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Measure for Measure

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“TH’ OFFENSE PARDONS ITSELF”: SEX AND THE CHURCH
IN *OTHELLO* AND *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

by

Jeffrey Wayne Windsor

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Jeffrey Wayne Windsor

This thesis has been read by each member of the following committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory

Date

Richard Duerden, Chair

Date

Kimberly Johnson

Date

Bruce Young

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Jeffrey Wayne Windsor in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Richard Duerden
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Date

Nicholas Mason
Graduate Coordinator

Accepted for the College

Date

John R. Rosenberg
Dean, College of Humanities

ABSTRACT

“TH’ OFFENSE PARDONS ITSELF”: SEX AND THE CHURCH

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by

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In 1604, James had newly ascended to the throne and England was now part of Great Britain. The Puritans—largely silenced during Elizabeth’s reign—began again to assert political influence and call for reformation to both the state and the church. This is the context in which Shakespeare wrote *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*.

In both plays, the role of the government in Cyprus or Vienna hinges upon the passions of a single authority figure. Both Angelo and Othello cause political unrest because they mismanage sexuality. In the case of Othello, his unfounded sexual jealousy leads to the death of Desdemona, Emilia, and himself. In *Measure for Measure*, Angelo’s unbending literal interpretation of law threatens the life of Claudio, and his newly awakened lust threatens the virtue of Isabella. Both Othello and

Angelo, through their self-government and sexual management, put those around them at risk.

My study uses the techniques of New Historicism to contextualize *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* in terms of both sexuality and religion. I intentionally avoid the typical Marxist perspective of New Historicism and instead focus on religion as itself an organizing and motivational principle.

This thesis examines these two plays together because of their chronological synchronicity and their thematic unity. Looking at *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* together provides a somber look at the attitudes toward sexual transgression and the role of the church in 1604. The quandaries raised in *Othello* are highlighted in *Measure for Measure*, but also resolved. Through the Duke's labors as the church-masquerading state, *Measure for Measure* discovers societal stability through the institutional church.

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Chapter I: Introduction

“If you speak, you must not show your face;

Or if you show your face, you must not speak.” (*Measure* 1.4.12-13)

The year 1604 is a turning point for Shakespeare. He is at the height of his craft, finishing the last of the “problem” comedies. He begins work on a series of tragedies that will continue without interruption for the next five years. While no record exists to explain this melancholy, it may perhaps be significant that the last comedy, *Measure for Measure*, and first tragedy of the period, *Othello*, are both plays deeply involved in questions of sexual transgression and religion.

For example, *Othello* describes what happens when a Christian convert and two competing cultural penalties of adultery intersect. In the play, Othello’s race is much less important than his (previous) religion—he is the embodiment of the “Homily Concerning Uncleanesse and Whoredome.”

Shortly after Christmas that same year, Shakespeare’s troupe, the King’s Men, performed *Measure for Measure* for James. It was just shortly after he ascended to the throne. The play is steeped in religious questions that are a major preoccupation for Shakespeare at the time. From the Biblical title, to the Puritanical Angelo and the aspiring nun Isabella, to the Duke disguising himself as a friar, religion is the backdrop and foreground for the play. Combined with the overt sexual advances and questionable marriages, the play forms an intriguing complement to the issues raised first in *Othello*. Their synchronicity in composition and theme insists they be read together.

My thesis will examine these two works in terms of their central issues—sexual transgression and religion—in the context of the religious environment of 1604. By investigating sermons, tracts, conduct books, and scripture I will show the interconnectedness of these two Shakespearean plays with Christian discourse. Considering that he and his contemporaries were legally required to attend services (though not necessarily to believe), church was, in an era before newspapers or journalism, the means to transmit information and exert influence. In other words, if religion was “the idiom in which it [early modern England] conversed with itself” (Collinson 18), then it is critical to the understanding of Shakespeare that we also understand his idiom.

Specifically, in *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses sexual transgression—adultery in *Othello* and fornication and prostitution in *Measure*—to draw these two plays together. In an appendix to his book *Romance and Reformation*, Robert Bennett compares *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. He describes correctly how the time and thematic similarities should propel scholars to do more work with these two together. He discovered that between 1985 and 2000, “Five articles over the period link *Measure for Measure* in incidental ways to *Othello*, but somewhat surprisingly overlooked has been the fundamental thesis-antithesis bond between these two plays that makes their kinship an especially strong one. Much more than just sharing a trait or a source, the two constitute a consciously conceived paired study” (Bennett 150). While I applaud Bennett for his foresight to link these two plays together, the points of overlap he chooses are as insignificant as they are baffling.

He mentions five points of intersection between the two plays. First is “the issue of being passed over” (151). Second, “interceding women” (151). Third, “reading

one's nature in one's face" (152). Fourth, "actual and supposed procuress" (152). Finally, "procuring called a mystery" (152). He then describes these five points in greater detail, points which include "overriding archetypal symbols" and "demonic disguise" (153-54).

I see a much tighter correlation between *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. I will show that Shakespeare uses sex as a lens to view other issues—ownership, dominion, and death—but that these taken together, both plays as set pieces, is a larger canvas upon which Shakespeare discovers the stabilizing and preserving and conservative power of the church.

Shakespearean scholarship over the last, say, 40 years, suggests that reading Shakespeare in a religious context is difficult. We tend to try to allegorize his work or dismiss the spiritual altogether. Because his religious sentiment is never clearly spelled out—he is clearly neither a Catholic apologist nor a Puritan booster—scholars have felt emboldened to insert imagined theologies into the texts. Even a disciplined reading of his work tends to leave only "the tantalizing ambiguity of Shakespeare's religious attitudes and background" (Jackson and Marotti 172).

In our current academic environment, we're most tempted to presume that Shakespeare was then, as we are today, a secular humanist. Jeffrey Knapp quotes Harold Bloom, that the appeal of Shakespeare is that he has "no theology" (Knapp xii). In this view, Shakespeare uses the rhetoric of religion to instruct his audience on secular, ethical principles. Religion is a suspect (or disparaged) ideology to these secular humanists, and Shakespeare is much too great to fall under the spell of such.

But the argument that Shakespeare is non-religious tends to spend much too much energy trying to prove itself. Even Bloom, in his effusive praise in *Hamlet: Poem*

Unlimited, works hard to turn spirituality into secular ethics. To justify *Hamlet* as “a meditation upon human fragility in confrontation with death,” he calls it “secular scripture” (3). Critics such as Bloom are less successful in rooting the religion from Shakespeare than in replacing it with their own misbrand of secular pseudo-religion. Bloom admits that Shakespeare is his “mortal god,” and thus demonstrates how to get sucked back into the very discourse he is trying to avoid (2).

Bloom’s reading of *Hamlet* works only in Bloom’s own extra-contextual world, where Shakespeare is more a god than an Englishman firmly rooted in the time of Elizabeth and James. Bloom has in effect imposed the Nicene creed upon Shakespeare, making him a god without body, parts, or passions, existing everywhere and nowhere. He is hardly the first to do so. D. H. Lawrence echoed the words of St. Paul to say that Shakespeare was “all things to all men.” Turning Shakespeare into a god makes it easy to avoid discussion of his own questions, needs, or influences. He is unknowable; we only try to know ourselves through him. Bloom admits that, in his god-role, Shakespeare “teaches us how to live” (3). Secular scripture, indeed.

Partly in response to this type of breathless swooning, the new historicists have relied on a Foucauldian contextualization to provide a fuller, broader vision of the author. Stephen Greenblatt’s scholarship, for example, is much more compelling than Bloom’s, and leads to much more interesting and insightful interpretation of the text. It is demonstrable that Shakespeare was a sometimes flawed individual who was influenced by the world around him. Greenblatt’s National Book Award nominee, *Will in the World*, is a fascinating biographical look at the forces which might have shaped the man Shakespeare.

This book, while decidedly popular, is a somewhat different work from one of the big names in the new historicism. It is a surprisingly popular work from a typically academic writer. While providing interesting anecdotes to support himself in discussion of education, politics, and family life, Greenblatt dedicates an entire chapter to the religious tenor of the age. He has used religion before—to some degree it is inescapable in early modern studies—but what is unusual is that Greenblatt allows religion to be itself, not just a tool for political gain (Greenblatt xxx).

Greenblatt and Gallagher's *Practicing New Historicism* is more true to form for Greenblatt and new historicists. In it, Greenblatt elucidates for two chapters on the meaning of the eucharist in early modern England: "he does not really take religious culture seriously, but rather approaches it as a cabinet of curiosities" (Jackson and Marotti 175).

This sentiment and practice is standard in new historicism. Revealing their Marxist roots, new historicists tend to turn everything political. The basic tools of the practice—anecdote, counter-history, etc.—lend themselves to the postmodern subversion which is such a pleasure to practice and much more rarely such a pleasure to read.

We arrive at the question: why are scholars and critics unable to grant Shakespeare the privilege of questioning his own faith? What if he didn't have an existing, fully-formed religious view and, like most of his contemporaries, struggled to work out his own relationship with God? His plays would, of course, reflect that struggle. We tend to presume that he knew what he knew, and somehow tried to encode into his work an organic, whole theology—or theology-less ethic—which was personal, unique, and complete. But this need not be. This thesis will demonstrate that in both

Othello and *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare wrestles with religious ideas in a very personal manner.

This is not a quest for a formalist. Shakespeare was too heavily influenced by the religious milieu to be understood without contextualization. Shakespeare's feelings and experience are valid in themselves, and deserve better than to be subsumed into a twenty-first-century religious environment. Debora Shuger asserts that religion is "the master-code of pre-capitalist society" (qtd. in Collinson 17). And Christianity, in early modern England specifically, was, practically speaking, the only religion. The Bible was "Englands Looking-Glasse," according to one preacher of the era (Collinson 17). I assert that religion is also the master-code of Shakespeare, and the Bible (together with the contemporary non-scriptural religious sources, like Foxe and Hooker) is similarly his looking glass.

Historians, for their part, have not avoided the religious. A number of excellent historical works on the religiosity of the early modern period show the sentiment of the English polity in terms that do not necessarily lead to national politics. Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*, for example, demonstrates a level of faith beyond superstition or enforced practice: "no substantial gulf existed between the religion of the clergy and the educated élite on the one hand and that of the people at large on the other" (2). Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* and Martin Ingram's *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* both cover material thematically similar to mine, though their range is far wider and they remain focused on factual data.

The historians have been admirable in their willingness to face religiosity, but they also tend to ignore imaginative literature, which leaves a space for literary his-

toricists to fill. The works of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists provide a picture of early modern England that is a useful companion to the diarists, letter writers, church wardens, and record keepers who inform the historians' work.

