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Dark Tones and Corrupt Relationships in *Measure for Measure*

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Measure for Measure and *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare's last comedies, are usually labelled as "problem comedies". Their world is far from idyllic, the shadow of death is pervasive. Devices like wit, eloquence, crossdressing or some benevolent power of romantic comedies and romances are not enough to bring the comedy to an appropriate happy-ending. Problems remain unresolved, reconciliation of lovers and families is full of tension, marriages have affinities with unions broken by social obstacles and unresolved sexual anxieties or even death, as we know them from the tragedies. While in *All's Well* there is at least a glimpse of hope, in *Measure for Measure* the conclusion remains pitch dark.

The atmosphere of Shakespeare's last comedies is, indeed, very dark. Proud and perfidious men, who after amorous victory quickly lose interest, women who are humiliated and refused by them and yet love them and fight for the right to spend the rest of their lives with them, maidens desired not so much for their beauty or charm but for their virginity read by the men as an invitation to violation, authority unscrupulously manipulating others, unwilling to help directly those who need protection – this is the grim world of these two problem comedies. Yet there is a remarkable difference. In *All's Well* there seem to be at least some normal human relationships presented, there is gratitude and friendship, compassion and solidarity; in *Measure for Measure* most of the positive relationships are deformed or at least weakened.

There are many instances of the darker tone of *Measure for Measure* in comparison with *All's Well That Ends Well*. I would like to give at least one important example. It is the attitude towards sexuality. In both plays sexuality is a source of trouble, but the approach of *Measure for Measure* is even more pessimistic. In *All's Well* sexuality is mostly associated with procreation, renewal and new hope. In *Measure for Measure* it is as often connected with procreation as with death, sterility, abortion, degeneration, prostitution and venereal diseases. There is not much pleasure in sexuality, the children born out of wedlock bring no hope of

renewal but serve as an evidence of a sin almost as grave as murder. Moral corruption of the society is regulated by an absurd law which, if applied, sentences to death those who practice pre-marital sexual activities, yet the law does not seem to be as strict to the professional pimps and prostitutes and their customers. Moreover, the law remains valid in the end, the Duke just uses his veto to pardon individual fornicators. In several other comedies we can find an absurd and unjust law creating an obstacle to a happy ending as well, it is an important part of the comic structure. These laws may initiate the comic action, but usually they are not so central – they are there to be overcome.

In *Measure for Measure* the law moves the first half of the play towards death and destruction. The second half of the play, which, according to the rules of comedy, should move towards reconciliation and festive mood, ends with two formal marriages that serve as punishment for the men involved (Angelo and Lucio, who is to be hanged afterwards), one marriage that has been postponed for some nine months or more, allegedly for economic reasons (Claudio and Juliet) and one rather unexpected marriage proposal pronounced from the position of authority (the Duke's proposal to Isabella). Even the saint-like forgiveness expressed in the end by the wronged women has its flaws: Angelo does nothing to deserve it, he just apologizes to Escalus and the Duke, never to the really wronged party, and he is only concerned with his loss of reputation. Moreover, we cannot help feeling that the Duke only wanted to apply another of his tests of human character to see how far the extensive patience and forgiveness of the two women involved will go, and that Angelo's fate had been decided before, regardless of the opinion of the victims of his actions.

Few characters in the play seem to be spotless and the same applies to the relationships. Escalus and Provost and some others are loyal to the Duke, Escalus and Provost, moreover, show pity for Claudio and try to mollify Angelo's determination, although they are quite easily silenced. Lucio is loyal to Claudio, tries to save him and supports Isabella at least in the initial part of her accusation of Angelo. Yet at the same time he is presented as a lecher and a slanderous scoundrel who accuses others of his own abuse to save his skin. Not even the pure Isabella or the godlike Duke are always perfect.

None of the sexual relationships in the play works as it should. The only actually married woman in the play is a minor character, Mrs. Elbow. She is pregnant, but she is not associated with a happy family circle, but with a brothel. This is not a very promising example for the marriages concluding the play. The nine times widowed bawd Mrs. Overdone does not improve the bleak picture. The relationship of Angelo and Mariana adds further dark shades. There is a girl who still loves the man who betrayed her in several ways, there is a man who not only deserted his betrothed when he found out she was not as rich as he had believed, but invented slander against her to slip out of the unprofitable engagement more easily. Mariana learns about his underhand activities, but even this does not put her off, she enthusiastically participates in the bed-trick. She is happy to forgive him and eager to save his life, after he almost succeeded in clearing himself of her and Isabella's accusation by accusing them instead. Her devotion is on a verge of masochism; her love is incurable. Which is perhaps good, because in their marriage she will need enough love for both, as Angelo is incapable of any love except self-love.

