"HEAVENLY COMFORTS OF DESPAIR"
LAW AND GRACE IN
MEASURE FOR MEASURE

BY

YI LI

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To my parents

ABSTRACT

In Romans Paul argues that no human being can keep God's law perfectly, and that in one sense this law serves not to remove human sinfulness but to arouse it. By this means, the law can serve to awaken man to the recognition of his own sin. It does so by making him aware of those elements in himself which oppose and resist the demands it makes upon him. In this man is made aware of his constant need for the saving power of grace.

From the moment she first appears, Isabella in *Measure for Measure* would seem to be practicing a rigid adherence to divine law in order to protect her own virtue. In doing so she has closed her eyes to a crucial truth about herself. In the final scene, confronted by Mariana's entreaty that she join her in her plea that Angelo's life be spared, Isabella comes to discover her own unrighteousness. She is made aware that, in her passionate desire for revenge, she has come to lack the power to forgive. Yet it is a desire which the Duke, as the voice of the law, has deliberately stimulated and brought to light in Isabella throughout the second half of the play. The willingness Isabella shows in the final scene to forgive Angelo, far from deriving from her own will for self-perfection, is thus a gift bestowed by the grace of God.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CompD Comparative Drama.

EIC Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism (Oxford, England).

ELR English Literary Renaissance.

MP Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted to Research in Medieval and Modern Literature.

PBA Proceedings of the British Academy.

PMLA Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.

PQ Philological Quarterly (Iowa City, IA).

ShakS Shakespeare Studies (Knoxville, TN).

ShS Shakespeare Survey.

SQ Shakespeare Quarterly.

TSLL Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the final scene of *Measure for Measure*, as the cruel and hypocritical Angelo is finally brought to justice, Isabella, the play's heroine, falls to her knees and begs that he be shown mercy. Though her plea is neither eloquent nor passionate, there is nothing in her words to suggest that she is not entirely sincere:

> Most bounteous sir:
> Look, if it please you, on this man condemn'd
> As if my brother liv'd. I partly think
> A due sincerity govern'd his deeds
> Till he did look on me. Since it is so,
> Let him not die. My brother had but justice,
> In that he did the thing for which he died:
> For Angelo,
> His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
> And must be buried but as an intent
> That perish'd by the way. Thoughts are not subjects;

Intents, but merely thoughts.[1]

(V.i.441-452)

To an audience viewing *Measure for Measure* for the first time, Isabella's argument here -- especially her willingness to accept a degree of responsibility for Angelo's actions -- must surely come as something of a surprise. Up to this moment in the play, she has shown only what would appear to be a growing animosity towards Angelo. True, she has spoken fervently on behalf of the value of mercy in an earlier scene (II.ii), but her concern in this scene was to save her brother from a punishment she regarded as savage and undeserved. Here she is pleading that mercy be extended to a figure she has come to regard as a monster of depravity, a figure whose actions have aroused within her a desire for revenge ("O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes!" IV.iii.119) that, at the beginning of the final scene, has become almost an obsession:

> O worthy prince, dishonour not your eye
> by throwing it on any other object,
> Till you have heard me in my true complaint,
> And given me justice! Justice! Justice! Justice!
>
> (V.i.23-26)

Isabella's plea for mercy on Angelo's behalf, like the play itself, has long been a subject of controversy. From the beginning, commentators on the play have been unwilling to

praise the virtue of her act. Charlotte Lennox (1753), viewing the play's ending as "absolutely defective in a due distribution of rewards and punishments", argues that the justification she offers for Angelo's crime involves "strange reasoning".[2] Even more severe in his judgement is Samuel Johnson, for whom Isabella's intercession for Angelo is motivated not so much by Christian charity as by her own vanity as a woman:

> I am afraid our varlet poet intended to inculcate, that women think ill of nothing that raises the credit of their beauty, and are ready, however virtuous, to pardon any act which they think incited by their own charms.[3]

Numerous commentators have echoed Johnson's observation here.[4] John, Lord Chedworth (1805), for example, argues that

> there are very few who, in contemplating the scene before us, will not agree in the justness of Dr.Johnson's comment upon it: it is true that Isabella is not prompt to comply with the request of Mariana, but when she yields at length female vanity is very conspicuously a motive with her.[5]

The charge has been repeated even by twentieth-century critics, For William Empson (1951), Isabella

> does react with the mercy enjoined by her religion, and this is certainly meant to be to her credit, but she attains this height by an impulse of personal vanity so repulsive so to surprise even Dr. Johnson.[6]

Empson's cynicism is seconded both by Geoffrey Durrant in 1968 ("What woman would not forgive a man driven to crime by her beauty?"),[7] and by Christopher Palmer in 1978: "Her remark suggests a covert pride or at least interest in the fact that it was she, not Mariana, who first swayed Angelo from virtue".[8]

Other critics have found different grounds for complaining of a lack of genuine Christian charity in Isabella's plea. Eileen Mackay (1963) argues that such a lack of virtue may be the result of her preoccupation with the Duke:

> The mercy speech, however, is so lacking in sense and reason, so un-Christian and so far from Portia, that it seems as though the speaker's thoughts must be distracted; and perhaps Isabella, as she kneels and pleads for Angelo's life, finds, as she looks up into the Duke's eyes, that her own heart is stirred. She, who can be so eloquent, becomes incoherent, and maybe she reads in the Duke's face

> that there is no need to beg; he is truly 'attorneyed to her service'.[9]

Ernest Schanzer (1963) also finds Isabella's speech devoid of any real spirit of forgiveness: "Indisputable is the fact that Isabella is here pleading for a judicial pardon, and not on the Christian grounds of the need to show mercy".[10] More recently, Cynthia Lewis (1983) states that Mariana's reasoning "rings truer than Isabella's legalism, which is strained at best", adding that Isabella's plea is "casuistic".[11] An even stronger condemnation, this time from a feminist perspective, is delivered by Marcia Riefer (1984):

> To those who argue that rather than depriving Isabella of autonomy the Duke is actually releasing her from moral rigidity by arranging for her to plead for Angelo's life, I answer that Isabella's final speech, often accepted as representing character growth, in fact represents the opposite. . . . Isabella's final appeal represents not an increased but a stunted capacity for mercy. Her 'prosperous art', subjected to the Duke's perverted dramaturgical efforts, has itself become perverted.[12]

Other commentators, though willing to acknowledge that Isabella has indeed undergone a change for the better throughout the play, see her plea for Angelo either as half-

hearted or as ineffective. Charles R. Lyons, Joseph Westlund and Alexander Leggatt observe Isabella in this light. Lyons (1971) contends:

> The cool rhetoric of this argument suggests the same lack of commitment with which she began to plead with Angelo to pardon Claudio, but her own sense of participation in Angelo's sin suggests that she understands more of human nature, the phenomenon of temptation, than she did earlier.[13]

Westlund (1984) has similar reservations:

> Isabella asks for mercy for Angelo, a great improvement over her attitude toward Claudio; still, we are not permitted to regard even her mercy as entirely valid. . . . She strains to be fair, and her virtue is now an active force; but she tries to argue her case, and it is a weak one.[14]

Leggatt (1988) offers an alternative view, arguing that Isabella's plea, though devoid of any real enthusiasm, is not without a certain moral strength:

> In one sense her plea is very different, cold and reserved as Mariana's is not. . . . In another way, however, Isabella's plea has far greater force. . . . Isabella, as the party most deeply

> wronged, can address with real authority the central question of Angelo's offense. Since there is no self-interest behind it, a plea from her has greater weight than a plea from Mariana.[15]

In spite of the impressive array of commentators who have found fault with Isabella's plea for Angelo, others, however, have not hesitated to speak in her defence. For the majority of these critics, *Measure for Measure* is to be interpreted above all as a Christian play, and Isabella's plea is to be seen as the consummation of a decisive change in her character. G. Wilson Knight, M.D.H. Parker, R.G. Hunter, Anne Greco, Darryl J. Gless, Rernice W. Kliman, and Northrop Frye belong to this group. Knight (1930), who speaks of Isabella in the first part of the play as the embodiment of "self-centred saintliness",[16] argues that she displays a spiritual growth by showing "a softening, a sweet humanity"[17] at the end. Parker (1955), referring back to Act II, Scene ii, concludes that in her final plea she is merely practising "what she had preached" in her earlier intercession for Claudio.[18] R.G. Hunter (1965) holds that Isabella achieves "a charitable humanity"[19] at the end of the play, and that her forgiveness of Angelo "must finally be inspired by the charity she did not demonstrate toward the human weakness of her brother".[20] Anne Greco (1970) emphasizes the fact that Isabella's speech is based on the knowledge that all human beings, including herself, are sinful:

> Isabella kneels and in so doing shows Christ-like forgiveness, for just as Angelo is undeserving of her mercy so is all mankind undeserving of God's mercy. She renounces her earlier demand for vengeance and refuses to judge Angelo, because she now realizes that man, lacking God's knowledge and perfection, has no right to condemn his fellow sinners.[21]

Gless (1979) agrees with Greco, observing, however, that Isabella's plea, imbued with Christian charity, "comes in direct response to Mariana's appeal".[22] Kliman (1982) takes this argument one step further, insisting that what has prompted such a spirit of forgiveness in Isabella is her desire to affirm her womanly solidarity with Mariana: "Moved to kneel by Mariana's cry for help, Isabella can forgive her tormenter and the beheader (as she thinks) of her brother because her 'sister' wants her to".[23] Finally, Frye (1983) argues that Isabella's speech is an ultimate actualization of an ideal of Christian charity that before was merely an abstract concept in her mind:

> Far less of a rhetorical set speech than Portia's speech on mercy, it expresses the genuine kind of love, the charity which is the supreme virtue, that Isabella had dimly in mind when she first wanted to be a nun. Isabella herself, perhaps, could not

> always live on the level of nobility that that speech represents, but there has been a moment in which her essential self spoke; and such moments may become foci around which all the rest of one's life may revolve.[24]

This essay will attempt to answer those questions Isabella's words and actions in the final scene of *Measure for Measure* have aroused. As I hope to make clear, I do not find myself in agreement with those critics who regard her final speech as deficient in Christian virtue, nor do I regard her as a defeated or victimized figure in this scene. At the same time, although the essay will take a position similar to that of those critics who offer a Christian interpretation of the play, it will view Isabella's final speech not as the culmination of a process of spiritual growth, but as the manifestation of a sudden and dramatic change within her. It will argue that the strength she is displaying in this speech is a strength beyond her own human capacities, a strength given to her by a special grace to which she has finally become receptive. To provide such an interpretation of Isabella's final speech, it will be necessary first to go beyond the play itself to an authority whose teachings on the subject of sin and grace few if any in Shakespeare's audience would have questioned.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

[1] All quotations from *Measure for Measure* are from *The Arden Edition* (1965), edited by J.W. Lever.

[2] "Observations on the Use Shakespeare Has Made of the Foregoing Novel in His Comedy Called *Measure for Measure*", reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol.2, p.390.

[3] "Notes on Shakespeare's Plays: *Measure for Measure*", reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol.2, p.391.

[4] Coleridge, though not exactly echoing Johnson, shows an equal lack of enthusiasm for Isabella: "I confess that, Isabella, of all Shakespeare's female characters, interests me the least" (*Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, p.49). Far from praising Isabella for her Christian charity in pleading for Angelo, he declares that the pardoning of Angelo is "degrading to the character of woman" (*Notes and Lectures Upon Shakespeare and Some of the Old Poets and Dramatists with Other Literary Remains of S.T. Coleridge*, Vol.1, p.126).