I am not the first scholar to feel a lack of much serious encounter with the religious in historicism. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti say as much in their article in the Fall 2004 issue of the journal *Criticism*, "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies." In their article, they make many of the same points as I do regarding the lack of emphasis on perhaps the most important aspect of early modern culture. They caution and explain:

While we should not turn to religion in our studies of early modern literature and culture the way that a much earlier and more naive generation of Whiggish ethnocentrists or Catholic apologists did, with belief systems governing the selection of evidence, the choice of texts deemed worthy of attention, and the results of interpretation, we should not take a smugly rational stance in approaching the religious culture(s) of an earlier era either but rather respond deeply to the interplay of defamiliarizing experiences and familiar knowledge. (182)

They were also hardly the first to mention the lack either. Debora Shuger has been faithfully trying to provide good historicism with a religious focus. Together with Claire McEachern she edited *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* in 1997, and in 2001 she published *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England*, in which she examines both the religious and the political, but does not make the mistake of turning religion into "an ideological mask for realpolitik" (McEachern 5). These liter-

ary historicists identify the problem and are beginning to provide excellent scholarship to remedy the traditional oversight. They are still much too marginalized; the work is just beginning.

Puritanism is one of the difficulties in using religion as a valid means to examine early modern culture. We tend to hyper-categorize Puritans, and characterize them with exceptional one-sidedness. To be sure, the stereotype is not wholly undeserved. They were, increasingly as time passed, strict, strident, and serious, placing dramatic emphasis on discipline and punishment. However, categorizing Puritans tends to increase the alterity of the situation. Instead of giving them an empathetic and compassionate reading, the extreme conservatism (in today's terminology) of the Puritans makes them a suspect group. We have not had a Judith Butler rise to speak for and re-imagine the Puritans, and their voice is, in postmodern criticism, an eternal other. They are objectified and seen as extreme or absurd.

While historians have "made it clear that the commonplace binary of 'Anglican' and 'Puritan' will not do as a taxonomic tool," literary historicists have not been so kind (McEachern 6). Thus Isabella becomes just "Catholic" and Angelo "Puritan."

Even worse, being categorized and dismissed by twentieth century literary critics was not limited to Puritans. Most of the staunchly religious people of the early modern era have been ignored by the postmoderns. "Lower-profile Catholic women, especially nuns, were not deemed worthy of attention because they didn't conform to modern expectations about the most commendable forms of female agency" (Jackson and Marotti 171). *Measure's* Isabella is exactly such a case: instead of having her religion investigated as a valid belief and motivator for her actions, scholars have typically attempted to subvert it, either attempting to demonstrate that she didn't

believe her own Catholicism, or using the convent as an excuse to investigate twentieth-century feminist politics.

By making religion central to my investigation of sexual transgression in two Shakespeare plays, I run the risk of pigeonholing myself as a scholar. Jeffrey Knapp describes his experience in writing his investigation into religion and Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Tribe*:

Thanks to a chapter on tobacco in my first book, *An Empire Nowhere*, I've often been asked whether I smoke. But no one who has heard or read a portion of *Shakespeare's Tribe* has ever asked me whether I go to church. The reason, I've learned, is not so much a loss of interest in my possible vices as a painful sense of certainty about them: who else but a devout Christian would want to claim that Shakespeare was religious?

(x)

Knapp does not reveal whether or not he fulfills the stereotype. I will state it plainly: I do. I am a devout Christian (although, like Collinson, I come from a non-conformist background), which itself might make me a suspect literary scholar. But I would argue that my personal Christianity makes me a better candidate to accurately interpret Shakespeare's faith (or lack thereof) than an atheist. Based on the evidence of existing scholarship, literary critics have been pretty lousy at providing empathetic readings of whole classes of people, such as the nuns mentioned above, because they do not meet the moral criteria of contemporary scholarship. Postmodernism is notorious for reflecting back an image of itself, Caliban seeing himself in the mirror; new historicism has been equally exclusionary. I do not make any claims to being univer-

sally accepting of everyone myself, but simply to shine light on that which has been left in darkness previously.

That is not to say that previous postmodern or new historicist readings of *Measure for Measure* or *Othello* are somehow invalid. On the contrary, many are important, interesting, intriguing, and valid. Nor could any self-respecting postmodernist argue that they are complete and fully inclusive. This thesis remedies at least a portion of this oversight and provide depth into the question of religion and sexuality, and to reveal Shakespeare's belief in the importance of a centralized, institutional church.

Chapter II: A History of Sexuality in Early Seventeenth-Century England

Because *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* are tied together thematically, I will spend the next few pages providing some background on the assumptions about sex in the early seventeenth century. These assumptions colored the audience in 1604 and influenced what they perceived regarding the overarching religious issues of the plays.

This chapter argues that seventeenth-century ideas about sexuality were very different from ours in the twenty-first. Because these attitudes impact our understanding of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*, I will briefly describe the medical understanding and popular cultural beliefs about sex.

Even in the seventeenth century attitudes varied, and many ideas popular in 2004 were available in 1604—they might not have been particularly common, but English theater-goers were a broad and varied group. I will focus this chapter on the most popular and common attitudes and ideas because even those who might have felt differently would have recognized what they saw on stage as a reflection of their own world.

I. The Role of Sex in Elizabethan and Jacobean England

In societies lacking adequate birth control, sex was an issue of major importance. All the concerns of parentage, inheritance, and family were wrapped up in it—

and the only certain method of manipulation was abstinence. This, of course, did not stop many people from trying.

By most accounts, birth control was taboo. Birth control contrasted with one of the fundamental purposes of marriage. These three purposes—universally accepted by virtually all religious factions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—were spelled out clearly in the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*. These were

the causes for the which matrimony was ordeined. One was the procreation of children, to be brought up in the feare and nutoure of the Lorde, and praise to God. Secondly, it was ordeined for a remedy agaynste sinne and to avoide fornication, that such persones as have not the gifte of continencie might mary, and kepe themselves undefiled members of Christes body. Thirdly, for the mutual societie, helpe, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other.

The Book of Common Prayer echoes the priorities of the Catholic church before it: marriage was first for the bearing of children, secondarily to keep clean from sin and finally to provide company, assistance, and comfort. The idea that sex within marriage was virtuous is not expressed here. *The Book of Common Prayer* was, despite any other progressivity within the church, a conservative document.

Some other writers did not share these priorities. Robert Schnucker found that “Becon, Rogers, Pritchard, Cartwright, Gataker, and Willet, although accepting the same three-fold purpose, placed mutual solace and comfort first” (660). These are notable, influential figures. That they all together saw the value of mutual solace—of using sex as one tool to keep marriages strong—is significant. They recog-

nized that sex was physically, morally, and socially powerful. They chose to embrace this power rather than struggle against it.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the enjoyment of sex became a bellweather because it shifted—slowly, over the course of both centuries—from the indication of a fallen people to a celebration of family. As the Council of Trent reaffirmed the centrality of celibacy in Catholic doctrine, Puritans and other reformers preached the importance of marriage, and of sex within marriage. For subjects in Elizabeth's and James' realms, this was a profound change. It reflected a change in which official belief finally seemed to correlate itself with popular belief.

2. Medical Belief about Sex in the Sixteenth Century

Medical writings led this gradual attitudinal change. Until the end of the seventeenth century they commonly held that sexual pleasure was necessary for the conception of healthy children. Despite their primitive understanding of physiology, they attempted to resolve any conflicts between the church and social custom.

William Vaughan's 1600 text *Naturall and artificial directions for health deriued from the best philosophers, as well as moderne, as auncient* actually encourages regular sexual activity: "Moderate venerie is very expedient for preseruacion of health. It openeth the pores, maketh the body light, exhilarateth the heart and wit, and mitigateth anger and fury" (46). He goes on to describe the best times for sex ("at night when the stomack is full, and the body somewhat warme"), the dangers of a man losing his seed inappropriately (it "harmeth a man more then if he should bleed fortie

times so much”), and how to drive away “unclean dreaming” (avoid “soft downe beddes” and “addict themselves to read the Bible and morall Philosophie”).

As indicated by the title to Vaughan’s book, most medicine of the period was historical rather than experimental. Thus, there were taboos against human dissection. This greatly hampered medical and scientific progress. Female anatomy was considered to be a mirror image of the male—complete with female testes—simply inverted due to a woman’s “colder” nature.

A popular story in the fourteenth century describes a young female swineherd who got so hot chasing a stray pig, and the act of jumping over a ditch was so jarring, that her genitals dropped, and she became a man¹ (Rackin 51). As a popular tale, this illustrates the fine line between the sexes: it was a question of heat and could be changed under particular circumstances. There was no question about choice—it was a strictly biological difference. As such, the difference between the male and female roles were naturally suited to their biological differences.

Conception would require a woman to have a similar ejaculatory experience as a male. Many doctors believed that the woman’s womb would open upon climax and then snap shut. Both the woman and the man would each produce seed of a particular variety, which would need to join together and enter the womb before the doors shut.

Medical professionals were mixed in their belief about the value of female seed, however. Some thought that both the male and female seed were necessary, each providing something essential. Others considered the woman simply a “fertile ground” in which the male could plant his self-contained seed. While the fertile

1. Rackin’s description uses the softer “henceforth she was recognized as a man.”

ground idea does minimize the importance of the woman in sexual reproduction—called “generation” at the time—the opening and “snapping shut” womb at least kept sexual pleasure as part of the equation. Theodore DeWelles reports with some humor that “unlike some of her Victorian counterparts, the last thing this Puritan gentlewoman experienced during sex was revulsion” (55).

3. Sex in Sixteenth-Century Popular Belief and Culture

Women who did not receive sufficient sexual pleasure were liable for disease and illness. “Greensickness” was commonly considered solvable through increased sexual activity. Patricia Crawford records this descriptive ballad:

A Handsom buxom Lass
 lay panting in her bed
 She lookt as green as grass
 amd mournfully she said
 Except I have some lusty lad
 to ease me of my pain
 I cannot live
 I sigh and grieve
 My life I now disdain. (qtd. in Crawford 66)

No internal testing or observation was necessary for diagnosis of greensickness. The prescription was to simply to have sex soon. That it was sometimes considered a medical affliction and diagnosable by doctors—being an exclusively male profession—is perhaps telling. In an era where there was still suspicion about sexuality at all, men looked for an objective rationale for increased sexual activity. In a country

where, Eamon Duffy estimates, more than 30 percent of the population was still decidedly Catholic, the tension was not inconsequential.

