DANICA IGRUTINOVIĆ*
Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, Univerzitet Singidunum

UDC: 821.111.09-2 Шекспир В.

THE AFFLICTED SPIRITS HERE IN THE PRISON: RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

1. HERE COMES A MAN OF COMFORT: *MEASURE FOR MEASURE* AS CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* has long confounded the critics. Part of the reason may be found in G. Wilson Knight's assertion that, as "the play tends towards allegory or symbolism", Shakespeare "elects to risk a certain stiffness, or arbitrariness, in the directing of his plot rather than fail to express dramatically, with variety and precision, the full content of his basic thought." Knight is quick to add that "the religious coloring is orthodox." (Stead/Dyson 1971: 91-92) While the text offers numerous and undeniable Biblical allusions confirming these claims, it also makes them appear highly problematic at times.

The Duke has consistently been identified with God or Christ, even by critics disagreeing with an allegorical interpretation of the play, while the other characters do not seem to be quite as clearly defined, though Isabella has sometimes been associated with Man's Soul or the Church, and Lucio with Satan. (Barton 1997: 579) Establishing the God-Duke parallel, Nevill Coghill points out that Duke Vincentio "had long since ordained laws the breach of which he has never himself punished," he had "withdrawn himself into invisibility from the world of which he is the lord, but remains as it were omnipresent and omniscient, in the guise of a priest, seeking to draw good out of evil," and he reappears "in righteousness, majesty and judgment in the last scene." (Coghill 1955: 21) As he returns to judge, after having himself been accused of sins not his, his people come to meet him at the city gates, which are often mentioned in the Gospel parables of the Second Coming.

The fact that the Duke has to endure Lucio's slander is, surprisingly, the least dramatic instance of the substitutionary atonement motif, which is pervasive, if highly problematicized, throughout the play. Isabel explicitly introduces it while pleading for her brother's life to Angelo: 'Why, all the souls that were forfeit once, / And He that might the vantage best have took / Found out the remedy.' (II.ii.73-75) This brings about 'Angelo's proposed atonement of Claudio to the law through the vicarious suffering and 'death' of one of Christ's brides.' (Cole 1965: 443) In the notorious bed-trick stratagem, Mariana is to 'suffer' to spare Isabel. When this plot fails to save Claudio, Barnardine is

* Kontakt podaci (Email): igrutinovic@sezampro.rs

proposed to die in his stead. Finally, Ragozine's head is substituted for Claudio's in order to deceive Angelo. This constitutes a bewildering and amusing game of salvation, in which no one is forced to participate, no one is really seriously hurt, and everybody seems to have learned a valuable lesson.

Isabel, by marrying the Duke, personifies both the traditional image of the Church as Christ's Bride, and an individual soul's final union with its Creator. The Duke's proposal is reminiscent of the father's retort to the good son who has judged the prodigal son in the Gospel parable: 'What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine' (V.i.537) Angelo, on the other hand, is the prodigal son, who is eventually pardoned and reinstated. Lucio, a.k.a. Satan, lures Isabel out of the convent, introduces temptation by entreating her to touch Angelo, performs his role of the arch-accuser when he informs on Mrs. Overdone, and slanders the Duke while possibly recognizing him, much like the demons in the Gospels. Like the demons, he is the only one the Duke 'cannot pardon.' (V.i.499) Though his final sentence appears to be far less harsh than eternal damnation, it is apparently more than sufficient. In his own words, 'Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging.' (V.i.522-523)

Mariana, with the unearthly moated grange as her abode, and her particular closeness to the Duke, may have a heavenly role to play. Her defining attribute is mercy, as opposed to 'precise' morality and justice: 'As Angelo has put the letter of the old law into effect, so Mariana sets the letter of forgiveness in act.' (Black 1972: 124) By asking for judgment to be tempered with mercy and pleading for the sinners, she fulfills the traditional role of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Isabel can be seen as the other, virginal, 'half' of Mary, as is indicated by Lucio's 'Hail, virgin, if you be, as those cheek-roses / Proclaim you are no less!' (I.iv.16-17)