[5] From E.H.Seymour's *Remarks, Critical, Conjectural and Explanatory, upon the Plays of Shakespeare*, Vol.I, p.104, reprinted in *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol.2, p.395.

[6] "Sense in *Measure for Measure*", in his *The Structure of Complex Words*, p.278.

[7] "*Measure for Measure*: A Comedy", in *Stratford Papers, 1968-69*, p.36.

[8] "Selfishness in *Measure for Measure*", in *EIC*, Vol.28, No.2, (1978), p.202.

[9] "*Measure for Measure*", in *SQ*, Vol.14 (1963), p.112. Mackay is echoed by Harold Bloom (1987) that Isabella at the end of the play "seems not so much changed as distracted". (*Modern Critical Interpretations of Measure for Measure*, p.4).

[10] *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, p.102.

[11] "'Dark Deeds Darkly Answered': Duke Vincentio and Judgment in *Measure for Measure*", *SQ*, Vol.34 , No.3 (1983), p.287.

[12] "'Instruments of Some More Mightier Member': The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*", in *SQ*, Vol.35 (1984), p.167.

[13] *Shakespeare and the Ambiguity of Love's Triumph*, p.144.

[14] *Shakespeare's Reparative Comedies: A Psychoanalytic View of the Middle Plays*, p.178.

[15] *SQ*, Vol.39, 1988, p.348.

16 "*Measure for Measure* and the Gospels", reprinted in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Measure for Measure*, p.45.
17 *Ibid.*, p.46.
18 *The Slave of Life: A Study of Shakespeare and Idea of Justice*, p.119.
19 *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, p.222.
20 *Ibid.*, p.220.
21 "A Due Sincerity" in *ShakS*, Vol.VI (1970), pp.168-69.
22 *Measure for Measure, the Law and the Convent*, p.204-205.
23 "Isabella in *Measure for Measure*" in *ShakS*, Vol.XV (1982), p.145.
24 *The Myth of Deliverance*, pp.29-30.

CHAPTER II

OPPOSED KINGS:
LAW AND MERCY;SIN AND GRACE

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
> Poison hath residence and medicine power;
> For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part,
> Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart,
> Two such opposed kings emcamp them still
> In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will.
>
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.ii.23-28)[1]

If critics have been willing to view *Measure for Measure* from a Christian perspective, it is surely in part because the play's title, derived as it is from a passage in the Sermon on the Mount, points to a central imperative in Christian ethics:

> Iudge not, that ye be not iudged. For with what iudgement ye iudge, ye shal be iudged: and with what measure ye mette, it shal be measured to you againe. And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brothers eye, and percieuest not the beame that is

> in thine owne eye? Or how saist thou to thy brother, suffer me to cast out the mote out of thine eye; and beholde a beame is in thine owne eye? Hypocrite, first cast out the beame out of thine owne eye, and then shalt thou se clearely to cast out the mote out of thy brothers eye.
>
> (Matt.7:1-5)

In the Gospel of Luke, this passage follows directly upon an injunction to forgive those whom we see as wrongdoers:

> Wherefore loue ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, loking for nothing again, and your rewarde shalbe great, and ye shalbe the children of the moste High: for he is kinde vnto the vnkinde, & to the euil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.
>
> (Lk.6:35,36).

What these passages are implying is that if human beings have no right to refuse to forgive the sins of others, it is because they themselves are not without sin. Although the doctrine of original sin, in its full Augustinian sense, is not to be found in the New Testament, nevertheless in the writings of Paul, human sinfulness is assumed to be a universal condition: "all haue sinned and are depriued of the glorie of God" (Rom.3.23). From this point of view, sin is a "bondage" (Rom.8:21; Gal.5:1; 2 Peter 2:19), a condition in

which man has the status of a fettered prisoner (Gal.3:22,23). Human beings, that is to say, are "seruants of sinne" (Rom.6:17), even those who would seek to be righteous:

> For I knowe, that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to wil is present with me: but I finde no meanes to perform that which is good. For I do not the good thing which I wolde, but the euil, which I wolde not, that I do. Now if I do that I wolde not, it is no more I that do it, but the sinne that dwelleth in me. I finde then by the Law, that when I wolde do good, euil is present with me. For I delite in the Law of God, concerning the inner man: But I se another law in my membres, rebelling against the law of my minde, & leading me into captiue unto the law of sinne, which is in my membres.
>
> (Rom.7:18-23)

Sin is so irresistible that the possessed and helpless victim exclaims: "O wretched man that I am, who shal deliuer me from the bodie of this death!" (Rom.7:24)

Being thus imprisoned, man, as Paul perceives, is confronted with the most fundamental question of his existence: how to obtain righteousness and salvation? Though the Old Testament initiates the notion of a universal sinfulness in the human condition,[2] the solution it provides

is rejected by Paul. For Israel, the great counterpoise to the destructive power of sin, and the only means by which man can acquire righteousness, merit, and reward, is to be found in strict observance of the law. Paul rejects this assumption on the ground that the law can neither make man righteous before God, nor free him from that state of mind which is the root of his sinfulness. And in one sense, Paul argues, this law serves actually to arouse and provoke the human desire to sin:

> Nay, I knewe not sinne, but by the law: for I had not knowen lust, except the Law had said, Thou shalt not lust. But sinne, toke an occasion by the commandement, and wrought in me all maner of concupiscence: for without the Law sinne is dead. For I once was alive, without the Law: but when the commandement came, sinne reuiued. But I dyed: and the same commandement which was ordeined vnto life, was founde to be vnto me vnto death. For sinne toke occasion by the commandement, and disceiued me, and thereby slew me.
>
> (Rom.7:7-9,11)

The law itself, Paul declares, is not sinful (Rom.7:7), but sin is given its opportunity through the law. When men strive to obey the prohibitions of the law, desires and yearnings are aroused in them for the very things that the law has prohibited. For this reason it can be understood that

the "motions of sinnes [are] *by the Law*" (Rom.7:5; italics added). Without the law sin would be "dead", that is, without its prohibitions sin would not have been able to make men rebellious and lawless.

Consequently, Israel's enthusiasm for observing the law -- in Paul's phrase, Israel's "zeal of God" -- becomes in fact a central obstacle to the receiving of God's saving power:

> For I beare them recorde, that they haue the zeale of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of the righteousnes of God, going about to establish their owne righteousnes, haue not submitted them selues to the righteousnes of God.
>
> (Rom.10:2-3)

In this we are aware that the very effort to perfect oneself in obedience of the law turns itself into an alienation from God, an unknowing rebellion against God. In Herman Ridderbos's words,

> the paradoxical phenomenon presents itself here that not merely in its transgression of the law, but also in its zeal for the law, Israel has not been able to obtain righteousness before God and life.[3]

Paul's comments on the law thus remind us of Christ's condemnation of the Pharisees, whose self-righteousness is founded on an ignorance of the true reality of their lives:

> Wo be to you, Scribes and Pharises, hypocrites: for ye are like vnto whited tombes, which appeare beautiful outwarde, but are within ful of dead mens bones, and of all filthines. So are ye also: for outwarde ye appeare righteous vnto men, but within ye are ful of hypocrisie and iniquitie.
>
> (Matt.23:27-28)

The fact that the law functions in such a negative way necessarily gives rise to a question Paul asks in Gal.3:19: "Wherefore then serueth the Law?" We have seen that the law arouses and makes visible in human beings a sinfulness which otherwise would remain hidden within them (cf.Rom.5:20;7:7,13). The law thus makes us consciously aware of our helplessness under the power of sin, of the impossibility of our achieving righteousness by our own human efforts. In this and this alone we come to realize our constant need for God's grace. Paul asserts in Rom.5:20-21:

> Moreouer the law entred thereupon that the offence shulde abunde: neuertheles where sinne abunded, there grace abunde much more: That as sinne had reigned vnto death, so might grace also reigne by

> righteousnes vnto eternal life, through Iesus Christ our Lord.

In Gal.3:24 Paul thus concludes that, ultimately, the purpose of the law is not to restrain sin, but to teach men truths about themselves that will open the possibility of their receiving the inspired strengths offered by divine grace: "Wherefore the Law was our schole master to bring vs to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith".[4]

For Paul, grace is "a power coming from the spirit of Jesus active in a Christian".[5] To be in "in grace" (Rom.5:2) is the same as to be "in Christ" (Rom.8:1,2). It was through God's grace, as Paul vividly recollects, that he was personally called and made an apostle. Grace is the active source in God to which everything that can be called salvation is traceable (Rom.11:5). As grace is offered unconditionally, as a gift, to receive it we are required only to show a readiness to receive it. In such a state, when grace becomes active within us, we become a new creature in Christ through the saving power of our faith:

> Therefore it is by faith, that it might come by grace, and the promes might be sure to all the sede; not to that only which is of the Law, but also to that which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of vs all.
>
> (Rom.4:16)

Whatever the differences among English Reformed Christians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were united in accepting Paul's teachings about sin and grace as a basis of Christian doctrine. For Shakespeare's Christian audience, because of the Fall, human nature was corrupted and depraved: if men lacked the power to make themselves righteous by their own efforts, it was because human reason, by itself, was incapable of overcoming man's own inclination to disobedience. As Milton describes the psychological state of fallen Adam and Eve:

> For Understanding rul'd not, and the Will
> Heard not her lore, both in subjection now
> To sensual Appetite, who from beneath
> Usurping over sovran Reason claim'd
> Superior Sway.
>
> (*Paradise Lost*, IX, 1127-1131)

What such a condition meant, for James Ussher, was that men could never enjoy a full spiritual freedom:

> And now since the fall of Adam, wee say further, that freedom of will remayneth still among men; but the abilitie which once it had, to perfome spirituall duties and things pertayning to salvation is quite lost: wee denie, therefore, that a naturall man hath any free will unto good.[6]

In the tenth article of the Thirty-Nine Articles, the same view of human nature is affirmed as orthodox Christian doctrine:

> The condition of man after the fall of Adam is suche, that he can not turne and prepare hym self by his owne naturall strength and good workes, to fayth and calling upon God: Wherefore we have no power to do good workes, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God . . . .[7]

From a Renaissance Christian point of view, the stoic ideal of self-sufficiency is thus an illusion which has to be destroyed if men are to receive the healing benefits of grace. Nothing, however, will serve to destroy this but our awareness of our continuing helplessness under sin. In the words of Calvin:

> For we will never have enough confidence in him unless we become deeply distrustful in ourselves; we will never lift up our hearts enough in him unless they be previously cast down in us; we will never have consolation enough in him unless we have already experienced desolation in ourselves. Therefore we are ready to seize and grasp God's grace when we have utterly cast out confidence in ourselves and rely only on the assurance of his goodness . . . .[8]

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

[1] *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blackmore Evans. All subsequent quotations from the plays (with the exception of *Measure for Measure*) will be derived from this edition.

