

*Dayton Haskin, S.J.*

Mercy and the Creative Process in *Measure*  
*for Measure*

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He reached for her hand and she drew back. . . . "I want something from you, but I don't know what—I want something!" he cried. "Something real! I want you to look at me like I was a human being, is that too much to ask? I have a brain, I'm alive, I'm suffering—what does that mean? Does that mean nothing? I want something real and not this phony Christian love garbage—it's all in the books, it isn't personal."  
—Joyce Carol Oates, "In the Region of Ice"<sup>1</sup>

I

This epigraph is excerpted from a recent short story that captures anew the classic difficulty in reconciling justice and mercy. Joyce Carol Oates has drawn her title and theme from *Measure for Measure*, but her retelling telescopes the essentials of the plot into the experience of only two characters. Allen, who speaks here, demands of his teacher attention and love and money. Sister Irene, who suffers his abuse, discovers that she cannot help him. Neither in her professional role as teacher nor in her religious role as sister is she able to deliver him from his horrifying vision of the "thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice." In fact, the story illustrates a cruel paradox whereby it seems to be Sister Irene's very commitment to Christ's ethical teaching that renders her helpless in the face of this needy "brother." In the end, she secures for him neither justice nor mercy.

"In the Region of Ice" isolates and emphasizes two related aspects of a problem at the heart of *Measure for Measure*. First, by showing that Sister Irene cannot meet Allen's real needs, it raises telling questions about the relevance of Christian doctrines to the practice of the moral life. Second, by assigning to Sister Irene the plights of both Isabella and the Duke, it uncovers the intimate and enduring connection between the dilemma of the private individual and that of the public servant: the difficulty is that mercy, however numerous and forceful the biblical injunctions that endorse it, cannot be domesticated or institutionalized. There is something mysterious and elusive, even something personal, about

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it; and in this it resembles the creative process itself. When presumed upon to provide a panacea for social ills, it degenerates into a crude parody of itself. As Escalus puts it, "Mercy is not itself, that oft looks so" (II.i.280).<sup>2</sup> In another context Isabella makes the relevant distinction:

Ignomy in ransom and free pardon  
Are of two houses: lawful mercy  
Is nothing kin to foul redemption.       (II.iv.111-13)

The right administration of mercy was a lively issue in the early months of the reign of James I in England (1603-04). Interest in the theory and practice of being a Christian prince had been stimulated by the wide circulation of *Basilikon Doron*; and expectations, especially among puritans, about what the British Solomon would accomplish were running high.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's play was timely; yet the considerable attention that it has won in the last generation has not depended upon recognition of this fact. For the drama does not provide a "mirror for magistrates." It explores in explicitly evangelical terms, as its title intimates, recurring problems relating to the administration of justice and mercy in society.

In addition to its concern with public issues, *Measure for Measure* interests itself in religious matters—up to a point. This is Shakespeare's most explicitly biblical play in title and theme. Wilson Knight began to detail its indebtedness to the New Testament, and a host of commentators have attempted to connect the play with passages from the gospels.<sup>4</sup> In due course, but not without reluctance (for there are limits to the usefulness of this exercise), I shall join their ranks. But I want to emphasize two points from the start: (1) Shakespeare's use of the Bible is not superficial; it involves playing with the ironies and paradoxes inherent in complex biblical notions such as "justification." (2) Shakespeare's primary debt to the Bible is, as James Trombetta has recently remarked, of a general and structural sort, in that the play "begins with a kind of genesis and ends with a kind of last judgment."<sup>5</sup>

