

CHAPTER 20. SMALLEST THINGS IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Airy tongues, that syllable men's names

--Comus 206

The word "authority" occurs more often in *Measure for Measure* than in any other Shakespeare play, and we cannot go far amiss if we consider the play, in its universal sense, as a study of authority - the dangers, limitations, possibilities and, ultimately - necessity for authority. In affirming the necessity of authority as an ineluctable element in the human condition, *Measure* also warns against authority's tendency to become rigid and ossified through adherence to the dead letter of tradition, forgetting the reasoned inspiration which is authority's fountain and source of self-renewing correction.

Isabella's speech

...man, proud man,
Dress'd in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd, (2.2.118-120)

might seem to have been written with the authorship question in mind. In this chapter I present a reading of *Measure for Measure* which argues that not only Isabella's speech, but the entire play, was in fact written with the authorship question in mind. My argument is organized into five acts, corresponding to the five acts of *Measure for Measure*¹.

The Duke as Author

To understand *Measure for Measure* as a play about authorship we may first wish to consider the narrative proposed by the Oxford theory in its broadest scope. A powerful and eloquent nobleman, gifted with the rhetorical skill and training of a Cicero, the historical sensibility of a Tacitus, and the dangerous wit of an Aristophanes, takes refuge behind a pseudonym and a front man rather than risk the public scandal and political instability which would inevitably ensue from the exposure of his identity and dramatic treatment of his conflicted relations with the power elite of newly Protestant England. Writes John Thomas Looney: "Our theory presupposes a man who had deliberately planned his self-concealment" (173). During the final years of his life de Vere was "hard at work, seriously, but *in a measure secretly*, engaged in the activities that have produced at once the greatest drama and the finest literature England boasts" (179). Justice Stevens, in his "Shakespeare Canon of Statutory

¹A version of this chapter was presented at the 1997 Annual Conference of the *Shakespeare Oxford Society* in Seattle/Washington, in Oct. 1997.

Construction,” confirms that the theory invokes an “imaginative conspiracy,” requiring both the coercion of the Tudor state and, in some measure, the willing abdication of the real – hidden – writer from his public role as legal author (Stevens 1993)².

Now, it is impossible to imagine this circumstance taking place without it arousing the most profound ambivalence on the writer’s part – and indeed testimony of his ambivalence over some “vulgar scandal” which has caused his name to be erased from the body of his work is well documented in *Shake-Speare’s Sonnets*.

In Sonnet 72 we read the admonition

My name be buried where my body is....

In Sonnet 71, the instruction

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Then you shall hear the surly sullen bell
give warning to the world that I am fled.... (71.1-3)

And again,

Do not so much as *my poor name* rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay.
Lest the wise world should look into your moan
And mock you with me after I am gone. (71.11-14: emphasis added)

Indeed, by the time we come upon the apparently contrary claim of Sonnet 76 that “every word doth almost tell my name” (76.7), where the phonic pattern identifies the author through the analogy “Every word = Edward Vere” – the paradox points unmistakably towards the condition of alienated authorship postulated in the Oxfordian case. The sonnet transports the theological paradox of transubstantiation – in which identity is preserved through phenomenal transformation – into the secular realm. However, although the prominence of this motif of the author’s “wounded” – transfigured -- name has long been known to students of the Oxford theory, the extent to which that narrative is deeply and pervasively engrained in the Shakespeare canon, appearing in numerous dramatic and linguistic permutations which constitute literary witness to its fruitful character has not, I believe, truly been apprehended by the theory’s students.

Our first act accordingly requires us to consider the direct and striking analogy of the dramatic action of *Measure for Measure* when compared to the above version of events: Duke Vincenzo, to avoid the scandal which will ensue from any direct attempt on his own part to secure rigorous justice by prosecuting the letter of the law in Vienna, goes into self-imposed exile. In departing he delegates authority to his Puritanical deputy Angelo, whose name recalls, on the one hand, the Biblical emissary between God and man and, on the other, an Elizabethan unit of currency – a coin on which the image of authority may be stamped to guarantee its legitimacy.

² For analysis of the role of "William Shakspere" of Stratford-On-Avon (1564-1616), see the final chapter of the dissertation.

On comes Angelo as the Duke's front man in Vienna. Although he lacks substantive authority, the Duke wryly instructs his deputy to ignore "any scruple" while acting to "enforce and qualify the laws/As to your soul seems good" (1.1.64-66). In an unconscious parody of the law set down in Genesis – in which mortality is the price to be paid for man's sexual awakening -- Angelo proceeds to enforce the dead letter of the strict statutes against fornication in Vienna. The Duke returns to Vienna disguised as a Friar so that he can witness at firsthand the foibles of the city's experiment in self-rule.

Both dramas, in other words, require an "imaginative conspiracy" in which the concealment of an author – in one case the author of laws and in the other the author of plays – is the necessary condition for their enactment.

