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A Measured Response: Staging the Ambiguity of *Measure for Measure*

Silence is far from conventional in Shakespearean theatre. The most acclaimed modern productions are always fast-paced with little downtime; those found lacking are often critiqued as sluggish or dawdling. Many of Shakespeare's comedies, if not so zippy for his contemporary audiences, lend themselves well to a rather breakneck pace today. This is especially true on the thrust stage, and companies who simulate Shakespearean staging conditions are often the quickest of the pack. In this environment, comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing* can essentially be taken at face value: happy-go-lucky entertainment, low stakes and an assurance of a happy ending that is never far off. For a modern audience, silence onstage is not unlike silence in a conversation. The experience is tense, awkward, and we are left with an opening for a kind of internal processing we've come to avoid.

Measure for Measure is different: silence saturates and settles it. As the last comedy Shakespeare penned, not even acknowledged as a comedy by some current scholars, a "dissatisfaction with its own dramatic mode" underscores the tone of this singular work (Barton, 579). Set in a bleak, promiscuous Vienna, the action circles the government of *pro tem* leader Angelo. In his first act after Duke Vincentio hands him the scepter, Angelo sentences to death an unlucky young man who has impregnated his fiancée. Doomed Claudio's sister, the nun-to-be Isabella, pleads with Angelo for her brother's life and is finally met with a proposition: if she

sleeps with Angelo, her brother will go free. She declines immediately, but before long, Duke Vincentio, disguised as a friar, helps her plot a bed trick to save Claudio without sacrificing her maidenhead. Although Angelo does not follow through on his end of the deal, another switch causes both him and Isabella to believe Claudio has been executed.

All this troubling doubling leads up to the famous final scene, V.1, in which the Duke sets to work controlling the outcomes of all present situations, which it may be remembered are the result of his own unwillingness to control those situations in I.1. To fulfill comic traditions, he arranges marriages between Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and a whore, and himself and Isabella. All four of these pairings are fraught to some degree, but the Duke's proposal to a novitiate nun seems especially prickly. For one thing, there is little evidence of any romantic interest between them before his proposal; for another, there is no indication of Isabella's response. After he entreats her, "Give me your hand, and say you will be mine" (492), nearly 50 more lines elapse before the play's end, none of them Isabella's.

Context clues make it fairly evident that Isabella's response to the Duke's first proposal is a nonevent. In the previous breath, the Duke has just revealed Claudio alive, standing before Isabella. After a shock of that caliber, little wonder she ignores the Duke's next words. If she rushes towards her brother in an embrace, she might entirely miss the proposal; this reaction would explain the Duke's following qualifier of his sudden romantic impulse. His next sentence is a short clip: "But fitter time for that" (493). In the line after, he changes the subject entirely and metes out forgiveness to Angelo. After dealing with him, Lucio, and Claudio, he returns to a softened rehash of his proposal:

…. 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. (534-539)

Again, these final lines of the play shed little light on the nature of Isabella's ultimate response, but their mere existence is evidence to assume that she did not accept his first proposal. The question we are left with is whether she accepts the second. And with line 539 marking the end of the play, that question easily becomes the most important for a director to consider when staging it.

Measure for Measure has a rather unique performance history in that it was largely avoided in 18th and 19th century theater; the subject matter was considered too racy to appear on the public stage. Modern interest sparked in the mid-20th century and the past several decades have seen a wide range of interpretations from "comfortably comic" (Frank McMullen, 1946, reviewed in Gay 121) to "sadomasochistic" (Libby Appel, 1998, reviewed in Taylor 73). As Nicholas Hytner, who directed *Measure* in 1987, said in an interview, "you can never aim for a definitive production of a Shakespeare play," least of all *this* Shakespeare play with its built-in ambiguity (Gay 139). With this in mind, the next most admirable step is to create a production based in textual evidence and which edifies textual authority.

Modern performances have achieved this in varying degrees of success, especially in regards to the Duke and Isabella. In the summer of 2015, Dominic Dromgoole staged a version at the Globe that didn't quite measure up:

> And the Duke proposes to Isabella and she accepts. … There are many ways to approach the play but Dromgoole has gone for, essentially, the romantic comedy approach with quite a lot of excess bawdiness added for good measure. It works well enough, but it comes nowhere near the blazing and confronting heights this play can reach when its limits are pushed and its darkest crevices carefully examined. (Collins)

Another reviewer qualifies the production's shortcomings by recognizing, "Dromgoole doesn't solve this play. I doubt any director could at the Globe, given its inherent sparseness" (Trueman). Puzzling, however, since the play was likely put on at the Globe in 1604 before its first recorded performance at court on December 26 of that year (Barton, 579). Or didn't Shakespeare "solve" his own play, even in "inherent sparseness"? Admittedly, we can never know how the King's Men might have played out the proposal scene, either in the Globe or at court. What we do know is that if Shakespeare had wanted his final comedy to be typical, that is, played for laughs with a happily-ever-after ending, he would have surely written it that way.

A decade before Dromgoole, Mark Rylance attempted a very different ending for *Measure* at the Globe under the direction of John Dove. Reviewers Hopkins and Orr lay out the scene after Vincentio receives no response from a shocked Isabella to his first proposal:

> Rylance (Vincentio) repeated this full stop when he again broached the subject of marriage in the final lines of the play, pausing after saying, "What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine." Again, Isabella does not answer. Yet the production answered for her: just as Isabella seemed about to reply to the Duke, Thompson (Isabella) took Rylance's hand and they began to dance. (99)

This production follows the textual evidence that speaks against true romantic interest from Isabella toward the Duke, and extends the Duke's role as, ultimately, a benign manipulator of other characters' destinies. It follows comedic staging traditions by including a dance, a move I hail as brilliant. Initially, this would have been uncomfortable for an audience still processing the outcome, but would then serve as a transition out of the theatrical headspace and back into reality. Finally, this performance also highlights the importance of those still, silent moments onstage; the action of the final scene is more fathomable with these pauses, uncomfortable but realistic and vital for staging such ambiguity.

