeed, Claudio tries to explain that

“Upon a true contract
I got possession of Julietta's bed –
You know the lady, she is fast my wife,
Save that we do the denunciation lack
Of outward order. This we came not to
Only for propagation of a dower
Remaining in the coffer of her friends,
From whom we thought it meet to hide out love
Till time had made them for us.”²⁶⁹

Their situation is clearly a *sponsalia per verba de presenti*, the marriage is sworn by both of them and physically consummated, but not publicly announced or “not followed by a religious service as the Church required”²⁷⁰.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., I.2.126-134.

²⁷⁰ See Brian Gibbons' Introduction to *Measure*, p.34.

Still, there are some critics like Bradbrook that are not sure of the kind of marriage contract that concerns Claudio and Juliet. Bradbrook declares that

“It is not clear whether this was a marriage *per verba de presenti*, as was the Duchess of Malfi’s; if so, the child would be legitimate, as the union was customary, and neither party could have married elsewhere according to the English law and habit.”²⁷¹

At the end of the play, however, they get married and their marriage is the only one that reflects the traditional comedy’s happy ending. Indeed, the marriage between Mariana and Angelo is ordered by the Duke and only one party is actually in love. The two relationships can be compared in terms of dramatic construction and what comes out is enlightening; Lever, indeed, notices that

“in both cases the sin ha[s] been committed of cohabitation before a church marriage, but in circumstances which, by normal human standards, show up Claudio as a better man than his judge.”²⁷²

In fact, while Angelo deserted his betrothed just because she had no longer a dowry, Claudio, who actually has a similar problem, kept his pledge and exchanged marital vows with Juliet, delaying the religious consecration only until her dowry became available. Lever goes further:

“It [is] dramatic justice that Angelo’s hypocrisy should be exposed by putting him in a similar situation to that of the man he ha[s] condemned. It [is] also dramatic mercy that by the Substituted Bedmate device he [is] saved from the far graver offence he had planned, and sentenced finally by his ruler to the same ‘penalty’ as Claudio’s: namely, marriage in the eyes of the church as well as the law.”²⁷³

²⁷¹ M.C Bradbrook, “Authority, Truth, and Justice in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.12.

²⁷² See Lever’s Introduction to *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.lv.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.lv.

Finally, there is a last female character that is worth of attention, Mistress Overdone. This woman is a canonic comic character, a bawd and the keeper of a brothel, and she is representative of the underworld of Vienna. She is the first female character who appears on the stage, shortly before Juliet; her name, typical device of comedies, reveals more of her personality than any word she utters in the play, since the verb “do” can probably means “copulate with”. Overdone is also her last husband, the last of a list of nine, as Pompey, her tapster, explains to Escalus:

ESCALUS “Hath she had any more than one husband?”

POMPEY “Nine, sir: Overdone by the last.”²⁷⁴

Her name can also be attributed to most of the main characters of this play, since they all have something that “overflows”, and what they do is often overdone.

Her great fear at the beginning of the play is to lose her job, since with the withdrawal of the Duke, and Angelo as his substitute, many brothels of Vienna seem to be close to their end. In fact, she finds her own business stuck as a consequence of Angelo’s orders to pluck down all the brothels, in order to control fornication in Vienna. A similar situation occurred during the reign of Henry VIII, who also tried to “pluck down” the brothels, but with poor results²⁷⁵. According to Pompey’s remark, a similar failure is expected in Vienna:

“Come, fear not you: good counselors lack no clients.

Though you change your place, you need not change your trade.

I’ll be your tapster still. Courage, there will be pity taken on you, you that have worn your eyes almost out in the service, you will be considered.”²⁷⁶

Pompey is saying that Mistress Overdone need not worry about her ‘service’, namely prostitution, since she might simply be a tavern landlady for a certain

²⁷⁴ *Measure*, II.1.172-173.

²⁷⁵ Cfr. Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.252.

²⁷⁶ *Measure*, I.2.89-93.

period of time, pretending to have stopped her business but actually carrying on with it.

Mistress Overdone does not resemble any of the other female characters of this play; she appears on the stage almost together with Juliet, but the difference between the two of them is extreme and obvious, the young and pregnant Juliet being the image of love and fertility, the old woman being the representative of physical and moral corruption. Sadly enough, we learn that also Juliet is seen as an image of sin and vice, since she is considered a “fornicatress”. Notwithstanding the evident contrast between the two characters, Mistress Overdone and Juliet have some striking similarities that add complexity to the play: for instance, Mistress Overdone has been married many times and as a (once) married woman she should be protected against being arrested, but actually this is not so; Juliet, who is not married, lacks the same kind of protection, and she is saved from prison only because she is pregnant.