It may be pertinent to recall that the Duke's motive for withdrawing into obscurity is to avoid being slandered in the political battle which is certain to ensue from strict application of the law in Vienna. As the Duke explains, "I love the people, but do not like to stage me to their eyes" (1.1.67). In defending himself from the slanders which nevertheless are comically dramatized through the copious intelligence of Lucio, the disguised Duke declares – speaking of himself in the figure of *illeism* or self-reference in the third person -- that were he "testimonied by his own bringing's- forth," he would "appear to the envious a scholar, a statesman and a soldier" (3.2.144-46).

Underneath the peculiar English phrase, "bringing's-forth," lies the Latin word *edita*, meaning "things having been brought forth," or "published" (Andrews 1876 514-15). The Sonnets employ the same phrase to express the writer's shame over his *literary production*. While the Duke, speaking of himself masked, testifies to his desire to be known through his publications, the Sonnet writer, speaking in his own person, confesses the indignity of his vocation as a writer of theatrical "trifles":

I am shamed by that which I bring forth,
And so should you, to love things nothing worth. (72.13)

The statements are perfectly tailored expressions of the same dualistic ambivalence regarding public acknowledgement for works -- each appropriate to the speaker and his circumstances.

We might conclude this first act, then, by noting that this comparison of the Duke to the Sonnet author has been, as it were, foreshadowed in persistent orthodox identification of the Duke as a distinctively "authorial" character. One could cite authoritative testimony *ad infinitum*: Dayton Haskin characterizes him as "at once a character in the world of the play, a dramatist-like designer who provides controlled experiences for his subjects, and a judge who observes and evaluates their actions. He performs all these functions with a view to heightening his subjects' awareness of moral complexities" (Haskin 3452). "The Duke is a virtuous absolutist," concurs Anne Barton in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, "...a kind of comic dramatist...trying to impose the order of art upon a reality which stubbornly resists such schematization" (547).

"Even critics generally opposed to the biographical heresy," concludes Rudolph Soellner, "have seen some measure of identification between the poet and his creature" (227)³.

³ Soellner intends the statement to cover both Duke Vincenzo and Prospero, the authorial magus of the *Tempest*.

The Spirit and the Letter of the Law

The second act requires us to consider the critical history of *Measure for Measure* with respect to its hypothetical or actual genre. *Measure for Measure* is a dramatic representation, but should we classify it as a comedy or a tragedy? Although identified in the first folio as a comedy, *Measure for Measure* is traditionally defined by scholars as a “problem play.” It eludes simple classification as a comedy, history or tragedy. From the point of view of the history of genres, the play has as much in common with the medieval mystery play as it does the classical comedy of Terence or Plautus. And although it has a happy ending – a requirement, apparently, for a comedy – many critics have felt that *Measure for Measure* is not a particularly funny play.

From its critical inception the category of “problem play” was a classification which helped to bracket the question of genre to return readers to investigation of the empirical and dramaturgical qualities of a play without pre-conception as to genre. According to the term’s originator, Boas, the problem play – under which rubric he included *Hamlet*, *All’s Well*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure* – was one involving “intricate cases of conscience” and requiring “unprecedented methods” of investigation.

Seven subsequent decades of interdisciplinary scholarship have shed some light on the general characteristics such an investigation should possess. *Measure for Measure* is indeed – on this point at least the critics seem to have reached a general consensus – an “intricate case of conscience.” Perhaps more than any other Shakespeare text, the play invokes an apparently unstable juxtaposition of legal, religious and literary discourses. In his seminal 1930 essay⁴, “Measure for Measure and the Gospels,” G. Wilson Knight adumbrated the dominant note in this 20th century tradition of considering the philosophical dimensions of *Measure for Measure*: “If the thought at first seems strange or the action unreasonable, it will be found to reflect the strangeness and unreason of Jesus’ teaching” (in Geckle, p. 49).

Knight’s insight into the play’s dependence on Biblical precept, and particularly the relevance of the New Testament parables of Jesus, received an abundance of confirmatory substance in critical essays such as Louise Schleiner’s “Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*,” Roy Battenhouse’s “*Measure for Measure* and the Christian Doctrine of Atonement,” Sarah Velz’s “Man’s Need and God’s Plan,” and Dayton Haskin’s “Mercy and the Creative Process in *Measure for Measure*.”

Moreover, even among critics stressing non-Biblical dimensions of the play – for instance in Ronald Berman’s “Shakespeare and the Law” or John W. Dickinson’s “Renaissance Equity and *Measure for Measure*” -- a consensus exists that the primary philosophical problem treated by the play is the tension

⁴ Battenhouse (1994 7) refers to this as “the most striking essay in Knight’s many volumes” of criticism. Battenhouse also makes the important observation that Knight was writing “not from any knowledge of the history of theology, but rather as a post-Romantic who valued human imagination as the key to insight into life” and who found in Shakespeare “a poet whose genius coincided here with that of Christ -- each being, as Knight explained elsewhere, an independent pioneer who challenged ‘orthodox’ morality” (Battenhouse 1994 7).

between the strict application of the so-called “letter” of the law and the merciful application of the so-called “spirit” of the law.