Then, there are Claudio and Juliet, a couple standing behind most of the action of the play, although it is not given much space onstage, a couple that might represent a hopeful future impersonated in their unborn child. The child is mentioned several times, the connotations, however, are negative: because of its illegitimacy, it is connected with the sin and shame of its origin, its conception is compared to murder and counterfeiting. It is evidence against its parents, one that sends its father to death. The relationship between the parents is not unproblematic either. Claudio does not deny that he is father of the child and adds that there was a pre-contract, which would lead to marriage later. Juliet confirms it and

from her reactions to Claudio's sentence and her proclamation of love we may believe that she, indeed, loves Claudio. She accepts the greater part of guilt in their "crime" and wishes to die rather than to lose her beloved. We cannot be so sure of Claudio's feelings. Quite understandably, he is concerned about himself and his coming death, but even so we would expect a bit more concern for Juliet and the child. Moreover, his association with Lucio and Mrs. Overdone sounds slightly suspect in a romantic lover. Allegedly the formal marriage was postponed for economic reasons, but the logic behind this is somewhat unfirm. Juliet is about to give birth, so they must have been waiting for at least eight or nine months. As Isabella proclaims that she is Juliet's friend, the two families are probably rather close, and such a clandestine relationship sounds unnecessary. The relationship seems to be marked by Claudio's immaturity, playing for time and reluctance to enter into a commitment for the rest of his life as yet.

The three central characters of the play, Isabella, Angelo and the Duke, have at least one thing in common. It is their concern about virtue. Isabella's virtue, her chastity is perhaps virtue least dependent on the public opinion. This is not to say it is totally independent, as she has to live in a society in which women's chastity was a crucial part of securing legitimacy, but at least her virtue seems more internalized than that of Angelo or the Duke. She is tolerant and never provoked by the sexuality of others, she has just chosen a different path for herself. However, even she in some cases may appear to mistake the priorities. Some critics suggest that her very decision to value her chastity over her brother's life is selfish and that she uses the religious reasons only as a pretext for not doing a proper act of charity. After all, Saint Augustine argued that sin is a property of the will and not a physical state, therefore if a Christian virgin was raped, the act was irrelevant to her soul. The problem with this interpretation is that Isabella was not threatened with a normal rape, she was asked not only to comply with Angelo's order, to give her consent, but to actively seek her own destruction and come to him. Even Saint Augustine might have had trouble justifying this, Isabella seems to genuinely trust that it would destroy her forever, although she has all reasons to believe that Angelo would do all he could to keep the whole thing secret for his own sake. She is not primarily concerned with public opinion but with her own conscience. Even if her deal with Angelo remained undiscovered, her way to the cloister would be barred. Moreover, her chastity may serve as a protection against the patriarchal world. As a nun she would be subordinate to the strict rules of the convent, but she would be partly freed from the rules of the patriarchal society. The representatives of the lay world in *Measure for Measure* seem to recognize the moral superiority the self-imposed eternal chastity represents. Even the incorrigible Lucio speaks of and to Isabella with reverence. At the same time the men of authority seem to be provoked by this "power" out of their control, therefore they feel the need to neutralize it either by a rape or by a marriage. Both ways will render Isabella powerless. Even her seeming participation in the act of her seduction leaves her helpless and vulnerable.

Thus her decision to sacrifice her brother to keep her virginity intact is at least partly justified. After all, her brother committed a sin and had bad luck enough to be made a precedent in applying the long disused law, but there is no reason why his "sin" should be combined with hers. And Claudio seems to understand it, at least until the moment when fear and despair overcome him. It is then that Isabella loses her aureole for a while – her rage against her brother lacks any understanding of his fear, any empathy, any mercy. Yet another reason may lurk behind her wild reaction – she may still feel pangs of doubt and guilt and needs Claudio to confirm her decision and she is frustrated when he changes his mind. Isabella also proclaims that she is a close friend of Juliet, but she never attempts to visit her, comfort her or to care for her yet unborn niece or nephew.

Isabella's participation in something as morally doubtful as the bed-trick is again slightly undermining her proclaimed virtue, but on the other hand, it reveals about her that although she is not prepared to sacrifice her immortal soul for her brother's life sake, she is willing to do almost anything else for him. Moreover, it is not her idea (nor Mariana's); they both just obey advice/orders of a "holy man", therefore their responsibility is limited. Isabella and Mariana become friends and support each other in peril, but it happens more or less out of necessity and self-interest, there is not much affection or solidarity. Where Isabella may really deviate from the Christian ways is her violent reaction to Claudio's death, she is full of un-Christian but human anger and desire for revenge, she wants to pluck out Angelo's eyes. She actively tries to destroy Angelo by her public accusation, although without the Duke's intervention she would only harm herself. Nevertheless, later she becomes again a marble statue of Christian charity, forgives Angelo and helps Mariana to plead for his life even before she learns that her brother is unharmed.