Not only the gospels, which recount stories about what Jesus said and did, but also certain features of the writings of the Apostle Paul, which interpret the meaning of Jesus's teaching and gestures, provide important clues to the interpretation of the play. This is not to claim a bookish debt on the part of the playwright, nor to turn him into a covert preacher. It is only to call attention to pervasive attitudes and assumptions, deriving chiefly from Reformation uses of the Pauline literature, that the play puts into question. *Measure for Measure* was written and first performed,

after all, during the “Pauline Renaissance” in England, when puritans and “precisians” were making loud and insistent claims for the “sufficiency” of Scripture, as the single key to all of human life and social intercourse. Not only were they urging discipline, as the “precise” Lord Angelo does, but they were eager to find scriptural warrant for any practice, public as well as private, civil as well as ecclesiastical. There is no need to deflect our energies into a study of the climate in which the play was created. What is essential to call to mind is that men of “precise” persuasion used, before all else, the epistles of Paul as the primary biblical texts in relation to which all the other books, and life itself, were to be understood.<sup>6</sup>

The uses *Measure for Measure* makes of the Bible belong specifically to the tradition of the English Reformation. In the first place, the English Bible popularized Pauline theology, what A. G. Dickens has called “that intellectual element of the faith which could not have been spread abroad by the theatrical modes of presentation used by the medieval Church upon a less literate public.”<sup>7</sup> *Measure for Measure* shows, however, that by the time Shakespeare wrote, the theater itself could play upon the ambiguities and the paradoxes found in Pauline theology. One dimension of the effectiveness of the play is the seriousness with which it takes Luther’s advice, disseminated in Tyndale’s “Prologue to the Epistle of Paule to the Romayns,” to work at understanding a unique biblical language. “Fyrst,” the reformer insists,

wemust marke diligently the maner of speakynge of the Apostel and aboue all thinge knowe what Paul meaneth by these wordes, the Lawe, Synne, Grace, Fayth, Ryghteousnes, Flesshe, Sprite, and soche lyke, or els rede thou it neuer so ofte, thou shalt but loose thy laboure. This word Lawe maye not be vnderstonde here after the commune maner, and to vse Paules terme, after the maner ofmen or after mannes wayes.<sup>8</sup>

Shakespeare’s drama, concerned with the problems of translating the law and gospel into norms for practical living, attests to the validity of Luther’s observation, though not necessarily in a manner that Luther would have approved.

In writing to the Romans, Paul was earnestly concerned with the problems caused by the admission of Gentiles into the Christian church. The letter is a kind of treatise on Jewish-Gentile relations, in the light of Paul’s understanding of Christ. The doctrine of justification by faith was devised to explain how both groups,

Jews and Gentiles, were capable of being good Christians. Salvation comes not from following the works of the Jewish Law, but by faith.

The second point to be made about the relation of *Measure for Measure* to the Pauline literature is that the play evinces no concern about the relations of Jews and Gentiles. It is illuminated, however, when we think about it with the Reformers' reading of Romans in mind: Luther and Protestants generally saw this letter as speaking to their own questions about their salvation as individuals. "The Reformers' interpretation of Paul," writes the Lutheran exegete Krister Stendahl, "rests on an analogism when Pauline statements about Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, Jews and Gentiles are read in the framework of late medieval piety. The Law, the Torah, with its specific requirements of circumcision and food restrictions becomes a general principle of 'legalism' in religious matters. Where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be included in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament."<sup>9</sup>

Nor is *Measure for Measure* principally concerned with the eternal salvation of the characters. Its interest lies, rather, in asking whether and how the biblical doctrines about "justification" and God's mercy have relevance for practical life and government in this world. These were lively questions in a time when many were insisting that truth was to be found in "the Bible only." But ultimately the play suggests a profound relevance of the Bible that one hardly associates with seventeenth-century bibliolatry. Shakespeare must have had a sound intuition about the meaning of the biblical doctrine of mercy.

## II

According to the Reformers' basic reading, the letter to the Romans dramatizes the Christian's inevitable wrestling with the implications, for human self-knowledge and personal responsibility, of a faith that ascribes omnipotence and providential wisdom to God and universal sinfulness to mankind. Paul argues that "all have sinned, and are deprived of the glorie of God, And are iustified frely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Iesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). But he is also at pains to exclude antinomianism, to show that Christians uphold the law. To this end he employs the metaphor, borrowed from the forensic arena, of "justification." It is this sort of legal metaphor that generates the structure of Shakespeare's play.

