

Measure for Measure

By Marjorie Garber

dramatis personae

- Vincentio, *the Duke of Vienna*
- Angelo, *appointed his deputy*
- Escalus, *an old lord, appointed Angelo's secondary*
- Claudio, *a young gentleman*
- Juliet, *betrothed to Claudio*
- Isabella, *Claudio's sister, novice to a sisterhood of nuns*
- Lucio, *a fantastic*
- Two other such Gentlemen Froth, *a foolish gentleman*
- Mistress Overdone, *a bawd*
- Pompey, *her clownish servant*
- A Provost
- Elbow, *a simple constable*
- A Justice
- Abhorson, *an executioner*
- Barnardine, *a dissolute condemned prisoner*
- Mariana, *betrothed to Angelo*
- A Boy, *attendant on Mariana*
- Friar Peter Francesca, *a nun*
- Varrius, *a lord, fiend to the Duke*
- Lords, officers, citizens, servants

"Measure for Measure," observed Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "is the single exception to the delightfulness of Shakespeare's plays. It is a hateful work, although Shakespearian throughout. Our feelings of justice are grossly wounded in Angelo's escape. Isabella herself contrives to be unamiable, and Claudio is detestable."¹In fact, *Measure for Measure* has always been controversial, exciting a great deal of critical and directorial interest, and puzzlement. It has been given unhelpful and unhistorical labels like "problem play" and "dark comedy" to explain, or explain away, some of its peculiarities. The play has been of special interest to scholars and critics concerned with English history and the court, with religion (the title phrase comes from the Gospel according to Matthew; a particularly conflicted character is called Angelo; the plot involves nuns, priests, confession, and vows of chastity), and with the representation of women, feminism, and sexuality. Despite Coleridge's spirited animadversion, the play has had many admirers, and it contains passages of brilliant verse—some borrowed by later writers like T. S. Eliot—and powerful, passionate action. On the hatefulness/delightfulness scale articulated by Coleridge it is surely "dark" rather than

“festive,” but its dramatic patterns and psychological investigations fit superbly well both in the evolving sequence of Shakespearean “romantic” comedies and in the cluster of agonized and even phobic encounters represented by its chronological neighbors among the tragedies, like *Othello* and *King Lear*.

Recent readings of *Measure for Measure* have tended to begin with King James I, who was on the throne of England and Scotland in 1604, when the play was first performed. The play's all-seeing, all-knowing Duke of Vienna has often been compared to James, an absolutist ruler who believed strongly in the divine right of kings. James was a staunch Protestant, raising the stakes for a play like *Measure*, populated by nuns and friars, religious true believers, and self-deceiving hypocrites. With his kingship, beginning in 1603, James ushered in a much greater bureaucracy and apparatus of state spying than had been in place in the equally watchful but more entrepreneurial government of Elizabeth. Above all, James came to be associated with the idea of power in absence, the keystone and cornerstone of absolutist power. James had strong views on morality; he described himself as the father of his country (and, as we will see in this play, as its mother, too), and he was deeply—a modern world would say, neurotically—involved in keeping track of activities going on in all corners of his kingdom. The motif of the disguised ruler, who conceals his real identity to spy on his subjects, was one that appealed to James and that he occasionally put into practice himself. As Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, declared in his coronation sermon, since princes “can not be Gods by nature,” since they are human beings, “framed of the same metal, and in the same mould, that others are,” then

It foloweth directly, they are gods by Office; Ruling, Iudging, and Punishing in Gods steede, & so deseruing Gods name here on earth.²

The Duke in this play is not literally a figure “of” King James, any more than he is a figure “of” God or “of” Christ; his deployment of what the play calls “power divine” is a delegation of power that devolves upon the good ruler as such a ruler was understood in the period. And the ideals for which such a ruler was to stand were those of reason and ethical judgment. “Judging” was the ruler's and the magistrate's duty; it was that obligation that made him, dangerously, like a god, if not like God.

As often as this Duke has been compared to King James, he has also been compared to Shakespeare, or to a playwright, ordering his cast and bringing about his plot devices, dramatic surprises, and denouements. Here, too, there is a danger of too quickly collapsing a fruitful allusiveness into a wooden, fixed identity. It would be more helpful, both in terms of the play's own freestanding energies and in terms of an understanding of its historical place in time, to observe that *Measure for Measure* is a play about *representation* and *aboutsubstitution*, two concepts that are as foundational for the theater as they are for the state. Who represents God? Who represents the King, or the Duke? How does an actor represent a character, or a set of ideas, on the stage? Since a “person”

(from the Latin *persona*, an actor's mask is one who impersonates, who represents, then an actor is a person, and a person is an actor. Both “counterfeit”— both represent. This was the view of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651):

- [1] A person is he whose words and actions are considered either as his own, or as representing the words and actions of another man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by fiction.
- [2] When they are considered as his own, then is he called a *natural person*; and when they are considered as representing the words and actions of another, then is he a *feigned* or *artificial person*. . . .
- [3] . . . [A] *person* is the same that an *actor* is, both on the stage and in common conversation; and to *personate* is to *act*, or *represent*, himself or another; and he that acteth another is said to bear his person, or act in his name.³

Hobbes's chapter "Persons, Authors, and Things Personated" is of relevance for those interested in the role of the stage actor in general and the question of authority in particular, since he is especially concerned with the relationship between an "author" and an "actor," where "author" means someone in authority, and "actor" (or "representer") someone who performs an action on the "author's" behalf or at the "author's" behest. The date of *Leviathan* is half a century after Shakespeare's play was produced, so the relevance of Hobbes here is indirect rather than direct. But just as a much more recent "author," like Sigmund Freud, may be said to have described scenarios that bear pertinently on Shakespeare's characters and plays even though he wrote and thought hundreds of years afterward (using the vocabulary of the "other scene" as the place of the unconscious), so it is useful to take note of the range of ways in which, in the years immediately following the heyday of early modern English drama, words that pertained to the theater, the stage, the king's court, and the judge's courtroom were intertwined and disentangled.

There was a time in critical history when the Duke in *Measure for Measure* was seen as a godlike playwright figure, a precursor to Prospero in *The Tempest*, ordering the lives of all the other characters, making sure that things come out right in the end. The logic of representation or substitution is voiced within the play itself, in the recurrence of words like "deputy" and "substitute," and in a phrase like Angelo's, spoken at the play's close—"your grace, like power divine, / Hath looked upon my passes" (5.1.361–362). "Passes" are trespasses—Angelo is citing the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4), and he seeks to have his sins forgiven by the person he also calls a "dread lord." Lately the Duke has not had such good press. If he is a playwright, he is often seen as a failed playwright who cannot keep his actors in order—a presciently post-Pirandello playwright whose characters are in search of another author. He is often regarded as something of a meddler or busybody, a ruler who may see himself as godlike, but who is mistaken. Some commentators, wittily noticing that he is the Duke of *Vienna*, have compared him, not without point, to a psychoanalyst, probing motives, reading the unconscious, delving into the past, and messing about with other people's sex lives.

