

Measure For Measure and the Epistle to the Romans

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In the period in which Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*, he was regularly investigating ways in which the drama might reflect and explore matters in doubt. In the Histories he had attempted to support certitudes upon which Man might depend, or at least find it useful or even necessary to depend; but after *Henry V* he was more interested in what was the experience of living with a philosophy or belief than in how it might be justified and made to work. *Julius Caesar* is a play of "isms": stoicism, epicurism, absolutism, and so on; Hamlet, as a Renaissance scholar-prince, seeks a place to stand between the "isms" of chivalry and those of the new politics. In *Measure for Measure*, a morality play warping towards tragedy, it was the "isms" of practical Christianity which came under scrutiny.¹

Shakespeare's working knowledge of the Bible has long been recognised, though he seems to have been more familiar with some books of the New Testament than with others. Matthew is more extensively quoted than the other three Evangelists together; *Romans* is more extensively quoted than even 1 and 2 *Corinthians* together. *Romans* was, of course, the great "Protestant" letter, and Shakespeare could be expected to know it more intimately than any other. Echoes of *Romans*, in terms of quotation, paraphrase, and shared terminology, are notably denser in *Measure for Measure* than in any other of Shakespeare's plays. That this is not an accident, but rather evidence of a carefully planned investigation of Paul's terminology and dialectic is what I am proposing in this paper. Whatever else he is doing, Shakespeare is testing out *Romans*.

The title of *Measure for Measure*, it has always been supposed, was taken from Matthew vii:2.

*For with what iudgment ye iudge, yee shall be
iudged, and with what measure ye mete, it shall
be measured to you againe.*²

There is more to it than this. Act V, where justice is not so much dispensed as dispensed with, presents a Doomsday situation in which either the God/Duke hasn't got it all right or we haven't. Justice goes out of the window, mercy is whimsical, and we can-

not be sure whether measure is given for measure or not. To say this, however, is not to agree with some commentators who have found this play unbearably negative or totally cynical. It is not, I suggest, an attack on God, but a subtle and serious refutation of certain ways of regarding Him, and all the more powerful for being wryly amusing. As Shakespeare sees it, if Paul is right, in *Romans*, the ways of Man are fraught and the ways of God incomprehensible:

... but sinne, that it might appeare sinne, wrought death in me by that which is good, that sinne might be out of measure sinfull by the commandment. (*Romans*, vii.13)

If we accept that, for God's mysterious purposes we, who are slain by sin, are thus sinful "out of measure", we must find what consolation we may in resigning ourselves to Paul's injunction:

... that no man presume to vnderstande aboue that which is meete to vnderstand, but that he vnderstande according to sobrietie, as God hath dealt to euery man the measure of faith. (xii. 3)

Understanding, Paul admits, is at the severest premium; we are out of measure sinful, that is, sinful beyond what is measurable by us; but we may be redeemed by the measure of faith we have been accorded, that measure of faith being itself beyond our comprehension. If this is the *measure for measure* about which Shakespeare is writing, the play was from its inception poised unhappily between tragedy and farce.

There is much in the opening chapter of *Romans* which is central to Shakespeare's thinking in *Measure for Measure*, and indeed Paul's quotation from Habakuk in verse 17 – "The iuste shal liue by faith" – may be taken to be the central truth to be affirmed in *Measure for Measure*, though not in the way Paul affirms it. Paul is not very helpful at this point about the meaning of "faith", but seems to be saying that it is a confirmed belief that God will repay, revenge, or at least readjust matters so that evil will not prosper and the faithful will be justified. There is to be implied later the often difficult distinction between faith and the Law: faith gives life, the Law death. Most of this *Measure for Measure* is concerned with in the most overtly challenging way: Shakespeare will argue that this may be an eternal truth – the Law certainly will pass away – but in practical terms, it could not be thought a temporal truth. At an important moment in the play he will have Isabella, trapped by her own argument, let her guard down and deliver a key line:

'Tis set down so in heaven, but not in earth. (II.iv.50)³

Shakespeare suggests in this play that in the Day of Judgment itself we shall still be taking things on faith; why some will be damned and others saved will be beyond our understanding. Thus

he has the play end with perhaps the oddest final declaration in all his work:

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

What's yet behind that's meet you all should know. (V.i.535-6)

Romans xii.3 is consciously echoed, but with a wry smile.

