

Abstracts for Measure for Measure Seminar Spring 2024  
W. Reginald Rampone, Jr, seminar leader

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*Measure for Measure and the Question of Consent*

My paper for the seminar will reflect my preliminary work on a new edition of *Measure for Measure* for the Cambridge Shakespeare Edition (CSE). A shaping force of the edition will be the question of consent, which will also be the focus of my seminar paper. Drawing upon theories of consent, equality, and justice advanced by feminist theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Susan Sherwin, I will begin my discussion of this crucial issue with the moment of Angelo's sexual proposition to Isabella, her vehement resistance to it, and her terrible question, 'To whom should I complain? Did I tell this, / Who would believe me?' (2.4.172), which still resonates painfully in the wake of #MeToo. I will consider how *Measure for Measure* raises issues of sexual consent, not only here but also through the relationships between Claudio and Isabella, Isabella and the Duke, Lucio and Kate Keepdown, and Angelo and Mariana (especially in the scene of the bed-trick).

While joining many recent scholars in viewing these issues as pivotal to the play, I also aim to consider them as a lens through which scholars, students, and other readers can view some of its other key thematic questions. For example, *Measure for Measure's* Christian theological subtexts are haunted by three key biblical acts of consent: Eve's accession to the serpent's temptation (and Adam's subsequent accession to Eve) in Genesis; Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, 'Be it unto me according to thy word' (Luke 1:38); and Jesus Christ's words in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done' (Luke 22:42). I hope to ask how these acts of consent—one sinful, the other two salvific, according to Christian tradition—inform such events in *Measure for Measure* as Angelo's acceptance of the Duke's bestowal of power upon him; Isabella's accessions to Lucio's suggestion that she plead for her brother's life, to the Duke's urging of the bed-trick, and to Mariana's request that she beg mercy for Angelo; and the Duke's final, ambiguous response to Isabella's plea. I will also examine some of the pivotal refusals in the play, including notably Barnardine's indelible declaration, 'I will not consent to die this day, that's certain' (4.3.53-4), which Stephen Greenblatt argues 'serves as an emblem of the freedom of the artist to remake the world' (13). Drawing on Noam Chomsky's influential theories of power and propaganda, we might ask whether this freedom to refuse survives the end of the play, or whether the Duke effectively manufactures consent to his regime through his staging of its final revelations and reconciliations.

After briefly considering these forms of consent and refusal as they shape *Measure for Measure*, I hope to conclude my paper by considering some of their implications for the processes of editing, reading, and performing this complex play. Contemporary interpreters' responses to *Measure for Measure* are created by constant acts of questioning, accession, and resistance. By either consenting to or rejecting an editorial or performance idea, each interpreter—like generations of editors, performers, and readers before them—remakes the play's potential meanings and social impact. To think about and with *Measure for Measure* is, I

suggest, not only to think about consent, coercion, and resistance, but also to consider the limits of interpretative agency itself.

### Works Cited

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Cole Polglaze, Vanderbilt University

“Julietta’s Bed”: The Allure of Unmarried Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*

Despite her limited presence in only three scenes and a mere ten lines of dialogue, Juliet emerges as a central figure in *Measure for Measure*. While existing scholarship delves into the play's nuanced—and confounding—treatment of marriage, especially the unrecognized union between Juliet and Claudio, little attention has been paid to Juliet herself. This essay seeks to rectify that gap by offering a focused exploration of Juliet's character. Such a focus will allow a clearer sense of the rules of matrimony within the world of the play. This analysis revolves around Juliet, her relationship with Claudio, and the consequential pregnancy that shapes the narrative. Rather than aspiring to matrimony, Juliet and Claudio's connection is rooted in the pursuit of unmarried sexual satisfaction—a dimension often overlooked in discussions of *Measure for Measure*. This study challenges conventional notions of marriage within the play, emphasizing that Juliet and Claudio resist fitting into predetermined definitions and societal standards precisely

because they do not desire marriage. By examining Juliet's character, this essay not only sheds light on the intricacies of matrimony in *Measure for Measure* but also opens avenues for understanding the portrayal of staged pregnancy and female sexuality.