The plot of *Measure for Measure* has also been of special interest to critics and audiences concerned with women's place, or places. The rich and problematic character Isabella, whose desire to enter the nunnery begins the play, receives not one but two sexual propositions: the first from Angelo, who wishes to seduce her; the second from the Duke, who wishes to marry her. In an early scene in *Measure for Measure* we learn that a woman who is a novice in the convent of Saint Clare can either speak to a man or look him in the face, but not both at the same time. This crux—the voice or the gaze, the ears or the eyes, the audience that hears or the spectators who watch—will persist as a point of crisis throughout the play. And we might note also the play's famous and discomfiting ending, in which the Duke proposes to Isabella and she does not respond. The supposed conventions of comedy imply that she will accept him; resistant modern readings and stagings have sometimes shown her hesitating or even rejecting his suit. The gap or space of interpretation has often balanced, or unbalanced, the interpersonal encounters that have gone before. Is this a play that ends, as formally it "should," with four marriages (Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and Kate Keepdown, the Duke and Isabella)? Or does Isabella's silence destabilize this neat equation, reminding the attentive Shakespearean audience of other, earlier hesitations, like that of Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*, who sends her too-confident lover off for a year to tell jokes in a hospital, to bring smiles to the "speechless sick"?

The scene of the play is laid, as we have noted, in Vienna, a Catholic city in Shakespeare's time and the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, ruled by the Catholic Hapsburgs. England had been officially a Protestant country since the 1534 Act of Supremacy created the King, Henry VIII, instead of the Pope, the Supreme Head of the Church in England. During the period 1536–1539 Henry VIII's troops suppressed the monasteries and despoiled them, often seizing their

wealth for the crown. Henry's daughter Mary Tudor, who married the Catholic King Philip II of Spain, briefly returned the country to Catholic rule (1553–1558), burning many Protestant heretics at the stake, but at her death the new Queen, Elizabeth, became Supreme Head of the Church in England. Both Elizabeth and James were staunch Protestants. Elizabeth was less zealous than Mary had been in persecution of those who held opposing beliefs, but she did authorize the occasional pursuit, torture, and execution of “papists.” Those not in the religious majority were often prudentially advised to dissimulate. The followers of the “old faith” (Catholicism) were, in the time of Elizabeth and of James, forced to hide their beliefs or—in the words of the Porter in *Macbeth*— to “equivocate” about their faith. To complete this broad and rapid account of Catholic-Protestant tensions in the period, let me note also that it is thought that Shakespeare's father, John, was Catholic, that he was a lifelong recusant who declined to attend church, and that his political and economic fortunes may have suffered as a result.

Vienna is also the supposed locale of the *Mousetrap* play in *Hamlet*, “The Murder of Gonzago.” “This play is an image of a murder done in Vienna,” Hamlet tells King Claudius (*Hamlet* 3.2.217–218). *Hamlet* itself is a play in which a ghost laments the fact that he has gone to his death without the religious comfort of the last rites of the Church and is thus condemned to wander in purgatory, a play that thus marks the same persistent tension between Protestant and Catholic, “old” and new beliefs.

As *Measure for Measure* opens, Vienna is a city riddled with decay and corruption. Under the rule of Duke Vincentio, laws have been allowed to lapse, morality to slacken, and order (what Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* called “degree”) to become disorder. As the Duke explains to the Friar in the monastery,

We have strict statues 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'ergrown lion in a cave
That goes not out to prey. . . .

Measure for Measure 1.3.19–23

Like a father who uses the rod only to threaten his child, and not to punish, the Duke has permitted his laws to be ignored. As a result they are no longer either respected or obeyed:

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.

3.1.27–31

This is the same concern about hierarchy and “degree” expressed so strongly in *Troilus and Cressida*—that a debased idea of justice produces loss of “degree” in society. But the Duke's solution to the problem is peculiar. He himself, he says, is too closely associated with this laxness to begin to enforce the laws. Instead he has chosen Lord Angelo to serve as his deputy and enforce them in his absence. “In our remove be thou at full ourself / Mortality and mercy in Vienna / Live in thy tongue and heart,” he tells Angelo (1.1.43–45). But mortality and mercy are the two attributes Angelo conspicuously lacks. He is neither human nor merciful as the play opens and as it unfolds, and it is hard to believe that the Duke does not know this perfectly well. The Duke's absence is not precisely what he says it is, and for two reasons: first, because although officially absent he is actually present onstage in disguise, and second,

because by deputizing Angelo he creates a structure for testing him. Angelo is being tested, as Vienna is being tested, by the apparent removal of the Duke, who represents order and law.

The Duke's supposed removal from Vienna invites us to group this play with other Shakespeare plays, like *Much Ado About Nothing*, where a middle world of transformation is created not by a geographical shift (for example, court to country to court, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *As You Like It*, or *The Winter's Tale*) but by an internal change in the composition and spirit of the community. In *Much Ado*, as in *Twelfth Night*, new people (soldiers home from the war; shipwreck victims washed ashore in Illyria) arrive to change a relatively static onstage society. In *Measure for Measure* the inner world of the play is realized by subtraction rather than by addition or movement: the inner world is the world of Vienna without the Duke. The Duke leaves, and disorder is revealed, but it was always there. So instead of transformation there is confrontation and discovery. In keeping with this, instead of the wild freedom of the Forest of Arden or the Athenian wood—or, indeed, the nighttime world of *Romeo and Juliet*—there is in this play an inner world that is largely composed of enclosed spaces, spaces that confine and compress (like Hamlet's figure of the nutshell) rather than setting characters free. Claudio's dungeon is an enclosed space, as is Isabella's nunnery, and the Duke's monastery, and Mariana's "moated grange," a farmhouse surrounded by a moat that serves in place of a wall, like the enclosed and walled garden, the *hortus conclusus*, of medieval and biblical tradition. Each is imaginatively a sign of a set of other enclosures: virginity and chastity; brotherhood and obedience; even death, as Claudio makes clear when he imagines death as a physical confinement:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod. . . .

3.1.118–121

As the play progresses all the enclosed spaces wait to be opened. Mariana waits to be freed from the isolation of the moated grange; Claudio, and even the drunken prisoner Barnardine, to be freed from prison; Isabella to be freed from the nunnery to a world of human sexuality, choice, and marriage; Angelo to be freed from the walled prison of the self. But initially Vienna appears as a place without appropriate law, and the very lack of good law locks its central characters into their several and separate, but analogous, prisons.