Incidentally, we might wish to note that this general philosophical question – when to apply the “letter” of the law and when a metaphorical invocation is appropriate – is common to the spheres of discourse of law, religion and literary criticism – at least insofar as the latter discipline is guided by any sense of the normative or “lawlike” as a criterion of investigation. Any attempt to ascertain “what a writer means” involves a reader in the (both editorial and philological) task of reconstructing an “ur-text” free from mis-readings and misprints and also the higher cognitive challenge, which depends on the labor of editors and philologists, of applying the author’s words to the circumstances of the text’s production so as to discover a meaning or a set of meanings which is the emergent property of a text having been –previously -- correctly arranged and glossed.

A competent editor argues from analogy, guided by an imaginative reconstruction of “authorial intent” when emending a misprint. Although restoring the “letter of the law” the editor is, paradoxically, applying the doctrine of mercy by presuming that the writer did not intend a mistake. Exactly the same process of reasoning might in other circumstances be employed to argue for the correctness of the text on the grounds that perception of an apparent anomaly or aberration is based on a reader’s incorrect assumptions about what the writer might have intended in the *textus receptus*.

An example of a textual feature which involves a reader or editor in such perplexities would be the hyphen in the name “SHAKE-SPEARE” in the text *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS*. What does this element of punctuation mean? Is it, as some orthodox scholars insist, a vicissitude of typesetting – or, as others have claimed, a tip-off to the pseudonymous character of the name “Shake-Speare,” used to heighten the iconic character of the name as one denoting the act of “shaking a spear”?

The Doctrine of Smallest Things

In pursuing the second act of our investigation we perceived that the primary philosophical problem of *Measure for Measure* is the relation between the spirit and the letter of the law. Our understanding of how this philosophical problem is pursued in the play will be enhanced by a quick survey of some dominant themes in the history of this question, as our author would have found them in his own reading of Aristotle and other sources. Shakespeare, let us remember, was heir to two great cultural traditions, the Greco-Latin and the Judeo-Christian, which differed in fundamental ways in their treatment of the spiritual-literal dialectic of interpretation. In the Greco-Latin tradition of literary criticism and legal theory, based on an alphabetic mode of writing, the smallest unit of meaning is a word; in the Hebrew tradition, however, the smallest unit of meaning was a letter or a syllable. This difference in the epistemology of reading resulted from the different emphasis of the two systems of written representation. In the more archaic Hebrew syllabic system, the identity of vowel sounds was determined by a reader on the basis of context. Individual letters, furthermore, retained the symbolic

vestiges of their originally iconic, hieroglyphic character. In such a system of written representation, the miswriting or misreading of a single letter or syllabic element was much more likely to yield an intelligible but mistaken transcription than would have been the case in the Greco-Latin tradition, although as *Measure for Measure* itself demonstrates, alphabetic systems are by no means immune to such problems of textual transmission. When Justice of the Peace Elbow mishears Pompey's characterization of his wife as "respected," transposing it in his hearing into "suspected," a fistfight almost ensues because Elbow imaginatively fills in the blank and assumes she is "suspected" of immoral behavior. Nevertheless, it was in the Judaic tradition of philosophy that the fierce dialectical emphasis on the scrupulous preservation of, or dispute over the identity of, a single letter in a text, remained most characteristic. As Cohen explains

The notion underlying the "letter of the law" is peculiarly Jewish and would sound quite foreign if not irrelevant to a Greek or Roman Jurist. To the Jew, to whom Scripture was directly revealed, there was no superfluous letter in the law. Hence a single even apparently redundant letter could be loaded with legal significance. Thus, even the letters *He vav* carried with them some meaning above and beyond that implied in the word itself.

(Cohen 1966 60)

Thus, although what I am calling "the doctrine of smallest" things had sources in both traditions, it was only in the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the microcosmic unit of a single letter or syllable could assume a vast spiritual significance.

An intriguing illustration of this doctrine of smallest things is found in Henry Peacham's 1612 emblem book, *Minerva Britanna* (figure sixty-one). The emblem is dedicated to the principle spelled out by the paradoxical juxtaposition of the superscription above the emblem, and the emblem itself. Literally rendered in English, the superscription might be translated, "by means of that which weighs greater"; however Peacham's emblem -- paradoxically -- depicts a quill pen and a crown of bays overweighing a cannon⁵. It