Kelly Lehtonen, Campbellsville University

### **Virtuous Attention, Abuse, and the Church in *Measure for Measure***

This paper aims to demonstrate Shakespeare's investment in theories of attention in *Measure for Measure*, an exploration that may help illuminate the play's notoriously complex exploration of virtue. As defined by two major theorists, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, attention is the discipline of focusing both the intellect and the affections on the lived experiences of other people, especially people who are unjustly suffering. Scholars such as Donovan Sherman have argued for the importance of attention to Shakespeare drama, emphasizing Stoic concepts of *apatheia* [indifference] and mindfulness, but the Platonic-Stoic notion conceptualized by Weil and Murdoch contributes an actively compassionate, emotionally invested component to attention that, I argue, is a particularly useful framework for what we see in Shakespearean drama. In *Measure for Measure*, this concept of attention can speak to ongoing controversies about the play's conclusion. Scholars have debated, for example, how to make sense of the Duke's testing and judgment of Angelo, an effort sometimes – though not always – striking audiences as controlling and manipulative. Exploration of the philosophy of attention, I would propose, can help us more precisely define the gap in virtue that the play exposes: a failure to attend *compassionately* to those suffering from injustice. Thus, the Duke's surreptitious efforts to attend to justice in Vienna exercises the intellectual component of attending, using his cunning to ferret out and condemn abuses of power, but lacks the appropriate affective concern – the “respect for otherness” urged by Murdoch. With the Duke acting as agent of the Church, moreover, the play offers a broader critique of an institution particularly charged with justice and care for the suffering. Throughout the drama, those associated with the Church fail in a variety of ways to practice virtuous attention well. Presenting a relatively dismal vision of institutionalized religion, the play suggests that a society where religious authorities fail to practice attention effectively will be like the one seen in *Measure for Measure*'s Vienna – where justice can only parody itself.

Joe Penczak, Troupe of Friends

Now 'tis awake...To whom should I complain?

Measure for Measure is full of contradictions; Angelo is hardly an angel, the virtuous Isabel initially lies to her brother, the Duke disguises himself for sinister purposes. Mariana pleads for Angelo's life, shortly after she utters the ironic lines, "there is sense in truth and truth in virtue." Upon her kneed, she begs Isabel to stand up (or rather, to kneel down) for Angelo's life, saying,

"They say, best men are moulded out of faults;  
And, for the most, become much more better  
For being a little bad:"

In spite of the fact that Shakespeare seems to suggest that forgiveness of the worst of all possible sins is the lesson to be learned from the play, the moral, if you will, against a morally corrupt society, it is nearly impossible to defend Angelo against feminist criticism of the play.

I hope to show that the delicate balance of comedy and tragedy in this play, and in particular in the Angelo/Isabella scenes (obvious in 2.2, and overlooked but present and critical to the understanding of Angelo's character in 2.4), need to be argued and not censored.

The similarities of Angelo and Isabella are present throughout the text: Angelo's first lines,

"Always obedient to your grace's will,  
I come to know your pleasure."

Are echoed in Isabella's first lines in 2.4:

"I am come to know your pleasure."

I will demonstrate that by the time of Isabella's second, private meeting with Angelo, she is fully aware of the implications of meeting with Angelo to plead for her brother's life. As would an actress hoping to be cast in the role. I hope to explore the ways in which the comic aspects of 2.4 can be staged that would highlight the humor in their exchanges, portray Angelo in a more sympathetic light, and emphasize the challenges that a masculinist interpretation of a production would entail.

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#### Abstract

My paper will read *Measure for Measure* with respect to its fundamentalist characters, defined in terms of their identifications with religious and political authority. For James I, the most common and most acceptable identity was that of a centrist Anglican. More marginal identities included Catholics and Puritans, which James imagined could be either a "friend" or an "enemy." In short, what distinguished a friend from an enemy were their attitudes toward fundamentalist theology.<sup>1</sup> For Catholics, James claimed that they were his "friend" as long "they be good subjects" and did not act to "increase their number and strength in this Kingdom."<sup>2</sup> For Puritans, his enemies were ones who believed "themselves only pure" and that "the rest of the world" is an "abomination in the sight of God."<sup>3</sup>

What these two groups have in common, it seems, is a seditious potential based upon a belief in their own unique and universal ideological superiority. Catholic proselytizing was especially threatening because of military and economic backing from the continent. Nevertheless, the ideological scaffolding was both necessary to the project and fundamentalist in nature: a conviction that their theology held the only right and true way to eternal salvation. Radical Puritans had much less material backing, but James saw them as enough of a threat to callout their smug, "elect" status and the belief that the rest of humanity were totally depraved.