[2] *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* gives a detailed explanation of the Old Testament's account of human sinfulness:

> The murder of Abel follows (the Fall of Adam and Eve) almost at once, and wickedness increases so rapidly that it soon brings down the judgment of the flood (Gen.4:23f.;6:1-6). Nor does the elimination of all but Noah's family basically change the situation, for sin is present there, too (Gen.9:20-24f.). The stories of Babel, Sodom, the Canaanites, and even of the family of Abraham, the children of Israel in the wilderness, and the settled people of the judges and the monarchy show that all people are constantly and persistently involved in sin. The prophetic literature is one long protest against the various forms of sin (Pss.32;51;139:23f.), even from the point of conception (51:5 [MT 7]). That sin has become part of the very life and being of fallen humanity is clearly and forcefully stated in Gen.6:5; Jer.17:9; Prov.6:14 (Vol.4, p.519).

[3] Herman Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, translated by John Richard De Witt, p.139.

[4] In *Paradise Lost*, Michael, while explaining to Adam why God will impose a complex code of laws on his chosen people, declares:

> Doubt not but that sin
> Will reign among them, as of thee begot;
> And therefore was law given them to evince
> Their natural pravity, by stirring up
> Sin against law to fight;that when they see
> Law can discover sin, but not remove,
> Save by those shadowy expiations weak,
> The blood of bulls and goats, they may conclude
> Some blood more precious must be paid for man,
> Just for unjust, that in such righteousness
> To them by faith imputed, they may find
> Justification towards God, and peace

> Of conscience, which the law by ceremonies
> Cannot appease, not man the moral part
> Perform, and not performing cannot live.
> So law appears imperfect, and but giv'n
> With purpose to resign them in full time
> Up to a better cov'nant, disciplined
> From shadowy types to truth, from flesh to spirit,
> From imposition of strict laws, to free
> Acceptance of large grace, from servile fear
> To filial, works of law to works of faith.
> (Book XII,285-306)

[5] *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.6, p.84.

[6] James Ussher, *An Answer to a Challenge* (1631), pp.515-16. Luther, too, hold that a person's salvation is effected utterly and absolutely through the work of another, that is, Jesus Christ. He declares:

> For the person is justified and saved, not by works or laws, but by the Word of God, that is, by the promise of his grace, and by faith, that the glory may remain God's who saved us not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by virtue of his mercy by the Word of his grace when we believed ("The Freedom of A Christian", in *Luther's Works*, Vol.31, pp.362-363).

[7] *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol.3, pp.493-94.

[8] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3:12.8.

CHAPTER III

A ZEAL OF GOD

> For I beare them recorde, that they haue the zeale of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of the righteousnes of God, going about to establish their owne righteousnes, haue not submitted them selues to the righteousnes of God.
>
> (Rom.10:2-3)

Isabella walks into *Measure for Measure* as a novice who is possessed by a zeal of God, a zeal which, as Darryl Gless suggests,[1] turns the New law into the Old. Focussing her faith on works performed according to law, she would seem to be striving, from the moment she first appears, to attain an ideal of virtue which might be expected of a saint:

> *Isab.* And have you nuns no farther privileges?
> *Nun.* Are not these large enough?
> *Isab.* Yes, truly; I speak not as desiring more,
> But rather wishing a more strict restraint

Upon the sisters stood, the votarists of Staint Clare.

(I.iv.1-5)

Isabella's aim, it is clear, is to achieve, through a strict programme of self-denial, a strength and a righteousness by which she will be able to overcome any temptation to sin. Yet in desiring for herself a greater restraint than that imposed by the strict rules of the order of St. Clare, she may be expressing at the same time an anxiety about what she sees as her own inborn weakness as a woman -- an anxiety she puts into words in her later scene with Angelo: "For we are soft as our complexions are, /And credulous to false prints" (II.iv.128-29).

Convinced as she is not only that men "are frail" and "women are frail too" (II.iv.121,123), her determined retreat to the nunnery might therefore be seen as an escape from a world that everywhere confronts her with dangerous temptations. As Anthony B. Dawson observes:

> . . . her chastity is more a way of avoiding her own sexuality than it is a moral conviction. This is the reason she wishes a stricter restraint: because she is afraid of her own passion and the possibility of its getting out of hand. She seeks external curbs because she cannot trust her own internal ones.[2]

If so, when he appears at the gate of the St. Clare convent in I.iv, the foppish Lucio represents for Isabella the intrusion of the very world Isabella has sought to escape. Indeed, she is immediately hostile and defensive in front of this intruder, obliging him, as a result, to appeal to what he senses is her female vanity:

> I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted
> By your renouncement, an immortal spirit,
> And to be talk'd with in sincerity,
> As with a saint.
>
> (I.iv.34-37)

Lucio's falseness here is betrayed by the impersonal "thing" which, as Gless observes, "jostles uncomfortably with its exalted . . . adjectives 'enskied and sainted'".[3] Isabella's reproving answer shows that she is not so foolish as to be appeased by such flattery, though in her words we detect a possible ambivalence: "You do blaspheme the good, in mocking me" (I.iv.38).

Lucio has to admit that what he said is not quite true. Yet he remains in the role of tempter. Eager to win her consent to interceding on behalf of Claudio, he presents her with a view of human sexuality radically different from her own, though enclosed in a smooth and glossy rhetoric obviously designed to conceal the fact:

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)

Lucio's speech, flowery as it is, sets her on alert "Someone with child by him? My cousin Juliet?" (I.iv.45). When her fear is confirmed, her immediate response reveals something within her other than the iciness of a sainted novice. Here, in fact, we have the first glimpse of Isabella as a loving and caring human being: "O, let him marry her!" (I.iv.49). Finally, when she learns that Claudio has been sentenced to death, her superior tone and manner disappear altogether: "Alas, what poor ability's in me /To do him good!" (I.iv.75-76).

Seeing his opportunity, Lucio at once resumes his temptation -- this time reminding Isabella of the peculiar advantages she has as a woman:

Lucio. Assay the power you have.
Isab. My power? Alas, I doubt.
Lucio. Our doubts are traitors,
And makes us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt. Go to Lord Angelo,
And let him learn to know, when maidens sue,

> Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel,
> All their petitions are as freely theirs
> As they themselves would owe them.
> *Isab.* I'll see what I can do.
>
> (I.iv.76-84)

Lucio's words here, his reference to Isabella's "power", recall what Claudio has told him about Isabella in I.ii:

> Acquaint her with the danger of my state:
> Implore her, in my voice, that she make friends
> To the strict deputy:bid herself assay him.
> I have great hope in that. For in her youth
> There is a prone and speechless dialect
> Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art
> When she will play with reason and discourse,
> And well she can persuade.
>
> (I.ii.168-76)

As more than one critic has observed,[4] the great hope Claudio is placing on Isabella lies not only in her eloquence as a speaker, but also in the power given to her by the fact that she is both young and beautiful -- a power which provides her with special persuasiveness with "men".[5] Is Isabella aware that she is endowed with such a power? The play provides no definitive answer to this question, yet it may be significant that on being reminded of the fact that "when maidens sue, /Men give like gods", Isabella begins to

show both a willingness to go to Angelo and an increasing confidence in her ability to win him over:

> I will about it straight;
> No longer staying but to give the Mother
> Notice of my affair. I humbly thank you.
> Commend me to my brother: soon at night
> I'll send him certain word of my success.[6]
>
> (I.iv.85-89)

If Isabella is transformed from a thing enskied and sainted into a flesh-and-blood human being in her scene with Lucio, we can trace a similar pattern in her first encounter with Angelo. Entering his office, and finding herself in the presence of a figure of such obvious dignity and importance, she is at first cold and remote: she speaks as if her only concern were the upholding of virtue and righteousness:

> There is a vice that most I do abhor,
> And most desire should meet the blow of justice;
> For which I would not plead, but that I must;
> For which I must not plead, but that I am
> At war 'twixt will and will not.
>
> (II.ii.29-34)

As Lucy Owen observes, Isabella here is clearly "thinking more of her own position as pleader than of her object in pleading".[7] Faced by Angelo's rejoinder that to pardon Claudio would be to ignore the law, she is at once

willing to abandon her mission. It is at this moment that Lucio steps in and once again urges her to assay her feminine charms. To win Angelo over, he suggests, she will have to play upon his emotions:

> To him again, entreat him,
> Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown;
> You are too cold. If you should need a pin,
> You could not with more tame a tongue desire it.
> To him, I say.
>
> (II.ii.43-47)

Though clearly unwilling to resort to such stratagems, Isabella turns back to Angelo, and it is significant that at this point we witness a shift on her part from an abstract discussion of the law itself to a direct and personal plea for mercy. The debate now centres on Angelo's "will" and "potency", and she asks him to feel for Claudio with his heart as she does with hers. Syntactically, the discourse is marked by a high frequency of modal verbs:

> *Isab.* Yes: I *do* think that you *might* pardon him,
> And neither heaven nor man grieve at the mercy.
> *Ang.* I *will* not do't.
> *Isab.* But *can* you if you *would*?
> *Ang.* Look what I *will* not, that I *cannot* do.
> *Isab.* But *might* you do't, and do the world no wrong,
> If so your heart were touch'd with that remorse

As mine is to him?

(II.ii.49-54; italics mine)

What Isabella's words here are suggesting, though not explicitly, is that Angelo's authority is god-like, that he is a figure whose will and power are such that he can do with the law what he pleases without fear. Even so, Lucio thinks her "too cold" (II.ii.56), and Isabella moves further in the direction in which he is impelling her. With a vivid image she pictures mercy as a garment Angelo might put on, a garment exceeding all others in its grandeur:

> No ceremony that to great ones longs,
> Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
> The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
> Become them with one half so good a grace
> As mercy does.
>
> (II.ii.59-63)

Here (given what is implied by the word "Become"), "grace" would seem to be both a divine attribute and a glorious appearance Angelo might assume in the eyes of all beholders. Whether aware of the fact or not, Isabella is using flattery and appealing not simply to Angelo's moral sense but to his vanity. Though reminding Angelo of his human fallibility, she emphasizes both his "potency" (II.ii.67) as a lawgiver and the divine mercy that will ensure his salvation. Her words are challenging, yet sweet and soothing at the same time, and

even as she speaks of the universality of human sinfulness, she holds out a promise of the benefits Angelo would reap as a recipient of grace:

> O, think on that,
> And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
> Like man new made.
>
> (II.ii.77-79)

When Angelo tells Isabella that Claudio "must die tomorrow" (II.ii.82), however, her flattering words are cut short; her whole tone and manner suddenly changes. If she does not literally kneel down before him or hang upon his gown, she does so figuratively:

> Tomorrow? O,that's sudden.
> Spare him, spare him!
> He's not prepar'd for death. Even for our kitchens
> We kill the fowl of season: shall we serve heaven
> With less respect than we do minister
> To our gross selves? Good, good my lord, bethink you:
> There's many have committed it.
>
> (II.ii.83-89)

Just as in her emotional response to Lucio's report of Claudio's death sentence in I.iv, so here Isabella would seem to be experiencing a momentary loss of poise and self-control. No longer is she using her debating skills; rather she is speaking from the heart, and the fact that Angelo

continues to reject her pleas serves only to throw her into a powerful passion. Giving up any attempt to win him over by soft persuasion, she attacks him with a vehemence that reveals an Isabella we have not seen before:

> Could great men thunder
> As Jove himself does, Jove would ne'er be quiet,
> For every pelting petty officer
> Would use his heaven for thunder;nothing but thunder.
> Merciful Heaven,
> Thou rather with thy sharp and sulphurous blot
> Splits the unwedgeable and gnarled oak,
> Than the soft myrtle. But man, proud man,
> Dress'd in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd --
> His glassy essence -- like an angry ape
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
> As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
> Would all themselves laugh mortal.
>
> (II.ii.111-124)

Isabella's indignation here, we might note, comes out of a compassion not only for her brother, but for those everywhere who are victims of the abuse of authority. Though she does not indict Angelo directly, she is attacking him here both as an individual abuser of authority and as a representative of human hypocrisy. Her words assail him relentlessly: like any "pelting petty officer" who thinks himself a god, he is no

more than an "angry ape" striving to impersonate a human being. The speech, bursting as it is with intensity and feeling, would suggest that, for Isabella, this is an inspired moment, a moment in which, if only briefly, her true self is visible. If so, we are catching a glimpse here of a potential in Isabella that will not be fully realized until the play's final scene. Challenging Angelo to examine his own sinfulness before judging others, her words are imbued with a spirit of the words of Christ in Matthrew 7:3 ("And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brothers eye, and percieuest not the beame that is in thine owne eye?"):

> Go to your bosom,
> Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
> That's like my brother's fault.
>
> (II.ii.137-39)

Significantly, it is at this moment we are given the first indication that Angelo is becoming erotically aroused by Isabella ("She speaks, and 'tis /Such sense, that my sense breeds with it": II.ii.142-43), though seventeen lines earlier we have been alerted to the change by Lucio's remark: "He will relent; /He's coming:I perceive't" (II.ii.125-26).