2. THE DUKE OF DARK CORNERS: SOME PROBLEMS RAISED BY THE 'CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY' INTERPRETATION

This neatly delineated allegorical reading of *Measure for Measure* has many critics. The very notion of an allegorical interpretation of the play is most commonly discarded mainly because of imperfections and inconsistencies perceived in Duke Vincentio's character, rendering him unfit for the role of the Almighty. He is "generally censured for being shifty and untruthful and for violating law and religious observance" (Lawrence 1969: 25) by hearing confessions in the guise of a priest, for his "seemingly motiveless malingering," (Cole 1965: 428) and for the observation that he "hurts people and treats them as if they were inhuman cogs to be manipulated." (Gelb 1971: 29) C. K. Stead offers a long litany of accusatory questions. (Stead/Dyson 16-17)

The Duke's outrageous mercy has had its critics as well. Coleridge felt that the pardon of Angelo "baffles the strong indignant claim of justice," (Stead/Dyson 1971: 45) and C. K. Stead insists that "we do not all err as Angelo errs," (Stead/Dyson 1971: 20) so he should therefore receive no understanding or compassion from us. The pardon of Angelo appears to have been devised to provoke just such sentiment – if we judge Angelo for judging and cannot forgive him for not forgiving another for the very sin he is guilty of, the joke is on us. Shakespeare might have had this verse in mind: 'And

thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?' (KJV, Romans 2: 3-4)

In his dealings with his subjects, the Duke has been seen as too controlling and manipulative, or as failing to prevent evil and hurtful actions of others, or as simply utterly ineffective, so that the other characters are able to "force upon him a series of hasty rearrangements and patchings." (Barton 1997: 581) Interestingly enough, rather than repudiate it, these accusations seem to confirm the allegorical association between God and the Duke. God is also commonly charged with allowing humans either too much or too little free will; being either too manipulative and controlling, or guilty of tolerating evil. It may be noted that, like the Duke, God does not impose His will on man, He is able to change His mind, improvise and elicit man's willing cooperation in salvation, and thus create synergy between the divine and the human wills.

Isabel, who marries the God-Duke, thus earning the privilege to be seen as the exemplary human, is far from being universally popular for her uncompromising virtue. While it has been clarified that "a Jacobean audience took for granted that there can be no compromise with evil," (Stead/Dyson 1971: 69) as is demonstrated by the failure of the bed-trick to actually save Claudio from Angelo's sentence, many are disturbed by Isabel's "rigid chastity," (Stead/Dyson 1971: 47) "distressing lack of warmth," and "self-centered saintliness." (Stead/Dyson 1971: 114-115) Isabel is, in fact, quite ambiguously portrayed, allowing the critics to take a surprising range of positions on her character: Howard C. Cole, for instance, contends that Shakespeare is "at least critical if not wholly unsympathetic to his icy maiden," (Cole 1965: 438) whereas George L. Geckle insists that he "takes great pains [...] to present her in a favorable light." (Geckle 1971: 167) This ambivalence stems from deep problems within the world of the play.

3. THE AFFLICTED SPIRITS HERE IN THE PRISON: THE 'ORTHODOXY' OF THE WORLDVIEW IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

The existence of an allegorical element in *Measure for Measure* is undeniable on a level, even though it poses more questions than it provides answers for, quite unlike the morality plays of old. However, how 'orthodox' is it really? By examining the real laws of the world existing within the play, it is possible to uncover in it certain elements of creeds other than mainstream Christianity, introduced into the intellectual atmosphere of Elizabethan England by way of Occult Neoplatonism. (Yates 2003)

The mentioned ambivalence surrounding Isabel's character stems from a chasm at the core of the world within the play. I will attempt to demonstrate that this world is fundamentally dualistic – Manichean or Gnostic – and not truly Christian, and that this is reflected most compellingly in the attitudes the play reveals, both in its characters and recipients, towards sexuality and the female gender.