All considered, women in *Measure for Measure* represent powerlessness and submission to men in a patriarchal society that is nothing but the representation of Shakespeare’s society. In other words, Shakespeare wanted to give an overview of the situation of London at his time, confirming the hypothesis that Vienna is a parallel to London. Isabella who wants to take refuge into a monastery, when monasteries were not so common in London any more, and her eloquent silence at the end of the play, Mariana and Juliet with the question of marriage and lawfulness, and Mistress Overdone who represents the essence of the underworld of Vienna, they all seem to send signals to the audience, as if Shakespeare wanted to convey precisely this message about the play: this is not a typical comedy with its typical happy ending, but it shows the harsh reality, the ugly truth of a society in which women (and the weak in general) have no voice, where powerlessness and submission are the catchwords.

3.4. Comic characters

In *Measure for Measure* there are no Shakespearean fools like Feste or Falstaff, but there are some comic characters, like whoremasters, brothel-keepers and pimps, that seem to have the same function or at least are treated comically. For example, a character like Pompey, even if the tapster of a brothel, can be considered a domestic fool.

The domestic fool is a recurring character type in Shakespearean plays, not only in comedies. He is usually a common citizen who, through his wit, outdoes people of a higher rank. Among Shakespeare's plays the character of the fool can have many different shades, creating in this way a heterogeneous group of fools. The main dramatic function a Shakespearean fool has is that of making the audience understand that, in the end, he is not a fool at all. Indeed, clowning is something more than mere comic relief: its aim is also that of making easier to understand a complex scene, shifting the focus from fiction to reality. Feste, for instance, is Olivia's domestic fool in *Twelfth Night*. He is called "allowed fool"²⁷⁷, and also "the jester, [...]; a fool that the lady Olivia's father took much delight in."²⁷⁸ He claims that he does not wear "motley"²⁷⁹ in his brain, thus making clear he is not an idiot. In the same way, Falstaff is primarily a comic figure, but also embodies vitality, merriment and joie de vivre.

In *Measure for Measure*, Pompey the pimp has the same function Feste and Falstaff have. He is a rascal, his job that of tapster in Mistress Overdone's brothel, but actually, even if he is not completely sincere about his real activity, he is a bawd. Though, his role in this play goes farther than merely playing the part of the low-life character; indeed, he shows Vienna's corruption to the audience with the implicated problems it hides. For instance, when he is led before Escalus (Fig. 17) by Constable Elbow, whose wit is clearly inferior to our bawd's, Pompey demonstrates that in Vienna authentic justice has no place:

²⁷⁷ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, edited by Keir Elam, Arden Shakespeare, London, 2008, I.5.90.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., II.4.11-12.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., I.5.52-53.



Fig.17, Henry Singleton, *Measure for Measure*, Act II Scene I, London, 1798. Constable Elbow tries to explain the crime Froth and Pompey committed with his own wife.

“If you head and hang all that offend that way but for ten year together, you’ll be glad to give out a commission for more heads. If this law hold in Vienna ten year, I’ll rent the fairest house in it after three pence a bay. If you live to see this come to pass, say Pompey told you so.”²⁸⁰

In addition, with his remarks he shows that he can be considered one of the most sincere and authentic characters in the play, being the only one who admits that women and men have sexual instincts they cannot contain.

Furthermore, he is well aware that the law is a kind of system made by man, and as a consequence of this, it can also be altered:

“ESCALUS: Is it a lawful trade?
POMPEY: If the law would allow it, sir.”²⁸¹

This comment may suggest that Shakespeare wanted to convey to his audience a certain message, namely that justice and law are two separate concepts, the first one having a moral quality, the second consisting of rules created by a government.

At a certain point of the play, Pompey is conducted to jail and again his role is to reveal a rotten legal system, that is Vienna’s. Indeed, while Claudio is in prison waiting to die, with no escape, Pompey is offered to become the assistant of the executioner, Abhorson; he gladly accepts, since for him death does not represent the boundary between life on earth and eternity, he rather perceives it as something that has to do with coarse jesting.

Probably because of his sincerity and because it is evident that Pompey is telling the truth, Duke Vincentio attacks him in an extraordinary unmerciful passage, where he betrays his disguise:

“Fie, sirrah, a bawd, a wicked bawd!

²⁸⁰ *Measure*, II.1.205-209.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II.1.193-194.

The evil that thou causest to be done,
That is thy means to live. Do thou but think
What 'tis to cram a maw or clothe a back
From such a filthy vice; say to thyself,
'From their abominable and beastly touches
I drink, I eat, array myself, and live.'
Canst thou believe thy living is a life,
So strikingly depending? Go mend, go mend."²⁸²

As a consequence, Pompey, like other comic characters of this play, has the function, among others, of throwing some light on the nature of the Duke, so that we can understand a little better what kind of man he really is.

Shakespeare's play also reflects the low opinion of the law enforcement at the time, such as the decision to elevate Pompey "from arrested bawd to official and paid executioner"²⁸³, as Kamps and Raber notice. The common opinion was that officers were nothing but "unpaid amateur members of the community". Yet, while in rural areas their power was sufficient and effective, in a large and mobile city like London things were quite different. The constables serving the city were not enough and they had too many responsibilities, not to mention the amount of corruption among them; as a matter of fact, crime fighting did not work. James Gryffon, honest and dutiful constable of Albury, a parish in Surrey, wrote a ballad in order to complain against this situation, revealing that some of his duties led him to be despised in English society²⁸⁴; therefore, no wonder that Shakespeare satirically portrayed Constable Elbow as an incapable fool.