As Angelo acknowledges at the end of the scene, his lust for Isabella has been aroused not so much by her physical attractiveness as by the whole-hearted compassion and love she has shown in her efforts to save her brother:

O fie, fie, fie!
What dost thou, or what art thou, Anglo?
Does thou desire her foully for those things
That make her good?

(II.ii.172-175)

What has happened is that during Isabella's speech he has suddenly perceived in her that inner goodness which, according to Renaissance authorities like Castiglione, manifests itself in a human being as a visible beauty -- a beauty which the "ill soul" must necessarily lack.[8] Giving way to his lusts, Angelo has found himself seized by a desire not to revere or honour such a beauty, but to possess it as his own. Though appalled by his own perversity, he discovers that he cannot restrain himself, that the power of his appetite is greater than any effort he might make to control it:

Most dangerous
Is that temptation that doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet
With all her double vigour, art and nature,
Once stir my temper: but this virtuous maid
Subdues me quite.

(II.ii.181-186)

Yet, ironically, the inspired ardour Isabella displays in this scene would seem to be short-lived. As she perceives

what she interprets as a weakening of Angelo's resistance, her passion subsides: sensing victory over him, she resumes the kind of soothing persuasion she employed earlier. Almost playfully, she speaks of offering him a "bribe":

> Not with fond sickles of the tested gold,
> Or stones, whose rate are either rich or poor
> As fancy values them: but with true prayers,
> That shall be up at heaven and enter there
> Ere sunrise: prayers from preserved souls,
> From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicate
> To nothing temporal.
>
> (II.ii.150-56)

Although the speech expresses well-intentioned goodwill towards Angelo and zeal in the service of God, it conveys at the same time something other than innocence. In Gless's words:

> The speech recalls in a subtler and more sympathetic form the tradition of the Summoner's Friar and his ill-founded confidence that the efficacy of fraternal prayer is enhanced by good works . . . . The metaphor of bribery yields further grounds for criticism of Isabella because she characteristically employs commercial diction at unfortunate times -- most notoriously when she considers her brother's death 'cheaper' than the

> effects of having intercourse with Angelo (2.4.105). Although they indeed are not gold, and we gratefully share Lucio's relief (2.2.149), her prayers are offered as payment for a benefit.[9]

Dominated as it is by his impatient lust, the scene of Isabella's second encounter with Angelo is marked by its growing sexual tension. As critics have noted,[10] even Isabella's speeches carry recurring erotic undertones, beginning with her opening words: "I am come to know your pleasure" (II.iv.31). Such undertones are most audible in her impassioned refusal to surrender her virtue for the sake of any personal gain:

> That is, were I under the terms of death,
> Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
> And strip myself to death as to a bed
> That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
> My body up to shame.
>
> (II.iv.100-104)

As Harriett Hawkins observes,

> In its psychological implications, Isabella's speech is like nothing else in Elizabethan drama. Other characters (like Claudio and Antony) associate death with sex; and other threatened heroines of the time (like Whetstone's Cassandra and Jonson's Celia) would prefer torture or death

> to dishonour. But here and only here -- or so a lurid play-bill might put it -- are fused the red and black extremes of passion and pain, the whips and longings of martyrdom and desire, of repression and sensuality.[11]

Even Angelo claims to perceive a hidden eroticism within Isabella's stubborn refusal to surrender her chastity:

> I have begun,
> And now I give my sensual race the rein:
> Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite;
> Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
> That banish what they sue for.
> (II.iv.158-62)

Angelo would seem to be arguing here that Isabella's Christian propriety, like his own, is a sham, and that the very emotion she shows in defending her virtue betrays the presence of a willingness within her to surrender to him. Though the scene offers no explicit evidence that would confirm Angelo's comment, given Isabella's awareness that women are "ten times frail" (II.iv.127), the extremism of her responses to his proposal suggests just such a possibility:

> Better it were a brother died at once
> Than that a sister, by redeeming him,
> Should die for ever.
> (II.iv.106-108)

What can Isabella mean here? How, as a committed Christian, can she possibly believe that she would necessarily lose her soul were she to surrender her virginity to save her brother's life? What she is expressing surely is an apprehension that, once dishonoured, she must be unable to attain the spiritual purity necessary for her salvation. Convincing herself, in other words, that what Angelo is proposing is a sin for which she could never atone, she is speaking not so much out of her Christian faith as out of a fear that her yielding to Angelo would deprive her of any sense of her own righteousness. Significantly, she cannot rid herself of this fear, and we are made aware of it again in her final words in this scene:

> I'll to my brother
> Though he hath fall'n by prompture of the blood,
> Yet hath he in him such a mind of honour,
> That had he twenty heads to tender down
> On twenty bloody blocks, he'd yield them up
> Before his sister should her body stoop
> To such abhorr'd pollution.
> Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother, die,
> More than our brother is our chastity.
>
> (II.iv.176-184)

Though the decision Isabella is making here has aroused the wrath of many a critic, what is most disturbing about it

is not the decision itself but the fact, as Frederick S. Boas observes, that it is arrived at without struggle, that it is "instantaneous, absolute, final".[12] It is a decision, that is to say, that would seem to be anything but the product of a free and rational choice on her part. As we know from her earlier scene with Angelo, Isabella loves her brother, and her desire to save his life is passionate and whole- hearted: if she will not allow herself even a moment's consideration of Angelo's demands, it is surely only because of the strength of her yearning to yield to them.

When, in III.i, Isabella goes to visit Claudio in prison, she is thus seeking, as Ruth Nevo rightly points out, "not so much to reconcile him to his fate as to confirm her own decision, to receive authority for it . . . ."[13] Again, powerful emotion underlies her words and actions here: the confidence she shows that Claudio will meet his death unflinchingly would seem to mask a deeper anxiety that he will not. In her first words she is therefore careful to put an encouraging sugar coat on the terrible news she brings:

> As all comforts are: most good, most good indeed.
> Lord Angelo, having affairs to heaven,
> Intends you for his swift ambassador,
> Where you shall be an everlasting leiger.
> Therefore your best appointment make with speed;
> Tomorrow you set on.
>
> (III.i.56-60)

It is at this moment, confronted by Claudio's failure to accept the martyr's role she has assigned to him, that Isabella gives way to the emotions that, up to now, she has kept firmly under control. All her smothered tension and anguish surface in a violent verbal explosion:

> O, you beast!
> O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!
> Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
> Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
> From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?
> Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair:
> For such a warped slip of wilderness
> Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance,
> Die, perish! Might but my bending down
> Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
> I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death;
> No word to save thee.
>
> (III.i.135-46)

Isabella's outrage here has, of course, little to do with Christian ethics; and in refusing even to sympathize with Claudio's dilemma, she is in every way contradicting her earlier speech to Angelo on the necessity of extending mercy to sinners. By condemning Claudio's failure to meet the high standards she has set for him, Isabella, Anne Greco asserts, is assuming "the role of self-righteous saint":[14] she is

condemning the mote in her brother's eye and overlooking the beam that is in her own. Yet, as we have seen above, the very violence of her emotions here suggests the presence within her of something other than merely a smug self-righteousness. Denying that she feels any sisterly concern for Claudio, wishing him dead, she is denying her own nature as a loving and caring human being: her near-hysteria tells us that now more than ever she is experiencing a conflict between her love for her brother and her need to be a thing enskied and sainted. It is a conflict, as we shall see, that does not escape the attention of Duke Vincentio, silently observing this scene as he is from one of his many dark corners.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

[1] See Gless, especially Chapter 2, pp.61-89.

[2] *Indirection: Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion*, p.110.

[3] Gless, p.103.

[4] See, for example, Richard Fly's *Shakespeare's Mediated World*, p.67.

[5] According to Lever's note, the equivocal words "prone", "move" and "play" are "all capable of suggesting sexual provocation" (p.18).

[6] Isabella, we might note, retains a surface modesty here. What she means is that she will send word to Claudio whether she is successful or not. Yet the briskness of her tone and manner surely suggest that she is no longer gripped by the doubts she has expressed at I.iv.75-75.

[7] Lucy Owen, p.27.

[8] As Peter Bembo remarks in Castiglione's *The Courtier*:

> I say that beauty cometh of God and is like a circle, the goodness whereof is the center. And therefore, as there can be no circle without a center, no more can beauty be without goodness (p.348).

From this point of view, "love is nothing else but a certain coveting to enjoy beauty" (p.344), though Bembo warns that, in the experiencing of this love, the human being is faced with two alternative possibilities:

> Whan the soul then is taken with coveting to enjoy this beauty as a good thing, in case she suffer herself to be guided with the judgment of sense, she falleth into most deep errors, and judgeth the body in which beauty is descerned to be the principal cause thereof; whereupon to enjoy it she reckoneth it necessary to join as inwardly as she can with that body, which is false; and therefore whoso thinketh in possessing the body to injoy beauty, he is far deceived, and is moved to it, not with true knowledge by the choice of reason, but with false opinion by the longing of sense (p.345).

[9] Gless, p.112-113.

[10] See, for example, Harriett Hawkins, ("'The Devil's Party': Virtues and Vices in *Measure for Measure*", in *ShS*, Vol.31, pp.105-110), who gives the most eloquent argument on the eroticism in Isabella in II.iv. See also *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, pp.146-47.

[11] Harriett Hawkins, p.107.
[12] "The Problem Plays", in his *Shakespeare and His Prodecessors*, p.366.
[13] Ruth Nevo, "*Measure for Measure*: Mirror for Mirror", in *ShS*, Vol.40 (1988), p.116.
[14] Anne Greco, p.112.

CHAPTER IV

THE DUKE: TEACHER AND LEARNER

> As if he mast'red there a double spirit
> Of teaching and of learning instantly.
>
> (1 Henry IV, V.ii.63-64)

As was stated in Chapter I, the central focus of this essay is on Isabella's change of heart in the final scene. Yet it would seem clear that although it is Isabella who makes the great plea for mercy on behalf of Angelo, the Duke plays a significant role in preparing her for this. We will argue here that it is the Duke who in fact teaches Isabella the true meaning of mercy, leading her to such an understanding by obliging her to confront the fact of her own human fallibility.