The very setting is telling. The action seems to spiral downwards from the Duke's heavenly palace to the dark prison-world, much like, according to Gnostic cosmogony, emanations of decreasing similarity to the One Uncreated Light finally resulted in the evil material world where souls are imprisoned. Save for the short reprieve of the unearthly 'moated grange' scene, the prison is where the rest of the action takes place. The prison's

constant inhabitant, Barnardine, is the Gnostic Everyman. A stranger to this world – 'A Bohemian born, but here nurs'd up and bred' (IV.ii.30-31) – he seems to have forgotten his true homeland and everything outside his narrow prison-world. Blind and oblivious to the true reality of the external world, though bound only by his own ignorance and intoxication with the world of matter, he does not even attempt to seek freedom: 'He hath evermore had the liberty of the prison; give him leave to escape hence, he would not. Drunk many times a day, if not many days entirely drunk.' (IV.ii.147-150) He rages and swears at those coming to awaken him and remind him of his mortality.

The Duke's announcement that he comes 'to visit the afflicted spirits / Here in the prison' (II.iii.5-6) has a definite Gnostic ring to it. The Christian Christ does arrive clothed in flesh to save humanity, but the Duke's sojourn in the prison precisely fits the Gnostic / Manichean image of Christ descending to teach and spiritually liberate the imprisoned souls. Vincentio does not seem to suffer much in the world, which is in keeping with the docetism of Gnosticism and Manichaeism.

Another notion not truly in line with any orthodox Christian teaching is that of God leaving the world to another's rule. Angelo, as the 'demigod authority,' can and does stand for mankind and secular authority, as opposed to God's justice. However, Isabel's tirade on 'man, proud man, / Dress'd in a little brief authority ' (II.ii.117-118) also closely resembles patristic readings of the Old Testament to find explanations for the existence of demons. In order to prove that the fall of angels was caused by their pride, Tertullian quotes Ezekiel 28: 2: 'Because thine heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of the seas; yet thou art a man, and not God.' (KJV, Ezekiel 28: 2) Augustine draws the same conclusion, only quoting Isaiah 14: 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God.' (KJV, Isaiah 14: 12-13) The quotes in question also clearly mention men, not angels, but are taken to symbolize the angels who fell from Heaven. Similarly, Angelo in his proud authority, and in his fall, can be taken to represent both man and angel, towards which his name would additionally seem to point, though also denoting his seemingly immaterial human nature. The rumor that 'this Angelo was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation' (III.ii.104-105) is another possible indication of this.

Angelo, cast in the role of the real deity's deputy, whether he be demigod or demiurge, the Gnostic temporary lord of the temporary prison world, or the Marcionite evil god upholding the cruel letter of the old law, has a demonic, not angelic, part to play. This is also reminiscent of the view held by St. Gregory of Nyssa, which has not been accepted as valid, that Satan was the angel originally given rule over the material world, whose fall was caused by his subsequent rebellion. Angelo's demonic status may be partly indicated in the text with 'Let's write "good angel" on the devil's horn, / 'Tis not the devil's crest' (II.iv.15-17) and 'This outward-sainted deputy [...] is yet a devil.' (III.i.88, 91) The notion of angels succumbing to sexual temptation can be found in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, as well as easily read into Genesis 2, where 'the sons of God' are described as becoming very intimate indeed with 'the daughters of man.' According to Justin Martyr, Satan's final fall is caused by his seduction of Eve, just as Angelo's fall is caused by his attempted seduction of Isabel.

4. "BE THAT YOU ARE, THAT IS A WOMAN": WOMANHOOD AND WORLDLINESS

The dilemma put before Isabel creates an artificial chasm between the virtues of charity and chastity, whose consequent precarious balance is one of the main questions the play poses. In Shakespeare's sources, the felon's wife yields but is still considered "chaste." (Barton 1997: 580) Shakespeare chooses to split the one woman, and in effect, womanhood as well, into Mariana and Isabel, or into adherents of charity or chastity. Together they form a complete, virtuous woman, apparently otherwise an impossibility in the world of *Measure for Measure*. The image of Mariana and Isabel meeting at the moated grange is juxtaposed to that of the offenders against charity and chastity, Barnardine the murderer and Claudio the fornicator, waiting in prison for their executions. Charity and chastity are radically opposed and fully exclude one another in the play. Chaste Isabel is capable of uttering 'More than our brother is our chastity,' (II.iv.185) while we find that it is Mrs. Overdone, 'a bawd of eleven years' continuance,' (III.ii.196) who lovingly takes care of Kate Keepdown's illegitimate child by Lucio.