Indeed, the man who leads Pompey to jail is precisely Elbow, another comic character in *Measure for Measure*. Elbow is a constable, and even if he is a low officer, he represents justice. As one of the characters belonging to low-life, his role is that of creating humour and the audience perceives it immediately after his first appearance on stage. Primarily, he is ignorant and quite bungling, thus always finding himself in a condition of disadvantage in respect to Pompey, who is rather quick-witted, making the audience smile, since it should be Pompey the one who

²⁸² Ibid., III.2.16-24.

²⁸³ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.255.

²⁸⁴ Cfr. Ibid., pp.312-313.

feels out of his element. In addition, there is another comic element that characterizes Elbow, namely his malapropisms, such as his inability to present Pompey and Froth as villains; in fact, while talking about them, he insists on calling Pompey and Froth “benefactors” rather than “malefactors”, thus reflecting a “general state of confusion concerning good Christian behaviour”²⁸⁵:

“I do lean upon justice, sir, and do bring in
here, before your good honour, two notorious benefactors. [...]
If it please your honour, I know not well what they are: but
precise villains they are, that I am sure of, and void of all
profanation in the world that good Christians ought to have.”²⁸⁶

In addition, his situation reflects also on his impotence, in fact, Mistress Elbow has apparently been caught in a brothel with Froth.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare assigned Elbow another important role, a more serious function; if Pompey can outwit an officer so easily in such a clever and mischievous way, this means that Vienna’s state of justice is rather unstable. Furthermore, wrongly calling Pompey and Froth “benefactors”, Elbow makes a mistake that creates a certain irony. Indeed, with this comment Shakespeare probably wanted to say that in Vienna (thus London) malefactors can escape requital, while those who are fundamentally good citizens like Claudio are condemned by the law as draft dodgers.

Among *Measure for Measure*’s dramatis personae, there is another important comic character, not intended as a Shakespeare fool, but whose witty irony is fundamental to the complexity of the play, that is “fantastic” Lucio. At first, Lucio seems a plain character: lascivious, gross and a prevaricator; but soon we learn that he is a humorous “fantastic”, whose behavior tells a lot about the other characters of the play and about the main topics of it.

The first time we see Lucio on the stage he is discussing with some friends of his about the decision of the Duke to withdraw for a period of time leaving

²⁸⁵ Harriett Hawkins, “‘The Devil’s Party’: Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.82.

²⁸⁶ *Measure*, II.1.45-47, 50-52.

Angelo in his place. Their conversation is full of sexual puns, a device used by Shakespeare in order to introduce straightforwardly Lucio's lechery to the audience. The first one is a reference to syphilis, which was called the French disease:

“Thou art good velvet: thou'rt a
three-piled piece, I warrant thee. I had as lief be a list of an
English kersey as be piled, as thou art piled, for a French velvet.
Do I speak feelingly now?”²⁸⁷

Here the pun is on the word “piled”: the sense can be “pilled” that means without hair, an effect of the treatment for syphilis, or “piled” which instead refers to a napped cloth. There is a play also on “French”, with a reference to the French disease and the imported cloth too. There might be an allusion to the “patch of velvet used in treating syphilis ‘to cover lanced chancres’.”²⁸⁸ The following example contains another reference to lust:

“Behold, behold, where Madam Mitigation comes. I have
purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to –”²⁸⁹

In this comment, Lucio confirms he has already contracted venereal diseases and he uses a nickname for Mistress Overdone that is an allusion to her job, in fact, as Brian Gibbons suggests, “she provides means to appease or mitigate lust.”²⁹⁰ Then, he alludes again to syphilis as the French disease and he makes a pun on the word “sound”, as a reference to one of the symptoms of syphilis, namely a problem to bones.

“Nay, not, as one would say, healthy, but so sound as things
that are hollow. Thy bones are hollow.”²⁹¹

²⁸⁷ Ibid., I.2.26-29.

²⁸⁸ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.94.

²⁸⁹ *Measure*, I.2.35-36.

²⁹⁰ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.95.

²⁹¹ *Measure*, I.2.44-45.

Lucio's lechery is evident now, since in these comments he suggests to be a brothel frequenter and to have already contracted venereal diseases.

In the third act, second scene, we also learn from Mistress Overdone that Lucio impregnated a prostitute, Kate Keepdown, whom he is obliged to marry at the end, a punishment he compares to "pressing to death, whipping, and hanging!"²⁹².

"Mistress Kate Keepdown was with child by [Lucio] in the Duke's time, he promised her marriage, his child is a year and a quarter old come Philip and Jacob [...]"²⁹³

Then, talking with the Duke, he describes lechery as a sport, implicating that he does not see fornication as wrong. For Lucio, lust is just a sort of "game of tick-tack"²⁹⁴, or the "rebellion of a codpiece"²⁹⁵. As a matter of fact, in his opinion Claudio was "condemned for untrussing"²⁹⁶. At a certain point of their discussion, he also slanders the Duke, even if Lucio thinks to be praising him.

