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## Eschatological Insights in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*

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### Abstract

The topic of the paper focuses on the import of applying the principle of justice by the authority, the elements conditioning the development of a process of forgiveness, and the ultimate role of mercy in upholding punishment in Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*. The paper purports to show that a close reading of the text in connection with certain biblical verses gives insights into the role one's deeds in life have in the fate of his or her soul in the afterlife. The stage of research regarding Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* shows that this play has at its core a plot which used to be widely encountered during the Renaissance and not just then. The plot is about unjust magistrates, about buying clemency with illicit sexual relations, and about the human fate thereof, and involves a contention between the concepts of justice and mercy in the relations between ordinary people and the authority. This paper parses the text of *Measure for Measure* in relation to the concepts of justice, mercy, and forgiveness to ascertain the mark of the play proper on its literary and dramatic heritage. The novelty of the paper consists in showing the potential of the play to reveal a connection between the text related to justice, mercy, and forgiveness and the theme of eschatology.

**Keywords:** afterlife; chiasmus; forgiveness; justice; mercy

### Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* "the complexity of the text, and its legal and historical context, unavoidably lead to a multiplicity of interpretations" (Bernthal, 1992, p. 2620). The present interpretation shows the eschatological caveats arising from the way dialogues, monologues, events, and the end of the play are arranged and treated in the play. The interpretation is backed by the appropriate references found in the state of research.



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The initial argument in the interpretation is that the Duke may signify Divine Providence. Then, the paper will show that the treatment of the issue of illicit sexual relations draws attention to the theme of eschatology. The major goal of this interpretation is to show that Shakespeare may have intended to give a spiritual end to the theme of the unjust magistrate.

## Method of interpretation

In his theory of hermeneutics, August Boeckh views the Greek word *hermeneia* as related to Hermes, “the messenger of the gods, the go-between of gods and men,” and writes that hermeneutics is rendering the language of a person intelligible to another or “the work of the interpreter” (Boeckh, 2006, p. 134). Boeckh writes that, since the speaker and the listener have mostly different ideas and even one and the same person might think differently at different moments, and because complete understanding may come as a response to a feeling, the more the interpreter perceives the feeling related to the interpreted text the better his approach to interpreting is (Boeckh, 2006, pp. 135–138).

Wilson Knight emphasises the complexity of any critical hermeneutics and underlines the distinction between interpretation and criticism. Knight maintains that interpretation tends to “merge into the work it analyses,” it tries to understand the work by using its own terms, it uses references only to enhance its understanding, and it makes no remarks on value or endurance (Knight, 2005, pp. 1–2). In Shakespeare’s case, Knight argues for the need to maintain in one’s mind a scheme formed of both time and space separated from the act of perceiving the story as a sequence of events in time. This scheme is a sort of “stationary background: if we forget that background for one instant parts of the dialogue fall limp; remember it, and the most ordinary remark is tense, poignant—often of shattering power” (Knight, 2005, p. 4). He recommends that “we should first regard each play as a visionary unit bound to obey none but its own self-imposed laws” and that we should refrain from separating parts that are easy to understand from what he names the “superlogical;” furthermore, events should be viewed in relation to both “the ‘temporal’ and ‘spatial’ elements” which means to relate them either to the story or to the “peculiar atmosphere, intellectual or imaginative, which binds the play,” thus giving them the right to unfold according to an internal rationale. This rationale will allow us to understand “many difficult actions and events” (Knight, 2005, pp. 13–14). Wilson Knight thinks that “the most profitable approach to Shakespeare” is interpretation rather than criticism (Knight, 2005, pp. 15–16). In line with Wilson Knight’s opinion, the rationale behind the eschatological insights deriving from the play is that an eschatological interpretation of the play spurs the spirit to meditate on how to live one’s life.



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## Collateral issues

The state of research shows that, indeed, there are numerous interpretations of *Measure for Measure*, ranging from early to general to historical, religious, linguistic, or psychoanalytic, and so on. There are even specific interpretations, which, for example, draw attention to Barnardine. Craig Bernthal noted that:

Audience unwillingness to see Barnardine executed disrupts the theater of execution, for it puts the audience on the side of a criminal who refuses to take the process seriously, and so draws the audience's attention to the theatricality of Elizabethan trial and punishment. (p. 263)

He contends that reiterating the drama of *Promos and Cassandra* or *Epithia* with the introduction of a character whose part leads to an upheaval of the source theme is to get the audience to “evaluate trial as a political institution” (p. 256).

From Bernthal's perspective two capital modes of reading the play can be inferred. On the one hand, there is theatrical performance which presupposes both “liveliness and enactment” existing at the same time—while liveliness presupposes the coexistence of both actors and an audience, enactment covers all variability presupposed by the pretence of acting a play (Osipovich, 2006). When the director (or the author, presumably) intends to convey a message, this can sometimes be a topical reading like in Bernthal's proposition related to the representation of the play on Saint Stephen 1604 (Bernthal, 1992, pp. 247–254). On the other hand, the reader of the text is sure to get a reading of his own—notwithstanding the several existing emendations of the work. The reader might even get different readings of the play at various times in life, as we have seen with Boeckh. All these suggest that the understanding of the play hinges on text edition, topical subjects within the time and space reference of the reading, the position as reader, or as part of a live audience, the director's approach to the play.

