

DRAMA

‘An Angelo for Claudio, Death for Death?’

Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (written in 1604), was the first major production for 1992, of the National Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C. The setting of the performances in May and June during the agonizing days before and after the execution of Roger Keith Coleman in nearby Greenville, Virginia, had a visible effect on the spectators. Although the production was a very bad one, many in the audience were on the edge of their seats during the second half of the play, as on the stage decrees of execution of three different characters loom, are delayed with the help of a charitable jailer, and are then finally averted; those watching could not help thinking of the play as reflection of their present world.

So strong and beautiful a polemic about justice and mercy is *Measure for Measure*, that it can overcome

the poorest or most amateur performance. In fact, as the cultural media in the United States have done so much to return the barbaric spectacle of executions to public favor, so this Shakespeare play might undo that, if performed and broadcast far and wide.

In it, Shakespeare achieves a direct and completely truthful human confrontation between the “new dispensation” of Christianity, flowing from the Sermon on the Mount, and the fatalistic idea that retribution—revenge in equal measure (the “measure for measure” of the play’s title)—is justice.

“But go, and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I have come to call sinners, not the just.” These words of Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew are the ground on which Shakespeare constructs *Measure for Measure*.

At the opening, the situation of one of the play’s protagonists, the Duke of Vienna, is like that of this nation a decade ago. Although the head of government has the affection and respect of the citizens, he has failed to stop an escalation of crime: in the case of the Duke’s Vienna, particularly crimes of license—prostitution,

public drunkenness, dueling, fighting, etc.

The Duke desires a “crackdown.” But thinking of his beneficent reputation and fearing to do it himself, he opens the play by making the kind of mistake which, in classical drama, creates tragic circumstances, and requires a true hero to avoid tragedy itself. The Duke decides suddenly to “leave” on an invented trip of state, appointing as his substitute a nobleman named Angelo, whom the Duke believes will be *rigorous* with the law, but who is actually *cruel*.

Angelo comes down with the whip on every petty madam and pimp. But he chooses to make an example of a young gentleman, Claudio, whom he sentences to immediate execution for fornication, because Claudio’s betrothed Juliet is pregnant, and they have not yet been married.

Thus the question of justice and retribution, of judicial murder, is first posed to the audience on the simplest level: can the state execute a man for a sin or crime so common and lacking in malice or forethought? Shakespeare lived in the condition to which our President and Congress would return us, in which a very wide variety of crimes were capital, carrying the penalty of death. Claudio is publicly displayed and then rushed to prison for execution the next day; his jailer, hoping Angelo will relent, says that Claudio “hath but as offended in a dream.” He warns Angelo as we warn those today who seek “expedited capital punishment” and an “end to constant delays”:

I have seen
When, after execution, judgement hath
Repented o’er his doom.

Shakespeare Quotes St. Augustine

Claudio’s sister Isabella, a convented novice, goes to Lord Angelo to plead for mercy, and Shakespeare directly



MEASURE, For Measure.

Actus primus, Scena prima.

puts into her words St. Augustine's celebrated rule of Christian correction: hate the sin, but love the sinner. Isabella says of her brother's crime,

There is a vice that I do most abhor,
And most desire should meet the blow of justice,
For which I would not plead, but that I must
I have a brother is condemned to die.
I do beseech you let it be his fault,
And not my brother.

In this famous scene, in which Angelo finally offers to pardon Claudio's fornication if Isabella will fornicate with him, Angelo first is shocked by his inability even to understand what she means:

Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it?
Why, every fault's condemned ere it be done:
Mine were the very cipher of a function
To fine the faults and let go by the actor.

In response, Angelo mouths the stoic fatalism which cloaks all attempts to base law and justice on mere procedure and "efficient" retribution. He claims that cutting off Claudio's "foul" life is what everyone needs (as we hear today, "so the others concerned can get on with their lives"):

I pity those I do not know,
Which a dismissed offense would after gall,
And do him right that, answering one foul wrong,
Lives not to act another.

But then, momentarily alone, he admits to himself that the real purpose of these procedures and rules of "efficient" retribution, is to create the mere scarecrow appearance of justice, the substance of which he does not desire:

O place, O form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
Wrench awe from fools. . . .
Let's write "Good Angel" on the devil's horn.

Angelo tries to impose this fatalistic, procedural view of right and wrong on Isabella, as he makes her his offer:

I, now, the voice of recorded law,
Pronounce a sentence on your brother's life;
Might there not be a charity in sin
To save this brother's life?

And finally, when she threatens to expose him, he tells her that his power, his procedures, determine right and wrong, true and false:

As for you,
Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.

This is *administrative fascism* wielding the power and threat of execution. But it must be said that the National Shakespeare Theater's conscious attempt to use as its model the movie *Cabaret*, with its pornographic portrayal of nightclub debauchery in existentialist Weimar Germany, for portraying Shakespeare's attack on the core idea of fascist law, is a dramatic disaster. The effect is that the license of a sexual underworld is seen as the alternative to Angelo's repression; the company went so far as to add characters—female prostitutes—who are nowhere to be found in Shakespeare's play (so that Claudio's friend Lucio and others can writhe around on the floor with them), and to take other arrogant liberties with the text.