Similarly, the spiritual and the carnal are radically opposed, and always present only in their extremes. As Harriett Hawkins rightly observes, "the borderline between angelic and demonic extremes of virtue and vice" is "a very narrow one, and all too easy to cross" (Hawkins 1978: 109) in the dualistic world of *Measure for Measure*. Thus far almost incorporeal, the Puritan Angelo is, at the first stirrings of bodily desire, driven "to embrace the basest of urges [...], since he believes that his prurient interest in Isabella indicates a complete depravity." (Holloway 1998: 3) Or, in Ted Hughes' terms, 'behind Angelo's face, Adonis has become Tarquin,' (Hughes 1992: 171) going from one extreme to the other in a matter of seconds. There does not seem to be a middle way.

Charity and chastity, the physical and the spiritual, are artificially separated to such an extent that a woman in this world can either be a whore or a nun. There are no wives in the entire play. Humankind in general and womankind in particular are split along these lines and a form of double vision is maintained throughout the play.

On the one hand, a Puritanical, Manichean hatred towards flesh as innately evil is displayed by several characters and masqueraded as true Christian religiosity; on the other hand, a subversive undercurrent makes certain our sympathies will side with fertility and motherhood, pitted against and starkly contrasted with sexual purity. Filial, motherly and 'conjugal' love, kindness, fertility and extramarital sex all belong to the same paradigm. The prostitute Kate Keepdown's illegitimate child is in the prostitute Mrs. Overdone's motherly care. Juliet's premarital pregnancy is announced to Isabel by the Satanically subversive Lucio in positive images of love and fertility:

> Your brother and his lover have embrac'd.
> 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. (I.iv.40-44)

Sarah C. Velz, interpreting the play in terms of the Gospel parable of the seeds, finds that the "good ground", those bearing spiritual fruit, relates to Juliet's pregnancy and Mariana's love (Velz 1972: 37-39). The "good ground" is thus equated with physical fertility and physical love, and mainly embodied in Claudio and Juliet.

The other paradigm, consisting of 'precise,' cold, sterile, legalism, and a Puritanical mistrust of the flesh, appears to be opposed to love and life itself. It is interesting to note that Claudio is sentenced to death not for fornication, but 'for getting Madam Julietta with child,' (I.ii.72-73) and Isabel tellingly claims 'I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born.' (III.i.189-191) Sympathy is readily aroused for Claudio and Juliet as they appear to be judged over a mere technicality. They could have, however, probably organized a secret church wedding, like Romeo and Juliet, with more ease and less publicity than the exchange of vows they did have. This would fail, however, to make the necessary point of their being the loving, fertile, but fornicating couple, destructive to the cold, restrictive, Puritan world of Angelo.

Womanhood in particular is associated with this threat of fertility, sexuality, and carnality. Angelo, when persuading Isabel to yield to him, urges her to 'Be that you are, / That is a woman,' (II.iv.134-135) suggesting that wantonness is merely female nature. The serpentine temptress Eve must be bridled for the world of cold, dry, masculine Puritanism to survive. An aspect of this necessary repression is the nunnery's regulations concerning interactions with men: 'When you have vow'd, you must not speak with men / But in the presence of the prioress; / Then if you speak, you must not show your face, / Or if you show your face, you must not speak.' (I.iv.10-13) Michael D. Friedman argues that because "these limitations apply only when a sister speaks with men, we may assume that they are designed to prevent the arousal of male sexual desire, which presumably occurs when women speak and display their beauty at the same time." (Friedman 1996: 4) The regulations signify more than this, however. They diminish the threat of women, as does the entire play, in a way, by artificially splitting them into mind and body, spirit and flesh, nuns and whores, and forbidding them to be both at once. It should also be noted that Isabel is advised by the Duke to demand 'all shadow and silence' (III.i.247) for their purported encounter; a woman cannot be both spirit and flesh, but she apparently can be neither.