Also, the impact of the play on audiences must be related to the law—the law in the time of Shakespeare, and also the present-day—and must have determined certain parts of the plot (Bernthal, 1992, pp. 247–258). The literature indicates certain laws existing in the time of Shakespeare, for example, to consider a crime “one must *intend* to commit a criminal act and then, *commit* the act, [ . . . ] and *both* be proved to establish a crime” (Bernthal, 1992, p. 258), the status of the marital contracts (Bernthal, 1992, p. 260), or the law figuring the state of the convicts before execution (Bernthal, 1992, p. 263). At the same time, the topicality of the subject is also a matter of considerable worth in view of the antics of the new Scottish King



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of England (Bernthal, 1992, pp. 247–265; Brown, 1996, p. 51). These matters add layers of reading to the Shakespearean play.

## Eschatological insights

It is apparent that, as in other plays, in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare has “waded further” (Prouty, 1964, p. 145) from the source plots which he used and that themes like justice, mercy, and forgiveness have been previously developed by his predecessors as well. What distinguishes Shakespeare’s treatment of the widely encountered plot of the unreliable magistrate is his in-text embedding of connotations to Scriptural verses or subtle eschatological caveats regarding the causality between the way a person lives their life and the fate of their soul after death.

The eschatological caveats in the play are related to the issue of illicit sexual relations. The fact that in Vienna the authority is unable to repress such practices is shown to be a serious failure (I.3.19–31).<sup>1</sup> The deadly character of illicit sexual relations is revealed in the way dialogues, monologues, events, and the end of the play are constructed. The most resounding in this regard is Angelo’s determination to curb the sin in the town (I.2.154–160), and Isabella’s determination to stay clear of Angelo’s cunning proposition of bargaining her brother’s release with fornication (II.4.106–108). The play purports that, as far as sexual relations are concerned, life comes with a warning, namely, that, when such relations are illicit, they condemn the soul to eternal death.

The eschatological warning in *Measure for Measure* must be viewed against its contemporary background. Shakespeare lived and worked during times of radical religious changes in England, and although a discussion of a possible direct relation between the Church *status quo* during his life and his work is beyond the purpose here for lack of “external evidence” (Boris, 1977, p. 206) certain inferences regarding eschatology are, however, available.

Thus, a relatively recent doctoral thesis records a “thinning” of the eschatological aspects in the official documents of the Church of England since the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth (Patrick, 2013, p. 3). However, it seems that in the wake of the Reformation in Tudor England, a few writers tackled eschatology and the Book of Revelation “to make it accessible to the ‘common sort’ of Christian” and to show “the usefulness of eschatological themes in studying ordinary and normative aspects of religious experience” (O’Banion, 2006, p. 693). Eschatology refers to “the ‘four last things’—death, judgement, heaven and hell” which were expanded “as the umbrella for all of end-of-life, end-of-creation, and New



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Creation beliefs” (Patrick, 2013, p. 5),<sup>2</sup> and also for the afterlife viewed as “the whole of the post-mortem period” (Patrick, 2013, p. 4).

Eschatological insights in *Measure for Measure* arise from connecting certain lines in the text with certain biblical verses related to acknowledging “death, judgement, heaven and hell.” In this sense, the play contains warnings, signs, and a sense of an implacable immediacy of the effect of one’s actions on the fate of their soul in the afterlife.

## Eschatology and Divine Providence

A Christian reading<sup>3</sup> of the play may see the Duke as a force within the play. The Duke could signify Divine Providence and be an element in the development of eschatological themes in the play. As Divine Providence, in his departure from the city the Duke lets people act as they want to. Then, he evaluates their conduct and guides them through. Bernthal’s pro-Jacobean reading emphasises four objectives for the Duke to attain: to test his “lieutenants,” to enforce the law as it is promulgated in the state, to regulate the state of marriage in the state, and to accomplish all these without him exercising his power in public (Bernthal, 1992, p. 254). Though Bernthal’s interpretation has political roots, the same aspects are paradoxically similar with Providence’s properties of omniscience (Swedenborg, 1848, p. 27, 96), omnipresence (Swedenborg, 1848, p. 30, 96), and omnipotence (Swedenborg, 1848, p. 27, 30, 96). Divine Providence may intervene in the life of people to steer them in education, to protect them with care, to bestow wisdom on them but not to force them (Swedenborg, 1848, pp. 38–58). Each of these functions of Divine Providence are exemplified by the Duke’s part in the play.

We find that the Duke knows the antics of Lord Angelo (III.1.213–230), he endows him with power (I.1.41–45, I.3.11–13), he requests enforcement of the extant law (I.1.64–66), and requests education (I.1.26–40). Under disguise, the Duke eases the conflicting situations brought by a wrong turn of the actions in the play (III.1.196–202, 250–256, IV.2.169–171), spurs people to repentance (II.3.19–39, III.2.18–26, V.1.478–484), and encourages forgiveness (IV.3.123–126, V.1.398–401), albeit he refrains to show himself as such (I.1.67–68, I.3.35–36). On returning, the Duke reveals a judgmental side. He judges (V.1.401–413, 441, 497, 505–511) and forgives on condition that his will be obeyed thereafter (V.1.359, 494–496, 516–518, 529–531).