Who *are* the just who shall live by faith? In i.7 Shakespeare found Paul speaking of those at Rome who are "called to be saints". The word "saint" was associated in the popular mind with two groups: Catholics, who canonised saints, and Puritans, who called themselves saints. In *Measure for Measure*, we associate the word with Isabella and Angelo.⁴ Shakespeare is far from mocking them: it is what each stands for that he is attacking: the Catholic delusion in the one, the Puritan delusion in the other; both, he suggests, derive from Paul. If Chapter 1 verse 21 seems to apply more to Angelo than to Isabella, that is simply because our natural tendency is to focus on sins of commission more readily than upon sins of omission. In fact, this verse applies with equal significance, though in a different way, to Isabella:

*Because that when they knewe God, they glorified him not
as God, neither were thankfull, but became vaine in
their thoughtes, and their foolish heart was ful of
darkenesse.*

What happens to these two people happens because neither truly knew God; each was entirely absorbed in his or her own performance, and both were therefore extremely vulnerable. Both were vain in their imaginations to start with, and so lacked the real resources with which to tackle the situations in which they found themselves. Angelo admits to himself his secret vanity (II.iv.9ff), and his rapid degeneration is traced in Pauline terms. In fact, Shakespeare seems to have been at considerable pains to make the fallen Angelo guilty of most of the vices listed by Paul in verses 24-27 and 29-31;⁵ and equally to have been at pains to lay the Pauline accolade upon Isabella: one of the great central ironies of the play is that there is little to choose between them.

In Chapter 2, Paul proceeds to an attack upon hypocrisy, especially that sort which is found in those holding public office. Administrators and teachers of the law come in for the direst warnings. He reminds them that all men are fallen creatures, so that judgment and condemnation of one by another is inexcusable:

*Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whoseuer thou
art that condemnest: for in that thou condemnest
another, thou condemnest thy self: for thou that
condemnest, doest the same things. (ii.1)*

But though Paul speaks powerfully against the hypocrisy of the individual, whether or not he holds public office, the further dimensions of the problem remain unresolved; as Angelo says (II.i.27-

28), the law must operate whether or not its minions are hypocrites. It was a popular debate in Shakespeare's time, and always a rather anxious one. Seeking what guidance they could find in Scripture, Shakespeare's contemporaries found little to help them in these opening chapters of *Romans*: at the crucial moment, Paul turns away into a discussion of circumcision and uncircumcision.

It was rather different with Chapter xiii, which was beloved of the Elizabethan administration, constantly pre-occupied as it was with the preservation of civil obedience. Verse 4 provided one of the most widely quoted passages of Scripture in the days of Shakespeare's youth and early manhood:

*... for he beareth not the sworde for nought: for hee
is the minister of God to take vengeance on him that doeth
euill.*

The passage is specifically evoked by the Duke in his sententious soliloquy:

*He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe. (III.ii. 254-5)*

He is thinking of Angelo, with whom the notion of "severity" (a rare word in Shakespeare) has been clearly associated. The Duke's point must have been familiar enough, but the making of it solves nothing. We have to recognise that, before he found himself so disconcertingly tempted by Isabella, Angelo was trying very hard to bear a blameless life; his severity was no more than what Paul recommended, and was in fact not so much severity as a refusal to compromise with what he took to be evil. Paul urges the Romans to put the past behind them:

*The night is past, and the day is at hande, let vs
therefore cast away the workes of darkenesse, and
let vs put on the armour of light. (xiii.12)*

Angelo tries to use the administration to do just this.