The Duke, to be sure, is a figure who has aroused, and continues to arouse, sharply different opinions from commentators on *Measure for Measure*. Such scholars as G. Wilson Knight (1930), R.W. Chambers (1937), R.W. Battenhouse (1946), Nevill Coghill (1955), and Tom McBride (1974) take the Duke's role in the play as essentially an allegory of

that of the Christian God.[1] Other critics -- W.W. Lawrence (1931), O.J. Campbell (1943), H.C. Goddard (1955) and Hal Gelb (1971), for example -- do not fully sympathize with the Duke's actions or are simply hostile to him. They regard the Duke as either a "stage Duke",[2] an over-clever intriguer,[3] or a heartless manipulator of human lives.[4] Standing between these two opposing groups are commentators like E.M. Pope (1949), R.G. Hunter (1965), S.J. Dayton Haskin (1977), Darryl J. Gless (1979), and John D. Cox (1983). Pope, the earliest of these critics, finds the play thoroughly Christian, but resists any allegorical interpretation of the Duke. According to Renaissance theory, Pope argues, the authority of the ruler is derived from God; the ruler is God's substitute on earth. She thus comes to the following conclusion:

> Any Renaissance audience would have taken it for granted that the Duke did indeed 'stand for' God, but only as any good ruler 'stood for' Him; and if he behaved 'like power divine', it was because that was the way a good ruler was expected to conduct himself.[5]

Hunter, Haskin, Gless, and Cox echo such a view: though aware of the Duke's human limitations, they nevertheless both approve of him and perceive him as a figure in a position analogous to that of the Christian God.[6]

The initial view we are given of the Duke in *Measure for Measure* would surely support such an interpretation. Here we see him confronted by a society which has become corrupt and ungovernable, a society which would seem to confirm Paul's diagnosis of human nature in Romans I.24-32. Vienna is a city where "liberty plucks justice by the nose" (I.iii.29), where the law seems impotent, unable to contain the animalistic desires of the flesh within prescribed bounds. Facing such a predicament, the Duke, at the opening of the play, is determined to restore a respect for law and order. Aware as he is that his own past leniency has contributed to the the current state of affairs (I.iii.23-31,35), he has come to believe that Vienna's excessive liberty can be only cured through excessive severity, and he expects his deputy Angelo to impose "strict statutes and most biting laws" (I.iii.9) to bring the city under control.

There can be no doubt that in theory at least Vincentio understands what the true office of a prince should be. His humility, his fondness for his people (I.i.67;I.iii.23-27), his awareness of his own limitations as a ruler (I.iii.19-31,35-43), his belief that a sovereign should be a torch shining upon his subjects (I.i.28-35) -- all indicate that he is both a sincere and humane Christian prince. Yet, no less than any of the other characters of the play, he suffers from human failings. His unwillingness to participate in the public and ceremonial aspects of his sovereignty, his

aversion to the "loud applause" of the people (I.i.70), suggest that there is a tension between his role as an active prince and his desire to be a contemplative scholar, free from the yoke of a prince's responsibilities.[7] His eagerness to withdraw into solitude is in fact a kind of self-indulgence, and he wavers "between using his wisdom to improve the common good and retreating into that wisdom out of contempt for common ignorance (e.g.I.iii.8-10)".[8]

Though not yet aware of the extent to which he himself will have to change in order to ensure the welfare of his state, the Duke nevertheless is anxious to learn more about government and its practical administration. To be sure, he believes that the severe laws Angelo will enforce can provide a short-term solution to Vienna's social ills, but the fact that his main concern while in disguise would seem to be with those who have fallen afoul of the law suggests that he is aware of deeper problems which the law's severity cannot solve. His purpose in going into disguise, in short, is to learn about his people -- both the governed and their governors -- through experiment. Thus, neither Escalus nor Angelo is given precise instructions as to how he is expected to administer the law. Instead, each is encouraged to bring his own initiative into full play. Escalus is told that he already knows so much about government that further advice will be unnecessary, while Angelo is given the right to use the same powers as the Duke himself (I.i.43-45;64-66).

If the Duke has expected his visit to the prison to be a learning experience, it proves to be so, however, in ways he has not anticipated. The purpose of his visit, he tells the Provost, is to speak with the "afflicted spirits" and to "know /The nature of their crimes" so as to "minister /To them accordingly" (II.iii.4,6-7,7-8). Yet what he sees more often than not leaves him in dismay: "O heaven", he exclaims in Act III, "what stuff is here!" (ii.5). At the same time, his attempts to minister to the afflicted spirits he encounters would seem, at first, awkward and even futile. In his meeting with Juliet, his commonplace words of wisdom are met by a strength and intensity on her part ("I do repent me as it is an evil, /And take the shame with joy": II.iii.35-36) that surprises him, and it is at once clear to him that she is now in no need of further spiritual instruction. By contrast, in his scene with Claudio, though the advice he offers -- "Be absolute for death" (III.i.5) -- continues for almost forty lines, his instruction would appeal to have no lasting benefit, and Claudio is firm in his new-found willingness to die only until he learns that he has an opportunity of reprieve. Yet, for all his ineffectiveness, we cannot condemn the Duke in either of these scenes. He is learning during his visit to the prison even as he is teaching; and though critics have described his speech to Claudio both as un-Christian and as lacking any real "knowledge of suffering and of the fear of death",[9] there is

no reason to conclude (especially in view of the sympathy he has just shown to Juliet) that he is preparing Claudio for death in the expectation that he will actually be executed. Just as he has decided at the opening of the play that extreme measures must be employed if the city is to be reformed, so here, surely, the Duke is resorting to extreme measures in order to reform Claudio. Like Vienna itself, Claudio has enjoyed "too much liberty" (I.iii.117), and the Duke is trying to temper his excessive appetite for life's pleasures by confronting him with the totally antithetical view that human existence is mere vanity.[10] Far from preparing Claudio for death, he is seeking to bring him to the point where he can lead a more balanced and fulfilled life. Further evidence for this is suggested by the fact that, after leaving Claudio, he remains behind to overhear his conversation with Isabella. Unaware of what has taken place in her unhappy encounter with Angelo, his motive for doing so can only be his desire to learn whether or not Claudio has benefited from his teachings.

It is at this point, however, that the Duke is first made aware of Angelo's depraved proposal, and his attention quickly turns to the practical problem of how Isabella is to be helped and Claudio's life saved. At the same time, Isabella herself becomes a centrally important figure to the Duke. As his first words to her make clear, she becomes

important to him not merely for the role she might play in saving Claudio, but for her own sake:

> *Duke.* Vouchsafe a word, young sister, but one word.
> *Isab.* What is your will?
> *Duke.* Might you dispense with your leisure, I would by and by have some speech with you: the satisfaction I would require is likewise your own benefit.
>
> (III.i.151-155)

The first line of the Duke's speech here stands out with rich implication against Isabella's final rejection of Claudio. Whereas Isabella's lack of a saving "word" (III.i.146) must culminate in despair and futility; the Duke's "one word", as Richard Fly observes, reminds us of the providential "creative power" he will employ in turning the play from tragedy to comedy.[11] The Duke's next comment ("the satisfaction /I would require is likewise your own benefit": III.i.154-55) has, according to Lever, similar religious overtones: the word "satisfaction", on one level, denotes the "performance of a penance enjoined by one's confessor".[12] If the Duke's speech is thus hinting that he wishes to act as a spiritual advisor to Isabella, guiding her out of her present sufferings, it also suggests, however, that he has more than a merely disinterested concern for her. The word "satisfaction" is surely sexually equivocal;[13] and it may be significant that when he asks the Provost to leave him alone with Isabella, he is strangely cautious:"...my mind promises

with /my habit no loss shall touch her by my company" (III.i.176-77). Though Alexander Leggatt has trouble finding the relevance of this remark, commenting that it is "odd and pointless -- even . . . a bit tasteless",[14] the remark may well reflect the fact that the Duke is discovering that he feels a strong and growing attraction to Isabella. In his next encounter with her, such an attraction is clearly evident in the gracious tribute he pays to her:

> The hand that hath made you fair hath made you good. The goodness that is cheap in beauty makes beauty brief in goodness; but grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall keep the body of it ever fair.
>
> (III.i.179-83)

The Duke may be expressing his admiration for Isabella here (and in the process preparing us for his declaration of love at the end of the play), but at the same time he is teaching her a truth about herself that she has not yet fully comprehended. Reminding her, in the style and language of a Renaissance Neo-Platonist, that the beauty that makes her attractive has its source in the goodness of her soul, he is subtly challenging the system of beliefs that has led her to feel such aversion to the life of the flesh. He is providing the first lesson in an education that will eventually lead her to a full discovery of her own false seeming. On the other hand, his words here tell us that, once again, he is

learning an unexpected truth: contrary to all his former preconceptions about himself, he is discovering that his bosom has begun to be pierced by the "dribbling dart of love" (I.iii.2). Observing Isabella in secret, witnessing her desperate struggle with Claudio, he has seen in her anguish the same impassioned caring and love, the same inner goodness, that Angelo has perceived earlier in the play. But the Duke is not an Angelo, and from the very beginning his desire for her is accompanied by a genuine concern for her well-being. From this point on, he will make it his business not to seize and devour the inner goodness he has perceived in her, but to protect and nourish it -- to save Isabella, in short, from her own extremism. As we shall see, he will be able to do so only by teaching her to understand herself -- by holding up a mirror that will confront her with truths about herself she might otherwise never know.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

[1] For Knight, "the Duke, like Jesus, is the prophet of a new order of ethics" (G. Wilson Knight, p.34). R.W. Chambers claims: "The Duke certainly reminds us of the ways of Providence" ("The Jacobean Shakespeare and *Measure for Measure*", in *PBA*, Vol.23, 1937, p.182). R.W. Battenhouse discerns a congruence between the Duke's actions and the Incarnation, Second Coming and Judgement of Our Lord ("*Measure for Measure* and the Christian Doctrine of Atonement", in *PMLA*, Vol.LXI, 1946, pp.1029-59). Nevill Coghill finds the play based on a pattern similar to that of the Book of Job, concluding that the play is a study of human testing. He describes the Duke as the *primum mobile* or prime mover of the action, and Isabella, Angelo and Claudio as the principal figures the Duke "tests" ("Comic Form in *Measure for Measure*", in *ShS*, Vol.8, 1955, pp.14-27). Tom McBride holds that the Duke's role "combines Christ the intervener with God the Judge" ("*Measure for Measure* and the Unreconciled Virtues", in *CompD*, Vol.8, No.3, 1974, p.270).

[2] W.W. Lawrence claims that the fantastic quality of the Duke and the scene of bed-trick are popular elements which Shakespeare borrowed for the sake of dramatic convenience, and that the Duke therefore is a mere stage Duke, a puppet "manufactured to meet the exigencies of dramatic construction" ("*Measure for Measure*", in his *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, p.109).

[3] O.J. Campbell follows the historical approach initiated by Lawrence and examines the play in the light of contemporary satiric conventions. The Duke, Campbell observes, "performs the duties of an intriguer" and acts like an "over-clever stage manager" ("*Measure for Measure*", in his *Shakespeare's Satire*, p.134).