The Duke leads his subjects through their tribulations without revealing himself to them as such. He says he loves the people but refrains from showing himself to them:

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I love the people,  
But do not like to stage me to their eyes:  
Though it do well, I do not relish well  
Their loud applause and *Aves* vehement. (1.1.67–70)

The reason the Duke does not want to be the one who enforces the laws seems to correspond, on the one hand, to the indiscernible action of Divine Providence, and, on the other hand, to the responsibility one must take for their actions. However, he attends to the function of education of Divine Providence, which resides in the Duke's enjoining Angelo to implement the extant, yet mocked statutes:

In our remove, be thou at full ourself,  
Mortality and mercy in Vienna  
Live in thy tongue, and heart. (1.1.43–45)  
[ . . . ]  
Your scope is as mine own,  
So to enforce or qualify the laws  
As to your soul seems good. (1.1.64–66)

This means that, although the laws exist, when there is no education about the effect of the extant laws on the people who fail to live by them, Divine Providence curbs punishment. Divine Providence acts for the good of people and does not punish as Divine Providence, like the Duke's leniency. However, from an eschatological point of view, obeying or disobeying the laws has repercussions on the afterlife. Divine Providence acting for the good of people means that the people should be informed of what is good. Therefore, the Duke delegates Angelo to implement the laws in his stead and intends to watch over his people under disguise, and this is exactly what he reveals to Friar Thomas when he asks him for an abode, a habit, and instructions on how to act like a friar:

Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,  
'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them  
For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done,



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When evil deeds have their permissive pass,  
And not the punishment. Therefore, indeed, my father,  
I have on Angelo impose'd the office;  
Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home,  
And yet my nature never in the fight  
To do in slander. (I.3.35–43)

Divine Providence takes care of the people; it oversees the way things evolve despite not being perceived by people. So does the duke in his retreat from authority as, under the disguise of a friar, he intends to oversee what happens in Vienna—particularly, to see what Angelo does:

And to behold his sway,  
I will, as t'were a brother of your order,  
Visit both prince and people. (I.3.43–45)

Similar to the way the wisdom of Divine Providence intervenes in the life of men to solve the problems, likewise the Duke manages to alleviate the evil initiated by Angelo. Imagining the Duke as signifying Providence creates the “stationary background” which Wilson Knight deems ineluctable if it is that “the most ordinary remark” in the play be perceived as “tense, poignant—often of shattering power” (Knight, 2005, p. 4).

## **Eschatological implications of illicit sexual relations**

With reference to illicit sexual relations, the Bible in *Jude* 1:7 writes that “Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them, which in like manner as they did, committed fornication, [ . . . ] are set forth for an example, and suffer the vengeance of eternal fire.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in *Jude* there is the concept of setting an example and the concept of damnation. The Duke’s leave of absence may suggest an absence of Providence as the invisible purveyor of support for living people. On the other hand, the departure of Divine Providence may also signify the end of a person’s life or the point when time ceases to flow for a person. So does the support from Divine Providence. The cessation of help from Divine Providence leaves the soul of the dead person to the mercy of what Laura Shanga in her article about angelology says about the angels of Heaven and Hell who contend for the soul of dead persons based on

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their deeds in life (2009). Lord Angelo, as the only authority left in the place of the Duke or Divine Providence, may be viewed as, on the one hand, the one who sets an example, and, on the other hand, an angel who contends for a soul.

The hypothesis that Angelo's word in the play suggests a condemnation of the soul of a person who had been involved in the sin of fornication develops on two levels. Within Knight's "stationary background," this means that, on the one hand, Angelo's word condemns a trespasser of the sin of fornication because he wants to set an example, and, on the other hand, Angelo's word condemns to eternal death the soul of a person who pursued fornication.

Firstly, Angelo condemns Claudio to death to set an example, according to what Lucio tells Isabella when he acts as Claudio's messenger to her:

he arrests him on it,  
And follows close the rigour of the statute  
To make him an example. (I.4.66–68)

Then, Angelo's illocutionary condemnation of Claudio comes when Isabella pleads for her brother's life, and Angelo answers with short sentences which reveal his intransigence regarding the sin of pursuing illegal sexual relations:

Your brother is a forfeit of the law,  
And you but waste your words. (II.2.71–72)

Angelo's illocutionary words written in his note sent to Provost condemns Claudio to eternal death:

*Whatsoever you may hear to the contrary, let  
Claudio be executed by four of the clock, and in the after-  
noon, Barnardine. For my better satisfaction, let me have  
Claudio's head sent me by five. Let this be duly performed,  
with a thought that more depends on it than we must yet  
deliver. Thus fail not to do your office, as you will answer*



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*it at your peril.* (IV.2.118–124)

Furthermore, Lord Angelo enjoins Isabella to be content with his decision of punishing Claudio for the sin of fornication:

Be you content, fair maid;

It is the law, not I, condemn your brother, (II.2.79–80)

then again:

Be satisfied;

Your brother dies tomorrow; be content. (II.2.105–106)

In enjoining Isabella to be content, Angelo seems to answer to her own desire expressed in the very beginning, when she comes to Angelo and says that, although she deems her brother's sin reprehensible and would like to have it punished, she, as his sister, feels compelled to ask for mercy for him:

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.2.29–33)

Isabella's mixed feelings about her brother's transgression combined with Angelo's implacable answers to her pleading for her brother's life are apt to give insights about the law against fornication and the repercussions of such a sin in the afterlife as laid out in several verses in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> The matter is reiterated when she comes to Lord Angelo again, to ask about the fate of her brother, and is reassured by Angelo that Claudio's cannot be forgiven:

That you might know it, would much better please me,

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Than to demand what 'is.—Your brother cannot live. (II.4.32–33)