We need not, then, be surprised at the aggrieved tone in which Claudio complains to Lucio:

*but this new governor
Awakes me all the enrolled penalties
Which have, like unscour'd armour, hung by th' wall.*

(I.ii.154-6)

Here we have the awakening from the night of darkness and the armour, the two central images used by Paul in this verse. Claudio accuses Angelo of doing all this simply "for a name", but what Angelo is doing has the clearest support in Paul's letter. Angelo is trying to be right; if he is wrong, we must suspect that it is because he is fated to fall. His failures will show off the Duke to advantage when he returns: Angelo's unrighteousness will reveal the Duke's righteousness. Paul is himself a little unhappy about all this, and

asks:

Now if our vnrighteousnes commend the righteousnes of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous which punisheth? (I speak as a man) (iii.51)

Shakespeare, speaking for Man, gives a fairly pointed answer in *Measure for Measure*, and the play offers no suggestion that consolation may be found in Paul's hopeful assurance that:

There is none that vnderstandeth. (Verse 11)

Paul returns to the joint issues of unbelief and incomprehensibility in Chapters xi and xii, where Shakespeare finds much that is relevant to his purposes. Taking up a thought he had introduced in ix.18, Paul applies it to the question of the Jews and the Remnant:

What then? Israel hath not obtained that hee soght: but the election hath obtained it, and the rest haue bene hardened. (xi.7)

It is Barnardine, whose name means Bear-hard, or Hard-as-a-bear, who represents this last category in *Measure for Measure*; Paul goes on to describe him with some accuracy in his next verse:

According as it is written, God hath giuen them the spirits of slomber: eyes that they shoulde not see, and eares that they should not heare vnto this day. (xi.8)

It is a passage over which there has been a good deal of altercation; commentators would have been glad to find it less uncompromising. Shakespeare baulks at it. Barnardine is quite inaccessible to the words of the Duke, who is finally reduced to forgiving him, murderer as he is, because he has no idea what else to do with him: to execute him would be to murder his soul (hence the need to introduce the dead Ragozine). Shakespeare will not go along with Paul in believing such as Barnardine damned for not understanding the incomprehensible.

Shakespeare challenges Paul on the whole business of "hardening" and "darkening". In Chapter xi we read how the Psalmist called down upon his witless contemporaries the curse of darkness:

Let their eyes be darkened that they see not, and bowe downe their backe alwayes. (Verse 10)

God not only hardens the hearts of unbelievers, but darkens their minds still further.⁶ If directly challenged, Paul would probably have argued that the darkening is the effect of Man's malice rather than the act of God; but, like many commentators, Paul is in difficulties here, as Shakespeare saw clearly enough. As Dodd observes of Paul's citation of the parallel curse in Isaiah (Verse 8):

... being theist, Paul no more than Isaiah could say "fate"; and, shrinking from dualism, he would not say "the devil". Somehow it must all lie in the over-ruling purpose of God.⁷

Interestingly, Shakespeare shows the Duke trying to blame the darkness upon Man's malice, as when he retorts to the slanders of Lucio:

*... if your knowledge be more, it is much darkened
in your malice. (III.ii. 143-4)*

But in fact the word "dark" and its variants are chiefly associated with the Duke himself, "the old fantastical duke of dark corners", as Lucio describes him (IV.iii.156). At another point he says that the Duke:

*yet would have dark deeds darkly answered: he would
never bring them to light. (III.ii.170ff)*

The force of the "yet" is easily overlooked; Lucio's point is that dark deeds are by God *always* darkly requited, that is, mysteriously dealt with. That the Duke "would never bring them to light" is usefully ambiguous: it could mean, "will never expose them for what they are"; or, "will never throw any light on what makes them sinful or on the criteria by which they are judged dark". In this play, "dark" nearly always signifies "mysterious", though Lucio usually manages to attach some sexual signification to the word, which is, of course, a way of trivialising it. Yet when Claudio speaks of dying, he says:

*I will encounter darkness as a bride
And hug it in mine arms (III.i.83-84)*

This striking image echoes Isabella's cry, when she pronounces herself ready to "strip myself to death as to a bed / That longing have been sick for" (II.iv.102-3). There is a persisting complexity in use of "dark" and "darkness"; it is as though Man, baulked of a clearer understanding, could only apprehend darkness sensually. The darkness that Paul attributes to Man, Shakespeare thus turns back upon God: it is God's darkness that fills the heart of Man.