Popular beliefs in the late sixteenth century were both informed by and influencers of the medical. It is logical to assume that the experience of midwives would have provided greatly enhanced understanding of the process of childbirth compared to what any male of the period would have known. Little written evidence supports this, however, partly because the literacy and publication abilities of women were minimal.

Between women, there was opportunity for discussion, but again, few records to demonstrate the oral passage of information. In fact, certain social mores made this difficult. One of the key opportunities to discuss the physical difficulties of childbirth would have been the birth itself, where groups of women would gather to assist, clean, and care for mother and child. Unmarried women were not allowed at such gatherings, sadly, and so they would not have overheard the talk, or seen and asked questions.

Similarly, sixteenth century women orally passed ideas about contraception, methods of insuring pregnancy, or the ever popular techniques to select the sex of the child. These were surely subjects of conversation, but there is very little to support it. A few diary entries—mostly by men—convey a few details, and we must simply assume that the doctors who wrote the scientific treatises at least consulted women before they set pen to paper. The few diary mentions we have are surprising in that they are men reporting what they heard from women. That there was such frank discussion between members of opposite sexes is surprising, and perhaps illustrative of the way these things were treated. They were taboo in that sex outside of marriage

was universally understood to be sinful. Since sex within marriage was not sinful and, in fact, beneficial, certain individuals felt comfortable discussing sex across gender lines so long as it was marital sex they were discussing. It is also possible that then, as now, some people are simply busybodies who talk about subjects which are, in fact, considered inappropriate.

Married couples clearly saw the act of lawful sex within marriage as a good thing. The diary of Ralph Josselin's wife shows that they did not wait the suggested period after childbirth before participating in sexual activities. Before she weaned her child, she mentioned to her husband that she was seven weeks pregnant, clearly indicating that they had sex while she was still nursing (De Welles 54). For more wealthy families, this tension was resolved by employing wet nurses to take care of the child's nutritional needs while opening the opportunity for sex more quickly than otherwise. Considering the natural prophylactic benefits of nursing, this might have had undesired consequences. Short of any really effective methods of birth control, at least nursing was demonstratively beneficial. But taboo is a powerful thing, and women would make the necessary resolutions to correct any difficulty.

As mentioned earlier, sex was generally considered both officially and unofficially to be a means to strengthen a marriage. However, there is a difference inherent in the experience of sex between men and women. For men it may well be, as Stone says, all in the head (Crawford 55). But for women, Crawford explains, there was always the risk of pregnancy. This perspective changed the nature of sexual experience at the popular level as women were forced to consider their responsibilities whereas men were not. The consistent and widespread number of issues about paternity illustrate the risks and inability of early modern English citizens to make any

laws about paternity. No one could ever be completely sure who the father was, but had never a question about the mother.

Sex is powerful. As the builder of families—the fundamental unit of society—sex affects virtually all areas of social existence: art, politics, business, religion, education, relationships. What makes sex such an attractive topic isn't the breadth, however it is that sex operates at life elementally. Because everyone participates in the sexual economy, sex is a means to talk about everyone.

Chapter III: “To be naked with her friend in bed”: Sex, Symbols, and Ownership in *Othello*

In 1615, Robert Guy wrote a ballad called, “A warning for all good fellowes to take heede of Punkes inticements.”² In the song, he warns good men that whores set up baths “for to catch in:/ All such simple woodcockes,/ as will not beware.” Prostitutes are, according to Guy, a crafty, dangerous bunch. He encourages them in the ballad’s refrain:

Oh come no more there boyes,
nor goe not thither:
But let them goe as they are.
like whores together.

The seventeenth stanza is interesting and different. After detailing the methods and locations of whores (who seem to travel from country fair to country fair), Guy for the first time mentions a wife:

Againe most happy is he,
has a chast Wife:
And can contentedly
so lead his life:
As that he may Whores detest,
and of them beware,
And likewise sweetly sing,

2. The facsimile for this song is on the UCSB Ballad Project: http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad_project/citation.asp?id=20135

come noe more there.

The ballad places the responsibility for the “most happy” man upon the chastity of his wife. It is only because of her that the man may “detest” the whores; an unchaste wife would apparently drive a man to seek them out. A wife’s control of her own sexuality was critical for her husband’s happiness.

Patricia Crawford asserts, “Divines and medical practitioners all shared the same assumptions: women were the disorderly sex, and their sexuality was to be controlled so that they bore children only within marriage, and then only to their lawful husbands” (82). While Crawford might overstate her point, in *Othello*, Desdemona and Othello both struggle with this assumption.

This chapter explores the interplay between dominance and sexuality, and how the act of sex and the discourse of sexuality relate to them. I will save the discussion on religion, and how the church completes *Othello* for a later chapter.

In this chapter, I will argue that sexuality in *Othello* is a suspect idea, and that the failure of Othello is a failure to appropriately manage sexuality both in a domestic matter as an individual family and across society as well. In his role as magistrate of Cyprus, Othello is both the political and military leader, and in those positions he is required to maintain the sexuality of his household. His failure is a failure of management and an example of the deadliness of sexual deviancy.

I. Dominant Desdemona

Frances Dolan describes Desdemona as a woman “in the tradition of cuckold jokes and shaming rituals,” because she is characterized by Iago as “the woman on top” (206). But Dolan misses the point: Desdemona isn’t just characterized as on top,

she really is the dominant figure in their marriage until the middle of Act 2. Consider Desdemona's entrance in 1.3: the first time she appears on stage. Before this scene, we know that Brabantio is upset at his daughter's elopement. Brabantio casts Desdemona as a victim: "She is abused, stol'n . . . corrupted/By spells and medicines . . . so preposterously to err/ Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,/ Sans witchcraft she could not" (1.3.60-65)³. The Duke of Venice accepts this situation as Brabantio describes it and calls Desdemona "beguiled" (l. 66). To Brabantio, she must be blameless because she is the innocent victim.

This is, of course, not the case. Desdemona is no victim; she is the instigator. She wooed him. She hints so obviously that Othello cannot miss that she is aroused by his stories.

Desdemona is not the victim, and Othello is not the aggressor. He is, in fact, willing to submit himself to her word, and allow his fortune to hang upon her statement:

Send for the lady to the Sagittary
 And let her speak of me before her father
 If you do not find me foul in her report,
 The trust, the office I do hold of you
 Not only take away, but let your sentence
 Even fall upon my life. (1.3.114-119)

He is willing to allow Desdemona's word determine his innocence. He has empowered her to decide his fate.

3. All *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* citations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1974 ed.

Othello's other statements back this up. He admits that she was the first mover, and that her love is the core of their relationship: "She loved me for the danger I had pass'd,/ And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.67-68). Othello's love is in reaction to hers and thus is dependent upon hers. The play's plot of course confirms this, as Othello's affection for Desdemona evaporates when he concludes hers for him is also gone.

Desdemona's speeches to convince the senate—first, that she wanted to marry Othello and second, that she wants to accompany Othello to Cyprus—seem to refute her dominance. She speaks of her "duty" (1.3.180) as a daughter and a wife. She explains that her "heart's subdued/ Even to the very quality of my lord" (ll. 249-50). Taken alone these do indeed show Desdemona in the position prescribed by the conduct book writers.

But Othello's reaction twists the meaning of her words so that they become a false show—she is playing to the prejudices of the senate. Othello asks not that he be listened to, but only that the senate please "let her have your voice . . . [B]e free and bounteous with her mind" (ll. 259, 264). He speaks in the imperative, but he is asking for her mind to be obeyed. Othello's mind is subject, and in reaction to Desdemona's. He begs from a subordinate position. His absolute trust in his wife allows Othello to proclaim, "My life upon her faith" (1.3.294).

Desdemona's superiority, her outspokenness toward her father, is demonstrated again in her explaining that her love is "downright violence" (1.3.249). She is the first mover, her words protect Othello in the senate, and the violence with which she demands to accompany him to Cyprus—all demonstrate the strength of her emotion. Juliet Dusinberre describes Desdemona as, "not in fact the submissive young

woman her father thought he had reared, but a young woman of character and initiative who has the guts to fall in love with a north African warrior, entertained at her father's house" (xxi).

This inverted relationship is also illustrated in 2.1, as Othello arrives in Cyprus. Desdemona, preceding Othello and in the company of Iago and Emilia, flirts playfully with Iago and Cassio. She is distinctly not quiet or subdued, but is the major player with Iago. The flirtation is playful, not sexual. It is entertainment for the witty in a world where courtly love is still fashionable.

The inverted hierarchy of Desdemona and Othello's relationship is not in the source text. Instead of the smitten, mousy girl in *Hecatommithi*, Othello's Desdemona is thoughtful, intelligent, and strong. She stands up to her father and insists upon entering a war zone so she may remain with her husband. The force of her love is considerable; she does not follow simply out of obedience.

2. Domesticated Othello

In contrast with Desdemona's outspoken violence, Othello is a demure pacifist. He defers to her for his safety politically, but even when confronted with physical violence, he responds gently.

Othello's response to the men of Brabantio works on two levels. "Keep up your swords, for the dew will rust them" (1.2.59) is, first, a non-violent response to a violent situation. This imitates Christ's behavior, but also establishes Othello as a violence avoider. He is not pretending to be opposed to violence—his words clearly demonstrate otherwise—but he intentionally eschews violence here.

Secondly, there is a related phallic level as well. Othello does not draw his sword physically nor metaphorically in Venice. In Venice, Othello explains, swords will become rusted with dew. Venice is not the place for fighting nor sex.

The phallic interpretation of this scene is not, in this case, overreaching. While not every sword in Shakespeare is a phallus—and sometimes a cigar is just a cigar—Othello prioritizes the domestic and familial over the affairs of state. In the senate, Othello's actions are driven by Brabantio and Desdemona. When he lands in Cyprus, however, he makes a clear prioritized decision to deal with Desdemona first.

Cyprus is not Venice. The scene shifting to a new location signals a change in attitude. The predicted battle quickly evaporates: in just twenty lines the audience is informed that the battle is over before it was ever fought. Cyprus now becomes a kind of luxurious playground for Othello and his men. Carol Thomas Neely asserts that “it is instead Venus's isle, a place for celebration—relaxation, drinking, eating (dinner arrangements are a frequent topic of conversation here as in Arden), flirting, sleeping, lovemaking“ (137).