There seems to be no room in the play for the truly orthodox Christian view of a fundamentally good world, though corrupted by the Fall, in which sexuality is innately good, but to be contained within marriage, and, like all other passions, to be controlled, not fully stifled or freed. When Claudio is asked 'whence comes this restraint?,' he rightfully answers 'From too much liberty.' (I.ii.124-125) In *Measure for Measure*, it is apparently impossible to find the right measure between liberty and restraint. There is no mention whatsoever of sexuality within marriage, and no children are conceived within wedlock in the entire play.

These unresolved dualities appear to be artificially united in the timelessness following the Duke's return and Judgment Day. The 'solution' comes in the shape of the impending multiple wedding, forming the first marriages in the play. Vincentio has thus far been known both as the reputedly lecherous Duke of Dark Corners who 'would eat mutton on Fridays,' (III.ii.181-182) and in his ascetic guise of a friar, boasting to Friar Thomas: 'Believe not that the dribbling dart of love / Can pierce a complete bosom.'

(I.iii.2-3) The God-figure has thus also been split into the dual extremes of his torn world. His final marriage to Isabel might indicate a much needed 'middle' way, perhaps possible only after time has ended.

An allegorical analysis of *Measure for Measure* going beyond the usual orthodox Christian interpretations reveals a dualism in the world of the play as the root of its commonly perceived problems. The chasm between body and spirit leads to a chasm between the virtues of charity and chastity and thus to Isabella's crucial but fundamentally insoluble dilemma. This may lead towards an enhanced understanding of Shakespeare's play.

REFERENCES

Shakespeare, W. 1997. *Measure for Measure* (prefaced by A. Barton). *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Black, J. 1973. The Unfolding of *Measure for Measure*. *Shakespeare Survey*, 119-128.

Coghill, N. 1955. Comic Form in *Measure for Measure*. *Shakespeare Survey*, 14-27.

Cole, H. C. 1965. The 'Christian' Context of *Measure for Measure*. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 64.3, 425-451.

Friedman, M. D. 1996. 'Wishing a More Strict Restraint': Feminist Performance and the Silence of Isabella." *SRASP* 19. [Internet]. Available at: http://www.marshall.edu/engsr/SR1996.html#"Wishing [25.1.2009].

Geckle, G. L. 1971. Shakespeare's Isabella. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.2, 163-168.

Gelb, H. 1971. Duke Vincentio and the Illusion of Comedy or All's Not Well That Ends Well. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.1, 25-34.

Hawkins, H. 1978. 'The Devil's Party': Virtues and Vices in 'Measure for Measure.' *Shakespeare Survey*, 105-113.

Holloway, B. 1998. Vincentio's Fraud: Boundary and Chaos, Abstinence and Orgy in Measure for Measure. *SRASP* 21. [Internet]. Available at: http://www.marshall.edu/engsr/SR1998.html#Vincentio's%20Fraud: [25.1.2009].

Hughes, T. 1992. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Lawrence, W. W. 1969. *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Stead, C. K. and A. E. Dyson (eds.). 1971. *Measure for Measure: A Selection of Critical Essays*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan.

Velz, S. C. 1972. Man's Need and God's Plan in 'Measure for Measure' and Mark IV. *Shakespeare Survey*, 37-44.

Yates, F. 2003. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*. London and New York: Routledge Classics.

SUMMARY

THE AFFLICTED SPIRITS HERE IN THE PRISON: RELIGIOUS ALLEGORY IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Religious allegory in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is explored and found to contain dualistic elements, primarily perceptible in the attitudes expressed towards sexuality and womanhood.

KEYWORDS: *Measure for Measure*, religious allegory, dualism, woman.