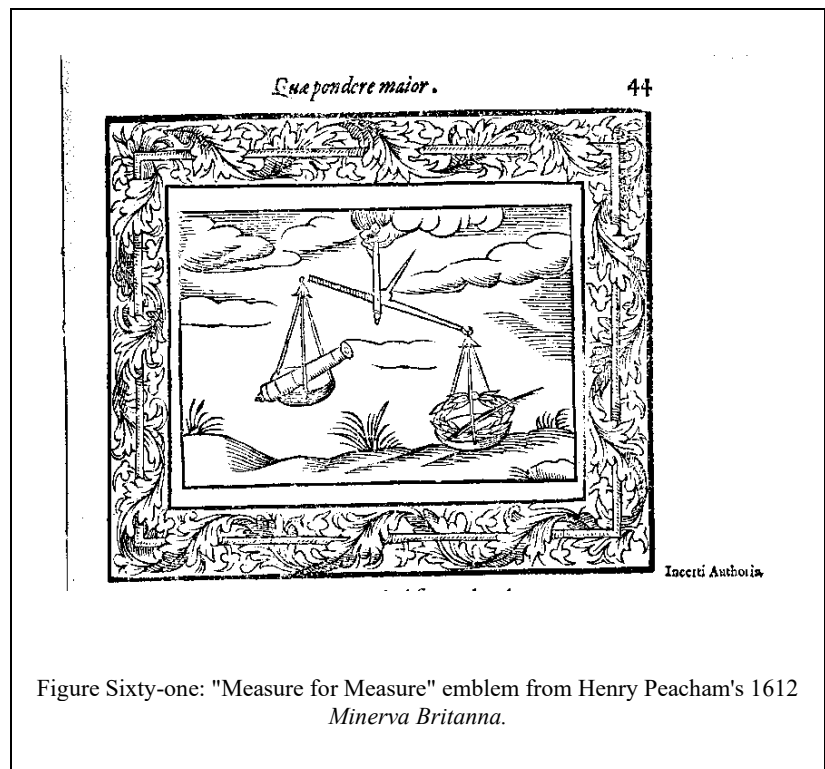


Figure Sixty-one: "Measure for Measure" emblem from Henry Peacham's 1612 *Minerva Britanna*.

illustrates the generic principle that sometimes things of apparently slightest significance turn out to weigh the most, at least in a spiritual sense. Is it a coincidence that the superscription and emblem call

⁵ Is it relevant to overhear the "cannon/canon" pun which occurs in *Hamlet* (1.2.32)?

to mind the title of our play, *Measure for Measure*? Although not published until 1612, Peacham's Latin side-note identifies the emblem as referring to events of Elizabeth's reign⁶. Not surprisingly, the emblem has been associated with *Measure for Measure* by editors of Shakespeare's play (figure sixty-two). Whether Peacham's consideration of the "doctrine of smallest things" represents an intentional reference to Shakespeare's play is, however, for our purposes, superfluous. That *Measure for Measure* is concerned with "smallest things" no alert reader could deny. The play is saturated with references to small but surprisingly consequential things:

Angelo need not
On my honour, have to do
With *any scruple*. Your scope is as mine own,
So to enforce or qualify the laws
As to your soul seems good. (1.1.63-66)

The Duke, furthermore, tells both Escalus and Angelo that

Spirits are not finely touch'd

⁶ The art historian Roy Strong contends that the emblem depicts a tournament impresa of the Earl of Essex, but a review of Strong's cited sources fails to confirm this claim.

But to *fine issues*: nor nature never lends
The *smallest scruple* of her excellence
But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines
Herself the glory of a creditor.

(1.1.35-39)

Escalus, later pleading for Claudio's life, urges Angelo to consider

Whether you had not sometime in your life
Err'd *in this point* which now you censure him,
And pulled the law upon you.

(2.1.14-15)

Isabella declares that if she could save her brother's life by
forfeiting her own

I'd throw it down for your deliverance
As frankly as a pin.

(3.1.103-105)

In a later scene, she weighs a beetle against a giant and
finds them equal:

The *poor beetle* that we tread upon
In corporal sufferance finds as great a pang
As when a *giant* dies.

(3.1.78-80)

The words scruple, point, pin, beetle – all “smallest things” – underscore this play's concentrated focus on measurement as the material metaphor for judgement. A judge – or perhaps in this case a reader -- is she who weighs things, even very small things, with scrupulous regard for spiritual consequences. Of these smallest things in *Measure for Measure*, the scruple is perhaps the most intriguing. We think of a scruple, as the Duke intends when he advises Angelo to disregard *any scruple* in pursuing his vigorous prosecution of the law, as the psychological doubt traditionally associated with the legal-philosophical study of casuistry. Casuistry is “that part of ethics which resolves cases of conscience, applying the general rules of religion and morality to particular instances in which ‘circumstances alter cases’ or in which there appears to be a conflict of duties” (OED 352). A scruple, then, in the ancient semantic tradition shared both by Catholic and Protestant theological minds of the 16th century, is the tiny doubt which resolves the jurist in favor of one or another application of general principle when ‘circumstances alter cases’ or ‘there appears to be a conflict of duties’ between two general principles.