After an exchange of words between Isabella—who insists on asking for mercy and forgiveness for her brother—and Angelo—who retorts—, the latter reaches a point when he turns Isabella's request against her on a «measure for measure» basis or, as D. A. Traversi has shown, proceeds to attack her on her own terms (1942, p. 50). In this scene, Angelo realises not only his obsession with Isabella but also his instinctual urges towards her. Thus, Angelo asks Isabella to choose between Claudio's death and Claudio's life specifying that for her brother's life she must compensate by giving herself up to him:

Which had you rather, that the most just law  
Now took your brother's life; or, to redeem him,  
Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness  
As she that he hath stain'd? (II.4.52–55)

According to Traversi, Angelo's proposition is formulated in such a way that Isabella may understand that her insistence in asking for mercy in a case of fornication equates with her admitting to pursue an act of fornication herself (1942, p. 51). At first, Isabella fails to understand Angelo's proposition, but, when Angelo repeats his proposal she understands the meaning and rejects it firmly. It is only then that she articulates explicitly that pursuing illicit sexual relations has an implication of eternal death of the soul:

Better it were a brother died at once,  
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,  
Should die for ever. (II.4.106–108)

To her reply, since she does not comply with his proposition in the name of charity, Angelo rounds off his rationale by inquiring whether she does not see her resolution as harsh as she deemed Claudio's death sentence to be. Isabella responds by making a distinction between asking for an abatement of a death sentence as an act of mercy and pursuing a sin of fornication as an act of charity:



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lawful mercy

Is nothing kin to foul redemption. (II.4.112–113)

This exchange of replies between Angelo and Isabella exudes sharply the implication of illicit sexual relations or the sin of fornication for the soul in the afterlife. To this effect, Roy Battenhouse enforces the eschatological sense of the play in saying that “Only a devil’s logic would confound Christian charity with mortal sin” (1946, p. 1044). Indeed, since Isabella is set on a path of refraining from sensual pleasures as she herself has asked of Sister Francisca upon intending to enter the sisterhood of Saint Clare, her love for herself is just that: to remain chaste. Or the love towards her brother should be judged in accordance with her options not in accordance with her brother’s, which, as the play shows, has indulged in worldly pleasures.

## Eschatological necessity of acknowledging sin and repenting

God told the Israelites in the Old Law that He does not want the death of the sinner but that the sinner should repent and live: “Have I any desire that the wicked should die, saith the Lord God? Or shall he not live, if he return from his ways?” (*Ezekiel* 18:23) Then, *Ezekiel* 33: 11, 15, and 16 reveals the Lord’s ordering the “son of man” to make known His statutes to the people so that the people may take care and mend their ways. If they commit sins they shall die and if they repent and observe the statutes, they shall live:

<sup>11</sup> [...] As I live, saith the Lord God, I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live [...] <sup>15</sup> *To wit*, if the wicked restore the pledge, *and* give again that he had robbed, *and* walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity, he shall surely live, *and* not die. <sup>16</sup> None of his sins that he hath committed, shall be mentioned unto him: *because* he hath done that, which is lawful and right, he shall surely live. (*Ezek.* 33:11, 15–16)

Being asked by the Duke to take his place: “In our remove be thou at full ourself,/Mortality and mercy in Vienna” (I.1.43–44), Angelo implements the law that “hath not been dead, though it hath slept” (II.2.91). In doing so, he is fully aware of the verses in *Ezekiel* 33 which show that the people need to be informed about the deadly character of the sins and that he may be held accountable for any lapse of information thereof as it is written in the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament:



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<sup>7</sup> So thou, O son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and admonish them from me. <sup>8</sup> When I shall say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt die the death, if thou dost not speak and admonish the wicked of his way, that wicked man shall die for his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thine hand. <sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it, if he do not turn from his way, he shall die for his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul. (*Ezek. 33:7-9*)<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Lord Angelo tells Escalus that the law must be actively applied to show the people that it is in effect:

We must not make a scarecrow of the law,  
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,  
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it  
Their perch, and not their terror. (II.1.1-4)

Escalus is recognised by the Duke as the epitome of science (“your own science/ Exceeds [ . . . ] the lists of all advice/My strength can give you” (I.1.5-7)) and asked to second Angelo (“There is our commission,/From which we would not have you warp” (I.1.13-14)). Or, from his privileged position, Escalus makes Angelo the first to be forewarned of the necessity of acknowledging the sin and of repenting, as it were. He asks him not to be too hard on people when he sets an example so that he may not risk being punished for sins of which he could have stained himself. In his reply, Angelo admits that he may be tempted but he cannot see himself falling: “Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,/Another thing to fall.” (II.1.17-18)

Angelo is introduced by the Duke as a person whose life should be an example for others. The Duke’s eulogy reminds the words of the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said that “a city that is set on a hill, cannot be hid” (*Matt. 5:14*):

Angelo:

There is a kind of character in thy life  
That to th’observer doth thy history  
Fully unfold. Thyself and thy belongings  
Are not thine own so proper as to waste  
Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.





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Angelo had recognized the sin of fornication in others (II.1.31, II.2.71, 80,91–99, II.4.33, 42–49), had proceeded to condemn it in others in order to set an example (II.2.91–99), and had admitted to being tempted himself (II.1.17–18), but he was unable to discern between being tempted by sexual attraction (II.2.163–187) and falling for the sin of fornication (V.1.468–475). In this incapability to discern between the two lies the dichotomy in his spirit. That is, on the one hand, Angelo knows theoretically that he should resist sexual temptation. On the other hand though, he falls under the impulse of sexual attraction. The impulse blurs his clarity of thought and he acts on the sexual impulse thereby forgetting all what he knew about resisting sexual temptation.