What is law? What are its limits? On what should it be based? The play's title, as we've noted, comes from a verse in the Gospel according to Matthew: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again"

(Matthew 7:1–2). At issue throughout the play is the question of retributive justice, and also the question of the fit judge. The Duke's phrase "[m]ortality and mercy," addressed, with some ironic foreshadowing, to Angelo, balances the power to execute with the correlative power to pardon. The so-called Golden Rule—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—is an injunction repeatedly pressed upon Angelo, both by Escalus, his second-in-command, and by Isabella, Claudio's sister. Put yourself in Claudio's place, they urge. Imagine yourself facing death for the sin of premarital sex. As Isabella says,

If he had been as you and you as he,
You would have slipped like him, but he, like you,
Would not have been so stern.

2.2.66–68

This is a prediction that all too clearly will come true, as Angelo does “slip,” propositioning Isabella with the promise of freeing her brother if she will only sleep with him—a promise he has no intention of keeping. The play thus centers on the question of whether judging is possible at all. From what vantage point can one fallible human being judge another, mete out measure for measure? As Hamlet replies to Polonius when Polonius tells him he will treat each player according to “his desert,” what the player deserves, “God’s bodykins, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity” (*Hamlet* 2.2.508–510). In her first interview with Angelo, in act 2, scene 2, Isabella urges this position of mercy upon him:

Alas, alas!

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,
And He that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. . . .

2.2.74–77

But to Angelo laws are not human-centered but absolute, inhuman, unchangeable. There is no such thing as mercy, as he makes clear at the beginning of act 2 in a conversation with Escalus. Angelo insists on rigidity:

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.

2.1.1–4

This is the Duke’s point, too—spare the rod and spoil the child. But Escalus, with a temperate wisdom that is often linked in these plays to age and experience, replies, “Ay, but yet / Let us be keen, and rather cut a little / Than fall and bruise to death” (2.1.5–6). Angelo, denying this possibility, speaks a line that can be seen only as “tempting fate”—or as another mode of ironic foreshadowing on the part of the playwright:

'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall. . . .

2.1.17—18

Angelo—the allegorical name is quite uncommon in Shakespeare—defines himself as a man who is above temptation, as something more than a human being. In refusing to imagine himself as human, and thus “fallen,” he falls. In trying to be more than a man, he becomes less. From the very beginning of the play we are given evidence that others regard Angelo as either inhuman or less than human. The Duke says of him that he “scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone” (1.3.51–53). Lucio describes him as “a man whose blood / Is very snow-broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge” (1.4.56–59). Elsewhere we are told that “when he makes water his urine is congealed ice” (3.1.354–355). The Viennese speculate that he was not born of a sexual union between man and woman. And this is the man who is called upon to give judgment—to be “[m]ortality and mercy” in Vienna.

The problem here is a familiar one in Shakespeare, one to which it is perhaps too easy to give the catchall therapeutic label “self-knowledge.” Angelo, despite, or because of, his angelic name, is as ignorant of his own mortal nature as his city’s laws are of the propensities of human beings. The old counselor Escalus knows this, which is why he appeals to Angelo for leniency. And it is Escalus who provides the crucial description of the Duke that is at the

opposite pole from Angelo's self-righteous iciness, when he says that the Duke—then thought to be absent from Vienna—is “[o]ne that, above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself” (3.1.456–457).

The word that above all symbolizes, and betrays, Angelo's situation is a word he uses repeatedly, the word “sense.” Listening to Isabella, he finds himself moved for the first time by sexual desire, and aside to the audience he observes, “She speaks, and 'tis such sense / That my sense breeds with it” (2.2.144–145). Lucio has earlier described him as a man who “never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense.” In these contexts “sense” means “desire,” sensuality— his “sense breeds” with her speech. But “sense” can also mean “reason”—good sense—and it is characteristic of Angelo that he should confuse the two. Having denied the senses, he begins to substitute one kind of “sense” for the other, producing a split, of a kind also present in *Troilus and Cressida*, between reason and passion. It is precisely because Angelo has never accepted the senses that he is vulnerable to the first onslaught of passion. Clinging to external laws and precepts rather than contending “to know himself,” he falls. Having fallen, he seeks instant gratification of his newfound sense. At the close of his second interview with Isabella, Angelo charts his own turning point:

I have begun,
And now I give my sensual race the rein.
Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite.
Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
That banish what they sue for. Redeem thy brother
By yielding up thy body to my will,
Or else he must not only die the death,
But thy unkindness shall his death draw out
To ling'ring sufferance. Answer me tomorrow,
Or by the affection that now guides me most,
I'll prove a tyrant to him. As for you,
Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.

2.4.159–170

The language of weighing and measuring, of scales of justice, so present throughout the play, now becomes *overweighing*, tipping the balance. The monk becomes the satyr. And Isabella's resounding accusation fulfills itself:

[M]an, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
.....
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep. . . .

2.2.120–125

As Angelo, the “angel,” will weep by the play's end.

The play thus asks the question, What is natural? And how can we contend to know ourselves? A failure to understand this central question has led, in Vienna, to two different but related kinds of excess: excess of liberty and excess of restraint. The two instincts, which are really two sides of the same coin, are exemplified by a brother and a

sister, Claudio and Isabella, who, like other pairs of Shakespearean siblings (Sebastian and Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Ophelia and Laertes in *Hamlet*), seem so complementary as to be in a way two aspects of the same person. Excess of liberty has produced the situation with which the play opens: Claudio's sexual relationship with his betrothed, Juliet, and Juliet's pregnancy.

Betrothal in the early modern period was a much more formal and legal status than engagement is today. There were two kinds of spousals, present and future ("I *take you* as my spouse" and "I *will take you* . . ."), and the declaration of vows in the present had a binding force, especially when combined with the two other factors that together with the vow made for a marriage contract: the dowry and sexual consummation. In fact, Claudio's situation with regard to Juliet is very similar to the situation of Angelo and Mariana. Both couples have been engaged but not married, bound by a precontract, lacking only the payment of a dowry. (Shakespeare-biography buffs may here wish to recall that Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway when she was already pregnant, and that the couple's daughter Susanna was born five months later.) The all-knowing Duke assures Mariana that she is married in the eyes of God. Nevertheless, for the sin of sexual knowledge Claudio is committed to prison, and the audience's first sight of him comes when he is being led through the streets as an example, at the command of Angelo. "How now, Claudio!" exclaims a startled Lucio, "Whence comes this restraint?" Claudio's answer is prompt and pertinent:

From too much liberty my Lucio, liberty.
As surfeit is the father of much fast,
So every scope, by the immoderate use,
Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that raven down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die.