We need hardly note that the scenario posited by the Oxfordians, in which one of the most skilled rhetoricians and writers of creative fiction in the history of the English language was, in a measure, forced to capitulate to the alienation of his literary work and to witness its publication under the name of another, is one involving a most potent “conflict of duties” and/or contest between two competing

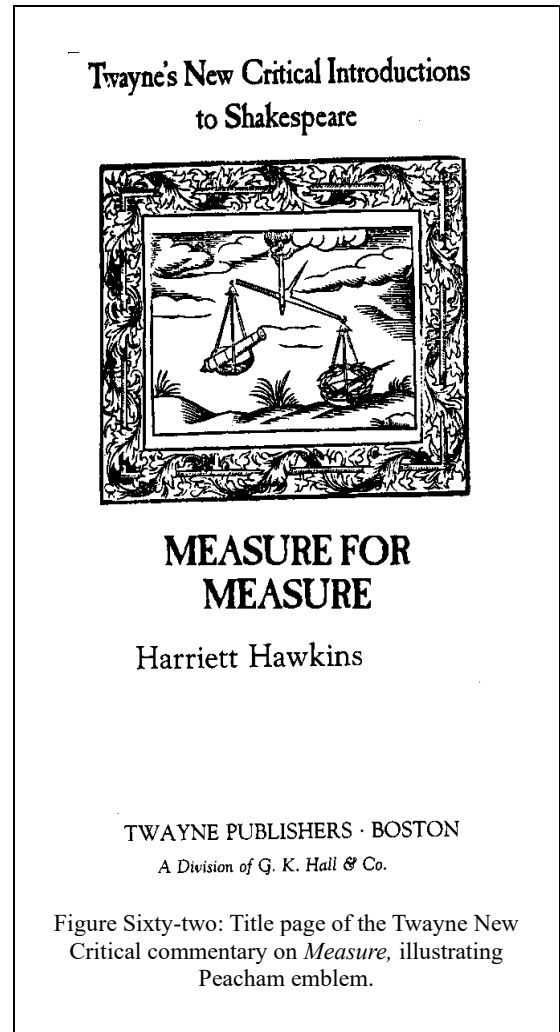


Figure Sixty-two: Title page of the Twayne New Critical commentary on *Measure*, illustrating Peacham emblem.

general principles. Accordingly the Duke's ironic instruction to Angelo to disregard *any scruple* in the prosecution of the law should strike us not only as a pertinent clue about the crisis of conscience dramatized in this play, but also about the play's relevance as a document which dramatizes, allegorically, the circumstances in which Edward de Vere found himself, like Vienna's Duke, confronted with a conflict of duties. For the Duke the conflict is between the application of Justice in Vienna and the preservation of his own "good name"; for de Vere it is between his destiny as a writer, naturally covetous of fame, and his loyalty to a Tudor state compromised by his insider's view of the personal and political conflict disguised behind pomp and circumstance.

There is, however, a more archaic and purely materialistic denotation of the word, of which Shakespeare is surely aware, and to which the Duke appeals when he says that "nature never lends the smallest scruple of her excellence/But she determines herself the glory of a creditor" (1.1.38). The scruple was originally an apothecaries' weight of 1/24 oz., often used as a measure of gold. Thus, this one word stands double duty in Shakespeare's play, both for the tiny grain of physical substance which trips the balance beam *and also* as the most potent symbol for the psychological effects the play intends to produce on a reader who, unlike Angelo, may pause long enough to "scruple" over its linguistic texture.

We should not in any case make the mistake of supposing that these "smallest things" are ever inconsequential as determinants of action in our play. Indeed, in *Measure for Measure* such "smallest things" become the leaven of secret action -- the tiny agent which, given time, produces results as magnificent as pregnancy. In fact, Dianne McColley considers the Duke a practitioner of spiritual homeopathy. His remedy for social ills "is neither palliative (as forgiveness with no real cure would be) nor harshly purgative (as exposure and punishment would be) but a homeopathic remedy.....[which] infuses a small dose having the same properties as the excess humor, in order to stimulate the body's natural ability to purge itself." Thus, the Duke's admonition to Angelo to avoid all scruple and, in assuming his own powers and prerogative, "so to enforce and qualify the laws/As to your soul seems good," is a kind of ironic baiting of sin. He knows full well that behind Angelo's repeated Puritanical outbursts against the state of sexual depravity in Vienna lies the soul of a depraved libertine who will, given the reigns of power, entrap himself in his own confused designs and end up a married man.

The mise en abyme

In the fourth act of the play, a messenger enters with a written stay of Claudio's execution. Explains the messenger to the Provost:

My lord hath sent you this note, and by me this further charge: that you swerve not from the smallest article of it⁷, neither in time, matter, or other circumstance. Good-morrow; for, as I take it, it is almost day.