Some other of the central concepts of *Romans* are brought into question as Shakespeare systematically puts pressure upon them. Two of the chief of these are "grace" and "sin"

"Grace" in *Measure for Measure* is a somewhat flexible concept, to say the least of it, and is too closely associated with trial and temptation, intolerance and death, to be a source of comfort and rejoicing (for example, at II.iii. 39; III.i. 44; and IV.iii. 135-6). That Shakespeare is investigating Paul's handling of this concept at crucial moments in *Romans* is revealed in his paraphrasing of vii. 15-16 (iv,iv.31-32 and xi.6 (I.ii. 24-6), recognising that Paul is far from happy about it himself. In Chapter vi, Paul identifies the inference which it is possible to draw from his argument thus far, and which he is anxious to reject:

*What shall we say then? Shall we continue still in
sinne, that grace may abound? God forbid. (Verse 1)*

Here again, the "still" has a force which it is easy for us now to

underestimate. The Authorised Version has simply, "shall we continue in sin", but the versions Shakespeare knew emphasised the continuance by suggesting that it is permanent. The meaning coming across then was not, "Shall we be content to remain sinful in order to show the power of God's grace?" but rather, "Shall we be kept always in sin that God may show the power of His grace?" a reading with more appeal for the Genevan translators, we might think, than for Anglicans in general. The tenor of passages like this is that of the ironic conclusion of *Measure for Measure*: Man cannot win; all he can accomplish is sin; and sin cannot be coped with except by the freely-given, but perhaps freakishly-given and in any case quite unearned grace of God.

In both stages of his argument in Chapter vi (Verses 15-23 repeat and elaborate Verses 1-14), Paul suggests, perhaps more specifically than he intended, that the solution to the problem of co-operating with grace is the crucifixion of the "old man" of the flesh, and the making of one's members servants to righteousness. That Paul meant the whole body of flesh and blood need not be doubted, but it proved very easy for Calvinists then, and for many of all persuasions since, to believe that Paul was talking once again of the sins he had attacked in Chapter i, and of the sexual members exclusively; as when he speaks of having "giuen your members seruants to vncleannes and to iniquitie" (Verse 19). The way to co-operate with grace was to live a sexually blameless life of chastity. Chastity seems to be proposed, if not as the most important virtue, certainly as the *key* virtue, the key to grace. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare calls this whole notion into question by presenting two people whose chastity is unimpeachable, but who, in concentrating so much of their spiritual energy upon its preservation, unbalance not only their judgment but also their nervous equilibrium, and so leave themselves vulnerable to attacks from unexpected quarters. What Shakespeare sets out to do is to call Paul's semantics of guilt into question, first by insisting upon a complex of meanings which Paul's broad distinctions do not take into account, and then by showing how the subtilisation breaks his structure down.

Shakespeare systematically exerts pressure upon three words which Paul employs as though he regarded them as being virtually synonymous. These are: "sin", "offence", and "fault"; to them Shakespeare added a fourth, "vice". "Vice" occurs thirteen times in *Measure for Measure*, always to denote sexual sin. "Sin" occurs eighteen times, and apart from its first use to denote Lucio's "familiar sin" (the deceit practised by a demonic familiar), it too consistently refers to sexual sin. "Offence" occurs fifteen times, more often than not to imply "legal offence", and sometimes mere technical error (for example in IV.ii. 184ff), and in fact the word is