In Othello's famous arrival, he greets her with a title, “O my fair warrior!” She responds as the more powerful figure, and even reduces him with a diminutive sign of affection, “My dear Othello.” He then continues with eleven lines of praise and relief. He refers to his own feminine soul: “My soul hath her content so absolute/ That not another comfort like this/ Succeeds in unknown fate” (2.1.189-90). Othello feels orgasmic joy—or implies that the physical, sexual fulfillment that awaits is less powerful than the spiritual joy in reunion he feels now.⁴ His love continues to overpower:

4. The idea that death is orgasm is well established in Shakespeare's plays (examples in *Lear*, *A&C*, *Much Ado*, and *T&C*). Gordon Williams has numerous examples in *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, p 98. This is also illustrated by the modern French phrase *petit mort*.

“I cannot speak enough of this content,/ It stops me here, it is too much of joy” (ll. 193-94).

Othello feels fulfillment without physically experiencing Desdemona, because his relationship with her up to this point is fully and exclusively spiritual. Their wooing was based on Othello’s words, not his actions. There is no indication that they have ever touched each other. R. N. Hallstead asserts that “there is nothing in Othello’s account of his wooing to suggest that it involves the slightest sexuality” (110). Their relationship is grounded solely in language, and does not require action. His words are not even grounded in physical proof: in his wooing, he makes no mention of providing her with any proof besides his words. He mentions no scars or souvenirs; only the stories he tells are sufficient to win Desdemona.

As mentioned above, when his ship arrives and Othello comes ashore, amidst a crowd of people, Othello—magistrate of Cyprus and general of the military—rushes up and kisses his wife. Only after he has climaxed does he speak to the larger audience about the wars with the Turks. He offers only one line, “Friends: our wars are done, the Turks are drowned” (2.1.199). Immediately after, he returns to his chatter: “O my sweet,/ I prattle out of fashion, and I dote,/ In mine own comforts” (ll. 202-04). Prattling and doting are female characteristics. His tone mimics the “lame and impotent conclusion” (l. 163) that Iago had offered to Desdemona just shortly before about women who “suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (l. 162). Othello is like the island of Cyprus: a domesticated warrior.

3. Transformative Power of Sex

Othello is spiritually fulfilled when he is reunited with Desdemona. But he is transformed when he finally encounters her physically. Many critics agree that

Othello and Desdemona do not consummate their marriage until 2.3.8-10: “Come, my dear love,/ The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue./ That profit’s yet to come ’tween me and you.” This is a major turning point for Othello, and the only act of sex explicit in the whole play.

When Othello returns, post-coital, to the stage, his demeanor is changed. He stops violence with “Hold for your lives!” (2.3.158) in stark contrast to the idealist who previously told his attackers to “keep up your bright swords.” He follows with a graphic and directed threat: “He that stirs next to carve for his own rage / Holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion” (ll. 166-167).

It does not take long for Othello to regain composure and control.

Now, by heaven,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,

And passion, having my best judgment collid,

Assays to lead the way. (2.3.197-200)

But even with his intended control of passion, Othello relies on threats of physical violence to control the situation. Until this point, the audience has seen a man who works with his words, not his sword. Now he is all action:

Zounds, if I stir,

Or do but lift this arm, the best of you

Shall sink in my rebuke. (2.3.200-02)

This new active, violent Othello has taken the place of the passive, witty Othello. The change occurred after he and Desdemona finally consummate their marriage. Sex changes Othello.

This change is more than simply a new attitude for Othello. Desdemona is affected also; their relationship changes. The new, active Othello arrogates the hierarchally dominant role. In celibacy, Desdemona is Othello's "fair warrior," a figure of authority, but after sex Desdemona becomes the possessed, "My Desdemona," (3.3.87) or the diminutive, "sweet" (l. 56).

Desdemona has changed as well. Her indomitable voice in Act 1 becomes increasingly subdued by the end of the play. When Othello strikes her and commands her to leave in 4.1, she responds with "I will not stay to offend you" (4.1.247). When he later calls her a whore, she tells Emilia "I cannot weep, nor answers have I none/ But what should go by water" (4.2.103-04). She lost her voice and her will when she lost her dominance over Othello. The heirarchy of their relationship has shifted: Desdemona is now submissive to him.

After 2.3, Othello is a different person: he is jealous, he desires a blood-thirsty revenge, he reduces Desdemona from an outspoken passionate to a silent victim. Desdemona changes in reaction to Othello. As Emily Bartels puts it, "what has changed is not Desdemona but the circumstances which surround her" (428). The new circumstances are sexual; sex helped cause the change in Othello.

4. Symbol and Physicality

Othello's sexual experience with Desdemona make him susceptible to Iago's manipulation: "The consummation of his marriage has enabled Othello to entertain in his imagination the vilest of Iago's slanders" (Hallstead 117). As sex reverses the hierarchy, Desdemona gains a body. She becomes physical. She is as much a physical object now as the handkerchief.

The introduction of the handkerchief is innocent enough: the first mention of it comes when Desdemona wipes Othello's brow and he calls it "too little" (3.3.287). Desdemona lets it fall carelessly. The text gives no hint of its significance. In this scene, both Desdemona and Othello seem to consider it just a handkerchief. The audience notices nothing.

Emilia moves the handkerchief into the center of concern: "My wayward husband hath a hundred times/ Wooed me to steal it [W]hat he will do with it/ Heaven knows, not I" (3.3.292-93, 297-98). Nor, at this point, does the audience have any idea; the text reveals only slowly this mystery.

Just twenty lines after she picks it up, Emilia passes the handkerchief to Iago. He passes it on to Cassio, who gives it to Bianca. It circles Othello; he never can possess it. Iago ensures that Othello is never satisfied by holding what he desires.

Iago uses two tricks on Othello: first, he uses pornographic imagery. From the first lines of the play, it is clear that Iago can see vice in anything. His second tool is much more sophisticated. He convinces Othello that immaterial objects have physical value. He uses the example of "my good name" to illustrate:

Good name in man and woman, my dear lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed. (3.3.155-61)

The immaterial name has gained monetary value and, like Desdemona's handker-

chief, can be physically carried and passed from person to person. Othello is frustrated that he cannot nail down the handkerchief (3.4.90-96), but because he has accepted Iago's conception of possession of immaterial objects, he can never be satisfied.

Iago senses and exploits this paradox's of the handkerchief's power *in absentia*. He describes the handkerchief as a "trifle," recalling Othello's assessment that it was too small. It verges upon nothingness, being "light as air": "Trifles light as air/ Are to the jealous confirmations strong/ As holy writ" (3.3.322-24). Iago's description is full of rhetorical substitution. The handkerchief becomes the "trifle," Othello is reduced to "the jealous."

A seventeenth-century audience would recognize the handkerchief as a biblical symbol. The Geneva Bible describes Paul's handkerchief in a marginal note: "God wrought no smale miracles by the hands of Paul, so that from his bodie were brought vnto the sicke, kerchefs or handkerchefs, and the diseases departed from them, and the euil spirits went out of them" (Acts 19:11-12).

Robert Watson, in his article "*Othello* as Protestant Propaganda," quotes from a 1603 book, *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*: "Who doth not bewayle the sely doating Indian Nation, that falls down and performs divine adoration to a rag of red cloth?" (Watson 247). Othello endows the handkerchief, like a silly Indian, with mystical powers, but likely the audience does the same due to Biblical allusion.

We do not question where Iago became acquainted with the story of the handkerchief, or how he came to understand Othello's belief in it. It is, however, new information for Desdemona, who seems to hear it for the first time in 3.4.51-80. As Othello is telling the story of the witch who made it, and the "magic in the web of

it,” Desdemona interrupts with “Is’t possible?” and “I’ faith! is’t true?” Whether by information or intuition, Iago understands that the handkerchief can greatly influence Othello.

After stealing the handkerchief, when Othello returns in 3.3, Iago taunts him with suggestive images and stories about Desdemona: “Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp’d?” (ll. 395-96). Iago’s suggestions succeed in agitating Othello, but are not enough to fully convince him of Desdemona’s wantonness. Iago recommends that Othello seek out more proof to substantiate “proofs that do indicate thinly” (l. 430). But Othello has already reached the “foregone conclusion” (l. 428) that she is a sexualized creature.

Othello considers ways to repair the situation; none of them include discussing the matter with her. He never considers ignoring the situation, or sending her to a nunnery, or asking her to repent. Othello’s solutions are terminal: he will act upon Desdemona. She is no longer a rational being, but an object to be dealt with.

William Gouge, perhaps the most popular of all conduct book writers, considers murderous thoughts to be a side-effect of sexual immorality. Because of adultery, a man or woman could be “stirred up to wish, and long after one another’s death: and not only inwardly in heart to wish it, but outwardly also in deed to practise it” (220). Murder is the extreme of objectification.

Because Desdemona has become now an object to Othello, the handkerchief acts not just a symbol for Desdemona’s virtue, but for Desdemona herself. The two objects unite. So when Iago tells Othello that he saw Cassio “wipe his beard” (3.3.439) with the handkerchief, Othello, having conflated the object and the person, hears it as a very sexual act. Under the veneer of straightforward reportage, Iago communi-

cates an illicit relationship where Desdemona fully demonstrates her wantonness. When Othello hears that Desdemona had Cassio to “wipe his beard,” he hears a description of oral sex.

The thin proofs of Iago’s invented stories are to be verified by “trifles.” Iago has an ungrounded signifier—a false story about Cassio’s beard—asking for support from another ungrounded signifier: the “light as air” handkerchief. Iago manipulates Othello’s perception because his proof lacks substance.

Proof, as Katherine Eisaman Maus explains, is a slippery concept for early moderns. While some crimes were easy to detect because of the lingering physical evidence—the stolen goods found in another man’s house, an unmarried pregnant woman, a dead body floating in a pond—not all crimes fit this mold. Some, like conspiracy and treason, may have no physical artifacts. They are “crimes that occur in the imagination” (34). These were capital crimes, but because they were a “secret thing hidden in the breast of man” (35), they could never be definitively shown. Desdemona has no way of showing her innocence because her purported evil—an unlawful sexual liaison—left no evidence. In an early modern family, female adultery was treason, equivalent to political treason (Dolan 203).

Othello is in a precarious position because Desdemona’s virtue, like the power of the handkerchief, is immaterial. He conflates Desdemona’s virtue with the handkerchief clearly in 4.1, where Iago goads Othello about the nature of virtue:

IAGO: But if I give my wife a handkerchief—

OTHELLO: What then?

IAGO: Why, then, ’tis hers, my lord, and being hers,
She may, I think, bestow’t on any man.

OTHELLO: She is protectress of her honour too.

May she give that? (4.1.10-15)

Here Othello simultaneously questions the interoperability of the handkerchief and Desdemona's virtue. Though the two men overtly discuss Emilia and an insignificant handkerchief, the context shows the two men are using the trope only to provide some distance between the painful subject Desdemona.