"He had some feeling of the sport, he knew the service, and that instructed him to mercy."²⁹⁷

Nevertheless, we also learn that he is Claudio's friend. In this way, Shakespeare probably wanted to show another aspect of Lucio's personality, completely detached from all we have seen until now about him. Lucio is immediately ready to help his friend, he directly goes to call Claudio's sister, Isabella, at the monastery, in order to pray her to ask for her brother's mercy. His devotion to Claudio is traceable in his willingness:

"CLAUDIO: One word, good friend: Lucio, a word with you.
LUCIO: A hundred, if they'll do you any good."²⁹⁸

²⁹² Ibid., V.1.514-515.

²⁹³ Ibid., III.2.171-173.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., I.2.171.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., III.2.100-101.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., III.2.153.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., III.2.104-105.

His remark shows that, all considered, Lucio is not only a lecher, but he is also capable of feelings. In fact, after that, he directly goes to Isabella (Fig.18) and unexpectedly, his behavior is full of respect; the change of register and language, from a low and vulgar to an elevated and polite one, indicates that Lucio is now serious.

“I would not, though ‘tis my familiar sin
With maids to seem the lapwing, and to jest
Tongue far from heart, play with all virgins so.
I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted,
By your renouncement an immortal spirit
And to be talked with sincerity
As with a saint.”²⁹⁹

Also the change from prose to poetry makes clear that something has changed. At first, Isabella thinks Lucio is making fun of her, because his seriousness and his elevated language are hardly believable. Still, he insists on and on, so that she eventually understands he is telling the truth. In this way, Shakespeare makes Lucio pronounce a poetic speech that highly contrasts with the gross puns of the first act; in this speech, he describes Claudio and Juliet’s relationship and the consequences of it, namely Juliet’s pregnancy, in such a refined way that leaves the audience quite astonished:

“Your brother and his lover have embraced;
As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry.”³⁰⁰

Ordinarily, he would have never used such a poetic and beautiful language to describe a sexual encounter. Clearly, this is something that complicates Lucio’s

²⁹⁸ Ibid., I.2.123-124.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., I.4.31-37.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., I.4.40-44.



Fig.18, Isabella and Lucio, Act I, Scene V. Cowden-Clark, Charles and Mary, eds. *The Plays of William Shakespeare. The Comedies.* Illustrator: H.C. Selous. London: Cassell and Company, c. 1830.

character. Why did Shakespeare put these words in his mouth? Why now? Maybe, Lucio fears that if he used a more explicit language, he would shock Isabella, since his aim is to convince her to help Claudio, go to Angelo and beg him to spare her brother. Notwithstanding his speech of great power and poetry, the critic Melvin Seiden calls this mechanism

“Measure against measure, the technique of giving with one hand and taking away with the other: the poetry affirms the natural dignity of lovemaking, the goodness of human fecundity, but the speaker – lewd, wisecracking, brothel-wise Lucio, cannot resist the nice pun on “tilt and husbandry” – undermines the beauty he expresses even as he is expressing it.”³⁰¹

Be that as it is, Shakespeare’s decision to add this aspect to Lucio’s personality is a way of communicating to the audience that this character is not merely a jester.

Still, he is even more complicated than this. Indeed, even if he is a good friend to Claudio, Lucio’s attitude toward Pompey, Mistress Overdone and Kate Keepdown, is not all that positive, rather he shows his worst side with them. It may be that Lucio considers Claudio a worthier person than a bawd, a brothel keeper and a prostitute, and as a consequence of this he keeps his loyalty only for Claudio.

However, we cannot say that Pompey, Mistress Overdone and Kate deserve to be treated so badly, when all that they hope in is Lucio’s help. For instance, when Pompey is to be conducted to jail (Act III Scene 2), he asks for bail, sure that Lucio will give him a hand in this. Once seen his willingness in helping a friend in trouble, the audience may expect the same treatment also with Pompey. Unexpectedly again, Lucio pointedly refuses and what is worse is that he willfully mocks Pompey, showing him as the worst kind of bawd. In his mocking, Lucio also comes back to a low and gross language, leaving poetry in favour of prose:

“How now, noble Pompey? What, at the wheels of Caesar? Art

³⁰¹ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.78.

thou led in triumph? What, is there none of Pygmalion's images newly made woman to be had now, for putting the hand in the pocket and extracting it clutched? What reply, ha? What say'st thou to this tune, matter, and method? Is't not drowned i'th'last rain, ha? What say'st thou, Trot? Is the world as it was, man? Which is the way? Is it sad a few words? Or how? The trick of it?"³⁰²

Clearly, he is trying to bother Pompey considerably, making fun of his name (reference to Caesar) and calling him "trot", an epithet usually used to address a poor common man. Still not satisfied, he goes on:

"Well then, imprison him: if imprisonment be the due of a bawd, why 'tis right. Bawd is he, doubtless, and of antiquity too. Bawd born."³⁰³

Now it is quite easy for the audience to dislike Lucio and instead be sympathetic with Pompey, who apparently is not able to follow suit. Eventually, Lucio addresses Pompey as if he was a dog, scornful to the point that the audience completely forgets Lucio's good manners with Isabella shortly before: "Go to the kennel, Pompey, go."³⁰⁴

The next victim of Lucio's betrayal is Mistress Overdone, who is to be taken to jail as well because of his "information against [her]"³⁰⁵. Mistress Overdone tells Escalus about it and also informs him that Lucio impregnated a woman, namely the prostitute Kate Keepdown, promised her marriage but eventually deserted her and disowned his baby as well.