1.2.105–110

Too much liberty produces restraint. Rats lack the power to regurgitate, so what they swallow they must keep inside them. "Proper" here has a double meaning, both "appropriate" (what they deserve) and "natural" (what they cannot help wanting). Sex is both natural and dangerous, and Claudio's and Juliet's excess has led to restraint—to his imprisonment and the threat of death.

But if Claudio has broken a civil law through liberty, Isabella seems to be breaking a natural law through restraint. She is first encountered as she is entering a nunnery, a destination resisted by other Shakespearean women from the Juliet of *Romeo and Juliet* to Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Moreover, though the order Isabella chooses, the Order of Saint Clare, was proverbially the strictest of all sisterhoods, it is not strict enough for Isabella. She desires, as she says, "more strict restraint." Their privileges are too free for her. The Poor Clares, as they were known, lived by begging, and it is arguable that one of the things Isabella is forced to learn in the course of this play is how to beg—though her begging is not disinterested but anguished and direct, pleading with Angelo for her brother's life.

In fact, as Angelo shrewdly observes, he and Isabella have a great deal in common. They refer to themselves, and are described by others, as saints (another Shakespearean danger signal), and Angelo admits that Isabella's virtue is part of her attraction: "O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint, / With saints doth bait thy hook!" (2.2.184–185). In other words, it will take a saint to catch a saint. But as unnatural as Angelo may seem, in wishing to enforce archaic laws for their own sake, he is not more unnatural than Isabella, who can proudly proclaim, "More than our brother is our chastity" (2.4.185). In a way, there could be no more excessive statement, no greater acknowledgment that

Isabella fails to understand the nature of humanity and the sense of sense. It is no accident that she claims to hear her father's voice in her brother's when Claudio consents to die rather than have her relinquish her virginity to Angelo: "There spake my brother; there my father's grave / Did utter forth a voice" (3.1.84–85). Like Ophelia, Isabella could be said here to be using the return to the role of the obedient daughter as a way to avoid certain crises of adulthood. The conflation and confusion of "father" and "brother" as male authority figures is something that will occur in a number of other Shakespeare plays (in *Twelfth Night*, for example, where Olivia initially is imprisoned by her obedience to a "brother's dead love," or, as noted, in *Hamlet*, where Laertes' advice to Ophelia is identical to Polonius's). In *Measure for Measure*, though, where both "father" and "brother" are also religious forms of address, and where confused epithets like "good father friar" and "good brother father" are used to comic effect, Isabella's recourse to finding the voice from her father's grave in the language of her condemned brother takes on a further resonance. In short, this is yet another one of the many temptations, trials, and tests that abound in the play. As the Duke tests Angelo and Isabella and Lucio, and as Angelo is tested by Isabella's youth, beauty, innocence, and eloquence, so Isabella is tempted by self-love. She is at this stage as securely locked in the nunnery of her own self-regard as her brother is locked in the prison.

There is a peculiar and disquieting, or titillating, side to Isabella's denial of desire, a denial that itself exhibits desire. Her protest of chastity against all assaults has a strong psychosexual tone, one that a modern world would classify as a kind of sadomasochism:

[W]ere 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 had been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.

2.4.100–104

This sensual imagery of blood, jewels, and martyrdom is one that in the next generation of English writers will recur in the work of a Catholic lyric poet like Richard Crashaw (1613?–1649; see, for example, his extraordinary "Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Theresa"). Somewhere behind Isabella's language there may also lurk the language of Proverbs, "Who can find a virtuous woman? Her price is beyond rubies" (Proverbs 31:10), a passage often benignly cited as praise of womanly conduct. In Isabella's imagination the rubies have become drops of blood, and the love-longing becomes an equally passionate longing for death and martyrdom. Isabella's excess, her erotic passion, is arguably far stronger than that of either Juliet or Mariana, the two women who represent a more conventional marital love.

In the context of the play, Isabella stands to learn from her contact with Mariana, who only inhabits her moated grange because, in a world governed by men and by men's laws, she has no choice. The substitution of the one for the other, the so-called bed trick, in which one woman sleeps with a man who thinks she is another woman—Mariana having sex with Angelo when he thinks he is having sex with Isabella—is, in the nature of such things, a metaphor, rendering the two women for a moment interchangeable. It is a lie that tells the truth. *Measure for Measure* is a play that turns on both bed tricks and head tricks, two substitutions: the body of Mariana for that of Isabella in Angelo's bed, the head of the dead prisoner Ragusine for the head of the condemned Claudio. The same event that rescues Mariana from the moated grange will free Isabella from the nunnery.

Saint Paul's views on virginity and marriage as expressed in his First Epistle to the Corinthians are clearly germane here: "[I]f thou marry, thou hast not sinned: and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such

shall have trouble in the flesh" (1 Corinthians 7:28). "There is difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit; but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please [her] husband" (1 Corinthians 7:34). These citations are from the 1599 edition of the Geneva Bible, almost surely the text Shakespeare would have read, a version whose copious marginal notes by Protestant Reformation scholars, and handy quarto size, made it invaluable to readers. The teaching was that men and women could be saints and abstain from sexuality and marriage, or they could choose marriage and the comforts and "trouble" of the flesh.

So Claudio shows excess of liberty, Isabella shows excess of restraint, and Angelo shows first the one and then the other. What all of them lack, and what the play will seek to supply, is a sense of mortality, desire, and limit. This perspective is given expression—oddly, but for Shakespeare characteristically—not by a noble character or a voice of authority, but by the bawd Pompey, a figure who, like Pandarus and Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida*, remains on the outskirts, commenting on the action. In this play Pompey supplies the place occupied in happier comedies by the clown or fool. He speaks more wisdom than he knows, and his wisest observations are disregarded. In his very name, Pompey, can be seen the fallen condition of the play's world, incorporating as it does the sense of "pomp" as worldly vanity, inevitably doomed (as in the "smiling pomp, nor falls" of Sonnet 124), and the heroic figure of Pompey the Great. For that Pompey, Caesar's noble adversary and one of the "Nine Worthies," is now become Pompey Bum, bawd and tapster. "Troth," says the long-suffering Escalus, "and your bum is the greatest thing about you; so that, in the beastliest sense, you are Pompey the Great" (2.1.194–195). This Pompey is the employee of Mistress Overdone, the brothel-keeper, whose place of business is itself a sign of the decay of morals in Vienna. The brothel is at the opposite pole from Isabella's nunnery, the two locations—on the stage as well as in the play-text—again demarcating excess and restraint, this time in sexual terms: a house of sexual license and a house of religious abstinence. We might note that the two kinds of "nunnery" of Hamlet's bitter taunt are here physically realized upon the same stage.