The characters in *Measure for Measure* seem to behave according to a metaphorical pattern rooted in a biblical understanding of human existence. Life, as it is lived in the interim between Christ's redeeming action in history and his return as judge, is imagined as a great *trial*, in various senses of the word. We may restrict ourselves here to three of the *OED* meanings: (1) "the examination and determination of a cause by a judicial tribunal"; (2) "the action of testing or putting to the proof the fitness, truth, strength, or other quality of anything"; and (3) "the fact of undergoing or experiencing." A fourth meaning—"that which puts one to the test; *esp.* a painful test of one's endurance, patience, or faith; hence, affliction, trouble, misfortune"—seems particularly appropriate for describing the experience of Isabella, Claudio, and Angelo. But this meaning gained currency only in the eighteenth century. In any event, it is clear that meanings (2) and (3) interpret the situation of these three characters.

To follow the metaphor more strictly is to attend to the primary definition of *trial* and to notice that *Measure for Measure* also suggests the image of life as a prelude to judgment.<sup>10</sup> According to this use of the figure, life is conceived as a progressive creation and gradual revelation of the individual's essential self in the total series of his actions. Paul has this figure in mind when he insists that all have sinned and deserve punishment, and the Duke calculates a testing trial for Angelo and Claudio and Isabella that is geared to their revealing in their actions the need for mercy and forgiveness that they bear within themselves. We are made to understand, in fact, that the Duke is at once a character in the world of the play, a dramatistlike designer who provides controlled experiences for his subjects, and a judge who observes and evaluates their actions. He performs all these functions with a view to heightening his subjects' awareness of moral complexities. He seeks to evoke in them that sympathetic understanding of the ruler's dilemma that makes possible something like a just temporal order. He does not stand for the actual achievement of "a psychologically sound and enlightened ethic"<sup>11</sup> but for the attempt to achieve one.

The trial that the Duke stages in the final act incorporates implicitly the sort of repetition and review of life that courtroom proceedings entail. From its start the Duke plays the role of judge, but in the course of the trial he comes to serve as witness as well. The revelation that Friar Lodowick is the duke—that witness and judge are one—challenges each character to rewrite the script he has been imagining he will follow when the Duke returns. This establishes a framework within which each character refashions

his version of the past for presentation at the judgment seat. Isabella and Angelo, Lucio and the others, all have to conceive anew their stories about what has been happening, under the burden imposed by the new knowledge that the judge has been privy to a great deal more than any of them had suspected.

This curious device points up the fact that in Shakespeare's Vienna, as in the world that Paul depicts, all are weak and all are sinful. Shakespeare emphasizes Isabella's weakness and Angelo's sinful proposition. But Isabella has no monopoly on weakness, and Angelo is not the only sinner. Gradually Isabella's self-centeredness and Angelo's helplessness in the face of his guilt are exposed. Weakness and guilt almost seem to be metaphors for one another: no one can "justify" himself before the divine tribunal.

In Romans, Paul has suggested a way out of this dilemma by calling upon the expectations raised in earlier Judaic literature—only to redefine and outstrip them. The just God who vindicates the poor and helpless, delivering them from unjust oppression, offers the possibility of repentance even to the powerful, who perpetrate injustices. When Paul uses legal and forensic terms to argue that God alone "justifies" his people, he provides a variation upon a basic insight that he sometimes frames in terms of other metaphors, such as deliverance, ransom, salvation, and propitiation. He is attempting to get at something that can be described only metaphorically, and he uses a series of figures precisely because no one metaphor is without connotations that render it inadequate. In his use of the figure of justification, Paul has God acquitting the guilty, which is, by Old Testament standards,<sup>12</sup> a reprehensible travesty of justice. Yet God can and does deliver all who acknowledge their guilt, their ultimate moral powerlessness. Deliverance begins when the sinner recognizes his total dependence upon God.