[4] Harold C. Goddard is more hostile than Campbell towards the Duke. He argues that the Duke

> is as fond of experimenting on human beings and inquiring into their their inner workings as a vivisector is of cutting up guinea pigs. . . . his motive seems less political and social than psychological (*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Vol.II, p.52).

Goddard's antipathy to the Duke is strongly echoed by Hal Gelb, who states that the Duke simply "plays a game" and "hurts people and treats them as if they were inhuman cogs to be manipulated" ("Duke Vincentio and the Illusion of Comedy;

or All's Not Well That Ends Well", in *SQ*, Vol.22, No.1, 1971, p.29).

[5] *ShS*, Vol.2 (1949), p.71.

[6] Hunter argues:

> His role as manipulator of the action has led some critics to regard the duke as a type of God. And so he is, of course. All absolute earthly power is 'like power divine', and all rulers are, in a special sense, the instruments of God. Finally, however, the duke, like the rest of the characters, is a man. As a ruler, he is a very special sort of man, but his solutions depend upon his comprehension of humanity, which is the result, not of supernatural omniscience, but of his knowledge of himself as a human being (Hunter, p.222).

S.J. Dayton Haskin takes a stand similar to that of Hunter:

> The Duke is in some ways like Christ and like God--'like power divine', in Angelo's words. But he is simply associated with the deity, as the Christian prince was supposed to be. He remains responsible for providing justice within the temporal order. He is neither omnipotent nor perfectly wise ("Mercy and the Creative Process in *Measure for Measure*", in *TSLL*, Vol.19, 1977, p.354).

Darryl J. Gless argues that the Duke "allusively presents himself as an analogue of God" (Gless, p.24). Observing the Duke against medieval background of the play, Cox comes to the same conclusion as E.M. Pope:

> Though the Duke undoubtedly shares with the medieval Christ some functions of divine sovereignty, it does not follow that he represents God, except in terms of the Renaissance commonplace that all earthly monarches do so ("Medieval Background of *Measure for Measure*", in *MP*, Vol.81, No.1, 1983, p.10).

[7] See Cynthia Lewis "'Dark Deeds Darkly Answered':Duke Vincentio and Judgment in *Measure for Measure*", *SQ*, Vol.34, No.3 (1983), p.276.

[8] Cynthia Lewis, p.276.

[9] Hal Gelb, p.30.

[10] Friar Lawrence resorts to a similar strategy in his attempts to counterbalance what he sees as the over-optimism of the youthful Romeo and Juliet. See *Romeo and Juliet*, II.iv.9-20.

[11] *Shakespeare's Mediated World*, p.74

[12] J.W. Lever, p.76.

[13] The Duke used the word twice in the play. The second occurrence is in III.i.264 when he teaches Isabella the bed-trick:

> . . . if for this night he entreat you to his bed, give him promise of *satisfaction* (italics mine).

[14] "Substitution in *Measure for Measure*", *SQ*, Vol.39 (1988), p.34

CHAPTER V

SCHOOLMASTER AND HIS PUPIL

> Wherefore the law was our schole master to bring vs to Christ, that we might be made righteous by faith.
>
> (Gal.3:24)

Northrop Frye has a remarkable comment on the main purport of the second half of the play. He points out that as soon as Isabella makes her plea that Angelo be shown mercy

> we understand that this is really what the whole second half of the play has been about. The primary end and aim of everything the Duke is doing is to get that speech out of her, and the state of morality in Vienna could not matter less.[1]

If this is indeed the Duke's aim, the fact is anything but obvious in his words and actions. Again and again what he says to Isabella would seem designed to arouse her hatred for Angelo and to make it impossible for her to show him any forgiveness. Thus, in his first meeting with Isabella, before

explaining the "bed-trick", by which he hopes to save her brother, the Duke tells her the full story of Angelo's betrayal of Mariana, emphasizing at every point Angelo's cruelty and hypocrisy. He plays on Isabella's sense of righteousness, fans her compassion for Mariana, encourages her with the remark that "Virtue is bold, and goodness never fearful" (III.i.208), and assures her repeatedly that she will not be stained by the plan of action he has in mind for her. Predictably, Isabella is outraged by his story:

> What a merit were it in death to take this poor maid from the word! What corruption in this life, that it will let this man live!
>
> (III.i.231-233)

We see in her response not only a sisterly sympathy for Mariana, but an indignation that she can barely control at Angelo's wickedness. Aroused out of her grief and despair, she is now eager to take action against Angelo -- and it is at this point that the Duke proposes that they entrap Angelo by means of the bed-trick. Unhesitatingly and without expressing a single moral concern, Isabella accepts the proposal that Mariana act as her substitute: "The image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection" (III.i.260-61).

The pleasure she expresses here should surely surprise us. What she consciously means is that she is pleased with

the poetic justice of the bed-trick and that it would surely lead to Claudio's release. Yet what she is picturing in her mind's eye is an act which, in II.ii, she described as a "vice" she most abhorred. Here, in the hope she expresses that Mariana's liaison with Angelo will "grow to a most prosperous perfection", there is, once again, a hint of the erotic, of a feeling possibly even reminiscent of "the strong and swelling evil" (II.iv.5) Angelo has perceived growing within his heart at the prospect of deflowering Isabella.

In IV.iii. after Angelo's decision to have Claudio executed, the Duke once again plays upon Isabella's feelings. Concealing the fact that Claudio is still alive, he lies to her, telling her bluntly that Angelo has broken his word and that Claudio's "head is off and sent to Angelo" (IV.iii.115). The reason for such deception, he tells us beforehand, is "to make her heavenly comforts of despair" (IV.iii.109). Yet here, too, the immediate effect of his news is to arouse Isabella's hatred of Angelo and to make any future forgiveness on her part more difficult. Hearing of Angelo's treachery, she is overcome by a most un-Christian passion for revenge: "O, I will to him and pluck out his eyes" (IV.iii.119).

It is significant that the Duke does not say anything here to console Isabella in her grief; instead, he adds fuel to her flames: "You shall not be admitted to his sight" (IV.iii.120). As a result, Isabella can only cry out again in

fury and anguish: "Unhappy Claudio! wretched Isabel! /injurious world! most damned Angelo!" (IV.iii.121-122).

Isabella is now in a state of mind in which she will agree to virtually any proposal that will allow her to vent her passion for revenge. Chiding her for her display of emotions, the Duke employs a language that would seem to appeal to the darkest and most self-seeking side of Isabella: "This nor hurts him, nor profits you a jot" (IV.iii.123). He then proposes a further course of action that would bring her a satisfaction that, from a Christian point of view, would seem directly contrary to the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount:

> If you can pace your wisdom,
> In that good path that I would wish it go,
> And you shall have your bosom on this wretch,
> Grace of the Duke, revenges to your heart,
> And general honour.
>
> (IV.iii.132-36)

In an earlier scene Isabella has declared her willingness to "do anything that appears not foul in the truth of [her] spirit" (III.i.205-207). Here, her simple and determined response ("I am directed by you": IV.iii.136) suggests something more extreme, and makes clear the extent to which she is now driven solely by her desire for revenge. Thus, in Act V, stepping out of a crowd to address the

returning Duke, she speaks out boldly to appeal for his assistance:

> Justice, O royal Duke! Vail your regard
> Upon a wrong'd--I would fain have said, a maid.
> O worthy prince, dishonour not your eye
> By throwing it on any other object,
> Till you have heard me in my true complaint,
> And given me justice! Justice! Justice!
> Justice!
>
> (V.i.21-26)

Though she appeals for "justice", her final cries here suggest that she is close to losing all self-control, her passion for revenge bringing her to the verge of hysteria. In his response to her petition, the Duke, we might note, only adds to the pressure already on her, commanding her to direct her appeal to the very figure she is going to accuse of wrongdoing: "Here is Lord Angelo shall give you justice, /Reveal yourself to him" (V.i.28-29).

This, as Isabella remarks, is to bid her "seek redemption of the devil" (V.i.30). She appeals to the Duke again:

> Hear me yourself: for that which I must speak
> Must either punish me, not being believ'd
> Or wring redress from you,
> Hear me! O hear me, hear!

(V.i.31-34)

At this point she is still clinging to the belief that by purely legal processes she can obtain redress for the wrong done to her and still looking to the law as the source of final justice on earth. Fortified by this faith, she now obeys the instructions of the Duke in disguise and openly accuses Angelo of dishonour:

> He would not, but by gift of my chaste body
> To his concupiscible intemperate lust,
> Release my brother; and after much debatement,
> My sisterly remorse confutes mine honour,
> And I did yield to him.
>
> (V.i.100-104)

Gless interprets her speech here as an important stage in her gradual spiritual renewal:

> Isabella has begun to abjure an important symptom of her proud religiosity. She has progressed, without under-standing why, from an excessive eagerness to preserve the appearance of virtue to a willing acceptance of public shame.[2]

True, Isabella does begin here to abjure her pride as a saint. But why, given the wildness of her behaviour here, and given the fact that her accusation is false, should we assume that this represents some kind of spiritual growth on her

part? Her speech is an angry speech, not a humble speech, and the explosiveness of her language makes it clear that what is giving her the strength to endure public shame is the dark passion for revenge that the Duke has deliberately aroused in her.

From the Duke's response to her petition, Isabella does indeed get some inkling of the extent to which she is behaving unreasonably. The intensity of her passion has worked against her twice before in the play: it has resulted in arousing the sexual desire of Angelo in II.ii; and it has driven her to condemn her own brother mercilessly in III.i. Now, in V.i, with her near-hysterical anger in calling for justice, her vehemence serves only to allow Angelo to escape her accusation. The more vehemently she argues her case, the less credible she makes herself in the eyes of all present:

> *Ang.* My lord, her wits I fear me are not firm:
> She has been a suitor to me for her brother
> Cut off by course of justice.
> *Isab.* By course of justice!
> *Ang.* And she will speak most bitterly, and strange.
> *Isab.* Most strange: but yet most truly will I speak,
> That Angelo's forsworn, is it not strange?
> That Angelo's a murderer, is't not strange?
> That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
> An hypocrite, a virgin violator,
> Is it not strange, and strange?

(V.i.35-44)

Facing the Duke's observation that she is "in th'infirmity of sense" (V.i.50), Isabella, made aware for the first time in the scene of her own extremism, is forced to speak more calmly and reasonably (in the Duke's words, with "a dependency of thing on thing": V.i.65-66). As she speaks, we catch a glimpse of the "prosperous art" Claudio has spoken of earlier:

> Make not impossible
> That which but seems unlike. 'Tis not impossible
> But one, the wicked'st caitiff on the ground,
> May seem as shy, as grave, as just, as absolute,
> As Angelo; even so may Angelo,
> In all his dressings, caracts, titles, forms,
> Be an arch-villain. Believe it, royal Prince,
> If he be less, he's nothing; but he's more,
> Had I more name for badness.
>
> (V.i.54-62)

With a faith in human rationality that would seem to parallel her confidence in the workings of human law, she appeals to the Duke to employ reason in order to penetrate Angelo's fraudulence:

> . . . do not banish reason
> For inequality, but let your reason serve
> To make the truth appear where it seems hid,

And hide the false seems true.