Lucio does not mock only the low characters of the play, his slanders being directed also to the high rank people, first of all the puritanical Angelo, whom he mischievously describes as a "freak of nature"³⁰⁶:

³⁰² *Measure*, III.2.39-46.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, III.2.59-61.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, III.2.75.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, III.2.170-171.

³⁰⁶ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.79.

“Some report a sea-maid spawned him, some, that he was
begot between two stock-fishes; but it is certain that when he
makes water, his urine is congealed ice, that I know to be true;
and he is a motion generative, that’s infallible.”³⁰⁷

Nevertheless, the worst slander he makes is directed to the Duke. On that occasion, Lucio proves to be an authentic liar, since what he states is completely false, and the audience is well aware of it. Lucio claims to be a close friend of the Duke and to share with him the passion for women.

“Sir, I know him, and I love him. [...]
Sir, my name is Lucio, well known to the Duke.”³⁰⁸

This scene is typically comic, since the audience knows that Lucio, who thinks he is simply talking to Friar Lodowick, is actually talking to the Duke himself, who is momentarily disguised. The position of advantage the audience can benefit of, is precisely typical of comedies. In addition, the comicality of this scene is even higher because the Duke has to endure Lucio’s slander without revealing his true identity. Moreover, the gross language Claudio uses heightens the Duke’s impatience.

Another comic scene is to be found at the end of the play, in the fifth act, when Lucio is accused of having slandered the Duke; at the moment he does not know that the friar and the Duke are the same person, so, he claims that it was the friar who mocked the Duke; as a matter of fact, Lucio is now slandering the friar as he did with the Duke before:

“My lord, I know him, ‘tis a meddling friar.
I do not like the man: had he been lay, my lord,
For certain words he spake against your grace
In your retirement, I had swung him soundly.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ *Measure*, III.2.95-98.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, III.2.129,138.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, V.1.127-130.

With “meddling” Shakespeare may wanted to refer to the bawdy quibble on the word, since a meddler was also considered someone who “indulges in sexual activities”³¹⁰. Then he carries on in his conviction:

“[...] a saucy friar,
A very scurvy fellow.”³¹¹

Lucio says that Friar Lodowick, alias the Duke, is an offensive man; thus, the funny side of this scene lies not only in Lucio’s failure to realize that Duke Vincentio and Friar Lodowick are not two distinct people, but also in the renewed annoyance of the Duke, who again has to endure Lucio’s slanders about him. What is more, Lucio, discomfiting the Duke with his slanders, is highlighting the ambiguity behind the Duke’s disguise.

Clearly, he is nothing but a lecher, a liar and a deceiver, but all considered, the behavior this kind of character adopts, arouses a certain sympathy in the audience as a consequence of the humour he creates.

We should also bear in mind that Lucio is the only character to be punished, being obliged to marry a prostitute, namely Kate Keepdown. What is awkward of this decision is that the Duke punishes Lucio not because he is a fornicator and he impregnated a prostitute, whom he after deserted, but because

“Slandering a prince deserves it.”³¹²

Why is Lucio punished while Angelo is not? At this point, the answer probably lies in what they actually *said* rather than in what they *did*. Still, many spectators and readers may have preferred to see Angelo whipped, but this could not happen, since while Angelo humbly asks for forgiveness and praises the Duke, Lucio’s words are quite different, less laudable we may say:

³¹⁰ See Brian Gibbons’ footnote in *Measure*, p.176.

³¹¹ *Measure*, V.1.135-136.

³¹² *Ibid.*, V.1.516.

“I beseech your highness, do not marry me to a whore. Your highness said, even now, I made you a duke: good my lord, do not recompense me in making me a cuckold.”³¹³

Actually, Angelo is guilty of fornication and attempted murder, while Claudio merely slandered the Duke, even if he did it more than once. Still, Angelo’s penitence strongly contrasts with Lucio’s “irrepressible, comic self, [so] Lucio must [...] be whipped some (presumably to make him compliant), while Angelo is judged ready to resume the life of a compliant subject.”³¹⁴

As a matter of fact, an ultimate unanswered and unanswerable question arises thanks to this comic character, namely if the Duke actually wants to reestablish order and justice in Vienna, excising corruption and fornication from the city, or if he merely misses the “attention” of his subjects. Seiden gives his opinion concerning it:

“It may be that because of the comic pleasure Lucio gives through his fertile slanders, he is punished less severely than the pervasive morality of the play demands that he be. The most significant grievance against Lucio – Vincentio’s, ours, the play’s – is that he is a major figure in the obscene world of “abominable and beastly touches” [III.2.21] between whores and customers. Thus is it that Lucio’s “marrying a punk” is a punishment that fits one crime, the other crime, slander, having been mitigated.”³¹⁵

Measure for Measure’s comic characters go beyond the traditional fool and the “fantastic”. Barnardine (Fig. 19), even if he has a small part in the play and seems to be the less significant character, covers an important role that can be compared to that of the gravediggers’ in *Hamlet*. Barnardine is thus a comic character, whose aim is to make the audience reflect on some important moral issues of the play.