⁷ Note, again, another instance of special rhetorical emphasis placed on "smallest things."

(4.2.100-105)

In our own fourth act we must accordingly pause long enough to consider the prominent role which writing and written communication have already assumed in our drama. Starting from the first scene of act one we have heard that the Duke-in-exile intends to communicate his legal orders to Vienna by means of the written sign. He is not an actor on the public stage, but the “duke of dark corners” (as his *bête noire* Lucio dubs him), an author who prefers to lurk in the shadows. Apologizing for his swift departure from the public scene, Ludovico admits that

Our haste from hence is of so quick condition
That it prefers itself and leaves unquestioned
Matters of needful value.
We shall write to you
As time and our concernings shall importune. (1.1.53-55)

Under such circumstances, perhaps it should not surprise us that both Escalus and Angelo express some confusion regarding the nature of the authority delegated to them. The former, in fact, desires verbal conference with Angelo:

A power I have
But of what strength and nature
I am not yet instructed. (1.2.80-81)

But if the nature of the Duke’s written law is not yet obvious, Claudio’s offense of making love with his fiancée “with character too gross *is writ* on Juliet” (1.2.155).

With this brief recapitulation under our belts, we may notice that in this fourth act, on the eve of the Duke’s long-prophesied return from his world travels, reading and writing have come into full blossom as a predominating motif and philosophical preoccupation. While the messenger bearing Claudio’s pardon delivers verbal command for the most scrupulous adherence to the letter of the pardon – and here one might interject, incidentally, the question of the identity of the “real author” of this mysterious epistle: is it Angelo, or the Duke himself? --the Duke is simultaneously launching a volley of epistles with further instructions.

To the Provost he announces, handing him a written note:

The contents of this is the return of the Duke: you shall anon over-read it at your pleasure, where you shall find within these two days he will be here. This is a thing Angelo knows not; for he this day receives letters of strange tenour, perchance entering into some monastery; but, by chance, nothing of what is writ⁸. (4.2.195-202)

Some lines later the Duke thinks, almost as an afterthought:

Now I will write letters to Angelo.
The provost he shall bear them, whose contents
Shall witness to him I am near at home;
And that by great injunctions I am bound to enter
Publically.... (4.3.93-96)

⁸ Note the ambiguously oracular character of this phraseology.

And in the closing scenes of act four we find him still busy handing yet further letters to Friar Peter with instructions: “these letters at fit time deliver <for> me” (4.5.1). There is something intentionally comic about all this letter writing. Angelo and Escalus, whom we met confused over the Duke’s intentions in the first act, are even more confused by the fourth scene of act four. “Every letter he hath writ,” grumbles Escalus, “hath disvouched other” (4.4.1).

All these instances of writing, reading and misreading, invoke the *mise en abyme* – the Duke’s letters are microcosmic miniatures of the work of art, little *simulacra* of the drama which have been, as it were, tossed into the abyss at the heart of the play. Shakespeare’s exploitation of this favorite of all uncanny literary devices is highly conscious and artful. Notice that the disguised Duke *does not say*, when he hands the provost his stage directions, “the contents of *this note* is the return of the Duke.” He says something much more subtle and intriguing: “The contents *of this* is the return of the Duke.” Of course, for the line to seem intelligible in performance, the actor playing the Duke must physically deliver a note to Escalus. But the cognitive effect the line impresses on *a reader’s mind* is another matter. That staging requires the prop of a note is merely another way of saying that for the Duke to deliver a copy of the play, in which he acts as a character, would *seem to be* a violation of the elementary principles of dogmatic logic. That this is in fact what the Duke actually does, dramaturgically speaking, merely illustrates the devious capacity of literature to evade censorious conspiracies: the omission of the word “note” where one might expect it⁹ merely underlines the virtual reality that the line does in fact refer, recursively, to the text of *Measure for Measure*. As we shall see in our fifth act, the text becomes a potent agent of the author’s redemption from the actual “dark corners” into which Elizabethan politics precipitated his name and his being.

Recognition

In our fifth act, *Measure for Measure* swerves unexpectedly in the direction of tragedy. The Duke, it appears, may not be as trustworthy a jurist as we readers have been tempted to suppose. When Isabella, on his private urging in the previous act, publically reports the charges against Angelo, the Duke suddenly does the administrative two-step and starts to backpedal. Is it merely irony, or outright naked cynicism when he commands Isabella’s testimony in these words:

Relate your wrongs. In what? By whom? Be brief.
Here is Lord Angelo shall give you justice. Reveal yourself to
him. (5.1.27-29)

The Duke knows the facts and has protested his support to Isabella. And yet, having heard her testimony, he dismisses her as a madwoman:

Away with her, poor Soul, she speaks this in the infirmity of sense. (5.1.47-48)

⁹ For a precise analog in the same play, review 4.2.100 et seq., quoted above where we read that “my lord hath sent you *this note*” (emphasis added).