(V.i.67-70)

The result, however, is the opposite of what she has expected. Applying the very principles she has advocated, the Duke turns her own argument against her. He pretends to let his reason "serve /To make the truth appear where it seems hid" by making a judgement as reasonable as the evidence presented to him allows:

> By heaven, fond wretch, thou know'st not what thou
> speak'st,
> Or else thou art suborn'd against his honour
> In hateful practice. First, his integrity
> Stands without blemish; next, it imports no reason
> That with such vehemency he should pursue
> Faults proper to himself. If he had so offended,
> He would have weigh'd thy brother by himself,
> And not have cut him off.
>
> (V.i.108-115)

This is the very judgment Angelo foresaw in II.iv. when Isabella in her anguish exclaimed that "with an outstretch'd throat" she would "tell the world aloud /What man thou art" (II.iv.152-153). Angelo's name is "unsoil'd" (II.iv.154), his life has been thought as austere, and his place in the state makes his attestation authentic. Reason is proved to be powerless to pierce through Angelo's falseseeming.

Yet Isabella must endure additional humiliation. Far from turning a sympathetic ear to her, the Duke makes a further inference on the basis of his "reasonable" judgement which turns Isabella's plea into an accusation against her:

> Someone hath set you on:
> Confess the truth, and say by whose advice
> Thou cam'st here to complain.
>
> (V.i.115-117)

As a result, with what would seem a sudden outburst of anger, the Duke orders that she be immediately placed under guard and sent to prison. At this point, in the role of accused criminal, Isabella finds herself exposed to a side of the law that would seem to mock justice, morality and reason. Lucio, who had claimed to view her as "a thing enskied and sainted", seizes every chance to make lewd jokes at her expense; and even the humane and moderate Escalus is given lines that would suggest an underlying erotic excitement at the prospect of interrogating her:

> *Esc.* Pray you, my lord, give me leave to question; you shall see how I'll handle her.
> *Lucio.* Not better than he, by her own report.
> *Esc.* Say you?
> *Lucio.* Marry, sir, I think if you handled her privately she would sooner confess; perchance publicly she'll be ashamed.

Esc. I will go darkly to work with her.

Lucio. That's the way; for women are light at midnight.

(V.i.270-278)

If the suffering she is undergoing here is of any benefit to Isabella, the benefit is not simply in the humiliation and shame she is being forced to endure, but in what she is learning about the blindness of the law and the limitations of earthly justice. For the first time in the play, as Gless points out, she looks beyond the world of human laws and institutions and calls upon divine providence to aid her course:[3]

Then, O you blessed ministers above,
Keep me in patience, and with ripen'd time
Unfold the evil that is here wrapt up
In countenance! Heaven shield your Grace from woe,
As I thus wrong'd, hence unbelieved go.

(V.i.118-22)

This is a moment of enormous disillusionment and anguish for Isabella. Deprived of all hope in worldly justice, she turns to a heavenly source of comfort, yet she has no guarantee that the "blessed ministers" she is calling upon will in actually intervene on her behalf. It is a little too early to claim that her "outward appearance of piety and her inner spiritual state have begun at last to correspond".[4] More exactly, she is approaching a breaking point, at which

she will discover that there is no righteousness even in her own desire for justice.

We are now aware that the Duke's plan to bring Isabella "heavenly comforts of despair" (IV.iii.109) requires not only that she experience a public humiliation, but that her whole system of beliefs -- the very system that has made her a moral absolutist -- be called into question. Only through such suffering can she be stripped of the illusion that she can conquer her human weaknesses by means of her own moral strength. Only by losing the confidence she has shown in her own virtue and rationality can she experience a full self-knowledge. From the Christian point of view, as we have seen in Chapter II, such an ordeal is an essential prerequisite to the experiencing of the healing benefits of grace. If this is what the Duke has in mind in speaking of bringing Isabella "heavenly comforts of despair", Isabella herself, even before the final scene, echoes the Duke when she describes what she will have to undergo in terms which would suggest the Christian notion of regeneration as a movement from law to grace:

> yet I am advised 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 not think it strange, for 'tis a physic
> That's bitter to sweet end.[5]

(IV.vi.3-4;5-8)

When the Duke's true identity is revealed and Angelo's crimes are exposed for all to see, Isabella's appeal for justice would seem to be finally answered. Yet because the Duke continues to keep her in ignorance of the fact that Claudio is still alive, we know that, in his eyes, there is a further lesson for her to learn. Now he caters quite openly to her desire for revenge, making it clear to her that, from the point of view of Christian justice, it would be inappropriate, even a contravention of what Christ himself decrees in Matt.7, were she to plead that Angelo be shown mercy:

> For this new-married man approaching here,
> Whose salt imagination yet hath wrong'd
> Your well defended honour, you must pardon
> For Mariana's sake: but as he adjudg'd your
> brother, Being criminal in double violation
> Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach
> Thereon dependent, for your brother's life,
> The very mercy of the law cries out
> Most audible, even from his proper tongue:
> 'An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!'
> Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
> Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.
>
> (V.i.398-409)

The last three lines allude to the Old Law passages that advocate blood for blood, breach for breach, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.[6] The final allusion directs our attention not only to the Old Law passages about revenge, but also to the passage about judgement in Matt.7. The words "Measure . . . for Measure", encouraging Isabella as they do to vent her desire for revenge, severely distort the original biblical meaning in so far as the passage being alluded to preaches not revenge but forgiveness. How, we might ask, can this be explained? If, as Frye claims, the Duke is secretly hoping that Isabella will plead that Angelo be shown mercy, why does the Duke's speech put the Old Law into Christ's mouth? Why has the Duke distorted Christian ethics to the point that any plea for mercy from Isabella would seem to be a denial of justice? The answer emerges in what we now see happening to Isabella.

First, she is confronted with Mariana's intercession. After pleading in vain that Angelo be pardoned for his crimes, Mariana turns to Isabella for help:

> Sweet Isabella, take my part!
> Lend me your knees, and all my life to come
> I'll lend you all my life to do you service.
>
> (V.i.435-437)

Mariana's argument is simple and impassioned. As she herself admits ("I crave no other, nor no better man": V.i.424), her

whole plea here is based not on any sense of what is just or unjust, but solely on her desperate need for Angelo as a husband. In entreating Isabella to speak on her behalf, she minimizes Angelo's guilt, emphasizing the possibility of his undergoing a complete regeneration:

> They say best men are moulded out of faults,
> And, for the most, become much more the better
> For being a little bad; so may my husband.
> (V.i.438-40)

Set against Mariana's emotionalism we hear the hard, unyielding voice of the Duke, insisting on the claims of the law: "He dies for Claudio's death" (V.i.441). Sternly, he reminds Isabella that she has a moral obligation to her brother to ensure that his death be atoned for: were she to plead on Angelo's behalf, he declares, Claudio's "ghost his paved bed would break, /And take her hence in horror" (V.i.433-34). Earlier in this very scene Isabella has appealed to the Duke to exercise his rational ability in his judgment. Now the Duke turns the tables, pointing out to her that in pleading mercy for Angelo she is acting "against all sense" (V.i.431).

Isabella remains silent for over forty lines during these speeches. From the moment Mariana pleads that Angelo be acquitted, Isabella is clearly in a dilemma: she is faced with the necessity of choosing between two seemingly

irreconcilable extremes, neither of which can be wholly appealing to her. On the one hand, if she sides with Mariana, she will be both ignoring the just demands of the law and frustrating her own yearning for revenge. On the other hand, should she refuse to plead for Angelo, she will leave Mariana heartbroken and be in part responsible for making her a widow.

Isabella's prolonged silence here, her reluctance to speak either for or against Angelo, can only mean one thing. She is discovering that, although she feels compassion and love for Mariana and wants to see her happy, she cannot yet bring herself to forgive a man she regards as her own personal enemy. If at this moment she is no longer driven by a passion for revenge, nevertheless the spirit of forgiveness that she has spoken of earlier in the play as essential to a Christian life is not yet present within her: when it is the hated Angelo who is in need of mercy, mercy cannot breathe within her lips. From a Pauline point of view, her silence would tell us that at this moment she is discovering her own unrighteousness: she is becoming aware that, being without charity, though she may speak with the tongues of men and angels, she is nothing. It is now, however, at the very instant when she would seem to be most helpless, most incapable of finding a solution to the conflicting alternatives facing her, that Isabella begins to speak. Falling to her knees, expressing her willingness to forgive

her enemy, she displays a strength and a compassion we have not seen in her before:

> Most bounteous sir:
> Look, if it please you, on this man condemn'd
> As if my brother liv'd. I partly think
> A due sincerity govern'd his deeds
> Till he did look on me. Since it is so,
> Let him not die. My brother had but justice,
> In that he did the thing for which he died:
> For Angelo,
> His act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
> And must be buried but as an intent
> That perish'd by the way. Thoughts are not subjects;
> Intents, but merely thoughts.
>
> (V.i.441-452)

As we have seen in Chapter I, Isabella's words here have failed to impress critics with their eloquence. In contrast to her earlier plea for mercy, she would seem, as Gless observes, to be "somewhat halting and awkward":[7] the "prosperous art" which Claudio praised in her (I.ii.174) is no longer evident. Even critics sympathetic to Isabella complain that a serious division exists between legalism and mercy in her argument. Northrop Frye, for example, acknowledges that "Isabella's speech is . . . full of obvious fallacies as a legal argument".[8] But such obvious fallacies do not necessarily weaken the strength of Isabella's plea.

Though they may reveal her as a limited and imperfect human being, their presence in her speech reinforces the fact that she is speaking here in a language she has never used before. While she speaks, she is neither venting her desire for revenge nor ignoring the full extent of Angelo's wrongdoing. She is speaking in a language which includes both justice and mercy at the same time, a language which reconciles the claims of the law with the Christian ethic of forgiveness.[9]

Visualizing the scene as it might be performed on the stage, we can imagine a grouping of characters which would emphasize, in the words of R.G. Hunter, Isabella's "central importance"[10] here: she is mediating between the tearful Mariana on the one hand, begging for a complete acquittal for Angelo, and the seemingly wrathful Duke on the other, demanding punishment without any possibility of pardon. At the same time, it is surely evident that in making her plea, Isabella is speaking with a whole-hearted sincerity, not simply fulfilling what she supposes to be her moral duty as a Christian. We see this in her admission that she is in part personally responsible for Angelo's fall, that "A due sincerity govern'd his deeds, /Till he did look on me" (V.i.444-445). If she is quietly including herself in the soiled reality of Vienna with these words, it can only be as a result of the self-insight she has gained through the inner struggle she has undergone during her silence. The new insight, we must assume, has permitted her to look back on

her first encounter with Angelo and to see it in a new light, to face and acknowledge the fact that she was not without seductive art in her efforts to win Angelo's consent to her pleas on behalf of Claudio. Having come to perceive the beam in her own eye, she can no longer bring herself to condemn Angelo for a sinfulness she herself has played a part in arousing.