Othello's description of the handkerchief in 3.4 provides the magical history of the object, but also gives it a sexual power. It allows a woman to "subdue" (3.4.59) a man, and keep him from seeking "new fancies." Even the coloration was procured from "maiden's hearts" (ll. 75). The symbolic nature of the handkerchief exists beyond the object itself in the story Othello learned from his mother. Similarly, Desdemona's virtue exists outside of herself in the stories created by Iago.

Othello entrenches himself in the symbolic interpretation of the handkerchief and his wife's virtue because neither can be made present. Othello demands the handkerchief from Desdemona three times in a row, in as straightforward a manner as possible:

DESDEMONA: Come, come;

You'll never meet a more sufficient man.

OTHELLO: The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA: I pray talk me of Cassio.

OTHELLO: The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA: A man that all his time

Hath founded his good fortunes on your live,

Shar'd dangers with you—

OTHELLO: The handkerchief! (3.4.90-96)

Othello's repeated refrain, "the handkerchief! . . . the handkerchief! . . . the handkerchief!" demonstrates his absolute fixation on the non-present symbol. Desdemona's inability to produce the physical object (and equally the proof of her virtue) solidifies—in Othello's mind—her guiltiness. To restore the handkerchief to Desdemona would simultaneously reaffirm Desdemona's virtue and to restore her to Othello.

5. Conclusion

Desdemona's body and virtue, the object and symbol of the handkerchief all interoperate in the play. Desdemona's body is equated with the physical object of the handkerchief, and her virtue is equated with the symbol of the handkerchief.

Iago's genius is to take innocence and transform it into something suspect. He forces Othello to jump to conclusions by being intentionally coy:

IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend in bed

An hour, or more, not meaning any harm?

OTHELLO: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean any harm?

It is hypocrisy against the devil.

They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,

The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven. (4.1.3-8)

Iago is taunting Othello. Othello senses the tension between the naked couple and innocence, and can't maintain it. It all collapses upon him: "Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief! To confess, and be hang'd for his labor—first to be hang'd, and then to confess. I tremble at it . . . Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!" (4.1.38-39, 43).

It is nonsense; it forces Othello into an epileptic trance.

Othello has a cloud of symbols swirling around him now: the handkerchief, Desdemona's virtue, name, jewels, purses. Iago has not only created them, but has divorced them from any physical signifier, so that, for Othello, they are each free-floating.

Othello's only remaining tool is interpretation. By assigning meaning to each symbol, he takes ownership of it. The handkerchief which he cannot possess physically he can at least possess spiritually. By assigning Desdemona's virtue as the meaning of the handkerchief-symbol, Othello feels some control over his circumstances. Othello learns that despite appearance, interpretation is not arbitrary, and there are dangerous consequences for presuming ownership through interpretation.

Chapter IV: “Concupiscible intemperate lust”: Sex in Transition in *Measure for Measure*

As in *Othello*, sex is central to *Measure for Measure*. The play investigates the limits of transgression to question the moral and social consequences of extra-marital sex. *Othello* looked within a marriage; *Measure* uses a broader canvas to encompass various types of sexual transgression, and then forces the audience to consider religious implications as well. This chapter will cover the sexual element, and the next will show how religion allows *Othello* and *Measure* to work together cohesively to make a statement about the value of the religion and the church.

Measure for Measure presents a set of dilemma that are structurally very similar to *Othello*, and the initial assumptions and conflict of the story are similar as well. Angelo brings about destruction because he mismanages his own sexuality, and therefore allows sexuality to become a destructive force. Sexuality that is mismanaged (or unmanaged, as occurs in the houses of the suburbs) leads to death. This cycle is eventually broken through the influence of the institutional church; however I will wait to discuss the church’s role until the next chapter. For now, I will look at how the mismanagement of sexuality causes pain, suffering, destruction, death, chaos, financial ruin, and familial infidelity. It causes Lucio to leave Kate Keepdown and abandon his child and his paternal responsibility. In the end, the power of the church provides social stability—though not happiness—for everyone.

I. In Discourse with Sex and Death

For Pompey, sex is business. He is a bawd by trade but a clown by disposition. He does not worry himself about morals. In Act 2, when Escalus interviews Pompey about his vocation, he asks him about his profession: “How would you live, Pompey? by being a bawd? What do you think of the trade, Pompey? is it a lawful trade?” (2.1.226). Though Escalus continues to address Pompey almost as a child, Pompey replies with partial seriousness, “If the law would allow it, sir” (2.1.227). Pompey sees a break between the moral law and the law of the state. Pompey does not consider being a bawd as wrong in itself, but only unfavored by men like Angelo. Pompey considers himself “valiant” in his trade (2.1.256). It is a job like any other job.

In making his decision to serve as the executioner’s apprentice (rather than face more severe punishment), Pompey observes, “I do find your hangman is a more penitent trade than your bawd: he doth oft’ner ask forgiveness” (4.2.51). On one level, Pompey’s flippancy is a dark humor. But more significantly, he invokes religious rhetoric and implies that the executioner is more righteous for considering moral implications. But Pompey may also mean the statement to imply that the bawd does not ask forgiveness because forgiveness is not required: sex is a natural act and exists beyond law, penitence, and forgiveness. It is part of natural law.

Most significantly, for Pompey, his position as executioner is a change in job, but not morality. Both are trades, that is all.

The play transforms sex into death when the Provost changes Pompey from bawd into executioner. Upon Pompey’s appointment, the provost recognizes the similarities between the two careers, that they “weigh equally; a feather will turn the

scale” (4.2.26). These are elemental, physical jobs that serve the body in different ways but with equivalent value.

Like Pompey, Claudio participates in discourse with both sex and death. Claudio explains to Lucio that he’s imprisoned because of “too much liberty, my Lucio, liberty,” but that the liberty is “a thirsty evil, and when we drink we die” (1.2.125,130). The liberty of sex, as described by Claudio, kills mechanically and surely as poison kills a rat.

Consider how the plot links sex and death together for Claudio. He will die because of sex. Isabella, the Duke, and Mariana work together to use sex to avoid Claudio’s death. After sex, Angelo strengthens and reaffirms his order for Claudio’s execution. It is almost a causal relationship: sex causes death. Sex-death is the thought center of the play.

When the text compares competing attitudes toward sex and death side by side, it privileges death over sex. When Isabella first explains to Claudio about Angelo’s bargain, he chooses death by rejecting the offer, “Thou shalt not do’t” (3.1.102). When he later repents of his decision, he confronts the magnitude of death: “death is a fearful thing” (l. 115). He then begs her to use her sex to help him avoid death:

Sweet sister, let me live.

What sin you do to save a brother’s life,

Nature dispenses with the deed so far,

That it becomes a virtue. (ll. 132-35)⁵

5. Claudio’s speech cannot be generalized to be a defense of sin generally. The word “sin” cannot be generalized but refers exclusively to sex. The play gives Isabella only one decision here: she may have sex with Angelo or let Claudio die. The word “sin” in this case is not broad, but metonymical.

Isabella refuses, of course, and Claudio returns to his original position. He accepts the inevitability of death and the inadequacy of sex to save his life. “I am so out of love with life that I will sue to be rid of it” (1. 171).

In a move that mirrors Pompey’s conceptual shift from bawd to executioner, Claudio uses the language of romance to talk about death. he is “out of love with life” and describes his upcoming execution as an amorous embrace of a newly married woman: “I will encounter darkness as a bride, and hug it in my arms” (3.1.82-84). By using erotic imagery, the discourses of sex and death become conflated. Claudio is no longer able to draw a distinction between the two and prepares himself for death.

2. Sex, Betrothals, and Ambiguity

I have been using the term “sex” generically to refer to both authorized and illicit sexual activities. This is intentional on my part, because the play does not—until the very end—carefully distinguish between the two.

Measure for Measure is a morally ambiguous play. The uncertainty about the moral line is illustrated by the confusing practice of betrothals in Renaissance England. Of the two accepted types of engagement, *de praesenti* and *de futuro*, it is unclear which of the two unions in the play are of which type. S. Nagarajan argues that Angelo and Mariana are lawfully engaging in sex, but Claudio and Juliet are not (117-18). Margaret Ranald argues the opposite (77-78). B. J. Sokol spends a few pages trying to reach a definitive conclusion, at one point mentioning in exasperation, “the rules are complicated” (28). Based on strict interpretations of the text, many interpretations are plausible.

The laws and customs of betrothal were an uncomfortable point of tension between the power of the church and the power of the state. In a pamphlet printed in 1612, Jesuit theologian Martinus Becanus demonstrates the confusion about the legality of the different types of betrothal. He argues that the laws of betrothal provide a basis to question the succession of Elizabeth as legitimate child of Henry VIII. In this passage, he is making a legal case using the three variables—marriage, sex, and betrothal—that Shakespeare investigates in the play:

In these dayes, the most vigilant Pastor of the Church K. *Henry*, that it might be knowne to posterity, what woman were lawfully married to another, enacted a perpetuall law concerning Marriage, authorizing the same by publicke Decree of Parliament: wherein it was ordained, that if any persons, not prohibited in the *Leuiticall law*, should contract marriage by only consent, and by words *de prasenti*, no carnall copulation following the same; and that the said persons, or eyther of them should afterward contract with another person not prohibited in the *Leuiticall law*, & consummate the same by carnall copulation; that then these later contractes, which were consummated by carnall copulation, not the former, that were agreed vpon by only consent, should be accompted for good and lawfull. In so much, that wheras the rule of the law of Nations in old tyme was, *That consent, not carnall copulation did make the marriage lawfull*; now heere after by the law of K. *Henry*, it began to be a rule, *That carnall copulation, not consent did make marriage lawfull*. . . . And of this law afterward the Protestants themselues were so much

ashamed, that after K. *Henryes* death, they recalled, and disanulled the same &c. (28-29)

It seems likely that Shakespeare's audience would have recognized that there was at least some possibility of both betrothals in *Measure for Measure* being interpreted as presented: Claudio and Juliet as criminal, sinful, and illicit, but Angelo and Mariana as acceptable and legitimate. This being the case, an audience in 1604 would recognize the similarities between Angelo's inflexible punishment with the reforms proposed by Puritan moralists like Bucer, Stubbes, and Lupton.

Not all, perhaps, would see the situation as black-and-white. Overdone, for instance, seems to consider Claudio and Juliet married (1.2.72): things are not clear even within the fictional world of the play itself. Is Juliet as Overdone thinks, a married woman, or as Angelo sees her, a "fornicatress" (2.2.23)? The play does not require that the audience decide. By allowing—even encouraging—ambiguity, the play forces the audience to participate in the play's moral dialog.