Isabella's answer might stand as an epigram to J.T. Looney's *Shakespeare Identified* (1920):

O gracious Duke,
Harp not on that, nor do not banish reason
For inequality; but let your reason serve
To make the truth appear where it seems hid. (5.1.63-67)

In both of our dramas, after all, -- that of the Shakespeare authorship question (with its pettifogging substitutes galore) and of *Measure for Measure* -- we suppose that something false only seems true while the truth has been concealed -- originally by conspiratorial means but now just the world's failure to comprehend. As it turns out, the Duke is merely toying with the perceptions of the witnesses in his 5th Act. Indeed, Isabella has been warned in the prior act, by the Duke (incognito himself), of his own dark circumlocutions and courtroom verbal antics. "To speak *so indirectly*," Isabella tells Mariana,

I am loth;
I would say the truth, but to accuse him so
That is your part. Yet I am advis'd to do it,
He says, to veil full purpose.

Besides, he tells me that, if peradventure
He speak against me on the adverse side,
I should think it strange for 'tis a physic
That's bitter to sweet end. (4.6.1-8)

If this is "Shakespeare,"¹⁰ it sure is not "gentle" William of Stratford. We are in the thick of an ornate, even mannerist, parody of the problem of conscience. The Duke's own heroine is advised to speak, against her own will, "indirectly," to "veil full purpose" so that the Duke can intervene on cue. Play your part, warns the Duke in his backstage directions in act four --so I can administer a "physic that's bitter to sweet end." Don't be surprised if you find me, just like an author arguing for the necessity of his temporary erasure from the public record, speaking against you, "on the adverse part"! The Duke, as author of his own "bringings-forth," fully seems to apprehend that he is embroiled in a difficult "case of conscience" -- if not set within a nest of Chinese boxes, each one containing a new dimension on the problem of how to administer a harsh but healing medicine. Consider the Duke's multiple devices: He wants Angelo humbled and reconciled with Mariana. He wants justice -- and maybe something more -- for Isabella. He wants punishment for the slanderer Lucio, restoration of public order in Vienna, and a happy ending for his play. But there is one more thing he wants. For he has already told Lucio, speaking in his friar's disguise, that

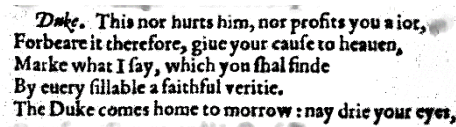
The business he hath helmed¹¹ must upon a warranted need give him a better proclamation. Let him be but testimonied in his own bringings-forth and he shall appear to the envious a scholar, a statesman and a soldier. Therefore you speak unskillfully; or, if your knowledge be more, it is much darkened with your malice.

(3.2.136-144)

¹⁰ Consider Dayton Haskin's apt characterization of the Duke as "at once a character in the world of the play, a dramatistlike designer who provides controlled experiences for his subjects, and a judge who observes and evaluates their actions. He performs all these functions with a view to heightening his subjects' awareness of moral complexities" (Haskin 3452).

¹¹ That is, helmeted (OED 1286: 207), or disguised by means of a helmet.

The Duke, in other words, wants recognition in, and for, his own “bringings-forth.” For this to happen, we readers must have a theory which can reconcile the generic actions of the play, and the general principles of law, language and mercy which are the play’s contribution to a theory of ethics, with the specific linguistic character in which those ideas are embodied and given substance. This is, after all, even more than *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s most classically mannerist work—and mannerism is a mode characterized by “a personal unrest, a complex psychology that agitates the form and phrase,” evoking and holding its matter “in a state of dissonance, dissociation, and doubt” (Sypher 116-117). Serious critics of *Measure* know that the language of the play often seems superfluous to – if not incongruous with -- its presumed matter; among the most striking examples of this apparent misfit between the letter and the spirit of *Measure’s* law is the Duke’s oath to Isabella in the fourth act: “Mark what I say....By every syllable a faithful verity. The Duke comes home tomorrow” (figure sixty-three).

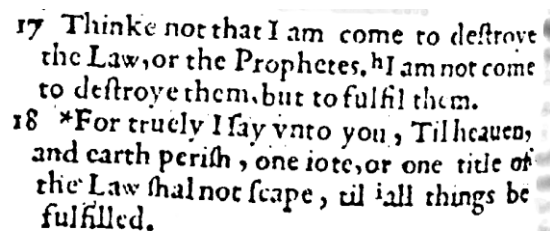


Duke. This not hurts him, nor profits you a iot,
Forbear it therefore, giue your cause to heauen,
Marke what I say, which you shal finde
By euery fillable a faithful veritie.
The Duke comes home to morrow : nay drie your eyes,

Figure Sixty-three: *Measure for Measure* 4.3.122-126, from the text of the first folio.