The dichotomy in Angelo’s conception about the workings of sin in man vanishes in the end of the play, when Angelo recognizes his deeds as they are disclosed by Isabella to an audience including the Duke (V.1.365–366, 472–475), and he admits to his fault (V.1.370, 375). His admitting to his own fault and showing remorse right up to wishing his own death (V.1.371–372, 474) makes him worthy of forgiveness on the part of the Duke (V.1.494–496). Besides, wishing himself dead than enduring the shame of his behaviour is a proof of the dichotomy he went through regarding fornication:

I am sorry that such sorrow I procure,  
And so deep sticks it in my penitent heart  
That I crave death more willingly than mercy;  
'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it. (V.1.472–475)

These happenings link the content of the play with the Old Testament teachings in *Ezekiel* 18:23, *Ezekiel* 33:11, and *Ezekiel* 33:19.<sup>7</sup>

## **Eschatology in relation to justice, mercy, and forgiveness**

The Duke withholds his resolution to absolve Lord Angelo until he is convinced of Isabella’s aptitude and determination to forgive Angelo while she is still convinced that her brother died at Angelo’s behest. The Duke unfolds an examination of her in two steps. First, he reveals himself to her by using the same word, “prince.”<sup>8</sup> “Come hither, Isabel./Your friar is now your prince” (V.1.379–380), which he used when he told Friar Thomas that he was going to watch secretly the way Angelo—who, at the time, was to be “prince” in the Duke’s stead—conducts himself:

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And to behold his sway,  
I will, as 'twere a brother of your order,  
Visit both prince and people. (I.3.43–45)

In doing so, the Duke wants to remind Isabella that he kindly assisted her with her tribulations when she asked him for help when he was disguised as Friar. Now that he is again himself, the prince in Vienna, the Duke wants to ask her to accept her brother's death with equanimity, and to forgive Angelo. Therefore, since he absolves Isabella for having asked him for help with her tribulations while she was completely unaware of his real identity, now the Duke asks Isabella to show the same level of grace towards forgiving Angelo in a two-step process. The first step is accepting Claudio's death without resentment:

You are pardon'd, Isabel.  
And now, dear maid, be you as free to us.  
Your brother's death, I know, sits at your heart:  
And you may marvel why I obscur'd myself,  
Labouring to save his life, and would not rather  
Make rash remonstrance of my hidden power  
Than let him so be lost. O most kind maid,  
It was the swift celerity of his death,  
Which I did think with slower foot came on,  
That brain'd my purpose. But peace be with him.  
That life is better life, past fearing death,  
Than that which lives to fear. Make it your comfort,  
So happy is your brother. (V.1.385–397)

Isabella passes the first step in her examination: "I do, my lord" (V.1.397).

The second step in Isabella's examination comes when the Duke pretends that Isabella forgives Angelo for Mariana's sake, yet still condemns the latter to death as a «measure for measure» justice for Claudio's death (V.1.409). Moreover, the Duke indicts Angelo for his "double violation/Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach" (V.1.402–403), that is, his



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attempt to corrupt a maiden promised to a convent; for failing to keep his promise regarding Claudio's life after the night tryst; and for having Claudio beheaded at "an unusual hour" (V.1.456). In secret though, the Duke is testing the disposition of both Isabella and Mariana for mercy despite their past tribulations endured because of Lord Angelo's ways towards them. Mariana passes the test spontaneously and implores the Duke to spare Angelo's life. Being discouraged by the Duke, she rallies Isabella's help in the process. Isabella is pliant, responds to Mariana's supplication, and declares Angelo innocent as far as his fault was only in intention not in deed:

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 no subjects;  
Intent, but merely thoughts (V.1.449–452)

According to Bernthal, at the time there was a law which absolved intention which was not carried through to deed: "the intention to do wrong was a sin but not a crime" (1992, p. 259). Therefore, Isabella passes the second step in her examination. The fact that his subjects show equity, mercy, and forgiveness in judging Angelo makes the Duke publicly absolve him.

In parallel with the eschatological view of the play, it is worth mentioning that, in his pervasive rational and legal analysis of the minutia regarding the various events and indictments in the play, Craig Bernthal assumes that "Shakespeare is creating a kind of 'stage law,'" particularly with regard to Angelo's much-disputed situation (1992, p. 260). Bernthal thinks that "the complexity of response to Angelo's situation" should be accepted because of the "audience propensity to use theatrical productions as a textual grid for topical interpretations, the wide dissemination of legal knowledge, the attendance at plays by members of the Inns of Court, and the high pleasure of using dramas as 'fictional questions' which furnished the beginning of debate rather than the end" (1992, p. 262).<sup>9</sup> Bernthal's ultimately invoking "poetic faith" (1992, p. 261) to mention the Duke's double treatment of Claudio's and Angelo's issues with fornication, aside from offering the advantage of creating interest in post-performance debates, is also a point of view which proves opportune in the relation between the play and the Scriptures. It moves attention from reason to Scripture.