The basic point that Paul makes is that "the personal relations of God to men cannot be described in legal terms at all."<sup>13</sup> As a limited human creature speaking to his fellows, he is obliged to use human language that cannot comprehend the riches of divine mercy: "I speake after the maner of man, because of the infirmitie of your flesh" (Rom. 6:19). The 1560 Geneva Bible glosses this verse with a recognition that Paul's language does not achieve technical precision: "Leauing to speake of heauenlie things, according to your capacitie, I vse these similitudes of seruitude & fredome, that ye might the better vnderstand." But Paul stretches language beyond the breaking point to get at something that ordinary human terms fail to comprehend: "O the depnes of the riches, bothe of the wisdome, & knowledge of God! how vnsearcheable are his iudgements, & his wayes past finding out!" (Rom. 11:33). The

revelation of God's justice and mercy is "made manifest without the Law" (Rom. 3:21), that is, apart from law altogether: it cannot be explained by the human *nomos*, be the principle legal or logical. There is no basis for expecting that God would show his merciful love to sinners.

The Duke is in some ways like Christ and like God—"like power divine," in Angelo's words (V.i.367). But he is simply associated with the deity, as the Christian prince was supposed to be.<sup>14</sup> He remains responsible for providing justice within the temporal order. He is neither omnipotent nor perfectly wise.<sup>15</sup> If he suggests the deity to Angelo and to some commentators on the play, he is nonetheless not represented as capable of supplying "justification" for human creatures before their Lord. Romans insists that Christ alone effects the justification of the sinner before the eternal judge. *Measure for Measure* does not interest itself in retailing this doctrine.<sup>16</sup> It explores, rather, the possibility of dragging Paul's metaphor back into the temporal realm from which it was originally borrowed, and it tries to see whether the meaning it has acquired in a theological context helps people to live more satisfactorily in this world.<sup>17</sup>

A supposed connection between divine truth and human experience generates for Isabella a peculiarly acute conflict. She assumes that her commitment to Christian ethical teaching will provide her with clear norms for practical conduct. When Claudio begs her to save him, claiming that circumstances attenuate the wrongdoing, she is shocked by a proposition whereby "Mercy . . . would prove itself a bawd" (III.i.149). Critics regularly censure Isabella for preferring her chastity, an abstract virtue, to her brother, a person. But Isabella—whether her destiny is to live out her life as a votive of St. Clare or as the wife of the Duke—is right to reject Angelo's proposition and her brother's request, wrong only in the way she goes about it. For in this drama, as elsewhere in Shakespeare, sexual relations are already constitutive of a married relationship, in accord with the Pauline dictum that intercourse creates "one fleshe" (I Cor. 6:16 ff.). When Isabella learns, for instance, that her brother has got Juliet with child, she spontaneously declares, "O, let him marry her!" (I.iv.49). Later, she is in no way shocked by the Duke's proposal that Mariana be substituted for her at the tryst with Angelo, because the antecedent commitment by the two lovers renders consummation a "prosperous perfection" of previously unfulfilled nuptial promises.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the play's low-life bawds and pimps serve to remind us that sexual relations, when divorced from lasting commitment, are far from sufficient to constitute a true marriage.

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It is in going off to Claudio preoccupied with her own dilemma, rather than to comfort and strengthen him in his need, that Isabella makes her great error. Her wrongdoing is epitomized in the resolve:

Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother, die:  
More than our brother is our chastity. (II.iv.183-84)

The dramatic self-indictment that Shakespeare thus assigns Isabella provides an index of her need for moral education. Isabella needs a trial, an experience of evil and of her own complicity in it. In accepting Angelo's framing of the proposition, which poses a question of alternatives and implies the possibility of weighing an abstract virtue against a human life, Isabella does implicate herself in injustice: she accords it power to define the limits within which she will carry on her life. The Duke who oversees the action, and the audience who sit outside it, know that this is no choice at all, that Isabella errs in accepting Angelo's cruel and unusual definition of the situation.