We are in act four, scene three; the Duke-in-disguise has just deceitfully informed Isabella of her brother’s execution, although he knows full well that if the provost has followed the messenger’s instructions to “swerve not from the smallest article of” his note -- Claudio has been reprieved. The authorities, at the direct or indirect instigation of the Duke, have staged a *false execution*, substituting Ragozine for Claudio. Nevertheless, the Duke provokes Isabella to tears with his false report of Claudio’s execution. What’s the point of this malicious emotion mongering? There is, it seems, only one motive for the Duke’s false report: he needs Isabella in tears. Her emotion sets the stage for his varied little mannerist jingle, “by every syllable a faithful verity.” With this oath, the disguised Duke Ludovico calms Isabella’s fears and prophesies his own return. Her brother may be dead, but the Duke will come riding in on his white stallion in the fifth act to make everything good in the end – o yes he will.

William Shakespeare. It may even now serve to remind us that that Duke’s oath to Isabella is a potent application of the “strangeness and unreason” of Christ’s gospel from Matthew¹², in which we read the following, startlingly rabbinical, claim (figure sixty-four):



17 Thinke not that I am come to destroye
the Law, or the Prophetes, hI am not come
to destroye them, but to fulfil them.
18 *For truly I say vnto you, Til heauen,
and earth perish, one iote, or one title of
the Law shal not scape, til all things be
fulfilled.

¹² For Calvin's commentary on this critical passage see Pringle (1984, pp. 275-84). Calvin writes that Christ fulfilled the law "by quickening with his Spirit, the dead letter" (277) -- just as an actor does when filling the written word with the breath of life.

Figure sixty-four: Matthew 5.17-18 from Genevan STC 2106.

Have we here a final instance of what I termed, way back in our third act, the “doctrine of smallest things.” The Duke swears “by every syllable” that what he says is true, although he has just finished telling a monstrous but presumably justified fib. In an earlier case of justified deception in the same act he told Mariana that using Isabella as bait to entrap her husband was justified because “the justice of your title to him doth flourish the deceit.” The justice of Edward de Vere’s “title” to his own “bringing’s forth” could not fail to “flourish the deceit” of the Tudor political lie anatomized in books such as *The Mysterious*

In the Duke’s witty jingle, “by every syllable a faithful veritie,” we find the anagrammatic seal of his close affinity to Edward de Vere, the same writer who in *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS* declares that “eVery word doth almost tell my name”¹³. The formative influence of the former text is Aristotle’s *Poetics*¹⁴; in *Measure for Measure*, it is Christ’s apocalyptic prophecy of the fulfillment of the law in Matthew. Christ’s doctrine in this passage is of the spiritual potency of each letter or syllable of an utterance. Inspired by this doctrine, De Vere’s answer to the Tudor state’s solution to the Shakespeare Question was to inscribe within this great and universal drama of the human conscience a tiny, secret but unmistakable badge of his authority-- a hidden signature just like that employed by visual artists deposited anamorphically¹⁵ within a visual work, for whom the elucidation of their identity became the moral responsibility of a connoisseur. The Duke has finally reconciled the “letter” of the law with its spirit and shown that mercy, and severity, if one may be pardoned the pun, belong to the same coin of the law. Thus measure answers measure: the justice of the true title flourishes the deceit. All that remains is for us to apprehend the time at which this epiphany will register. Jesus speaks of the “pleroma,” or moment of fulfillment, that moment when “all things shall be ready.”

Isabella, in the fifth act, echoes the Duke’s jingle with a variation on the de Vere motto, *vero nihil verius*¹⁶:

Truth is truth to the end of reckoning. (5.4.45)

Here our Arden editors assist us by recalling the relevant source-passage from Cinthio’s *Epitia*¹⁷:

Più ver, che il vero¹⁸,

Which translated back into English reads “more true than the true thing” – but says nothing about time.

¹³ Typography and emphasis supplied.

¹⁴ Derrida has declared that truth is in the footnotes. For the dependency of Sonnet 76 on *The Poetics*, see XXI, concerning compound words (onoma triploun, tetraploun, pollaploun), metaphor (metaphora) et alia.

¹⁵ In anamorphic art, “Like perspectives....rightly gazed upon/Show nothing but confusion,” but when they are “eyed awry, distinguish form” (*Richard II* 2.2.19).

¹⁶ Nothing truer than the truth.

¹⁷ On Cinthio’s Italian drama as one of the play’s source texts, see Kenneth Muir’s “*Measure for Measure*,” in Geckle, 13-20.

¹⁸ See also, of course, de Vere’s Jan. 1603 Danver’s Escheat letter: “I hope truth is subject to no prescription. For truth is truth, though never so old, and time cannot make that false which once was true” (Fowler 771). Prescription is used in its technical legal sense as denoting the “limitation of the time within which an action or a claim can be raised” -- which is same sense in which Isabella asserts the timeless and universal character of truth.

Replies the ever-ironic Duke:

Poor soul, she speaks this in the infirmity of sense.

(5.1.48).