As suggested earlier, the majority of those critics sympathetic to Isabella seem to regard her change of heart in this scene as the consummation of a process of gradual moral and spiritual growth on her part. In so doing they leave unanswered the question as to why such a change of heart should come so abruptly and with so little warning. Though here Gless would seem to be the exception, declaring that "Shakespeare has clearly chosen to emphasize the improbability and irrationality of Isabella's action",[11] he asserts that what provokes Isabella's intercession is the power of the plea delivered by Mariana: "The speech that immediately precipitates Isabella's decision contains *wisdom that her recent disillusionment has prepared her to understand*" (italics are mine).[12] He thus comes to the following conclusion:

> Although we are not told what effect Mariana's speech has on Isabella, we recognize its aptness. Isabella has recently been brought to nothing in herself -- shorn of that honor in which she had

> been inclined to glory, and deprived of all hope in her own powers and in human justice -- and consequently imbued with a new, or newly conscious and thoroughgoing, faith in and dependence on divine providence. In her new state of humility and faith, she is prepared both to accept and to pattern her life upon the fundamental Christian ideas of which Mariana reminds her.[13]

To be sure, the fact that Isabella has been brought to nothing in herself is a crucial precondition for her awakening, but Gless would seem to be overlooking the significance of her self-knowledge, the key element in the whole process. It is the dynamic flux within her -- her awareness of the unrighteousness of her desire for revenge, a desire which the Duke, as the voice of the law, has deliberately stimulated and brought to light throughout the second half of the play -- that finally makes her ready for her transformation. From a Christian point of view, as we saw in Chapter II, the arousing of such a self-awareness in human beings is indeed one of the central functions of divine law. At the same time it is surely insufficient to assert, as Gless does, that it is the presence of "fundamental Reformed Christian doctrine"[14] in Mariana's speech that frees Isabella from her desire for revenge. Such a view would reduce the fundamental change in Isabella to a mere change of attitude or opinion. Furthermore, it would imply that this change is

more a product of intellective process than of an inner spiritual awakening, that her transformation stems ultimately from a conscious act of her own will.

Yet, as we have also seen in Chapter II, Christianity has always assumed that, by its own resources alone, human nature is incapable of freeing itself from its own unrighteousness. From a Christian perspective the capacity to love our enemy does not derive from any human will to strive for self-perfection. It is a capacity given by the grace of God, a grace available to all without discrimination, and given on the one condition of our willingness to receive it (Matt.5:46).

Given this fact, and given the depth and suddenness of Isabella's change of heart in this scene, Shakespeare's Christian audience might well hear in her voice what, at a crucial moment in *All's Well*, the King of France hears in the voice of Helena: "Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak /His powerful sound within an organ weak" (II.i.175-76). What the King means here is that, at this moment, Helena would seem to be divinely inspired, that the strength she is displaying in offering her life to save him would seem to have come not from her own frail humanity but from some special grace she has received. In commenting on the final scene of *All's Well*, R.G. Hunter makes a similar point in regard to the suddenness of the transformation we see in the selfish and unloving Bertram:

> The final scene of *All's Well* draws upon and refers to a belief in the reality of the descent of grace upon a sinning human. The Elizabethan audience believed in such an occurrence not as a theological abstraction, but as an everyday psychological possibility.[15]

If so, with mercy now for the first time truly breathing within her lips, Isabella, in the final scene of *Measure for Measure*, would surely emerge for Shakespeare's audience as a person newly born in Christ, a person empowered to transcend the limits imposed on her by her own fallen human nature.

Curiously, in contrast to her earlier plea on behalf of Claudio, her words here leave out any reference to Christ or Christian ethics. An insightful explanation for this omission is provided by Lucy Owen, who, like M.D.H. Parker, suggests that Isabella is now putting into practice what she has before merely preached:

> It seems to me that the attention is deliberately shifted to the human level of the action. Isabella has pleaded for mercy on the basis of a viewpoint that includes the divine and the eternal . . . but it is difficult really to act on a principle of mercy in the world or to see its applicability to legal decisions . . . . Shakespeare has brought the action of mercy into the human level of the play

> and shown that when properly understood as a reciprocal process rather than as a one-sided pronouncement, forgiveness is workable and right in ordinary temporal affairs. True mercy is not just an occasion for idealistic exposition; it is really equivalent to true justice -- the justice that educates rather than punishes.[16]

In other words, the spirituality we perceive in Isabella's forgiveness of Angelo is not the other-worldly spirituality of a "thing enskied and sainted", the spirituality she has sought as a novice in the sisterhood of St Clare. What she is displaying is a charitable humanity, a humanity accompanied by a certitude far removed from the shrill dogmatism of her pronouncements earlier in the play. As William Leigh Godshalk observes, Isabella, freed from external restraint, "no longer requires the restraint of an external authority, such as a convent. She is able to accept the world as it is".[17]

Any examination of Isabella in this scene faces one final question: is it significant that she does not speak again for the remainder of the play? In this regard, how do we explain her failure to respond to the Duke's proposal of marriage? The issue has become an important concern in recent criticism, especially in feminist commentary on *Measure for Measure*. Derek Cohen, for example, argues that at the end of the play Isabella finds herself in a new kind of bondage:

> Vincentio is using his own authority to assert his male supremacy and his male right to possess his woman . . . . It is hard, then, not to see in Isabella's response to the Duke's marriage proposals the silence of despair and resignation.[18]

Marcia Riefer, in a similar vein, argues that what Isabella suffers at the play's conclusion is a loss not only of independence but of her own personal identity:

> All of Isabella's main assumptions -- that Angelo was condemned, that the Duke was a committed celibate, that her brother was dead, and that she herself would remain chaste for life -- are challenged, if not negated, in the space of five lines. She remains speechless, a baffled actress who has run out of lines. The gradual loss of her personal voice during the course of the play has become, finally, a literal loss of voice. In this sense, *Measure for Measure* is Isabella's tragedy. Like Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus,* the eloquent Isabella is left with no tongue.[19]

Such arguments presuppose that Isabella is left submissive and helpless in the face of the Duke's intention to marry her, that her silence reflects the fact that she has been deprived of any right to a will of her own. Does the text of *Measure for Measure* support such an interpretation?

Before attempting to resolve the issue of Isabella's silence, we should, it seems to me, examine the words and actions of the Duke in these final moments of the play.

In the first place, we might note that the Duke's proposal is not only sudden and unexpected, but ill-timed. No longer able to conceal his feelings for Isabella, he impulsively asks for her hand at the very moment he reveals to her that Claudio is still alive:[20]

> If he be like your brother, for his sake
> Is he pardon'd; and for your lovely sake
> Give me your hand and say you will be mine.
> He is my brother too . . . .
>
> (V.i.488-491)

In view of the harshness of Isabella's treatment of Claudio in III.i, her total silence at his resurrection can only testify to an overwhelming intensity of feeling on her part. At this moment, though no stage direction is provided by Shakespeare, Isabella would surely display no trace of her new-found humanity were she not to rush forward to embrace Claudio with unrestrained love. When the Duke, having made his proposal, adds quietly (and perhaps even self-reprovingly) at line 491, "but fitter time for that", he is thus speaking in response to the fact that Isabella has failed to hear his proposal, absorbed as she is in the joy of her reunion with Claudio. In this connection, the Duke's

speaking of a "fitter time" for such a proposal may even allude to a Biblical passage no doubt well-known to Shakespeare's audience:

> To all things there is an appointed time, and a time to euerie purpose vnder the heauen. . . . a time to embrace, and a time to farre from embracing. . . . a time to kepe silence, and a time to speake.
>
> (Ecclesiastes,3:1,5,7)

In short, the Duke has come to realize the tactlessness of his proposal at this moment: it is now a time for Isabella and Claudio to be reunited, not a time for the voicing of his own personal desires. As a result, the Duke does not refer to marriage to Isabella again until the final lines of the play:

> Dear Isabella,
> I have a motion much imports your good;
> Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
> What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.
>
> (V.i.531-534)

Those commentators who view Isabella's silence at this moment as a sign of her despair and resignation assume that the Duke's words here constitute an actual proposal. But is this in fact the case? In contrast to the imprudence of his proposal at line 490 ("Give me your hand and say you will be mine"), the Duke shows here a patience and a self-control, a

willingness (reinforced by the hypothetical "if" at line 533) to respect Isabella's right to decide her own future at a "fitter time". As the final line of the play suggests, this will be a time when she has a fuller understanding of the purpose of his actions in the play and a fuller knowledge of his love for her. As his speech is a declaration of intent, not a proposal in the strict sense of the term, it would be totally inappropriate for Isabella to reject or accept it at this point. Given what Isabella has become, and given the trust and respect she has shown to the Duke throughout the second half of the play, there is surely every reason to suppose that she will accept his love, and that in the future she will no longer turn away from human society, but participate in it as wife and mother.

Far from being being victimized or defeated, Isabella, from a Shakespearean perspective, is a renewed and liberated figure at the final curtain of *Measure for Measure*. In Darryl Gless's words:

> As Isabella leaves the stage, bearing with her the honor that follows a rectified faith and the charitable deeds that inevitably result from it, we may perceive, retrospectively, the accuracy of the Duke's promise 'To make her heavenly comforts of despair'. Her 'comforts' have about them an aura of divinity, and they result, quite literally, from a purgative 'despair'.[21]

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

[1] *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*, p.29.

[2] Gless, p.183.

[3] Gless, p.190.

[4] Gless, p.190.

[5] In 2 Cor.3:12-16 Paul expounds his notion that the law of Moses is a "veil" concealing the divine plan which is revealed in the life and teaching of Christ:

> ...we vse great boldnes of speeche. And we are not as Moses, which put a vaile vpon his face, that the children of Israel shulde not looke vnto the end of that which shulde be abolished. Therefore their mindes are hardened: for vntil this day remaineth the same couering vntaken away in the reading of the Olde Testament, which vaile in Christ is put away. But euen vnto this day, when Moses is red, the vaile is layed ouer their hearts. Neuertheles when their heart shalbe turned to the Lord, the vaile shalbe taken away.

[6] Cf. Gen.9:6; Lev.24:17-20.

[7] Gless, p.205.

[8] *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, p.152.

[9] Some commentators have similar views of Isabella at this moment of forgiveness. For example, R.G. Hunter states:"Then, for the first time in the play, Justice speaks with the voice of Mercy and of Charity" (p.221).

[10] Hunter, p.220.

[11] Gless, p.211. As Gless further points out:

> We are made to feel the absurdity of Isabella's action and therefore to discover its 'unreasonable' rationale. Although many modern critics are simply surprised and even repulsed by Isabella's improbable action, Shakespeare seems to have created an effect commonly sought in medieval and Renaissance symbolic art: the pleasurable surprise of being obliquely reminded of a familiar and respected truth.

What Gless is alluding to here, he explains, is the Medieval and Renaissance assumption that all genuine acts of charity work "contrary to the egocentric emotions and rationality of sense" (p.211).

[12] Gless, p.203.

[13] Gless, p.204.

[14] Glass, p.203.
[15] Hunter, p.129.
[16] Lucy Owen, "Mode and Character in *Measure for Measure*", in *SQ*, Vol.25 (1974), pp.31-32.
[17] William Leigh Godshalk, *Patterning in Shakespearean Drama*, p.149.
[18] Derek Cohen, *Shakespearean Motives*, p.50.
[19] Marcia Riefer, p.167.
[20] The suddenness and inappropriateness of the Duke's proposal here has led critics skeptical of his moral authority to conclude that in his desire for Isabella, he is releasing a lust not unlike Angelo's. (See, for example, Derek Cohen, pp.50-51). Yet is the Duke to be condemned merely because he is fallible and human? Yielding to such an impulse, the Duke is revealing himself to be no more exempt from the pressure of his own passions than any other character in the play. What is important here is not that he is seized by any impatient desire for Isabella, but that he is able to master and control his desire, as he is able, later in this same scene, to master and control his desire for revenge against Lucio.
[21] Gless, p.213.

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