But in refusing to make mercy a bawd, Isabella recognizes, at least implicitly, that, far from remedying the disease that afflicts Vienna, her submission to Angelo's lust would compound the travesty of justice that his proposition represents. Injustice in the exercise of civil power, rather than lechery, is the basic evil that the drama exposes.<sup>19</sup> Lecherous conduct (sexual consummation without vows) and its obverse (vows without consummation) emerge as manifestations of injustice. The connection between unhealthy emotional and sexual attitudes and unjust government becomes explicit when the Duke explains to Friar Thomas the nature of the test he has devised for his vicegerent:

Lord Angelo is precise;  
Stands at a guard with Envy; scarce confesses  
That his blood flows; or that his appetite  
Is more to bread than stone. Hence shall we see  
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.  
(I.iii.50-54)

Isabella's ambiguous situation vis-à-vis her brother and Lord Angelo mirrors in little the general problem faced by a governor responsible for the welfare of the body politic. To submit to Angelo, to accept his power as an effective if illegitimate means of saving human life, would be to repeat the wrongdoing that has set the whole drama in motion. By allowing the law to sleep, according to Angelo's metaphor (II.ii.91 ff.), the Duke had made mercy a bawd

and engendered disrespect for order among his subjects. This is itself a basic injustice and the Duke bears responsibility for it, just as Milton's Adam is accountable for allowing Eve to establish her claim that their working apart will be innocuous. Law is necessary in Vienna because, as Angelo surmises, all people are *frail*. The various characters react differently to this basic truth about their human condition.

Isabella accepts her frailty and even Angelo's suggestion that women are especially frail, only to transform frailty into a kind of moral strength. She defies her antagonist to play upon her real weakness, the fact that he can wield power against her brother unjustly. "Women?" she taunts him, "Help, heaven! Men their creation mar / In profiting by them" (II.iv.126-27). Angelo, for his part, subtly redefines frailty, making the idea a ploy in his attempt to seduce Isabella, as if to deflect responsibility for human wrongdoing onto the Creator:

And from this testimony of your own sex—  
Since I suppose we are made to be no stronger  
Than faults may shake our frames—let me be bold.  
(II.iv.130-32)

For Angelo, human frailty derives from faulty workmanship for which he bears no responsibility. The Duke, on the other hand, draws upon his knowledge of human weakness to understand Angelo's falling, but not to excuse it (III.i.185). He appreciates that Claudio's "frailty" has been for him the source of "many deceiving promises of life" (III.ii.239-40). But such frailty suggests still another kind of strength, a tenaciousness of the human spirit in the face of death that elicits our admiration.

*Measure for Measure* offers, but ultimately disallows, two false justifications for disregarding the law. First, the Duke's permissiveness would seem to attenuate the responsibility of his subjects for their moral failings. We scarcely feel that Claudio merits beheading for what is denominated fornication by a mere technicality. The cruelty of his punishment is magnified, moreover, by a sudden, uncompromising enforcement of the letter of the law. "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giueth life," the author of *Romans* observes elsewhere. Second, the unmistakable fact of human frailty—powerfully dramatized in the experience of Angelo—again suggests that human responsibility for sin has important limits, and that capital punishment should hardly be administered for a failure to which all are susceptible.

Isabella attempts to enlist both these bases for disregarding the

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letter of the law when she pleads for her brother. Conspicuously the most naive character in the play, she nonetheless points out, apropos of the offense for which Claudio is to die, "There's many have committed it" (II.ii.90). She puts this recognition at the service of her plea that Angelo imagine himself to be in the place of Christ the Judge:

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,  
And He that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy. How would you be  
If He, which is the top of judgement, should  
But judge you as you are? O, think on that,  
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man new made. (II.ii.73-79)

In short, Isabella attempts to infer human truths from the revelation of divine ones, encouraging Angelo to use his imagination to perceive the connection. Her theology may be unexceptionable, but it is not ultimately effective. If there are connections between the divine and human realms, they are more subtle—and more pervasive—than those which a direct appeal to scriptural doctrine would establish.