It is to this most insignificant, and in some ways despicable, character, Pompey, that Shakespeare entrusts his definition of the human condition. We have heard Isabella disparage the presumptuousness of human beings in placing themselves among the angels ("man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority"). We now have Pompey's correspondingly stripped view of the condition of humanity, expressed in a dialogue with Escalus, the play's representative of disinterested justice, who has asked him whether he is not really a bawd, and not just, as he claims, a tapster or bartender. Pompey replies in a single existential line that resonates throughout the play: "Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live" (2.1.199). But how would he live—by being a bawd? Does he think, pursues Escalus, that such a trade is lawful?

Pompey

If the law would allow it, sir.

Escalus

But the law will not allow it, Pompey; nor it shall not be

allowed in Vienna.

Pompey

Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the

city?

Escalus

No, Pompey.

Pompey

Truly, sir, in my poor opinion, they will to't then.

2.1.202–208

In Pompey's commonsense view sexual desire is a natural part of life, and a law that seeks to regulate or thwart it, whether the nunnery's laws or the punitive laws of Vienna, cannot be enforced. Such a law is against nature, just as Angelo's self-repression, to "rebate and blunt his natural edge," is against nature—"they will to't." As for humanity, again we have Pompey's word: "Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live." Pompey is the bare, forked animal of this play, unadorned by rank or title, by money or special gifts. He is to *Measure for Measure* what the skull of Yorick was to *Hamlet*, and what Thersites' crabbed vision of the Trojan War ("All the argument is a whore and a cuckold") was to *Troilus and Cressida* (2.3.65)—a sign of basic human instincts and necessities. The play also points forward to *King Lear*, in which Poor Tom, the disguised Edgar, will likewise personate "the thing itself," a "poor, bare, forked animal." In one way, then, this play suggests that human nature is why human beings need laws. The Duke's masking, and his descent—like that of the disguised Henry V—among the people, is in this view a necessary step toward finding laws and codes that work from within and below. But if the play contains a fallen and circumscribed view of sexual desire and the "trade" in bodies and desire, it also contains something like its opposite: an idealizing and powerfully naturalized vision of harmonious lovemaking as a figure for process and productivity.

The voicing of this alternative vision is given over, with a perhaps purposive inappropriateness, to the cynical Lucio, whose wonder at the fulfillment of love breaks through his usually glum view of the world. Arriving at the hostile environment of the nunnery in act 1, scene 4, to tell Isabella that Claudio is in prison, he speaks in the language of nature, culture, and harvest:

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.

1.4.39–43

The iconography of female earth and male sower is conventional (woman = nature, man = culture). The image is one of complementarity and fertility. The passage itself is luminously beautiful, and it seems to prefigure certain lyric passages embedded in later tragedies, like *Antony and Cleopatra*. This language of growth (the word appears numerous times in the play) is structurally set over against the language of weights and measures, scales and balances. There is a striking—and highly pertinent—biblical precedent for this imagistic conflict (weights and measures versus natural fecundity; repressive laws versus laws of nature) in the evocative incident, so popular in the Renaissance, called "the parable of the talents," a story that—like the play's title—comes from the Gospel according to Matthew. It is the story of a man who goes on a journey, as Duke Vincentio pretends to do. It begins: "For the Kingdom of heaven is as a man that going into a strange country, called his servants, and delivered to them his goods." The man gave to his servants, as stewards in his absence, "talents" according to their abilities. (A "talent" is a certain *weight of silver*.) To one servant he gave five talents; to another, two; and to a third, one talent. Then he departed, and after a long time he returned and summoned his servants, to ask them for an account of what they had

done. And the man who had been given five talents, and the man who had been given two talents, showed him that they had made use of and multiplied the talents. Each had doubled them, and he said to each, "It is well done, good servant and faithful; thou hast been faithful in little, I will make thee ruler over much." But the man to whom he had given one talent had done nothing with that talent but bury it, and he said to his master, "Master, I knewe that thou wast an hard man, which reapest where thou sowedst not, and gatherest where thou strawest no; I was therefore afraide, and went, and hid thy talent in the earth." The master was angry, and took the talent away from the man, calling him evil as well as slothful, telling him that he should have invested the talent so that "at my comming should I have received mine own with vantage," and saying, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (Matthew 25:14–30).

Our modern sense of the word "talent" as meaning "personal or natural gifts" derives from this story. Duke Vincentio is the "lord" or "master" of the parable, and the talents he leaves behind with his stewards are readily identifiable. His appointment of Angelo as his deputy is the giving of a talent, and Angelo, instead of using and profiting from it, buries it. By contrast, Claudio does participate in a pattern of productive growth. His violation of the civil law of Vienna is counterbalanced by the "teeming foison" and "plenteous" fruitful-ness so richly described by Lucio. The apparent "falls" of characters from Mariana to Claudio, and ultimately to Angelo, are falls into a condition of humanity.

Of all Shakespeare's comedies, *Measure for Measure*, his last comedy, is the most evidently impatient or uncomfortable with its inherited generic form. It is a comedy that exposes the difficulties, perhaps the impossibilities, of its being a comedy—a comedy that, if it ends in marriage at all, ends only in the forced marriage of Lucio to the "punk," or whore, Kate Keepdown; the precontracted marriage of Claudio and Juliet; the marriage under ducal arrangement of Angelo to Mariana; and the unanswered proposal of Duke Vincentio to Isabella. All throughout Shakespeare's dramatic career the comedies have tried to hold death at bay, to keep death outside their charmed circle. As we have seen, news of death does reach a comic society (thus, for example, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the lady Catherine has a sister who died long before the play began, and word is brought, toward the end of the play, about the death of the King of France), but no character the audience encounters, no member of the *dramatis personae*, dies in the course of a Shakespearean comedy. (This is a trait that distinguishes the comedies formally from the so-called tragicomedies, or romances, at the end of Shakespeare's career.) But in *Measure for Measure* we confront the face of death: the head of the prisoner Ragusine substituted for the head of Claudio. We come face-to-face with limit, just as Hamlet does when he stares into the eyeless skull of Yorick and recognizes it as the twin of his own. Thus when the Duke, dressed as a friar, counsels the imprisoned Claudio to "[b]e absolute for death," his words carry weight, even though he himself, as the civil authority in Vienna, has the power to prevent it at any time. He tells Claudio:

Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,
Dreaming on both. . . .