The turn of the play to the happy conclusion in the end fails to release the tension accrued in the first part of the play. In fact, certain critical interpretations mention a lack of





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ordinariness, a lack of consistency, or plainly indict the author.<sup>10</sup> One is left with a frustrating frame of mind as something in the play lingers on and spurs the thought into a thorough search of meaning provided that no perfunctory label has already been attached to the play. Somewhat similar ideas can be found in Stacy Magedanz's claim that the play's implicit failings would lead the audience out of the rational path and uncover the irrational but beneficent possibilities of forgiveness (2004, p. 329). Harry T. Baker remarks that the play has the power to elicit positive attitudes towards its central characters from a live audience in spite of the difficulty of translating forgiveness into acting on stage given the character of forgiveness to be "beyond nature" (1923, p. 21). David L. Stevenson, too, thinks that the intricacies of justice and mercy, and the use of paradox are elaborately drawn together in the play to spur the audience into making sense out of them for themselves (1956, p. 263). All these views support the idea that the play aims at a spiritual end.

### Eschatology and the Kingdom of Heaven

In the end of the play, the Duke utters a most perplexing chiasmus: "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (V.1.534) There is an oxymoronic content betrayed by the contrast between the Duke's possessions as the representative of the government and a votary of a sisterhood, who by definition should relinquish all possessions. The chiasmus opposes two concepts and repeats the words in an antimetabole fashion to maximise the impetus. Since an antimetabole places the stress on its second part, the exegesis should start with the second part of the chiasmus: "what is yours is mine." We are aware that Isabella's material possessions are nought because she pledges to enter a convent where she is bound to "profess the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience."<sup>11</sup> What then is there that the Duke pretends she possesses other than precisely her vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience? Or, according to the Gospels,<sup>12</sup> these are "counsels for those who desire to become *perfect*."<sup>13</sup> The Duke's statement seems to mean that Isabella's endowment is what she is required to have to be perfect.

As for the Duke, harking back to the text of the play referring to him, we find that, when asked by the Duke as Friar "of what disposition was the Duke?" (III.2.224–225), Escalus says that he is endowed with a propensity towards introspection as being "One that, above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself" (III.2.226–227). When asked "What pleasure was he given to?" (III.2.228), Escalus responds that he has an earnest concern for people—more for the others than for himself: "Rather rejoicing to see another merry, than merry at anything which professed to make him rejoice" (III.2.229–230).



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The Duke's chiasmus in the end of the play could be seen as a commendation praising Isabella for her Christian ways. Isabella is introduced in the play as an aspirant to the secluded life in a convent in order to relinquish all kinds of passions and lead a spiritually enriched life. This interpretation considers Shakespeare's choice of introducing Isabella as a novice to a convent as a condition which is to remain as such. Moreover, the way in which the Duke arranges the finale for Isabella seems to be a test for her ability to forgive the evil done to her. There is even a passage in which the Duke tempers Isabella's anger at the news of her brother's death: "Forbear it therefore; give your cause to heaven" (IV.3.124). Indeed, she forgives Angelo even when she thinks that her brother is dead at Angelo's behest. Isabella passes the test of Christian forgiveness. Forgiveness of Angelo and a serene attitude regarding the death of her brother, who failed to obey the law, are in accord with the Christian ethics and sustain the caveats connected to eschatology in the play. Isabella would therefore qualify for the life of renunciation of worldly pleasures.

Neither the Duke, nor Isabella show any propensity towards married life, and nor is there any reason for them to be punished with marriage for sexually laden acts as the rest of the couples are. Right from the beginning of the play, the Duke declares his disentanglement of any preoccupation with love:

No. Holy father, throw away that thought;  
Believe not that the dribbling dart of love  
Can pierce a complete bosom. Why I desire thee  
To give me secret harbour hath a purpose  
More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends  
Of burning youth. (I.3.1–6)

Then the Duke has a dispute with Lucio about women. Being disguised as a friar when Lucio, with reference to illegitimacy, insinuates that the Duke is accustomed to women, the Friar replies that the Duke has given no proofs of interest in women:

*Lucio.* [ . . . ] He had some feeling of the  
sport; he knew the service; and that instructed him  
to mercy.

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*Duke.* I have never heard the absent Duke much de-  
tested for women; he was not inclined that way. (III.2.115–119)

Since Lucio continues to develop the calumny, he is enjoined by the Friar to repeat it face-to-face with the Duke:

if ever the Duke return—as  
our prayers are he may—let me desire you to make  
your answer before him. If it be honest you have  
spoke, you have courage to maintain it.” (III.2.150–153)

As far as Isabella is concerned, Shakespeare shows her to be knowledgeable of life in the world but not less of life in a convent. When Isabella is spurred by Lucio to enhance her plea for Claudio’s life, she develops her pleading increasingly up to a point when Angelo postpones their dialogue. Being already incited, Isabella promises Angelo “gifts that heaven shall share” (II.2.148) with him as she promises him prayers from “fasting maids” (II.2.155). In that, she shows a profound knowledge of the way prayers should be carried out:

true prayers,  
That shall be up at heaven and enter there  
Ere sunrise: prayers from preserved souls,  
From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicated  
To nothing temporal. (II.2.152–156)

When she realises Angelo’s proposition to her, Isabella exclaims:

Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother, die:  
More than our brother is our chastity. (II.4.183–184)

A somewhat similar point is made by R. W. Chambers. He views Isabella’s determination to remain chaste as chiming her choice of becoming a votary of Saint Clare: “Whether she



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remains in the Convent or no, one who is contemplating such a life can no more be expected to sell herself into mortal sin, than a good soldier can be expected to sell a stronghold entrusted to him” (1939, p. 288).