Mistress Overdone's rhetoric is that of a merchant-class woman. Her complaint—"what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with the poverty, I am custom-shrunk" (1.2.82-84)—is about business, not morals. As she discusses the fate of businesses in the suburbs and in the city, the only references to prostitution are highly veiled:

POMPEY: You have not heard of the proclamation, have you?

OVERDONE: What proclamation, man?

POMPEY: All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be pluck'd down.

OVERDONE: And what shall become of those in the city?

POMPEY: They shall stand for seed. (11.93-97)

In 1604 the references would have been clear to the houses in the suburbs or, as Overdone calls them later, “houses of resort” (l. 101). But the intentional vagueness helps establish Overdone not as a highly sexualized woman, but a very practical one. She has no highly sexual dialog at all.

The text carefully avoids the whores themselves; no business is ever transacted in front of the audience. Inside the bawdy house, the men are talking to each other; there are no women at the table. There, as everywhere in the play, Overdone and Pompey are above all else a merchant and a tradesman. Their sin is much more abstract than other Shakespearean prostitutes, like, for instance, Bianca in *Othello*.

Mistress Overdone is a pragmatic woman, not wicked. Where Pompey is a clown and a bawd, even in his speech, Mistress Overdone is a realistic portrait of a 1604 woman. She is the voice of the merchant class, indistinguishable by trade.

3. Absolutist Attitudes: Sex and Death

When Isabella first confronts Angelo and pleads Claudio’s life, they have an identical philosophical approach. She can hardly mount an argument because their logic is so similar that she is lost in the exchange. At first, she tries only one explanation—“condemn the fault, and not the actor of it” (2.2.37)—before she gives up. Only with encouragement from Lucio, and consideration of the seriousness of the punishment, is she able to persist in the argument. The first interview between Isabella and Angelo demonstrates that both are moral extremists. Isabella works to convince herself as much as Angelo, as evidenced by the prodding she requires from Lucio.

Isabella exists far beyond laws of Vienna, the Duke, or Angelo. She begins the play firmly entrenched in a Catholic world. Leaving the convent, she retains her Catholic sensibilities. At first, she cannot even say out loud her brother's sin, "a vice that most I do abhor" (2.2.29). Her gentility and purity are demonstrations of her innocence as well as her naivety. She lacks the experience even to comprehend, let alone embrace, the sin.

Slowly, she begins to embrace a more subtle, sophisticated world view. After receiving her shocking proposition from Angelo she confides to her brother with surprising forthrightness, "If I would yield him my virginity,/ Thou mightst be freed!" (3.1.97-98). And, shortly thereafter, Isabella is persuaded to the bed trick. The Isabella from act one could hardly have even entertained such a scheme, much less discussed it openly as she does with the Duke in 3.1.

She is influenced by exposure, to be sure, but also by the duke-as-friar. As such, she believes she's under the influence of the church, when instead it is the state under the masquerade of the church. Isabella is led to lower her guard, and this creates the change in her. Though she wants to follow the church, she unwittingly follows a political path: "the very situation in which Isabella champions orthodox claims of Christian faith is situated as the culmination of the duke's project, a project he himself has acknowledged as having exclusively political motivations" (Barnaby and Wry 1249).

Isabella's personality in the final act is so transformed it is barely identifiable when compared to her first appearance. Where before she could not even mention by name any sexual behavior, even removed from her own person, by act five she can talk about them directly, openly, and loudly, even in front of a crowd. What before

was euphemistically “a vice” she now in Act 5 proclaims freely: Claudio is “Condemn’d upon the act of fornication” (5.1.70). She uses new vocabulary to accuse Angelo of being “an adulterous thief,/ An hypocrite, a virgin-violator” (5.1.40-41). With surprising directness, she tells the duke and the entire crowd of Angelo taking “gift of my chaste body/ To his concupiscible intemperate lust . . . /And I did yield to him” (5.1.98-101). Even though she never actually did yield to him, she’s willing to suffer the personal shame.

Angelo’s stance is an unwavering upholding of the law, which itself is a literal interpretation of the Bible. The law follows the Bible injunction that the “wages of sin is death.” His philosophy and the law both follow literally the Geneva Bible’s marginal note to Romans 6:23: “Death is the punishment due to sin.”

When we see Angelo before his second interview with Isabella, he suffers not because his world view is challenged, but because he is having difficulty fitting his own feelings into his current world view. He feels a separation between his words and his thoughts: “When I would pray and think, I think and pray/ To several subjects” (2.4.1). His divided self demonstrates his fractured world view. As an absolutist, he cannot simply modify his perspective—it is either right or wrong, black or white. By separating himself into different parts, he can maintain virtue while perusing evil. This explains why Angelo experiences such a dramatic turn from virtue to wickedness: his virtuous self could not be moved, and so his newly-discovered sexual side was left unchecked. He is simultaneously both the “good angel” and the character on the devil’s crest (2.4.16-17).

His view remains unchanged in Act 5, though he had taught himself to live with the guilt, apparently. When the Duke returns and Angelo's carefully crafted web collapses, Angelo remains a moral absolutist. In his confession he says, "Immediate sentence then and sequent death/ Is all the grace I beg" (5.1.374-75). Angelo is steadfast and absolute.

His final words lead to a troubling prediction for the success of his marriage to Mariana:

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. (5.1.474-77)

Angelo, having both sides of his character revealed, would rather be dead than married. He is steadfastly absolutist—there is no middle-ground alternative for Angelo, either flawless virtue or death—and remains so.

4. Conclusion

Neither moral ambiguity nor unflinching absolutism regarding sexual activity is acceptable to the Duke. The flood of marriages in Act 5 serves to authorize virtually all the sexuality evident in the play. By forcing Angelo and Mariana, and Lucio and Kate Keepdown to marry, the Duke *ex post facto* authorizes their sex.

This keeps in line with his character: the Duke's world view is dramatically different from any other character in the play. He sees the world in terms of tools. Angelo is a tool to clean the city of sexual wickedness. The Duke's disguise as a friar is initially a tool to allow him to act as a spectator, and later the church becomes a

tool for him to intervene to save Claudio's life. Provost, Isabella, and Mariana are all tools as he tries to undo Angelo's dangerous deception. The government is a tool for him to mold society according to his vision. Marriage also is a tool: it can repair the damage of fornication and provide a recourse for victimized women and bastard children.

The Duke not only uses tools for his own benefit, but he enables others to leverage tools themselves. Specifically, he allows Mariana to use sex to force a marriage between herself and Angelo; she had personal motivation to participate in the bed trick. Since Angelo had defamed her, his "unjust unkindness (that in all reason should have quench'd her love)" (3.1.240) has made Mariana powerless to win him back. Sex was her one tool that, because they had a pre-existing contract for marriage (whichever type it may have been), made an immediate marriage legal and necessary (Sokol and Sokol 43). Mariana was able to force Angelo to wed, courtesy of the tool that the Duke empowered her to use.

Because the women in the play are all otherwise disempowered to a degree, sex and sexuality is one of the few tools at their disposal. Each of them uses it for a social good to provide stability for Vienna and to correct previous wrongs. Even Overdone is not condemned in the play; her pragmatism outshines any moral misgivings.

In *Measure for Measure*, sex is an instrument of female power. Every woman in the play takes advantage of it: Mistress Overdone merchandizes sex for financial gain, Isabella uses sex to save her brother, Mariana uses sex to gain a husband. With so few options for female empowerment culturally available, *Measure* makes a clear case about the value of sex: it gives the women a position of strength in society.

Sex is thus a social good. Rather than an evil-but-necessary tool for procreation, sex is a positive force. However, it must, as demonstrated by the deliberate manipulations of the Duke, be constrained within marriage.

Despite the limitation that sex is only authorized in certain circumstances, *Measure for Measure* draws permeable lines around these particulars. Any moral ambiguity that seems to pervade the play serves to illustrate the central idea that sex empowers women. Sex does not cause death after all, but provides women with voice, recourse, and power.

Chapter V: “Craft against vice”: Religion and Sex in Seventeenth-Century England

In *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* sex is a critical element of the plot. In each, Shakespeare uses sexual transgression and man’s reaction to sex to comment on male-female relationships. It is the universality of sex—the way it operates at humanity’s most essential level—that makes it such a rich and broadly appealing topic. But these plays are related in more than just sex.

Despite obvious differences—most obviously that one is a tragedy and the other a comedy—the two plays have an intriguing correlation of characters; all the major characters in each play have a twin in the other play. Desdemona works together with Isabella, Othello with Angelo, and Iago with the Duke. As I will show, these three character pairs together demonstrate how *Measure for Measure* serves as an answer to the religious quandaries of *Othello*.

Sex still informs the discussion, but now with the critical addition of the church. I will first examine the role of religion in the audience’s assumptions about sex and then consider each of the three character pairs. In the end, it should be clear that the net result of these two plays jointly considered produces an ultimate valorization of the institutional church.

The previous two chapters have examined how *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* have approached the management of sexuality. In these plays, sexuality explicitly needed to be managed for the social stability (as well as for religious experience). Othello’s jealousy and acceptance of assumption and imagination over evidence—the ocular proof he claimed to require but actually imagined—led to violent mismanage-

ment. His religious and cultural heritage led him to believe that the proper management of Desdemona's infidelity was, literally, death. To Othello, Desdemona's murder was the appropriate (and perhaps only) remedy. As the head of the household and the governor of Cyprus ("else she deceive more men") his response was the necessary corrective to a failure to keep sexuality managed in his household.

Angelo's management of sexuality—a strict Biblical interpretation of Deuteronomy—was challenged not from outside, but by Angelo's personal confrontation with sexuality and his failure for appropriate personal management. His hypocrisy is a failure in the system of government/state that Angelo has studied. While he had strict comportment, the only safeguard was the state, which Angelo controlled exclusively. Because he was able to control the power of government, Angelo mismanaged both his own sexuality and the social security/stability as well.

In the case of Angelo in Vienna, the power of the institutional—that is, established, state sponsored-church—is able in 5.1 to correct Angelo's mismanagement. Through the power of the church, the Duke is able to preserve Claudio's and Julietta's lives, to maintain Isabella's chastity, to obtain a husband for Mariana, and to humble the haughty Angelo.

This is not the pure power of the state. Angelo controls the strings of political power while the Duke deliberately refrains from reasserting his political power until Act 5. Except the humbling of Angelo, all the Duke's lifesaving actions occur while he is in the robe of the church—literally in the garb of it. Everyone responds and acts not based on the political power of the Duke, but because they perceive that he is the power of the church. Whether or not he actually represents any religious author-

ity, the rest of the characters in the play believe that he is and follow him based on their assumptions.