3.1.32–34

The idea that "life is a dream" was a poetic and theatrical commonplace. A later Shakespearean duke, the exiled Prospero in *The Tempest*, can tell the audience of his masque that the sudden end of the performance is a model for mortality: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep." The Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *Life Is a Dream* (1635) would exploit the figure to the full. But for Claudio, locked in his dungeon, his own emblematic hell, a despairing glance into the grave ("[t]o lie in cold obstruction and to

rot") is both prefaced with and followed by a distinctly Christian resignation: "To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And seeking death, find life" (3.1.42–43). For a moment he pleads with Isabella to exchange her body for his (inverting, we could say, the "die" pun that animates so much sexual banter in these plays), but when the Duke intervenes to say that Angelo is only testing Isabella's virtue, Claudio is moved to ask for pardon: "I am so out of love with life that I will sue to be rid of it" (3.1.172–173). With this direct, visceral, and imaginative confrontation with his own death Claudio begins his ascent back to life. His appearance in the play's climactic final scene, muffled and unspeaking, will present him as a dramatic emblem: silent, shrouded, he is Death, a dead man, the dead Claudio, "another prisoner . . . like almost to Claudio," and finally, as we will see, a kind of risen Lazarus.

To this point we have been considering the play as one that formally explores the psychology of repression and denial (characters locked up in their separate enclosed spaces, whether prison, or nunnery, or moated grange; Angelo and Isabella as inadvertent doubles, confined by their own superhuman visions of themselves as saints), and over against those images of repression and denial a counterplot of expansion, fertility, and growth, though one that likewise threatens to overflow its boundaries (Juliet's pregnancy before marriage; the brothels and brothel-keepers that are all we see of the commerce of Vienna). But the play's central and most puzzling character, the Duke, traverses a space that is at once psychological and theological, and how the audience responds to him will determine much about the tone of any production.

If Claudio's dungeon is one pole of the play's dramatic geography, it is easy to see the Duke as occupying the other. "Bring me to hear them speak where I may be concealed," he says to the Provost (3.1.51), and so is able to overhear Isabella's conversation with Claudio in the prison. Whether or not he literally appears aloft—in the play-text Lucio calls him "the old fantastical Duke of dark corners" (4.3.146–147), and he says of himself that he is a "looker-on in Vienna," so perhaps he lurks at the edges of the action—Duke Vincentio does pull strings, like a semidivine puppeteer, or, as is so often observed, like a playwright. He substitutes Mariana for Isabella, and he alone seems to know Mariana's sad and hidden story of shipwreck and loss, the tale of her brother's death at sea and the loss of the money to pay her dowry. He substitutes Barnardine for Claudio, then the dead Ragusine for the obdurately, and comically, life-loving Barnardine, so that no character encountered in the play is put to death, and even the semblance of tragedy is averted. ("O, deaths a great disguiser" [4.2.161], he will observe amiably as he directs that Barnardine's head be substituted for Claudio's.) In fact, from the opening moments onward, the Duke follows a path that is recognizably both theatrical and allegorical, descending to earth in disguise among the people to observe their actions and see which of them will believe in him, becoming simultaneously actor and director:

I love the people [he says to Escalus],
But do not like to stage me to their eyes.
Though it do well, I do not relish well
Their loud applause and *aves* vehement.

1.1. 67–70

These are lines that have often been applied to King James, whose ambivalence about crowds and public appearances was frequently noted.

The Duke's predilection for testing and tempting is almost the only "explanation" we have for some of his more humanly puzzling behavior. Why, for example, does he tell Claudio that he should be "absolute for death" when he knows he can save him? Why does he leave Angelo in charge of the state when he suspects him of weakness and inhumanity? Why, above all, does he tell Isabella that her brother is dead, when Claudio is still alive? Why does he

stage the whole final public scene, even bringing Isabella to the point where she kneels and prays for Angelo's life to be spared, even though she believes that he has been the agent of her brother's death? These are all tests and trials—in the case of Isabella, “To make her heavenly comforts of despair / When it is least expected” (4.3.102–103). It is worth noting that Renaissance rulers regularly used horrific public events like executions and torture as ways of producing fear and anxiety in the populace. The beheading of noble and royal persons and the maiming and drawing and quartering of political rivals, religious dissidents, and other public figures for moral crimes and crimes against the state were a mode of social regulation. As numerous scholars have pointed out, one of the most powerful devices at the command of the ruler was the occasional and unpredictable use of clemency. When a ruler intervened at the last moment to pardon a prisoner condemned to die, the public approbation was enormous. James used this power—indeed something like “power divine”—to great effect throughout his reign. Since a “scaffold” was both a stage and a place of execution, the theatricality of these events was intensified. As Sir Walter Raleigh, himself to die in the Tower of London, observed trenchantly in a poem that compared life to a stage play, “Only we die in earnest, that's no jest.”

Passing among his subjects, listening and watching, the Duke in his disguise is also hidden by darkness, for again and again in *Measure for Measure* significant scenes and actions take place at night. “Upon the heavy middle of the night” Isabella is to go to Angelo's walled garden and yield up her virginity—as Mariana will do in her stead. And at night, the same crucial night, the Duke goes to the prison and finds a warrant for the execution of Claudio; the Provost imparts this information to Claudio: “ 'Tis now dead midnight, and by eight tomorrow / Thou must be made immortal” (4.2.53–54). Night cloaks, blurs distinctions, makes dissimulation possible—and forces the soul to contemplate its unimaginable end. Appropriately then, the play's most lyric moment signals the coming of morning, and also the enlightenment that will unscramble its mysteries:

Look, th' unfolding star calls up the shepherd. Put not yourself into amazement how these things should be. All difficulties are but easy when they are known. . . . Yet you are amazed; but this shall absolutely resolve you. Come away, it is almost clear dawn.

4.2.185–191

The speaker is the Duke himself, still in disguise, but forced to hasten the denouement. The Provost, or jailer, has challenged him in his friar's role, and he now produces letters predicting the Duke's imminent return.

The verbal counterpart of the physical device of disguise is a key word this play shares with *Hamlet*, the word “seeming.” When the Duke appoints Angelo as his deputy he observes, “Hence shall we see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be” (1.3.53–54). *Seeming*'s complicated for the theater, where everyone is a “seemer”—just as for Hobbes “a person is the same that an actor is.” What is the tipping point between impersonation and lying? *Measure for Measure*, like *Hamlet*, engages that problem, philosophically and metatheatrically, at every turn. In act 2, scene 3, the Duke, disguised as a friar, greets the compassionate Provost:

Duke

Hail to you, Provost!—so I think you are.

Provost

I am the Provost. What's your will, good friar?

The Provost is a provost, but the friar is not a friar. What seems to be true is not. This seems trivial enough, but it is a classic Shakespearean setup. For in the next scene Angelo propositions Isabella, and, scandalized, she threatens that she will tell on him:

Seeming, seeming!
I will proclaim thee, Angelo. . . .

2.4.150-151

His retort is quick and cynical—and it has an all-too-familiar ring. It will be a case, he points out, of he said/she said:

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 outweigh
That you shall stifle in your own report.