The Duke is the main authority of the play, he controls most of the turns of the plot. He seems to represent an almost saint-like virtue which gives him right to manipulate and judge others and legitimizes his actions. His moral superiority seems to be even more important than his rank. But what are its manifestations? Spying on his subjects, inventing schemes using people as tools in his game, neglecting his duties as a ruler, bending the law and interpreting regulations according to his whims? His virtue is perhaps more genuine than Angelo's, but it is blemished by vanity. He insists so much upon his virtue and self-restraint that no crime of Angelo can enrage him as much as Lucio's malicious slander. The insistence upon his reputation is one of the characteristics he shares with Angelo; he does everything to appear as a good, moral and, indeed, god-like ruler. Perhaps even the choice of Angelo as his deputy is a part of the Duke's self-promoting campaign. He assumes the authority of a deity, he goes around dressed as a holy man, but he lies even to his "fellow-friar". He decides to speak the truth only when it suits him and chooses to manipulate his subjects rather than to rule them. In Shakespeare's comedies we meet many characters who use disguise and overhear conversations not meant for their ears. Nevertheless, they are never in a position of such an authority. It is hard for anyone with an experience from a totalitarian regime not to recognize the methods of the secret police in some of the Duke's actions.

Most of the trouble of the play originates in the Duke's decision to test Angelo's much talked about virtue. However, as we learn, the Duke knew all along about Angelo's disgraceful treatment of Mariana, something completely contradicting any idea of virtue. With every new information the Duke is more and more convinced of Angelo's hypocrisy and moral decline, yet he does not stop the test and lets Angelo fall further and further. It is not so much a test as watching a man bringing about his own destruction and helping him along the way. The Duke's final marriage proposal to Isabella then bears a resemblance to Angelo's proposal earlier in the play. It is presented as a reward for Isabella, but it is, in fact, closer to Angelo's blackmailing. Isabella has never expressed a wish to get married, she wanted to become a nun. Now she is once again given a choice, which does not accept "no" as an answer, it is an order masked as a proposal. The brother's life has already been saved; she must show her gratitude. Some interpretations explain her silence as willingness to give her hand to the generous Duke to keep at least a semblance of a comedy to the ending, but many critics do not share such an optimistic view.

The most obvious fall from virtue is shown in Angelo. In him (and partly in the Duke and even Isabella) we can find an echo of Shakespeare's Sonnet 94. Angelo's name suggests an association with heavenly creatures, pure but inhuman, without ability to understand human weaknesses, who, nevertheless, may fall and then their fall is deeper than anyone else's. However, Shakespeare does not present Angelo simply as an ascetic and virtuous man who expects virtue in others as well, but who cannot resist real temptation when it comes and

after the first moral doubts and conflicts falls deeper and deeper. Each new piece of information about him presents him as less and less admirable. After he is presented as an example of a perfect virtue by the Duke (and others agree, the only thing they hold against him is his coldness and lack of mercy), we find out how easily he is tempted. He uses plain blackmail to have his wish granted. Yet if he was tempted by Isabella's beauty and eloquence, it would at least show him as fallible but human. However, he does not really want Isabella, it is only her moral superiority, chastity and virtue he wants, when these are corrupted by him (as he thinks), he loses all interest and only makes sure her brother cannot threaten him. Moreover, we learn from the Duke about Angelo's disgraceful behaviour towards Mariana. And when Isabella and Mariana make Angelo face a public accusation, he piles up a lie upon a lie, trying to ruin their reputation to save his own.

He perhaps at least tries to be virtuous in the beginning, but for him it means mainly an appearance of virtue, a public image of it. He is more concerned about what people will think of him than about the true moral consequences of his actions. This is probably why he invented slander about Mariana, he wanted to appear to be the virtuous party wronged by a perfidious woman. In virtue, as he sees it, power lies. It helped him to the post of the Duke's deputy. He enjoys the power and wants to strengthen it by an unforgiving attitude towards the sins of others. Yet even when he still passes for a virtuous man, we see his enthusiasm for executing Claudio as exaggerated, after all, the Duke had never told him explicitly he wanted the severe law back to practice. Angelo seems to prosecute the fornicators with such vigour primarily to contrast his own virtue with their sins in the eyes of the public. In the end he is a broken man – not because he is sorry for what he has done, but because he was publicly found guilty, despite all his efforts to discredit his accusers. The appearance of virtue was an important part of his identity, his death-wish is in this context quite understandable. When Mariana and Isabella are pleading for his life and finally are granted it, they unintentionally demand a worse punishment for him – they force him to live with his shame. His life is saved only to be given to Mariana as a recompense for her trouble, the act of mercy has, indeed, very bitter undertones.

As I have tried to demonstrate, *Measure for Measure* is the darkest of Shakespeare's comedies. Instead of amorous adventures and romantic love we find here blackmailing, seduction, death, unscrupulous manipulation etc. Such non-comic themes appear in other comedies as well, but the clouds are much more easily dispersed and the festive mood prevails there. However, in this comedy, if we still choose to call this play a comedy, the shadows remain or are replaced by other ones. The reconciliation is incomplete and the marriages in the conclusion rather add to the pessimistic view of human relationships than bring about a promise of couples living happily ever after. Although structurally the play is still a comedy, its content points rather in the direction of the tragic genre.

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