### III

The intimate relation between divine truth and human experience is nowhere in Scripture more powerfully realized in an imaginative picture than in the Matthaean story of the final judgment. Shakespeare assimilates this story to the folk motif of the disguised ruler in structuring *Measure for Measure*.<sup>20</sup>

And when the Sonne of man cometh in his glorie, and all the holie Angels with him, then shal he sit vpon the throne of his glorie. And before him shalbe gathered all nacions, and he shal separate them one from another, as a shepherde separateth the shepe from the goates. And he shal set the shepe on his right hand, and the goates on the left. Then shal the King say to them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father: inherite ye the kingdome prepared for you from the foundations of the worlde. For I was an hungred, and ye gaue me meat: I thursted, and ye gaue me drinke: I was a stranger, and ye lodged me: *I was naked*, and ye clothed me, I was sicke, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came vnto me. Then shal the righteous answere him, saying, Lord, when

sawe we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or a thirst, and gaue thee drinke? And when sawe we thee a stranger, and lodged thee? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sicke, or in prison, and came vnto thee? And the King shal answere and say vnto them, Verely I say vnto you, in as muche as ye haue done it vnto one of the least of these my brethren, ye haue done it to me. (Matt. 25:31-40)

“In the Region of Ice” plays up the bitter irony that knowledge of this text only increases Sister Irene’s frustration. She wants to care for Allen’s needs, but finds that she cannot. *Measure for Measure* operates more delicately, inviting recollection of the passage through a series of resemblances. The Duke goes about in the disguise of a simple brother, he himself visits the imprisoned, he receives respect from Escalus and abuse from Lucio, and he returns suddenly—to everyone’s surprise—to administer judgment according to people’s true deserts.<sup>21</sup> The crucial resemblance lies in the way that the obvious presence of the ruler at the beginning and end of the stories frames a secret presence that informs and confers meaning upon the experiences and events of the interim.

The biblical vision of the final judgment reminds us that if, according to Christian belief, men are saved by the free gift of God’s grace and not by their “works,” they are nonetheless accountable for their actions. It also suggests how antinomian inferences are to be ruled out: Christians are to be moved to do good works not in order to merit salvation but out of gratitude to Christ and from a sensitivity to their brothers’ needs. To imagine the needy brother as an *alter Christus* presupposes a basic respect for and gratitude to Christ himself. In fact, the ethical dimension of the gospel teaching has a profound connection with the process that *Measure for Measure* dramatizes. To treat the least brother as Christ, to love your neighbor as yourself, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, all this requires that highly developed sympathetic imagination that the Duke would foster in Angelo and Isabella.

That Isabella learns her lesson well is clear when she pleads for Angelo’s life, even as she believes that he has executed her brother.<sup>22</sup> That Angelo develops a sympathetic imagination is less clear: much depends upon how the last scene is acted. Though he tried to seduce Isabella, Angelo has been unable to envisage himself in a state parallel to Claudio’s, or at least he has been unwilling: “what I will not, that I cannot do” (II.ii.52). Later, in order to prod Angelo into a recognition of this inconsistency in his moral imagination, the Duke feigns incredulity in the face of Isabella’s accusation:

it imports no reason  
That with such vehemency he should pursue  
Faults proper to himself. (V.i.111-13)

Isabella is able to project herself into Angelo's place—"I would to heaven I had your potency, / And you were Isabel" (II.ii.67-68)—but only to a point. She invites Angelo to a sympathetic understanding of her plight, but she is unable to sympathize with the human weakness that issues into his outrageous proposition. Likewise, she fails to appreciate her brother's real needs in his presumed last hours.

The more knowledgeable Duke provides a better example of genuine caring, despite what seems to be a perverse withholding of knowledge. It would be misguided to suppose that because he intends to prevent Claudio's execution his advice is irrelevant. The counsel, "Be absolute for death. . . . A breath thou art. . . . thou art Death's fool" (III.i.5 ff.), represents the placing of stoical wisdom at the service of evangelical teaching. The advice never becomes explicitly Christian. It serves only as Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae* might, or *contemptus mundi* literature generally, to establish a context within which the message of gospel freedom might be heard.<sup>23</sup> That Claudio does not take the advice to heart does not cancel out the wisdom that it offers. The Duke's counsel recognizes that a just society depends to some extent upon his subjects' sense that all life is a marvelous gift, and that each person's life goes on by a continual reprieve.