2.4.154–158

Scholars of the early modern period often warn against mistaking sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary texts for modern ones. The term for this is “presentism,” and it is thought to be a naïve error, a kind of category mistake. Yet Shakespeare has *mademodernity* as much as he has uncannily anticipated it, and an exchange like this could now serve as a textbook case of sexual harassment. Angelo is a powerful, authoritative man of good reputation, a high government officer. Isabella is a novice (we could call her an “intern”), a young woman, without influential friends. She wants his assistance; he wants a sexual quid pro quo. “Who will believe thee, Isabel?”

Angelo's word “outweigh” may remind us of the other time he uses the same term: “[M]y false o'erweighs your true.” Both usages point directly at the play's title and the language of weights and measures. Yet by the end of the play the verbal disguise marked by “seeming” will undergo a series of reversals, and the great last scene is a series of unmaskings. Isabella pleads with the Duke “[t]o make the truth appear where it seems hid, / And hide the false seems true” (5.1.66–67). But the Duke's way of doing this begins with more dissimulation. His triumphal progress into the city involves a very public embrace of Angelo, his deputy:

Give me your hand,
And let the subject see, to make them know
That outward courtesies would fain proclaim
Favours that keep within. . . .

5.1.13–16

The gesture of taking the hand of a friend or an enemy is a constant and powerful one on Shakespeare's stage, especially in plays that focus on hidden treachery, like *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*. In this play, as in those, the public extension of the hand invites the duplicitous subordinate to compound his treason. The outward/inward language here recalls the description of the sacraments as the outward sign of an inward grace. And the word “grace” itself does double duty throughout the play, since it is the proper form of address for a Duke: thus, as we have seen, the repentant Angelo will later observe that “your Grace, like power divine, / hath looked upon my passes” (5.1.361–362). (Compare his words with those of York in *Richard II*: “[G]race me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle. / I am no traitor's uncle” [2.3.86–87].)

One of the most visible onstage theatrical portrayals of the outward/inward split is the commonplace device of disguise. Lucio provides a watchword for it when he quotes the Latin proverb *Cucullus non facit monachum*, "The cowl does not make the monk," or, more broadly, "Don't trust appearances." Characteristically—both for Lucio and for Shakespeare—this commonplace is comically *misapplied* when it is cited (Shakespeare never uses clichés straight, but always puts them in the mouth of an unlikely or ironic speaker). Thus Lucio lashes out at "Friar Lodowick" (the Duke in disguise), declaring that the friar is "honest in nothing but in his clothes" (5.1.259–260)—the one thing in which he is in fact dishonest. Stung by the supposed friar's accusations, Lucio reaches out for him: "Why, you bald-pated lying rascal, you must be hooded, must you? Show your knave's visage. . . . Will't not off?" (5.1.345–347). Here Lucio literalizes the verbal gesture about the cowl and the monk, pulling off the friar's hood to reveal the Duke. Gracelessness produces his Grace.

Stripping and unmasking of this kind is emblematic of the whole play, and becomes visually evident as a stage event in the final scene. Just as Angelo appears to be a kind of Machiavel, saying one thing to his court, another to Isabella and to the audience, so the play is full of symbolic disguises. In the final scene alone the Duke is disguised as a friar, Mariana is veiled, and Claudio is muffled when he is at last produced. Onstage are Angelo, in his everyday "disguise" as a justice, and Isabella in her novice's costume. Only moments before, at the end of the fourth act, Isabella had complained to Mariana against the veiling, disguising, and equivocation that are part of the friar/Duke's plan: "To speak so indirectly I am loath— / I would say the truth, but to accuse him so, / That is your part— yet I am advised to do it, / He says, to veil full purpose" (4.6.1–4). The idea of seeing indirectly in a fallen world so as to be able to glimpse the truth more clearly has its own insistent biblical precedent, notably in Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). This is the same book of the Bible in which Saint Paul offers his influential views on virginity and marriage, and it is fitting that the two Pauline themes should come together in the play's dramatic denouement.

For the mode of the final revelations *is* revelation, and its poetic equivalent, romance. The appearance of Mariana, as a mystery woman swathed in veils, translates the dramatic action into a different key. The Duke, pretending not to recognize her, gives over the judgment of her case to Angelo, who is, of course, her unknowing lover, as well as her faithless fiancé. "First, let her show her face, and after speak," says the Duke, and the audience should at this point recall the strictures of the Order of Saint Clare, which held that a woman could either speak or show her face to a man, but not both. On cue, Mariana refuses:

Mariana

Pardon, my lord, I will not show my face

Until my husband bid me.

Duke

What, are you married?

Mariana

No, my lord.

Duke

Are you a maid?

Mariana

No, my lord. Duke A widow then? Mariana Neither, my lord.

Duke

Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife!

5.1.168–176

Shakespeare's Christian audience would here again recall Saint Paul on marriage, virginity, and widowhood. The irrepressible Lucio offers his own answer to this enigma: she is a "punk," a whore. But Mariana, whose name, Mary, like that of Angelo, the angel, is allegorically significant, has a further riddle to propound:

My lord, I do confess I ne'er was married,
And I confess besides, I am no maid.
I have known my husband, yet my husband
Knows not that ever he knew me.

5.1.182–185

Whether expressed in the form of Freud's tendentious dichotomy of "woman" in the male imagination as either virgin or whore, or via Mariana's deliberately mystifying negations (not a maid, not a wife, not a widow), this puzzling account is presented as a conundrum. Again, a Christian audience would have a ready analogue in the concept of a virgin mother. But the main effect is that of a riddle, a form that will recur in later Shakespearean romances like *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*. This riddle is visual as well as aural or textual, an undecipherable human figure on the stage.

If the veiled Mariana can be said to represent the mystery of woman, the muffled Claudio represents the mystery of death. He stands there, silent, his face covered as hers is, and although the audience knows that Claudio is not dead, this news is not shared by those who love him: his sister, Isabella, his fiancée, Juliet. Once again, as with the unmasking of Mariana, the questions asked have a mysterious timbre that seems almost to come from the world of romance:

Duke

What muffled fellow's that?

Provost

This is another prisoner that I saved,

Who should have died when Claudio lost his head,

As like almost to Claudio as himself.

5.1.480–483

Claudio stands revealed, although in this scene he never speaks. Again we can look to the Gospels for a story behind the story, in this case the story of Lazarus, who died and was restored to life. Lazarus had two sisters, Mary and Martha, who went to Jesus and told him their brother was dead. They went to the cave where the grave of Lazarus was; he had been dead four days. Jesus prayed, and cried "with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:43–44). The stage picture here, with the two anxious women

awaiting the return of their lost beloved, is immediately evocative. Claudio is restored from death to life, from the dungeon to marriage and paternity, from the ultimate restraint to the ultimate—though lawful—liberty.