bandied about till it loses meaning altogether. In the closing speech of the play, the Duke observes, "Th' offence pardons itself", so finally emptying the word of any meaning it might have retained. Shakespeare plays even more elaborately with "faults", which occurs twenty-four times and has the widest range of applications, nearly all of them trivialising. Cumulatively, its use by all the characters, with the significant exception of the Duke, represents an insistence upon degrees of guilt, upon distinctions between one kind of sin and another; as, in a similar way, the use of "offence" has been an insistence upon distinctions between different kinds of law. The Duke has generally tended to deny these distinctions by using all four words inter-changeably (for example, IV.ii. 106ff and 111; V.i. 113); yet when he is given the last word on "faults", it is to say to the murderer, Barnardine:

Thou'rt condemn'd;

But, for these earthly faults, I quit them all. (V.i. 480-1)

This word too is thus emptied of meaning. The mercy that is offered is, then, of a mysterious quality. As Paul in his letter, so the Duke in the play has equated "faults" and "offences" with "vices" and "sins", even though the experience of the other characters (human experience) compels them to insist upon degrees and distinctions. The mercy which forgives them all can be understood only if there is something meaningful to be forgiven; but if the equation stands in the play, not only "faults" and "offences", but "vices" and "sins" are meaningless, and the mercy offered by the Duke is a kind of bluff. Shakespeare backs the instinctive perceptions of human experience, forcing the Duke into one of his dark corners; and what he is certainly trying to do, it seems to me, is to force Paul into it with him.

It is in Chapter ix that Paul reaches what Dodd has called "the weakest point in the whole epistle" (p 159); if the view proposed in this essay is valid, we should expect to find Shakespeare tackling Paul hardest at this point. And we do.

When Claudio is first led on-stage under guard, he objects to being paraded before the world. Assured by the Provost that this has been Angelo's specific order, Claudio replies:

Thus can the demi-god, Authority,

Make us pay down for our offence by weight.

The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will;

On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just. (I.ii. 112-5)

It is an important moment in the play, our first meeting with the nearly inert Everyman figure around whom all the action and debate will revolve. If there is a certain lameness about his response to the situation, we have nevertheless to see that to the pious listener it is mildly redolent of the resignation of Christ Himself. However, he does not say, "Thy will, not mine, be done"; he

rather states the case as one of Divine whimsicality, which chooses to punish or not to punish, to be severe or lenient, to let it fall or not, on no known criteria: yet the absolute and unquestionable justice of it has to be assumed. Claudio is simply following, and in fact paraphrasing, St Paul:

For he saith to Moses, I wil haue mercy on him, to whome I wil shew mercy: and will haue compassion on him, on whō I wil haue cōpassion. (Romans, ix. 15)

Whether or not we feel we can agree with Dodd that this is defensible, he surely says for it what may be said:

This is, indeed, the quality of mercy. If it counts desert, it is not mercy. But there can, in the nature of things, be no desert on man's part before God. The "prevenient grace" of God is a necessary condition of any salutary activity of man. The mercy of God is an original act of His creative will. (pp 156-7)

There is little of this in the tone of Claudio's remark, which rather looks forward to Paul's subsequent expression of his own conscientious concern:

Thou wilt say then vnto me, Why doeth he yet complaine? for who hath resisted his will? (Verse 19)

But, O man, who art thou which pleadest against God? shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? (Verse 20)

If this is the best answer Paul can give, what else is there for Claudio to say? The whole drift of Paul's argument is towards what Dodd calls the "mechanical determinism" that "annihilates morality" (p 158). Paul was trapped in his own logic, and in proving what Dodd calls "the absolute and arbitrary sovereignty of God", he made Him responsible also for sin. He doubtless intended no such thing, but was intent upon avoiding the imposition of any limitation upon God: not even morality could be that. So Paul, finding himself in a windy corner, makes smoke with a murky analogy:

Hath not the potter power of the clay to make of the same lump one vessell to honour, and another vnto dishonour? (Verse 21)

The trouble is, as Dodd observes, "a man is not a pot; he will ask, 'why did you make me like this?'" Shakespeare shows us his pathetic Everyman trying his dutiful best to be no more than a pot: it is not an edifying role, and the playing of it must lead Man into either tragedy or farce, and *Measure for Measure* has long been thought an uncomfortable mixture of the two. But if the ironies of Shakespeare's conclusion to *Measure for Measure* derive from the constant threat to the solemnities represented by the richly-flowing undercurrent of farce, we should not fail to observe the

truth to which those ironies are pointing, and in which they are resolved.