There is clearly religion in *Othello*, both in the dialog and symbolically as well. It comes from three characters' mouths: Othello, Desdemona, and Iago. Each invokes religious rhetoric at various times, but none deals specifically with any organized church. Their overt religion is a personal Christianity: Othello famously ensures Desdemona has said her prayers before he kills her. Like Hamlet in reverse, Othello wants Desdemona to have the blessing of prayer to catapult her to heaven. Unlike Hamlet who wishes for a vengeful damnation for the one he is about to kill, Othello demonstrates a Christian concern for Desdemona. She, similarly, considers her salvation a necessary component of her life.

But the church as an institution is noticeably absent from *Othello*. There are no priests in the play; Othello and Desdemona are not married in a church and indeed never attend or mention attending any organized religious services; no priest is called for to attend to the dead and dying. No one ever mentions clergy in the whole play.

In *Othello*, the church as an institution is absent. Where *Measure for Measure* combined church and state, Othello joins state and military. In Othello's position as a general of high esteem and respect, his military role allowed him to fulfill a position of responsibility despite racial and religious differences from Venetian society. However, the blessings he enjoyed—trust, authority, Christianity, military prowess, love from a rich and beautiful younger woman—were insufficient to protect himself or the society of Cyprus from him. It appears that the absence of the church left

Othello vulnerable, but that vulnerability is only visible when viewed through the lens of *Measure for Measure*.

I. Sex and Religion, 1604

Puritan moralists approved of sex. They saw the role of marriage, sex, and childbirth as godlike. They correlated earthly pregnancy and birth with the activities of God, as creator. Thomas Gataker wrote that human conception was a means of God to produce “one in all respects like himselfe, the chiefe of God’s works; of giuing being to a creature with Gods Image, wherein himselfe had beene created” (qtd. in Schnucker 661). Thus for Puritans, having sex was a way to be more like God.

Puritan moralists believed that “the full realization of an individual’s human and spiritual potential was best accomplished not by withdrawing from the physical side of wedlock, but by embracing it wholeheartedly” (De Welles 46). Puritans were concerned, however, that sex should not supplant faith and religion as the central motivating force in a man’s life. According to Edmund Morgan: “There was just one limitation which Puritans placed upon sexual relations in marriage: sex must not interfere with religion. Man’s chief end was to glorify God, and all earthly delights must promote that end, not hinder it” (593).

In his article “Elizabethan Birth Control and Puritan Attitudes,” Robert Schnucker summarizes the situation well:

In general, most of the Puritan authors of marriage manuals and the scriptural commentators accepted a three-fold purpose for marriage [procreation, marital solace and comfort, and deliverance from temptation]. The Puritans were divided over placing procreation or mutual

solace as the primary purpose for marriage There is ample evidence that [this] was in fact part of a cultural change rather than a new emphasis spawned by Puritanism. For example, one of the first statements in English to place procreation second was William Tyndale's *On the Obedience of a Christian* (1528) This idea was not original to Tyndale but came from his teacher, Martin Luther Thus, there is evidence for a movement away from the time-honored priority of procreation as the first purpose of marriage during the sixteenth century and some of the Puritans were part of this movement or at least reflected it. (660-61)

The Puritans were not necessarily original, but they preached the value of pleasurable marital sex more broadly and with greater enthusiasm than anyone who preceded them.

These attitudes were not even new in the Reformation, as Kathleen Davies has demonstrated (Davies 563-80). Many Catholic thinkers already articulated and published similar ideas. Where the groups diverged, however, is the ultimate role of sex and marriage in the larger picture. For even the most progressive Catholic writers, Erasmus and More included, voluntary abstinence was a means to greater spiritual gifts than sexual activity. Even within marriage, abstinence could be a blessing and a means to draw closer to God. According to Greenblatt, until the time of Milton, marriage was, at least partially, a “consolation prize for those who did not have the higher vocation of celibacy” (128).

Harrington explained in *Commendations of Matrimony* (1528) that voluntary abstinence by married couples could be the means to “grete merite with gode fortune

and gracious fruyte and the better prospere in al theyr werkes” (qtd. in Davies 575). The “gracious fruyte” is evidence that procreative sex was acceptable, but otherwise married couples should seek the “better prospere” of asexuality. This view was reaffirmed in the mid-sixteenth century by the Council of Trent’s reaffirmation that celibacy was a spiritually superior state to that of marriage. Celibacy became, in the English mind, a Catholic trait (De Welles 58).

The sinfulness of fornication and adultery runs across virtually all Christian theology. Ideas regarding the righteousness or depravity of sex within marriage, however, vary greatly across churches. At the time of Shakespeare, the Catholic view was still popular in England that sex was a necessary evil and should be avoided as much as possible, even within marriage.

These sexual and religious conflicts have political implications. By the seventeenth century, sexual issues had been major factors in the reign of all monarchs for the past hundred years. Henry divorced or put to death multiple women, and had a schism with Rome because of them. His offspring suffered in similar ways: Edward was never fully empowered because he was not sexually mature, the anticipated fruit of Mary’s sexuality turned out to be a deadly tumor, and Elizabeth never engaged in sex at all (at least not officially). The messy lines of succession illustrate the sexual failure of the Tudors.

There is a more general political element to sexuality. A man’s sexual activity, early modern Englishmen believed, could greatly influence his ability to govern others. James illustrated this in the *Basilicon Doron*, where he warned his son Henry that desire, once followed, can make itself a tyrant: “to measure any one sin by the rule of his lust and appetites, and not by his conscience, what shall let him to do so with the

next that his affections shall stir him to, the like reason serving for all.” In other words, a man who is not sexually pure is unable to judge others: the magnitude and gravity of his own sins clouds his judgment. A sexually impure man is unworthy—even unable—to govern others. Fornication can thus make a man unable to reign.

This belief conjoins both the religious and the social. Adultery makes a man religiously unworthy and socially not respectable, so his governance over others is already questionable at best. That his abilities themselves are diminished is not surprising; he has already lost both his salvation and his reputation.

2. Angelo and Othello

Othello and Angelo both experience sex, and it changes them both. They are each flawed before the experience of sex, and the experience awakens in them a worst-case: they become their most evil, basest selves. Additionally, both have long-suffering women who overlook their undesirable behavior.

They are also both religious characters whose religion acts as a significant operator within the play: Angelo the quasi-Puritan and Othello the Christian convert. Their religiosity significantly impacts how they confront the world around them and how the play treats them.

While most scholarship presumes that Angelo is indeed Puritan (being called “precise”) the text does not support this interpretation. In the opening soliloquy in 2.4, Angelo makes obvious reference to the eucharist, that which was perhaps most reviled by Puritans: “Heaven in my mouth,/ As if I did but only chew his name” (2.4.4-5). Greenblatt in *The Norton Shakespeare* removes the word “heaven” and

restores the text (as it presumably existed before the censors required the removal of oaths in 1606) to “God in my mouth.” This is an even more explicit description of the eucharist, and Angelo says that his lust for Isabella reduces the miracle of transubstantiation to only a word—and the miracle becomes textual rather than physical.

His assumption that the miracle of the eucharist is real signals that Angelo is not a Puritan. This, the group that felt even priestly vestments were too much a distraction from the Word—indicates that Angelo is, at best, a symbolic Puritan.

Unlike real Puritans, Angelo never mentions nor proposes any church or state reform. Perhaps he sees no fault in the people who are running the state and church. Angelo is concerned with a reform of personal discipline and behavior through enforcement of existent state laws. Hence his condemnation of Claudio (and subsequent defense of his position to Isabella) is not a reflection of the Petition nor the works of reformers like Bucer, but rather is to use him to “make him an example” (1.4.68). He hopes to illustrate that, as Paul teaches, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)

The focus on the personal over the institutional explains, at least in part, how Angelo, seeming strict and precise, and surely heartless toward other’s shortcomings, could justify the exchange of sex to free a fornicator. The very act, as he said, is “condemn’d ere it be done” (2.2.38). This seeming paradox is resolved when we consider that Angelo desires a top-down approach. The proposal he makes to Isabella is private, both because no one needs find out and because it presents no threat to the community at large and he will almost certainly avoid being caught. This is, obviously, not the attitude of reformers like Bucer—he argued that personal sins will

cause larger societal difficulties—and hence need to be managed on the larger scale and are worthy of being dealt with by institutions like the church.⁶

But Angelo does not consider himself a Puritan. He thinks of himself as a statesman and a politician. He prides himself in his demeanor, and has studied the affects of governance (2.4.7-11). That is not to say that he is not religious, but his study has been about state and law, not heaven and scripture.

Compared with the moral reformer Angelo, Othello plays a very different role. He is the physical manifestation of a well-known character to the audience. He is the cuckold husband, and he is a character from the “Homily on Uncleanness and Whoredome.” Ronald Bond asserts that Othello’s behavior made him clearly identifiable to the audience: “The very fact that adulterers were punished harshly by heathens, a fact on which the homily dwells, could be used to prove the barbarity of the Old Law by those who held that Mosaic legalism had been abrogated by the Christian dispensation” (Bond 203).

Jackson and Marotti, in their article “The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies,” describe the central issue of *Othello*: “[Othello’s] skin color [is] less of a problem in the playwright’s imagination than the (other) possibility that he might have converted from—and returned to—Islam. The play, then, is more about religious divisions than racial ones” (180).

In an interesting dilemma, the final speech of Othello is different in the first folio and the quarto. In the folio, he calls himself “a base Iudean” (5.2.347) In the quarto, he is “a base Indian.” Considering that the folio is typically considered supe-

6. Bucer’s long-term goal was to establish a theocracy in England, where God’s laws and the laws of state are one and the same. Debora Shuger’s *Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England* discusses this at length.

rior to the quarto, it feels safe to presume that the quarto is a sight error by the typesetter. Yet interestingly, both the *Norton* and the *Riverside* use “Indian.”

But the implications of Othello appropriating a third religion right before suicide are compelling. The text draws attention to Othello’s religious flexibility and at the same time references the Biblical story of the pearl of great price. As an “Indian,” Othello is aware of his racial difference; as a “Judean” he calls attention to his religious history.

The text sometimes positions Othello’s actions in a Christian sphere. Brabantio’s attack upon Othello in 1.2 mirrors the soldiers coming for Jesus in Matthew 26:47 and John 18:3. Othello in the place of Jesus speaks with calm assurance, and allows himself to be taken—he was going there anyway. Iago, playing Peter to Othello’s Jesus, draws his sword threateningly.