Shakespeare cuts a clear distinction between the inclination to married life and the propensity to lead a life devoted to God or “[t]o nothing temporal” (II.2.156) in the case of Isabella, or to a more important end than love and marriage in the case of the Duke:

a purpose

More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends

Of burning youth. (I.3.4b–6)

When the Duke says to Isabella that she is to be his when he shows her that her brother is alive although she thought him dead, his statement might be interpreted as his considering that Isabella is akin to him: that Isabella is a person with a propensity towards a life of study and contemplation. An unexpected further statement of the Duke’s is his postponing his own words by adding: “but fitter time for that” (V.1.491).

The Duke has a quasi-authoritative attitude towards Isabella. He fails to mind her answering him and, indeed, she has no answer. The repeated proposal in the last five lines is also postponed immediately after the chiasmus:

Dear Isabel,

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.

So bring us to our palace, where we’ll show

What’s yet behind that’s meet you all should know. (V.1.531–536)

The Duke’s proposal followed shortly by summoning everybody to the palace sounds like a directorial indication for the actors to ensure the exit from the scene in the fashion of a wedding succession as a crowning of a finale of good auguries. Therefore, the chiasmus is better left as an aporia. For lack of emotional attitude on the part of the Duke and for lack of answers from Isabella to the Duke, the chiasmus might stay clear of a wedding proposal.



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Besides, Barbara Baines writes that—

Shakespeare's adherence to the conventions of comedy goes too far [ . . . ] in the proposal of marriage by the Duke to Isabella. This proposal is not only precipitous but contextually problematic, for it is spoken to one who has already chosen to be a bride of Christ and spoken within the Duke's display of absolute authority. The Duke's proposal is precipitous because the dramatist is trapped by the chastity essential to the characterization of the Duke. One whose 'complete bosom' is safe from 'the dribbling dart of love,' whose chastity allows him to wear the robes of a holy friar, can hardly acknowledge that he has fallen in love. His proposal of marriage must, likewise, be couched not in terms of the fulfilment of his desire but as a benefit to Isabella: "I have a motion that imports your good." (V.1.535) (1990, p. 284)

The way in which the Duke formulates his statement in the form of antimetabole seems to be a thorough appreciation of Isabella. If the role of the Duke is viewed as a synecdoche of Divine Providence or even of the Kingdom of Heaven, then whoever has his characteristics is apt to belong to the improved life: "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" (V.1.534). Or, with her intention of entering a convent, Isabella has already professed her aspiration to an improved life. Roy Battenhouse's religious interpretation of the play identifies the Duke's proposal to Isabella in the end of the play to be her admittance into the Heavenly Kingdom with all that should follow to such an admittance: "for Isabella, on the other hand, there are the words of welcome: 'Come thither, Isabel. Your friar is now your prince.' (Cf. *Matt.* 25:34. 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . . ')" (1946, p. 1034).

## Conclusions

Whereas the skeleton of the plot comes from Italian and English sources with different overall treatment, *Measure for Measure* allows connecting the themes of the play to biblical precepts. In terms of eschatology, this paper argues that *Measure for Measure* shows that pursuing illicit sexual relations leads to eternal damnation. Isabella states it clearly in her response to Lord Angelo. Therefore, the play is spurring one to recognise illicit sexual relations as undesirable and to repent while they have time and can be forgiven. It is also a warning that Providence is enduring as long as the person is alive.



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With respect to Providence, the character of Barnardine has a particular place in the play. He is indifferent to death and to what may come after death. Barnardine's condition is described through a chiasmus: "Drunk many times a day, if not many days entirely drunk." (IV.2.147–148) Mirroring the phrase tautologically suggests that Barnardine is twice hazy. When the Duke inquires about Barnardine's repentance and attitude in prison as a death convict, Provost describes Barnardine as being "careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come: insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal." (IV.2.140–143) The oxymoronic construction "insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal" is a chiasmus which summarises the condition of a person who, despite being a mortal, ignores any preoccupation with his ineluctable death. The chiasmus shows the nature of Barnardine's haziness: he is at the same time inebriated physically and blindfolded spiritually. The latter chiasmus is a forceful eschatological signal in the play. *Ezekiel* 18:20–21 shows that a person's deeds decide their fate: "20 [ . . . ] the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. 21 But if the wicked will return from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, *and* shall not die." Verse *Ezekiel* 18:32 says "For I desire not the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: cause therefore *one another* to return, and live ye."

Therefore, referring to Barnardine's lack of preoccupation with his death, the Duke says that "He wants advice." (IV.2.144) This remark transcends the text of the play and may have been employed by Shakespeare to induce an effect on the consciousness of the listeners or readers. It shows the importance of education and brings us back to the Duke's role as Divine Providence. Then again, the play shows that the chances are that mistakes might be forgiven if there is remorse for making them, and it suggests the inevitability of punishment after an unrepentant death.

Isabella's attitude in the play shows that charity—"A disposition to judge leniently and hopefully of the character, aims, and destinies of others, to make allowance for their apparent faults" (*OED*)<sup>14</sup>—is a necessary ingredient in the array of feelings one needs to have.