It is this awareness of the sheer gratuitousness of both human and eternal life that Paul attempted to foster when he wrote of the redemption. Isabella appeals to the idea when she chides Angelo, "Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once." Against the backdrop of such an understanding of life's precarious nature and its precious value, a person's treatment of his fellows can be seen as an index of his own response to divine mercy. "Measure for measure" *does* operate even in a Christian dispensation where mercy is offered to all. For the final revelation induces a high degree of self-knowledge. When the truth emerges, however, human freedom is not compromised. Only those who accept the truth about themselves and embrace the free offer of pardon that follows can benefit from mercy. Those who will not (like Marlowe's Faustus in his final hour), cannot.

The process by which mercy is created appears when Mariana pleads with Isabella to win pardon for Angelo, and Isabella at last graciously does so. It appears more fully still in the experience of Angelo himself—but only if the part is acted with appreciation for

the power of mercy. When his guilt is first revealed, Angelo pleads with the Duke:

No longer session hold upon my shame,  
But let my trial be mine own confession.  
Immediate sentence, then, and sequent death  
Is all the grace I beg. (V.i.369-72)

In fact, the experience of Angelo epitomizes the way in which the trial of a serious offender ideally functions: it serves first to bring a person to accept death as an apt punishment for serious guilt and then to transport him beyond this to a new life. At this point he gratefully acknowledges that life continues by reprieve.

The Duke shows by his counsel and his action that he has mastered the subtleties of this perspective. He is like the teacher who learns the lesson better for having to teach it. Even at the start, when he seems to quit Vienna, he has understood that “mercy” is but a spur to injustice if the ruler offers it as license. By the end he appreciates that mercy fulfills itself and provides a “remedy” for injustice when it evokes genuine sorrow and allows the sorrowful one to have a change of heart, what the New Testament speaks of as *metanoia*.<sup>24</sup> The Christ of the gospels elicits a change of heart by treating the guilty party with respect (e.g., Luke 19:1-10; John 7:53-8:11): he takes less account of past offenses than of what sort of person the offender is capable of becoming. Angelo’s experience offers a paradigm since, in the end, he moves beyond his craving “death more willingly than mercy” (V.i.474). The Duke sees at last new life for him, in the “quickenings in his eye”; and he magnanimously commends him for having achieved the maturity to accept pardon: “your evil quits you well” (V.i.493-94).

Mercy appears in *Measure for Measure* not as an abstract quality such as we would meet in a morality play but as a gradual healing action that embraces honest judgment. The play dramatizes mercy as an aspect of the creative process itself, a characteristic operation of the creative force that enables creatures to become their best and truest selves, achieving the sort of fulfillment that the marriages symbolize at the close.

But evil is not rooted out. It is accepted rather as inevitable. Shakespeare does not ask us to share the pretentious expectations of those Christians, becoming increasingly vociferous in Jacobean England, who direct their hopes for discovering norms for practical government to “Scripture alone.” Rather than suggesting that the Bible provides solutions to basic problems of establishing justice, *Measure for Measure* points up the limitations of any attempt

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to read off directives for human conduct from injunctions couched in the pages of a book—even of the Book which provides its pre-text. The play provokes us to long for “something real,” not something in a book that “isn’t personal.” Insofar as we sense this play to be unsatisfactory, or elusive, perhaps we have discovered something about the inherent incapacity of literature—even Shakespeare and the Bible—to effect a personal transformation that it can at best stimulate and invite.