Othello is the Christian and the barbarian; he is simultaneously foreign and familiar. The Protestant audience of 1604 is forced to confront Othello’s alterity at the same time they recognize his similarities to themselves.

These religious actions by Othello are only hints, however. He does not have the overt religiosity of Angelo, let alone the Duke. Othello is metaphorically but not literally a religious character in a non-religious play.

For both Othello and Angelo, religion is one important defining characteristic, but not the single important characteristic. Their similarities help make *Measure for Measure* a play to be read in the context of *Othello*, or after *Othello* as a solution to its tragedy.

3. Isabella and Desdemona

Unlike Othello and Angelo who are alike in their religiosity and different mostly in their manner of implementation, Desdemona and Isabella are almost opposites. One is a celibate novice who emerges from her cloister, the other is a child of the merchant class, for whom religion is more cultural than a statement of affiliation with a particular sect. Their differences in religion help explain how the plays work together.

Richard Hooker is one of the most prominent pro-celibacy Protestants of the late sixteenth century. In the fifth *Book of Ecclesiastical Polity*, he describes (along with many, many other things) the correct structure of a family, the role of women, and the language appropriate for a Christian wedding. He explains that while celibacy is a more exalted state, without marriage society would disintegrate: “In this world there can be no Society durable, otherwise then only by propagation. Albeit therefore single Life be a thing more Angelical and Divine, yet . . . the replenishing first of Earth with blessed Inhabitants, and then of Heaven with Saints everlastingly praising God, did depend upon conjunction of Man and Woman” (288). He does not provide any proof as to the superiority of single life, except for marginal notes of almost entirely scripture references.

He describes the role of woman in terms that should make a twenty-first-century woman shake her fist in frustration:

So that Woman being created for mans sake to be his Helper, in regard of the end before mentioned; namely, the having and bringing up of Children, whereunto it was not possible they could concur, unless there were subalternation between them, which subalternation is naturally

grounded upon inequality . . . an therefore was even in her first estate framed by Nature, not only after in time, but inferiour in excellency also unto Man, howbeit in so due and sweet proportion, as being presented before our eyes, might be sooner perceived then defined All women which had not Husbands nor Fathers to govern them, had their Tutors, without whose Authority there was no act which they did, warrantable: And for this cause, they were in Marriage, delivered unto their Husbands by others. Which custome retained, hath still this use, that it putteth Women in mind of a duty, whereunto the very imbecillity of their nature and Sex doth bind them; namely, to be always directed, guided, and ordered by others. (Hooker 288-89)

The idea that women are cursed with a “very imbecillity of their nature and Sex” informs much of the misogyny of the seventeenth century. And while Othello over the course of the play forces Desdemona to experience this, Isabella learns that women are actually quite powerful and that she, specifically, has power in her words and body.

After 2.3 in *Othello*, Desdemona ceases to act for herself. She is acted upon, socially and sexually and, finally, mortally. Isabella, on the other hand, begins almost incapable of proceeding in the world without hand-holding and some stern direction from Lucio. By the end, Isabella needs no one to help her do the most important work of condemning and forgiving a murderer-rapist. Both *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* follow the path of these women who migrate between states of power: dominant and submissive.

Isabella begins as submissive: on her knees to beg for Angelo's clemency. She is completely disempowered except for her moral position as a virgin and a novice. She tries to use what power she has to "bribe" Angelo (2.2.145) which does not work. In the end, she is back on her knees, begging this time for Angelo's life: "Thoughts are no subjects,/ Intents but merely thoughts" (5.1.453-54). Her power comes from her experience this time. This scene shows an empowered Isabella. She is aware now of her own persuasive power, sexually and verbally.

Desdemona is not like Isabella; she is Isabella in reverse. Desdemona begins as outspoken, bold, and disobedient. She is gradually humbled and driven lower—all the way down to her death in 5.2. She demonstrates that the conception of woman as quiet, submissive, and obedient is a descent that leads to/ends with/results in death. Submission literally de-grades her.

Isabella ascends. She begins literally in confinement. She develops her voice, an independent mind, and a power to act. Her final scene shows a woman willing to stand in strength to condemn her oppressor, even in the face of scorn and possible imprisonment (5.1.158-62). Isabella is objectified like Desdemona, but refuses to submit.

Isabella's second submission is the most moving scene in the play. Her pleading at Mariana's request for Angelo is the fulfillment of Christian power. She is willing and able to forgive (as far as Isabella is aware, Angelo is guilty of attempted rape, breaking a contract, murder, and hypocrisy)—and the greater the sin, the greater the glory of forgiveness.

Where Othello and Angelo are both changed after sex, Desdemona and Isabella are acted upon by these changed men. The women respond inversely, and

show that, at least for Isabella, the church gives her refuge, some direction, and an escape from her overwhelming situation. Without the church, Desdemona is left defenseless.

4. The Duke and Iago

Iago and the Duke are the most significant character-pair. Though their differences are great—Iago works for a negative outcome and the Duke for a positive one—their greatest differences are religious.

At first blush, what separates these two men might be more important than what brings them together, since Iago’s “motiveless malignity” causes the tragic death of three people and the Duke saves everyone’s life and arranges marriages. But a second glance reveals a rich river of similarity. Firstly, both men are secret manipulators who work to accomplish a secret outcome. Iago reveals his early in the play. At the end of 1.3, his soliloquy shows that though he casts about for specific motivation (“it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets/ He has done my office: I know not if't be true;/ But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,/ Will do as if for surety”), his is already fixed to bring Othello’s destruction: “It is engerd’red. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (ll. 387-90, 403-404).

The Duke also makes his intention clear. He does not have the same motivational confusion, but he also indicates that his plan is to only observe: “hence shall we see/ If power changes purpose: what our seemers be” (1.3.53-54). It is only after he hears of Angelo’s offer to Isabella that he becomes motivated to get involved (3.1.151).

Like Iago, the Duke chooses to remain occluded: he reveals his logic to no one, including the audience.

The Duke's major soliloquy in 3.2 is more sign-posting than revelatory, but he does concede that he will work by stratagem instead of force: "Craft against vice I must apply" (l. 277). He never satisfactorily explains why he would use craft rather than solve the problem directly. He could easily have removed the friar's habit, saved Claudio and condemned Angelo, yet he chooses to remain concealed. The text never explains why.

While religion in *Measure for Measure* is explicit, *Othello* is more veiled. Watson argued in 1997 and again in 2002 that *Othello* is protestant propaganda, Iago playing a Jesuit devil. In 2001, Anthony Gilbert also evaluates *Othello* in broadly religious terms, taking the opposite position, with what seems to be a willful misrepresentation of Puritanism, that Iago is an "ethical" Puritan. He asserts that the play propagandizes a secular Catholicism.

Such widely differing interpretations indicate the difficulty of the task.. A religious historicization of Iago always feels like an imposition: he resists categorization. But he has more Biblical quotations and allusions than any other character in *Othello*. Shakespeare encourages a certain level of religious interpretation, but it is a vague, non-definitive Christian rhetoric that does not motivate nor inform Iago's actions at all.

To contrast Iago, the Duke's religion is transparent. He wears the robe of the Catholic church, hears confession, and acts with priestly authority. The state justifies his actions—he is, after all, the legal magistrate of Vienna—but it is the church that provides the means.

The audience would have resonated with the idea. James had said as much in the super popular *Basilicon Doron*. He explains that the idea of the priest/king is not a conceit, but the actual nature of a true monarchy. Kings are “*mixtae personae* . . . being bound to make a reckoning to God for their subjects’ souls as well as their bodies” (qtd. in Shuger 110).

This is the crucial difference between these two: the Duke’s religiosity provides him the motivation and the means to do his secret work, and Iago has no such justification. The church makes the Duke’s manipulations worthy and good, and Iago, lacking that overt authority, can only bring about tragedy. In *Measure for Measure*, the church is the stabilizing and protecting factor. It is the church that allows the otherwise very dark *Measure* to become transformed into a comedy. The power of the Duke, wielded through the trappings of the church, preserves Angelo and Claudio, and secures the fortunes of the play’s women.

5. Conclusion

The net result of these characterizations is to valorize the institutional church. It is not the spiritual acts of the characters, but the presence and authority of the church. For Isabella, the church provides power and security, for the Duke, it is motivation and authority.

Othello raises questions about the impact of sex on men and women. In that play, the idea of sex is enough to demean both Othello and Desdemona. Her murder is a tragedy not simply because she dies, but because the audience feels sympathetic to Othello as well. He has been manipulated and used.

There is no one to protect Othello. He is caught up in a confusing web of symbols, ideas, and competing religions; he cannot nail them down. His inability to deal with such abstract complexity is his most significant flaw.

As a play, *Othello* is surprisingly non-religious. There are no priests and no churches. Othello and Desdemona do not wed in a public religious ceremony. Three characters make explicit reference to Christianity (Desdemona, Othello, and Iago), but none of them appeal to God in their difficult time.

Measure for Measure, on the other hand, drips with religiosity. Isabella and the Duke make it their professions, at least temporarily. Angelo is, as I have discussed, a proto-Puritan and a Biblical literalist. *Measure for Measure* is Shakespeare's only play with a Biblical allusion in the title.

The Duke's speech at the close of *Measure for Measure* is full of grandiose and celebratory verbiage. He restates his proposal to Isabella, he joyously commands that the couples move forward with happiness: "Joy to you, Mariana! Love her, Angelo!" (5.1.526). But there is also a subtle condemnation of the absolutism of Angelo and Isabella in the second act. In their first interview, Angelo explains that fornication could receive no mercy from the law: "every fault's condemn'd ere it be done" (2.2.38). Now, after all has been revealed and corrected, the Duke provides a new interpretation. In the case of all his machinations, he is justified, not because the law allows it, but because the Duke says so: "th' offense pardons itself" (5.2.534). As an embodiment of both the state and the church, the Duke is able to grasp both offense and pardon simultaneously. Angelo and Othello, having only the law without the organized and institutional church, could not offer the pardon, and could not save themselves nor their respective states from tragedy.

Looking at *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* together allows for a somber look at the attitudes toward sexual transgression and the role of the church in 1604. Where most religious interpretation focuses on the Catholic and Puritan, the message of these plays together is that a genericized, institutional church is important.

These plays show the value of state sponsored church is an effective—even the only effective—means of maintaining social or societal stability. Personal religiosity is not sufficient, nor is a powerful central governing military, nor is the state alone sufficient. Like Elizabeth's famous proclamation that she didn't care about what people believed so long as they went to church, *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* together illustrate the wisdom of that idea.

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