My paper will utilize these and other politico-theological coordinates to map *Measure for Measure's* characters and read the play with an eye toward the larger, transhistorical issue of fundamentalist rule (perhaps especially current Christo-authoritarian and Christo-fascist strains). I see the play (and Shakespeare generally) as skeptical of any position of authority. Nevertheless, Angelo is remarkably vile: a sadist *and* a would-be killer *and* a would-be rapist. Indeed, Angelo's rabid theology seems bound up with his cruelties. Can't have one without the other.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, "The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I," *Journal of British Studies* (1985), pages 169-207.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Blackerby, *An Historical Account of Making the Penal Laws by the Papists against the Protestants, and by the Protestants against the Papists*, 1689.

<sup>3</sup> King James VI and I, *Political Writings*, edited by Johann P. Sommerville, Cambridge University Press, 1994, page 6.

**Benjamin Jeffery, The University of Chicago, “What’s yet in this / That bears the name of life?”: Mastery and Ego Rigidity in *Measure for Measure***

At the heart of *Measure for Measure* are two characters who (in Janet Adelman’s words) “attempt to claim exemption from ordinary sexual processes.” Angelo and Isabella are each in their different ways punished and degraded within the logic of the play for this effort to remove themselves from sexuality and, by tacit extension, from the anxieties and indignities of embodied life. But what do their examples – alongside that of the curiously desire-less Duke Vincentio – tell us about the fear of being overwhelmed by one’s own psychic life, a theme that makes itself subtly felt through the play as well as being one of its chief connections to Shakespearean tragedy? In this paper, I will examine these characters using Benjamin Fong’s recent treatment of the death drive in *Death and Mastery* (2016) as well as Richard Wheeler’s seminal psychoanalytic reading of the play, to try and bring out a fresh perspective on how the drama appears to think through the issue of inner life achieving (or failing to achieve) an integrated balance with its surroundings.

Amy Smith, Kalamazoo College

With the proliferation of programs like Shakespeare Behind Bars, it feels important to investigate just what “Shakespeare” in prison is doing, and, equally important, what else it might be asked to do. I aim to use *Measure for Measure*, a play that sets one third of its scenes in prisons, to bring Shakespeare in prison and prison in Shakespeare together. While many prison programs see Shakespeare as a tool for self-reflection and personal redemption, scholars and activists have begun proposing methods that instead focus on social justice. Ayanna Taylor asks us to think about the following question: “Why are all these programs focused on individual rehabilitation as opposed to systemic change? While the type of systemic change *Measure for Measure* proposes in its sudden crackdown on illicit sexual activities is problematic, the play can and should encourage us to think about corruption in legal systems, unequal sentencing, indiscriminate punishment, and surveillance—some of the very issues inherent in current critiques of our criminal “justice” system. If Shakespeare scholars, prison program developers, and social justice advocates came together (even if only through my analysis), *Measure for Measure* could become a tool for social change.

Elizabeth Burow-Flak  
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Abstract, SAA seminar *Measure for Measure* and Its Cultural Currency

“Our Country Was Raped Around Us”: Racism, Sexual Violation, and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in Godinez and Ireland’s performances of *Measure for Measure*

