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The Wrath of Duke: The Problem of Justice and Religion in William Shakespeare's

*Measure for Measure*

Throughout William Shakespeare's career, he has consistently expanded the limitations and expectations of genre in dramatic literature. It comes as no surprise then, that Shakespeare's last "comedy," Measure for Measure, is a culmination of thematic elements explored in previous comedies that push the comedic genre to an almost unrecognizable form. The main difference between Measure for Measure and Shakespeare's previous comedies lies within the use of comedic genre tropes that exist within each. Where one line can mark the difference between comedy and tragedy in Midsummer Night's Dream, no line, or rather, no resolution defines Measure for Measure as either. If Midsummer Night's Dream explores the issues of sexual violence, and Merchant of Venice "consistently blurs the distinction between good and evil," Measure for Measure incorporates aspects of sexual deviancy and the existence of both good and evil inherent in the morality of the ruling members of any society. Yet, the *focus* of Measure for Measure exists within Shakespeare's examinations of the problem of justice versus its enforcement. This problem exists on two levels within the play, in the realms of god and man. It is the interplay between the two that allows Shakespeare to critique the the place of religion within the control structures in place during Elizabethan era England.

Shakespeare introduces the problem of justice in Vienna at the beginning of the play with the Duke Vincentio's choice of Angelo to rule in his stead over Escalus who is arguably far more qualified for the task. The Duke claims that Escalus is well versed in "The nature of our people, / Our city's institutions, and the terms / for common justice" (I.i.9-11). At the same time, the Duke describes Angelo as "precise; / [he] Stands at a guard with envy; scarce confesses / That his blood flows; or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone" (I.iii.50-53). There are two problems that Shakespeare presents with this choice. First, the Duke (the one who is truly in power) makes a choice that is not for the benefit of his people, but rather for his own personal amusement. He wants to see if "power [can] change purpose" for Angelo (I.iii.54). Because Shakespeare begins the play with praise for Escalus' ability he is able to establish that the Duke is making the *wrong* choice. Without the character of Escalus, there would be no known alternative and therefore the Duke's choice in Angelo would contain much less impact.

Secondly, Shakespeare uses this choice as a method to describe the difference between entirely lax and strictly enforced rule. The Duke explains that in Vienna they "have strict statutes and most biting laws ... Which for this fourteen years we have let slip" (I.iii.19,21). The Duke chooses Angelo to rule both for his rigid adherence to the enforcement of all laws (which the Duke does not have) as well as Angelo's potential for failure. He wants to use Angelo as a scapegoat, and to solve the problem that he has run into where nobody obeys the laws at all anymore. He does this so that he can enter on the coattails of the change in the public view of law in Vienna that he intends for Angelo to introduce without any of the backlash.

As a character, Duke Vincentio is also significant for Shakespeare's experimentation with genre. The historical figure of Macbeth's Duncan, is in a similar situation to Measure for Measure's Duke. In The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, Raphael Holinshed writes:

The beginning of Duncan's reign was very quiet and peacable, without any notable trouble; but after it was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offenders, many misruled personse took occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet state of the commonwealth. (Holinshed, 135)

The main difference between Duncan and the Duke is in the *consequences* for their inability to keep the peace by avoiding their responsibilities as rulers. For Duncan, it ultimately leads to his death, and the Duke is never held accountable for his actions. This distinction keeps Measure for Measure (at least partially) firmly rooted in the comedic genre, because there are no direct consequences of the Duke's actions.

Additionally, the Duke escapes his responsibility while standing right under the noses of the rest of the cast. It is significant that the Duke asks the friar to "Supply me with the habit, and instruct me / How I may formally in person bear / Like a true friar" (I.iii.46-48). This is because of the duplicity inherent in the choice to avoid his responsibilities while observing from within, but also because of the association Shakespeare makes with persons of power (the Duke) with religious figures (the Friars). The Duke claims that "He who the sword of heaven will bear / should be as holy as severe," and that Angelo "receives letters of a strange tenor, perchance of the Duke's death ... entering into some monastery ... Look th' unfolding star calls up the shepherd" (III.ii.261-262, IV.ii.200-203). In a sense, the Duke is playing "God," but he is

playing “God” the way “God” *plays* “God,” under the surface. Yet, while the Duke spends the majority of the play working behind the scenes, his choice in appointing Angelo for rule sets the “stage” for the issue that is central to the play: Claudio’s execution for the crime of getting his fiancée pregnant before marriage.

Not only is the basis of his crime derived from an expectation for marital sexual connection that is taken from contemporary religious extremes, but the reaction of Claudio’s sister Isabel to the consequence for the crime reveals a significant problem with religious overzealousness. When faced with the option of either saving her brother’s life or having sex with Angelo in exchange for his *mercy*, Isabel replies “Better it were a brother died at once, / Than a sister, by redeeming him, / should die for ever” (II.iv.106-108). The seriousness of the problem lies in her reluctance to save her brother based upon an abstract belief. Granted, she is not given a particularly forgiving or *fair* choice, but she has the ability to save her brother without any definite consequence. It isn’t until the Duke, reveals his plans later that this issue is resolved. In a sense, he is both Claudio and Isabel’s “savior.”

Ultimately, Measure for Measure explores the issues of religion and justice without the necessary restrictions of the comedic genre. The difference between the fate of the immortal soul versus that of the living flesh, the figure of power operating under the guise of a religious figure, and laws prohibiting sexual acts that are rooted in Elizabethan religious sentiment all provide Shakespeare with a solid foundation to undermine the value of religious authority within society.