The play's long last scene has offered numerous problems for readers, audience, actors, and directors. In it the Duke attempts to assert control, and though he has some successes, he also has some signal failures. The scene begins with his triumphal "return" to a city he has never left. In rapid succession he reveals the secret of the bed trick (Angelo has slept with Mariana, his betrothed wife, not with Isabella, whom he sought to ravish), announces Claudio's apparent death, sends Mariana and Angelo offstage for a hasty marriage ceremony, brings them back onstage, condemns Angelo to death, provokes Mariana to plead with Isabella to join her in asking for Angelo's pardon, and finally, at long, long last, unmuffling the disguised Claudio, demonstrates that he is alive. At this point he proposes marriage, not once but twice, to Isabella. Why does he break off his first proposal in the middle? Gesturing to the unmuffled figure, he says to her:

If he be like your brother, for his sake
Is he pardoned; and for your lovely sake
Give me your hand, and say you will be mine.
He is my brother too. But fitter time for that.

5.1.484–487

At this point the Duke turns away and begins to do ducal business in an almost manic spirit, addressing governing and judging remarks to Angelo, Lucio, Escalus, the Provost, and anyone else he can find onstage. Only at the very close does he turn once more to Isabella and renew his proposal:

Dear Isabel,
I have a motion much imports your good,
Whereto, if you'll a willing ear incline,
What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.

5.1.527–530

What makes him break off and then renew his suit? Remember that this is indeed a very long scene, at the end of which a husband is reunited with his wife, who has believed him dead. But Juliet, the wife, enters upon the scene very late, and does not speak. The reunion is staged, not between husband and wife, but between brother and sister. It is Isabella who is presented with the miraculously living man—"If he be like your brother. . . . He is my brother too." We might conjecture that the Duke has to repeat his proposal because on the first instance Isabella is not listening, but is instead rapt in contemplation of the brother so unexpectedly and miraculously restored to her.

The relationship of Isabella and Claudio is overdetermined, and in its own way excessive. It is Isabella who glancingly mentions the loaded topic of incest when she is pleading with Claudio to die like a man rather than force her to sleep with Angelo: "Is't not a kind of incest to take life / From thine own sister's shame?" (3.1.140–141). We have noted that she conflates her father and her brother in hearing the father's (censoring) voice when Claudio asserts his decision to die: "There spake my brother; there my father's grave / Did utter forth a voice" (3.1.84–85). The father's voice, as so often, says "no": no, Isabella does not have to swap her chastity for her brother's life. We have seen, too, that brothers and fathers are regularly confused with one another by those who try to address the clergy by their official titles: thus the foolish constable Elbow, one of Shakespeare's classic malapropists, greets the Duke, dressed as a friar, with "Bless you, good father friar," to which the Duke jauntily replies, "And you, good brother father." Isabella is free to idealize her brother and his love for her, which is both unreserved and unsexual. How can the Duke compete?

Isabella's reply to the marriage proposal is not given in the text. Directors have therefore had to work out some way of indicating what she does and does not do with this odd invitation from a ruler who has previously denied that the "dribbling dart of love" can ever "pierce [his] complete bosom" (1.3.2, 3). In recent years it has become common to question the Duke's omniscience and power—after all, he fails to get the prisoner Barnardine to consent to die, in one of the play's most darkly comic scenes, and thus almost scuttles his own plan. Whether vainglorious or bumbling, this Duke has often been set up as a figure who is emphatically not a version of "power divine," whatever he or his acolytes may believe. For this reason, and for the same reasons modern directors and audiences try to envisage a less-than-compliant Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*, contemporary stagings of *Measure for Measure* often open up the ending rather than closing it down. Sometimes Isabella turns away when the Duke offers his hand, leaving him standing alone, rather foolishly, on the stage (the analogue here is Portia's gift to Antonio of his returned argosies, also staged as an ambivalent moment, since he would rather have Bassanio than a thousand ships loaded with treasure). But this, too, is a decided choice, a choice of refusal rather than acceptance. One dramatic solution that appealed to me was offered at the Stratford (Ontario) Festival some years ago. After the proposal, and the Duke's final exchange with Lucio, everyone but Isabella left the stage. She alone remained, dressed in her white novice's robe. Slowly she reached up to remove her headdress, and then shook her hair free. Instantly her novice's robe was converted to a wedding gown, and she smiled at the audience, indicating, perhaps, her readiness to leave the convent, even though she had not yet accepted the Duke. What was particularly effective about this moment was that it directed attention to the figure of Isabella, making *Measure for Measure* her play as well as, or more than, the Duke's. Whether or not this interpretation-via-stage-action is persuasive to any individual reader or audience member, it should remind us of how much "Shakespeare" is in the action and gesture of the play rather than its language. This is very clear with musical insets (the masque in *The Tempest*; the songs in the comedies and romances; the marvels and portents that attend witches and soothsayers). But it is also true of more "ordinary" moments, which render uncertain and unknowable any final decision about dramatic meaning.

Readers interested in history may wish to observe that the name Isabella is the Spanish equivalent of Elizabeth, and that this Jacobean account of a virgin's choices and suasive power has a certain double-edged resonance. One fantasmic outcome of a reading like this is to see the romance at the end as an iconographic rendering of James's final victory, the deceased Elizabeth's capitulation to the new King's hand and to his will.

But the finest energies of *Measure for Measure* are not so much comic or historical as they are allied with tragedy and romance, with the fact of mortality and the mystery of revelation. If this play is a "comedy," it is not so because it ends in several uneasy marriages, nor because comic figures like Elbow and Barnardine emerge from it as minor heroes of a satisfyingly amusing Shakespearean kind, but rather in the general sense in which Sir Walter Raleigh uses the term in his little poem "On the Life of Man." Raleigh had long been Queen Elizabeth's favorite, but he fell out of favor when he seduced one of her attendants. He was imprisoned by James I for thirteen years on a charge of treason, released, reimprisoned, and finally beheaded. His poem offers a bleak analogy between life ("this short Comedy") with its presumed "happy ending" in heaven and the elements of the theater ("tyring houses" are dressing rooms, "music of division" is melodic descant as contrasted with plainsong). It is well to recall that, as Raleigh astringently notes, the play goes on, even though the individual characters, players, and "actors" in both senses—Hobbes's "Persons, Authors, and Things Personated"—may die:

What is our life? A play of passion.

Our mirth the music of division.

Our mothers' wombs the tiring houses be,
Where we are drest for this short Comedy.
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is,
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss,
Our graves that hide us from the searching sun,
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
Thus march we playing to our latest rest,
Only we die in earnest, that's no jest.⁴