When Isabella alludes to the virgin martyrs she would gladly emulate to save her brother’s life, she refers to them, Dennis Austin Britton observes, in terms of whiteness. Two recent performances of *Measure for Measure*, however, portray racism and anti-immigrant sentiment as intersecting in Angelo’s indecent proposal, particularly as it weighs on the character of Isabella. Henry Godinez’s 2022 performance, set in 1950s pre-revolutionary Cuba, and Paul Ireland’s film adaptation set in present-day Australia portray the consequences of colonialism and political autocracy on the men who victimize the Isabella figures as well as on the Isabella figures themselves. The performances’ settings accord with Patricia Akhimie’s recognition of certain Shakespeare characters as being “marked” by circumstances “like indelible blackness” that render them unable to advance in social hierarchies and that underlie “the workings of racist thinking.” In the Godinez performance, revolutionary Angelo bristles at the sexual playground that Cuba has become to wealthy U.S. expats. In the Ireland film, Farouk, a Muslim crime boss, expresses as rape the domination of his country even as he shames his sister Jaiwara, the film’s Isabella character, for falling in love with the anglo Claudio. Although each performance allows sympathy for the Angelos despite their hypocrisy and for the Claudios despite their desperation, the performances’ Dukes exemplify the worst of racism and inequity. Resembling Batista in the Godinez performance and a godfather-like crime boss in the Ireland film, both Dukes victimize the Isabella characters they purport to protect from crime worlds of their own making.

This essay examines how, in these performances, belief in what Akhimie calls “immutable difference” and its “processes of inclusion and exclusion” doubly “mark” the Isabella figures at the hands of the Duke. In the Godinez performance, a nightclub frame establishes the Duke, Batista-like, as having enabled and profited from the brothels. His problematic marriage proposal, coupled with his earlier passing up Escalus, a Black woman, for the position of deputy, casts doubt on the proposal as anything other than another way to wield power. The Duke in the Ireland film, although he arranges for Claudio’s release from prison and the threat of rape by Farouk’s men, fails to protect Jaiwara from the *quid pro quo* bargain with Angelo, even though it was in his power to do so. The Isabella figures in each performance thus bear, as sexual harassment, the humiliation and powerlessness that the men closest to her equate with sexual violation. So targeted, the Isabella figures cannot fully self-advocate, even as they advocate with acuity for the men they love. These productions consequently suggest that the reconciliation that Shakespeare’s Isabella has come to represent can never be achieved unless the systems that “mark” her and her loved ones can first be corrected.

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### *Measure for Measure* and (the) Authoritarian Right

It is well within the mainstream of Shakespeare studies to read *Measure for Measure* “politically,” i.e., to interpret the play as having a political “message” or demonstrating something fundamental about government. Rosalind Miles argues that the play endorses mercy over retributive justice,<sup>1</sup> a position also taken by J.A. Bryant<sup>2</sup> and Debora Kuller Shuger.<sup>3</sup> A common view, exemplified by John W. Dickinson, is that the play endorses prudential moderation or “equity” in enforcing the law.<sup>4</sup> This moderation is necessary to address the social and political problems presented in the play’s early acts: moral breakdown due to permissive or absent government, and the injustice or imprudence of any strict remedy. How does one restore order when it has been lost? Julie Robin Solomon concedes that in the play sexually-transmitted diseases are metaphors for social “disorder” which can be cured by good government.<sup>5</sup> Jean Howard asserts that the play shows how difficult it is to find a mean between “life-denying restraints upon the self” and “unchecked appetite.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Virginia Lee Strain argues, “When it comes to marrying formal law with social needs and values,” Duke Vincentio shows “reformed or exercised judgment.” Strain analogizes the political and the literary forms, noting that the “peace” achieved at the play’s conclusion “shapes standards for social maintenance based on mutual interest rather than the realization of abstract ideals or individual preferences. [...] At the end of Shakespeare’s comedy there is a uniting of hands in multiple marriages regardless of a ‘uniting of minds.’ As well as providing the conventional end of a comedy, this is a legal

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Miles, *The Problem of Measure for Measure: A Historical Investigation* (Barnes and Noble, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> J.A. Bryant, *Hippolyta’s View: Some Christian Aspects of Shakespeare’s Plays* (University Press of Kentucky, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Debora Kuller Shuger, *Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure* (Palgrave, 2001). Shuger also notes that “the path of equity [...] leads in the direction of absolutism” (79).

<sup>4</sup> John W. Dickinson, “Renaissance Equity and *Measure for Measure*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.3 (1962): 287-297.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Robin Solomon, “Mortality as Matter of Mind: Toward a Politics of Problems in *All’s Well That Ends Well*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 23.1 (1993): 134-169.

<sup>6</sup> Jean E. Howard, “*Measure for Measure* and the Restraints of Convention,” *Essays in Literature* 10 (1983): 148-158, at 155.