The play is a proponent of answering with equanimity to life's aggressions, of inciting to repentance, and of inducing the idea that life on earth is temporal and that the way it is led has repercussions. Whether these repercussions are perceived as related to the afterlife of the soul depends on a certain level of acquaintance with the Bible. In a review of Hannibal Hamlin's book *The Bible in Shakespeare*, Steven Marx shows that the significance of *Measure for Measure* is to instil present-day audiences with a familiarity with the biblical topics in Shakespeare's plays (2014, pp. 1116–1118). Hence, the present insights on eschatology which seem to derive from the play should be welcomed. It is just one of the



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many possible interpretations of the play. Protagoras's thesis that "man is the measure of all things" (Bonazzi, 2020) has a certain kinship with the title of the play in suggesting the possibility that each encounter with the play—by reading or by watching a performance—might elicit a different interpretation.

## Notes

1. All references to acts, scenes, and lines are from J. W. Lever (ed.). (1965, 1966). First edition of *Measure for Measure. The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*. London and New York: Routledge.
2. Patrick. "Resurrection and Eschatology," p. 5, referencing N.T. Wright. (1996), *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress press, pp. 207–209.
3. Wilson G. Knight. (1930). *The Wheel of Fire*. (London: H. Milford), pp. 80–106. W.W. Lawrence. (1931). *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. (New York, Second Edition), pp. 102–112. Charles Jasper Sisson. (1934). *The mythical sorrows of Shakespeare*. (London: H. Milford), p. 18. R.W. Chambers. (1939). *Man's Unconquerable Mind*. (London: Jonathan Cape), p. 282.
4. All Bible quotes are from the 1599 Geneva Bible. Tolle Lege Press. [Online]. <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/1599-Geneva-Bible-GNV/>. Accessed: 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.
5. "For this is the will of God *even* your sanctification, *and* that ye should abstain from fornication," (*I Thessalonians* 4:3), "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his wife, and let every woman have her own husband." (*I Corinthians* 7:2), "As Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them, which in like manner as they did, committed fornication, and followed strange flesh, are set forth for an example, and suffer the vengeance of eternal fire." (*Jude* 1:7)
6. <sup>14</sup>For the *kingdom of heaven* is as a man that going into a strange country, called his servants, and delivered to them his goods.<sup>15</sup>And unto one he gave five talents, and to another two, and to another one, to every man after his own ability, and straightway went from home. (*Matt.* 25:14–15)
7. <sup>19</sup>But if the wicked return from his wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby. (*Ezekiel* 13:19)
8. According to J. W. Lever, "prince" is "the person with sovereign authority, irrespective of his title." J. W. Lever (ed.). (1965, 1966). First edition of *Measure for Measure. The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 21.
9. Bernthal's Notes give Birje-Patil, Lawrence, and Schanzer for "fictional questions."
10. Dr Samuel Johnson considers that "The plot is rather intricate" and only "the comick part is very natural and pleasing." Also, "in many of his plays the latter part is evidently neglected" (Johnson. *Preface to Shakespeare*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5429/pg5429.txt>. Accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> May 2022). William Hazlitt thinks that the play "has succeeded in causing repulsiveness in audiences in spite of presenting people, such as Lucio, Pompey and Master Froth, that are determined to perform well their role in society." (Hazlitt. (1921). "Measure for Measure," *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*.



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London & Toronto: J M Dent & Sons, New York: E P Dutton & Co. [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). Accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> February 2022, pp. 245–246). Samuel Taylor Coleridge considers the play “the only painful” in the canon. He also thinks that “the pardon and marriage of Angelo not merely baffles the strong indignant claim of justice—for cruelty, with lust and damnable baseness, cannot be forgiven, because we cannot conceive them as being morally repented of; but it is likewise degrading to the character of woman.” (Coleridge. (1907). *Coleridge’s Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare & Some Other Old Poets & Dramatists*, in Ernest Rhys (ed.), *English Library*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., Retrieved from the Internet: [https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4507094/mod\\_resource/content/1/COLERIDGES%20ESSAY%20ABOUT%20SHAKESPEARE.pdf](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4507094/mod_resource/content/1/COLERIDGES%20ESSAY%20ABOUT%20SHAKESPEARE.pdf). Accessed: 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2022, p. 84). Sir E. K. Chambers considers that *Measure for Measure* is a play that “perplexes and offends, with its deliberate painting of the seamy side of things, through which intolerable personages pass to an end that is certainly determined by no principles of poetic justice.” He also thinks that “there is a cruel hint in the laughter, and the engineer of the reconciliation is surely a cynic.” (E. K. Chambers. (1964). *Shakespeare. A Survey*, Penguin Books. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.499240/page/n177/mode/2up?view=theater>. Book Source: *Digital Library of India Item 2015.499240*. Accessed: 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2022, p. 162, 164). Craig A. Bernthal declares *Measure for Measure* “a play which stoutly resists closure” because the Duke “forces two [ . . . ] marriages,” because he receives no answer from his “pardoned criminals and Isabella,” and because “There is the unresolved question of Angelo’s legal guilt” (Bernthal. *Staging Justice*, p. 264).

11. *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1192 §2. [Online]. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic\\_lib2-cann573-606\\_en.html#TITLE\\_I](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann573-606_en.html#TITLE_I). Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2022.
12. *Matthew 19:10–12; Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23; Mark 10*, and “Jesus and the rich young man.”
13. The STANDS<sub>4</sub> Network. [Online]. <https://www.definitions.net/definition/evangelical+counsels>. Accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> April 2022.
14. Meaning of «charity» since 1483.

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