Shakespeare sees that Paul has, in this letter, made possible the God of Calvin; but equally he sees that Paul does not himself believe in that God, for if he did he could not find such obvious comfort in the feelings of awe with which the incomprehensibility of his God fills him:

*O the deepnesse of the riches, both of the wisdome,
and knowledge of God! howe vnsearchable are his
iudgeṃets, and his ways past finding out!* (xi. 33)

The whole tenor of passages such as this is rooted in love, not in fear. And Shakespeare sees that for Paul, truly, the most incomprehensible attribute of God is His mercy, so that Paul undoes a great deal of his own teaching in this letter when he says:

*For God hath shut vp all in vnbeliefe, that he might
haue mercie on all.* (Verse 32)

To the Shakespeare of *Measure for Measure*, this must have seemed a clear case of love bursting through logic: God is unknowable and cannot be satisfied, and cannot therefore condemn in justice. But if He cannot condemn in justice, He must forgive, "haue mercie on all". This verse, which comes at the end of a perfectly surrealist foray into horticultural analogies, and some quite ferocious logic-chopping, has given the commentators a great deal of trouble. It has, nevertheless, the beautiful merit of clarity, and to Shakespeare it must have seemed that this is what Paul's love reduces him to; for in his conclusion to *Measure for Measure* he takes Paul up literally, teasing him to the last, and presents his Duke as having mercy on all — as the only form of justice available to one whose judgments are truly unsearchable, and whose ways of doing things are past finding out.

- 1 Following E. K. Chambers *Shakespeare: a Survey* 1925, Penguin ed. 1964; pp 167-8. I read the Duke as an ironic presentation of God: so that Claudio ("the lame one") is seen as Everyman, Lucio (Lucifer) as the Devil.
- 2 Biblical quotations are from *The Newe Testament ... Englished* by L. Tomson (Christopher Barker, 1590). Shakespeare, it is now commonly accepted, knew this version in the 1595 edition. He would almost certainly know the Geneva (1560) version to which Tomson in 1576 made very few alterations. He would also be familiar with Bishops' version (1568-72), which is the one he would hear in Church. All three versions have been cross-checked in the preparation of this essay.
- 3 Quotations from *Measure for Measure* are from the Arden edition by J. W. Lever (1967, reprinted 1972).
- 4 *Isabella* was by this time regarded as a foreign and specifically Catholic form of *Elizabeth*, and was thus appropriate for one about to enter a Catholic convent. *Angelo* was typical of Puritan love of Biblical and associated names; his icy purity and meanness make him typical of the popular projection of the Puritan. There was much contemporary discussion of the Catholic and Puritan "alternatives" in the period of *Measure for Measure*: much of it was merely bitter polemic, but some writers were seriously responsible, e.g. Oliver Ormerod, in *The Picture of a Puritan* (1605) and *The Picture of a Papist* (1606).
- 5 Shakespeare borrows a whole vocabulary of shame from Paul's two lists, in the course of which he uses a significant number of words very rare in the rest of his plays.
- 6 In his rendering of 1.21, Tomson, following a surprise rendering in the Geneva, keeps this idea at bay: "... and their foolish heart was ful of darknesse". The Bishops' does not: "... and their foolish heart was blynded". Nor does the Authorized Version: "... and their foolish heart was darkened".
- 7 C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* 1932, p 176. All references to Dodd are to this commentary.