³¹³ Ibid., V.1.507-509.

³¹⁴ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, cit., p.148.

³¹⁵ Seiden, *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.83.

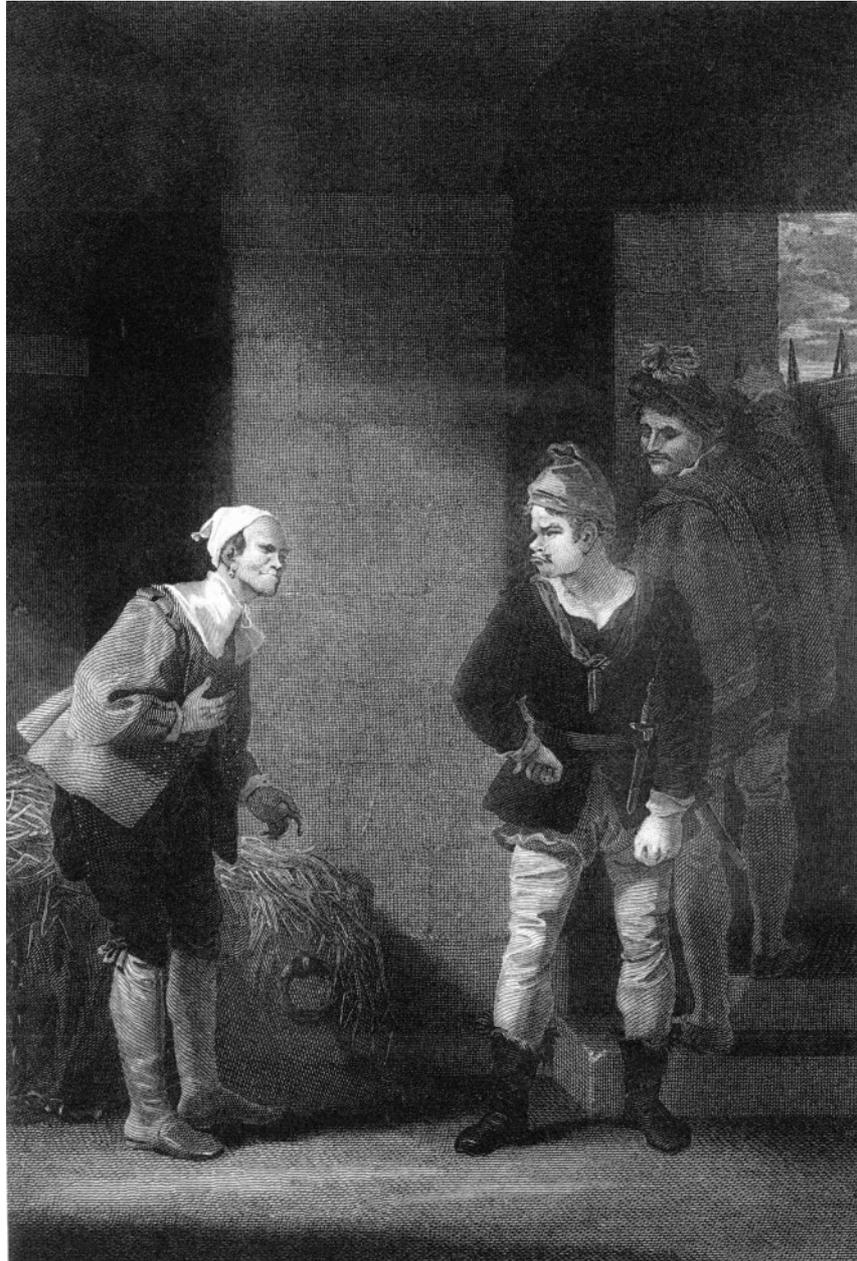


Fig.19, Robert Smirke, *Barnardine*.