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*Notes*

1. Joyce Carol Oates, *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (New York: Vanguard, 1970), pp. 31-32.
2. Quotations from the play follow the Arden edition of J. W. Lever (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). Quotations from the Bible are from the 1560 Geneva version. I have expanded abbreviations.
3. David Stevenson’s treatment of this feature of the play is disappointing in “The Historical Dimension in *Measure for Measure*: The Role of James I in the Play,” *ELH*, 26 (1959), rpt. in *The Achievement of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 134-66. See D. Harris Willson, *King James VI and I* (New York: Henry Holt, 1956), pp. 138-74.
4. See G. Wilson Knight’s “*Measure for Measure* and the Gospels,” in *The Wheel of Fire*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949), pp. 73-96; note, also, the excellent piece by Arthur C. Kirsch, “The Integrity of ‘*Measure for Measure*,’” *ShS*, 28 (1975), 89-105; see, also, Sarah C. Velz, “Man’s Need and God’s Plan in ‘*Measure for Measure*’ and Mark IV,” *ShS*, 25 (1972), 37-44.
5. James Trombetta, “Versions of Dying in *Measure for Measure*,” *ELR*, 6 (1976), 71.
6. See the important study by John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), esp. pp. xiii-xiv, 104, 142, 150.
7. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken, 1964), p. 137.
8. *The New Testament Translated by William Tyndale 1534*, ed. N. Hardy Wallis (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1938), p. 293.
9. Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HTR*, 56 (1963), rpt. in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 85-86. Stendahl’s argument has been criticized by Ernst Käsemann in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 60-78.
10. The play’s coin imagery is closely connected with the judgment theme. In addition to Lever’s notes in the Arden edition, see E. Pearlman, “Shakespeare, Freud, and the Two Usuries, or, Money’s a Meddler,” *ELR*, 2 (1972), 217-36.
11. Knight, p. 74.
12. See Exod. 23:7; Isa. 5:23; Prov. 17:15.

13. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Fontana, 1959), p. 76.

14. See W. Moelwyn Merchant, "Measure for Measure: An Essay in Visual Interpretation," in *Shakespeare and the Artist* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 221-32. Merchant suggests connections between the play and the letter to the Romans.

15. Only recently has the Duke's need to learn been emphasized. See William B. Bache, *Measure for Measure as Dialectical Art*, Purdue University Studies (Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue Research Foundation, 1969), esp. pp. 19 ff.; Herbert Weil, Jr., "Form and Contexts in *Measure for Measure*," *CritQ*, 12 (1970), 55-72; Hal Gelb, "Duke Vincentio and the Illusion of Comedy or All's Not Well That Ends Well," *SQ*, 22 (1971), 25-34; and Marvin Rosenberg, "Shakespeare's Fantastic Trick: *Measure for Measure*," *SR*, 80 (1972), 51-72.

16. Cf. Roy W. Battenhouse, "Measure for Measure and Christian Doctrine of the Atonement," *PMLA*, 61 (1946), 1029-59. See, also, Elizabeth M. Pope, "The Renaissance Background of *Measure for Measure*," *ShS*, 2 (1949), 66-82.

17. As Kirsch aptly phrases it, "To Shakespeare the Bible was not simply an eschatological document, but a revelation of human as well as divine truths, and it is precisely the relationship between the two that *Measure for Measure* is about" (p. 91).

18. See Lever's introduction to the Arden edition, pp. li, lv; and E. Schanzer, "The Marriage Contracts in *Measure for Measure*," *ShS*, 13 (1960), 81-89.

19. See Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1954), pp. 368-69. See, also, D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 3d ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1969), II, 46-67.

20. In calling attention to this vision, I do not wish to suggest that it supplies an exclusive key to interpretation. I mean to supplement those treatments of the play that have demonstrated its connections with other features of the gospels and to suggest that Shakespeare's debt to Matt. 25:31 ff. is structural, not doctrinal.

21. Professor Louis L. Martz has pointed out to me that "Look, th' unfolding star calls up the shepherd" (IV.ii.203-04), suggesting the Duke in its immediate context, confirms my argument about the relevance of Matt. 25 to the play. See also Matt. 2:1 ff. Cf. Battenhouse, pp. 1038-40.

22. Cf. Robert Grams Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 216 ff.

23. Cf. Trombetta, esp. pp. 71-72.

24. See, e.g., Mark 1:4; Matt. 3:8, 11; Luke 3:3, etc. Cp. Acts 13:24, 19:4; Rom. 2:4.