A concurrent production, directed by Simon McBurney at the Royal National Theatre, also emphasizes Isabella's wordlessness in the final scene, although to a much different end:

> The Duke said, "What's mine is yours," then, with an ominous change in tone, "and what is yours is mine." While saying this line, he gestured upstage, where the scrim flew out to reveal the full vastness of the theatre. In the distance was a small white room containing only one thing: a bed, with a red rose on a pillow. As the lights faded, Isabella was left gasping and choking, desperately trying to find words with which to respond to a proposal that left her with neither choice nor voice. (Hopkins and Orr, 100)

In this interpretation, silence is used to "underscore Isabella's ultimate powerlessness," which is furthered by this Duke's unique inflection of line 537. A similarly avant-garde production of *Measure for Measure* ran concurrently with Dromgoole's Globe version in 2015. Directed by Joe Hill-Gibbins at the Young Vic, the blatancy of this interpretation made waves with reviewers. After all, not everyone is going to find the opening scene, "a swirling mass of inflatable sex dolls" which never entirely disappear from view, quite fitting treatment of Shakespeare

(Billington). Katelyn Stevens, who saw this production when she studied abroad in London this fall, told me about the playing of the final scene:

> "The Duke matches everyone up and they kind of think he's gone crazy. I remember Michael [her instructor] leaning over and gleefully commenting, 'He's gone mad!' And then he proposes to Isabella and she kind of sighs in an annoyed rom-com *Bridget Jones Diary* type of way. Like, 'Eh, men!'"

Katelyn, a self-identified Shakespeare traditionalist, was not impressed with this portrayal of the ending or this production in general: "It was too sexual, too fast and the sexuality presented in this specific updated version wasn't the sexuality that Shakespeare intended." I immediately noticed her critique of the fast pace. Even in today's instant entertainment climate, we are keenly wired to notice unnatural tempos, like jittery high schoolers rushing through their first speech in public speaking class. In *Measure for Measure*, we cannot downplay the importance of slowing down and taking time to develop the multifaceted characters rather than creating a simple spectacle.

On my stage, Isabella would be more timid and reserved, prone to long silences, and saving her unbridled emotion for a few scenes where her temper outweighs her training in the convent. The Duke would start out egotistical but benign, slip into a visibly false gentleness as a friar, then reemerge in Act V with the capability of malice. The audience may notice him trying to cover it up when speaking to Isabella at line 381. The one thing he will not be is bumbling or inept; if anything, his plans seem to have been set up long before Act I. When Claudio is revealed to be alive, Isabella will rush to him and embrace him. The Duke's lines 490-492 will occur during this embrace, with a long pause before his "But fitter time for that." Only as he

goes on to the next order of business, having turned away from the siblings, will Isabella let go of Claudio. She is obviously overwhelmed to see her brother alive after hearing time and time again that he was dead, but she also extends the embrace as an excuse to ignore the Duke's first proposal—wishing herself invisible in Claudio's arms to avoid facing Vincentio. She remains by Claudio's side until line 525, when the Duke bodily pulls Claudio towards Julietta as he proclaims, "She, Claudio, that you wrong'd, look you restore." He approaches each character as he addresses them in the following lines, leaving Isabella distanced from the group and unguarded. All this movement would place the two of them in opposite quadrants as he reaches line 534. At "Dear Isabel," his motion ceases, then he begins a deliberate journey toward her, one hand extended, while she remains stoic. After "what is yours is mine," an even longer pause than the first is filled by Isabella slowly backing away from him to an empty gallant stool on the side of the stage, where she sits aghast. Once she sits, a lengthy beat, then the Duke turns back to the others, delivers the final two lines and ushers them offstage ahead of him. He remains alone, near the exit, back to the audience, and turns his head to gaze one more time at Isabella, still seated. After another tense silence, she looks down at her lap, leans forward as if to rise, then looks up at the rustling of the curtain to see the Duke's heel as he disappears.

In effect, Isabella ends up on the outside looking in, sitting down with and becoming part of the audience to observe the Duke's final actions. This specific response might not mirror Shakespeare's staging of the final scene, but it does communicate his intentions. Isabella has been relegated to an onlooker in her own life at the end of this play. For some characters, this role would break them, but Isabella is made of sturdier stuff than that. There is power in her silence. Peter Brook's 1950 groundbreaking production hinged on the earlier pause before

Isabella kneels to plead beside Mariana, which Brook urged his Isabella (Barbara Jefford) to hold "'until she felt the audience could take it no longer'…usually about thirty-five seconds" (Gay 125). More than half a minute of silence is an unbelievably long time on stage. Making her silences meaningful is a way to return power to Isabella in her final scene, over the audience if not over her own situation, as well as upholding the character Shakespeare developed. Giving the audience space to think what she might be thinking, in the moment she's thinking it, is a subtle but effective method for engaging modern audiences, full of multitaskers accustomed to high-tempo, on-demand entertainment. Suddenly, they are trapped, forced to process the lines and acknowledge the problems before them and, ultimately, to decide what they would have done in her place.

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