The real core of the performance's disorientation is that the company does not understand the Augustinian idea of mercy stated by Isabella; in fact, they show no understanding of the *heroic* character of Isabella at all. She is presented merely as an oppressed woman, and the characterization of the other major figures suffers like distortion. As can be imagined, the resulting production, particularly as Shakespearian acting, is very poor.

But a Convicted Murderer?

As the jailer and the disguised Duke try to stop the execution, Shakespeare raises his attack on judicial murder to another plane. The Duke—now disguised as a friar—and Isabella, trick Angelo into meeting his own rejected and lovesick former fiancée for a midnight tryst, Angelo thinking he has possessed Isabella instead. Angelo then demands Claudio's head anyway. The "friar" suggests that the jailer instead behead a convicted, hardened murderer—Barnadine—held nine years in the same prison, and send Barnadine's head to Angelo instead.

Here the audience experiences a strong tension and apprehension: the Duke, who we thought beneficent, is about to treat another man's life with the same callous expediency shown by Angelo, in order to save Claudio's life. But this is a convicted murderer, unrepentant and drunk in his cell, alive after nine years only because "his friends still wrought reprieves for him." The question of the death penalty is now confronted on a sharper level: may the friar—who is really the Duke, the state's true authority—now cause his immediate execution?

In a blunt, comic confrontation which is so abrupt that it raises tension as well as laughter, Barnadine staggers out and declares himself drunk and unprepared to die today, and lurches back to his cell. He is a parodied

extreme of the mentally retarded, those who we see being sent to the ultimate punishment without even understanding that it is coming. The “friar” admits to himself it’s wrong:

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

When the jailer bravely conceives of an alternative and takes responsibility for it, the Duke thanks heaven for providing a way out from killing a man for expedience, even in pursuit of justice for another.

The Duke’s poetry directly recalls Christ’s words in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, “For I say unto you that unless your justice exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven . . .” Shakespeare has the Duke’s speech break into a shorter poetic line, so that the audience knows he is speaking directly to them:

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe;
Pattern in himself to know,
Grace to stand, and virtue go;
More nor less to others paying,
Than by self-offenses weighing.

A Third Level

Now Shakespeare’s fight for the spectator’s idea of justice and mercy reaches its third and sharpest level. Isabella, and Angelo’s former fiancé Mariana, who has become her friend, believe that Claudio has been beheaded; yet they will try with the “friar’s” help both to expose Angelo, and to make him marry Mariana—a seemingly impossible undertaking.

The Duke now choosing to reappear as himself, the two women tell him the truth; yet because the Duke is trying to draw out Angelo, he appears to reject their exposé and orders them to prison. In the entire play, the Duke’s sudden and prolonged disappearance acts as a metaphor for the forcing of the heroine Isabella, and the others, into the necessity to act on behalf of human life and the rights of man. Their government has vanished; usurping irrational tyranny appears in its place; the sanctity of life is left in their hands. The Duke’s long delay, the uncertainty to the last as to whether he will restore justice, force the spectators to think what Isabella is thinking: that she, her brother, and her friends may all die before this evil is overturned and truth restored.

Ordered to prison, Isabella speaks to heaven and to future generations:

Then, O you blessed ministers above,
Keep me in patience, and with ripened time
Unfold the evil which is here wrapped up
In countenance. Heaven shield your grace from woe.

When Angelo is finally exposed before the Duke for all his cruel corruption of power, he, in his humiliation, asks to die:

No longer session hold upon my shame,
But let my trial be mine own confession.
Immediate sentence, then and sequent death
Is all the grace I beg.

One thinks then of those few on death rows today who actually *ask* to be executed on live television, sweeping themselves into the public spectacle of judicial revenge. Now Shakespeare has put the question of justice at the highest level: shall a cruel man, who has killed one person and degraded another, and who confesses and asks the penalty of death, be executed? (The spectators, who have the same “evidence” the Duke has, must also be thinking that, in fact, Angelo has not murdered Claudio or raped Isabella, although he thinks he has.)

The Duke decrees Angelo’s death:

‘An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!’
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure,
Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure . . .
We do condemn thee to the very block
Where Claudio stooped to death, and with like haste.

But then, when Mariana begs his mercy, the Duke leaves the decision to Isabella, who still believes her brother dead. She, the victim, does not seek to answer her grief with vengeance, as we are now told victims must do—a “solution” which must only fester and make grief worse as years pass. Instead, Isabella shows Angelo that she still hates the sin, but loves the sinner, and that love of God and sacred human life guide her. She tells the Duke,

Look, if it please you, on this man condemned,
As if my brother lived . . .
Let him not die.

Because of Isabella’s justice and mercy, the Duke may, at the play’s end, dispense appropriate judgments which force the various sinners to redeem themselves.

So, Shakespeare hears the only commandment which St. Matthew reports Jesus to have spoken twice, in just the same words: “But go, and learn what this means. I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”

—Paul B. Gallagher