The first time we see Barnardine on the stage is in the fourth act, when the Provost asks Pompey if he wants to become the executioner's assistant in beheading Claudio and Barnardine, since both of them are going to be executed the next day. It is precisely the Provost who gives us a general description of Barnardine:

“A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep: careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come: insensible of mortality and desperately mortal.”³¹⁶

The description of Barnardine gives the idea that he is ready to die; on the contrary, his behavior is quite unexpected, since he refuses to be executed each time he is told the time has come. The most interesting but also comic scene concerning this has to do again with the Duke. When the Duke, disguised as a friar, tries to persuade him to come out of his cell in order to go to the scaffold, Barnardine refuses to obey:

“Friar, not I. I have been drinking hard all night, and I will have more time to prepare me, or they shall beat out my brains with billets. I will not consent to die this day, that's certain.”³¹⁷

Gibbons highlights the irony in Barnardine's possibility to choose what to do, “to spend some time in his own cell, almost as if it were his club, but Barnardine's sense of dignity is apparent.”³¹⁸ This scene, however, provokes laughter since it shows the Duke's renewed failure (the first time was with Claudio, who refused to “be absolute for death”) in making the men of this play do what he wants and as a matter of fact authority has to accept its limits. Claudio indeed is in the same condition of Barnardine, thus, they apparently share the same lot, but at the same time they are two characters in contrast with each other: Claudio has to die for

³¹⁶ *Measure*, IV.2.125-128.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.3.45-48.

³¹⁸ See Brian Gibbons' footnote in *Measure*, p.171.

fornication and because he impregnated his mistress, thus creating a new life; on the other hand, Barnardine is to be executed because he killed a man, thus taking away a life. As a matter of fact, the audience is well aware that it is not fair that Claudio has to be punished like Barnardine. The role of Barnardine is here fundamental for the play: true justice does not aim to apply the law arbitrarily, but actually this is what happens in Vienna/London and the Provost perceives it when he says:

“Th’one has my pity; not a jot the other,
Being a murderer, though he were my brother.”³¹⁹

Though, there is something that lessens the difference between the two characters, placing them on the same level; they both believe in life, since they both want to live and thus, in a sense, they are both against the system. In being admirably vital, they remind us of the greatest of vitalists, namely Sir John Falstaff.

Barnardine has also another function though, namely to reveal something more about the Duke’s nature through his behavior. Seemingly, the Duke was once a firm ruler; indeed, in the fourth act he asks the Provost why Barnardine is still in prison, since the Duke has always taken care of his subjects:

“How came it that the absent Duke had not either delivered
him to his liberty or executed him? I have heard it was ever his
manner to do so.”³²⁰

The Provost confirms what the disguised ruler affirms, but this aspect of the Duke is in contrast with his admission at the beginning of the play that

“We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds,
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,
Even like an o’er-grown lion in a cave

³¹⁹ *Measure*, IV.2.48-49.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.2.115-117.

That goes not out to prey.”³²¹

It is also in contrast with the image of the good ruler, who knows what happens in his city, and clearly this is not the case of Duke Vincentio.

Apparently, what to the Duke really matters about Barnardine is his spiritual situation. Barnardine deserves to be executed and in addition, his head is needed by the Duke for the bed-trick plot. However, the Duke, in his disguise of friar, concludes that a drunken man with no repentance cannot be beheaded. He says that Barnardine must have time to understand his sins, repent and save his soul:

“A creature unprepared, unmeet for death,
And to transport him, in the mind he is,
Were damnable.”³²²

At the end of the play, however, Barnardine’s head is not needed anymore and the Duke decides to spare him.

“Sirrah, thou art said to have a stubborn soul
That apprehends no further than this world,
And squar’st thy life according. Thou’rt condemned:
But, for those earthly faults, I quit them all,
And pray thee take this mercy to provide
For better times to come.”³²³

His decision makes the audience reflect about the development of the character of the Duke: the choice of his disguise and his withdrawal from Vienna may have instructed him about the right balance there should be between justice and mercy.

Still, the question remains: does Barnardine deserve mercy and Lucio deserve to be punished? All considered, the measure which justice and mercy should be measured out with, remains one of the great unsolved questions of this play. Thus, the fool and comic characters in *Measure for Measure* are necessary

³²¹ Ibid., I.3.20-24.

³²² Ibid., IV.3.58-60.

³²³ Ibid., V.1.473-479.

especially because they give the audience the possibility to reflect on this topic, mostly on the character of the Duke, even if in the end they do not provide a solution; their role remains that of creating humour as well as of throwing some light on the nature of some characters or on some fundamental topics like justice, morality and corruption. The other function they have is to represent authenticity, since unlike Angelo or the Duke, they all “avoid all ‘seeming’ or pretence to a virtue they do not possess”³²⁴, and this is the reason why comic characters are generally so highly appreciated by the audience.

³²⁴ Herbert Weil, Jr., “Form and Contexts in *Measure for Measure*” in Bloom’s *Measure for Measure*, cit., p.70.

Conclusion: A Failed Happy Ending

When we read or watch *Measure for Measure* for the first time, we may have the feeling that this is a common Shakespeare comedy; though, an attentive reader or spectator might perceive that there is something wrong in its idea of a happy ending. Indeed, it leaves a sense of perplexity and a series of questions that we have tried to answer in this dissertation.