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### The Problem of Isabella

When Frederick S. Boas first refers to *Measure for Measure* among several other Shakespeare's works as "problem-plays," he refers to the moral problems characters must work through in certain works. Plays like *Measure for Measure*, Boas states, "introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness. Amidst such media, abnormal conditions of brain and emotion are generated, and intricate cases of conscience demand a solution by unprecedented methods."<sup>1</sup> Characters may solve a difficult predicament through trickery. However, twenty-first century audiences may interpret a "problem-play" as morally questionable. According to today's sensibilities, *Measure for Measure* is problematic. Its plot prominently features sexual harassment and a non-consensual sexual act, behaviors that the public increasingly denounces in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The conundrum in *Measure for Measure* is that Isabella, the sexual harassment victim, is also a perpetrator in a non-consensual sex act. Because the heroine of *Measure for Measure* is not simply a proto #MeToo victim but also a suborner of rape, directors must grapple with changing audience mores. As a result, Gregory Doran's RSC 2019 production portray Isabella as a martyr to the sexual politics of a corrupt Vienna, downplaying her role in the bed-trick. This paper will explore both meanings of the "problem-play" label through the lens of Isabella's, attempting to reconcile how a character who values her own bodily autonomy foremost can violate the bodily autonomy of another seemingly without consequence. 253 words

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900, p. 345.

Amy Smith, Kalamazoo College

With the proliferation of programs like Shakespeare Behind Bars, it feels important to investigate just what “Shakespeare” in prison is doing, and, equally important, what else it might be asked to do. I aim to use *Measure for Measure*, a play that sets one third of its scenes in prisons, to bring Shakespeare in prison and prison in Shakespeare together. While many prison programs see Shakespeare as a tool for self-reflection and personal redemption, scholars and activists have begun proposing methods that instead focus on social justice. Ayanna Taylor asks us to think about the following question: “Why are all these programs focused on individual rehabilitation as opposed to systemic change? While the type of systemic change *Measure for Measure* proposes in its sudden crackdown on illicit sexual activities is problematic, the play can and should encourage us to think about corruption in legal systems, unequal sentencing, indiscriminate punishment, and surveillance—some of the very issues inherent in current critiques of our criminal “justice” system. If Shakespeare scholars, prison program developers, and social justice advocates came together (even if only through my analysis), *Measure for Measure* could become a tool for social change.

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"The Feminist Ethics of Refusal: Isabella's Anger in *Measure for Measure*."

In this essay I would like to think about Isabella as part of what I am calling a feminist ethics on the early modern English stage. As I have argued in regard to Margaret in *Richard III*, I am interested in ethical stands taken by female characters whose acts and points of view are in some sense repulsive but also compelling in light of certain moral questions or challenges posed by their plays. I want to think about how such stands retain an ethical force that is in conflict with other troubling or even brutal acts committed by the same characters that pose difficulties of interpretation or reception. I do not hold Isabella up, therefore, to idealized forms of moral purity, but want to hold in tension what many scholars find troubling about her, with what I will argue is a larger ethical point she makes in response to a culture of female sexualization and objectification in Vienna. This is a matter about which Isabella becomes angry and her anger leads her to refuse her brother's plea that she save his life by giving her body to Angelo. Thus, I openly acknowledge that Isabella's ethical compass is harsh, even ruthless. While she begins as an advocate of mercy, she later compromises that stand in favor of protecting her own chastity. Isabella's judgment of Claudio is, perhaps, difficult to listen to, to watch. In addition, the bed trick can be read as rape of Angelo (he does not consent to sex with Mariana). If we see it that way, then the bed trick implicates her in what is already a corrupt socio-political system. Within the context, however, of Vienna's laws and the state representatives who deploy them as weapons, whose approach to government is at odds with mercy, Isabella speaks truth to power and shifts legal, marital, and gender lines. Angelo may sentence Claudio to death for fornication with his fiancée, but he is not above sexual blackmail to save him. The Duke may fight for Claudio's life and Mariana's reputation as a slandered woman, but he is not above asking a nun to marry him, to choose a life she has already refused. And I would note that like Angelo, he makes this demand **because he saved her brother's life**. Women's legal, sexual, and domestic vulnerability to men makes anger and her refusal of all three of these men both imperative and ethical.