First of all, after a short introduction to the genre of comedy and specifically to Shakespeare's comedy and his problem plays, an attempt to classify *Measure for Measure* has been made. The conclusion has been a confirm of what a reader or a spectator might think at the end of the play: *Measure for Measure* is a problem play, whatever we try to call it, whether tragicomedy or dark comedy, things do not change. Indeed, in order to label it as a dark comedy or as a tragicomedy, all criticism should agree on the existence of such genres. However, there are many different thoughts concerning this theme; therefore, the best thing to do is to give it a label that everyone would agree upon, namely a problem play. In fact, contrary to many other Shakespeare plays that can be defined problem plays since they show a series of problems to discuss, *Measure for Measure* is totally a problem, as we have seen in the first chapter in the section entitled "Introduction to the problem plays". As a matter of fact, the only thing to do has been to throw some light on the main problems implied in this play, and to give an answer, as far as possible, to the many questions that might arise throughout the play and at the end of it.

In order to do this, the main characters of *Measure for Measure*, from the ruler of Vienna to its substitute, from the women of the play to its comic characters, have been analysed.

The character of Duke Vincentio, who can be considered the protagonist of the play, has been discussed at length. His disguise, his deception, his manipulative role, are all elements that make people think about what kind of person he could be. At first, he may appear as a good-natured man, someone who worries about his subjects and would do the best he can for them. Nevertheless, throughout the play,

we come to learn that his behavior is not so fair and adequate, but rather selfish and manipulative; he acts for his own sake and interests and uses Angelo just to appear as a God-like figure at the end. Therefore, even if from a first glance he might be perceived as the representative of justice, actually what he merely exhibits is the desire of a man to regain power in a corrupted and lecherous city, not through fair means but by cheating and deceiving his subjects. Then, another aspect that has been taken into consideration is the parallel between Duke Vincentio and James I. There are various different opinions concerning this topic, but, in the end, what has come out is that the analogies between the two rulers are real, that is to say they really share some features; what is uncertain is the reason why Shakespeare decided to create a character that could be compared to his king: some say that he wanted to praise the new monarch of England, others say that it is a sort of satire, in other words that Duke Vincentio's bad behavior might be a reflection of James I's little success in ruling England. Who is right remains a choice of the reader/audience.

The Duke's substitute (or surrogate), Angelo, in particular his change throughout the play, has been analysed in the following section. At first a man of healthy values and tenets, he himself discovers not to be "snow-broth", since hot blood flows in his veins. The Duke appears to be testing him, as he does with the rest of the characters as well, and Angelo apparently falls into the trap immediately. His reaction to Isabella's eloquence bewilders him to the point that he proposes to her to commit the same crime for which he condemned her brother. At the end he seems seriously contrite for all he has done, in this way appearing to the audience a better man in respect to the Duke. Nonetheless, his final praise to the Duke might appear more a last attempt to save his neck rather than the real apology of a regretful man. Again, it is the reader/audience who has to decide.

Furthermore, Isabella is the main female character of *Measure for Measure* and the criticism concerning her absolute chastity is wide. When we first see her on the stage, she is going to become a nun of the order of St Clare. Then, Lucio tells her about her brother, so her vows are delayed. What characterizes her, in addition

to her chastity, is her eloquence, namely the feature that makes Angelo go mad. Like Angelo, Isabella's character changes with the unfolding of the play: at the beginning she is a sweet, merciful and good-natured girl, but once she is asked to sacrifice her virtue to Angelo by him, but also by her brother, her harshness comes out, revealing that hot blood flows also in her veins and that, as Angelo, she is considered to be one of the representatives of human frailty.

The other women in *Measure for Measure* have minor roles, though their function is fundamental. Juliet, together with Claudio her beloved, is the trigger of the action, from Claudio's sentence on; Mariana is essential for the success of the bed trick; and Mistress Overdone, together with the comic characters, is the representative of the underworld of Vienna, the corruption and the licentiousness.

Pompey, Elbow, Lucio and Barnardine, as comic characters, have a quite simple role, namely that of mitigating the darkest and heaviest scenes of the play, such as Isabella and Angelo's meeting, or Claudio's plea to his sister; however, their function is again more important than their mere role in "clowns" of the play. In fact, through their satire, or their carping remarks, or simply their peculiar behavior, they make the audience meditate on the main themes of *Measure for Measure*; as a matter of fact, the contrasts between appearance and reality, honour and corruption, chastity and licentiousness, justice and mercy, come out and become central to the play, finally leading the audience to ask those questions it has not been possible to answer, since it is not exactly clear what kind of message Shakespeare wants to convey. The answers are thus subjective, like the interpretation of the whole play. Some may think that Isabella's silence at the end of the play stands for an acceptance on her part, others may believe that she would never agree to the Duke's proposal, since her desired life was in a convent. Some might wish that Angelo was finally punished for his behavior, others may consider him sufficiently penitent. No to talk about the Duke: is he a just ruler or a deceiver and a manipulator who acts for his own interests? These are the questions that, notwithstanding the analysis that has been carried out, cannot be answered with absolute certainty. All considered, this is also another aspect for which Shakespeare

should be appreciated. Even if *Measure for Measure* is commonly classified as a play worth of little attention, it is probably one of the few plays that allow the audience to give a free interpretation, in this way making of *Measure for Measure* a play that deals with current themes in all ages, included ours.

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