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The Language of Tragicomedy: Measure for Measure as Test Case

Camille S. Williams

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Most readers these days don't find *Measure for Measure* a very funny comedy. In fact, classifying it as a comedy—as the First Folio does—can be a stumblingblock to interpretation even though historians of the genre can justify doing so on the basis of precendents classical or medieval. F. S. Boas solved the difficulty by reclassifying *Measure for Measure* as a problem play in 1896, grouping it with other troublesome works such as *Troilus and Cressida*.

The term problem plays has, since then, served as a tacit condemnation of the plays. Presumably a problem play is one that does not meet our expectations; we have trouble placing it—its plot, characters, and style fail to stir our souls as does tragedy and fail to delight us as does comedy. They leave us with mixed feelings. It seems that critics have never been truly satisfied with leaving their problem unsolved.1

W. W. Lawrence mentioned tragicomedy in connection with these plays as early as 1930, and contemporary critics are attempting to solve their problematical status by examining them as tragicomedies. In general, characters in tragicomedies are challenged, death threatens some of them (that's the tragic), but the resolution of the play is "happy and fortunate" despite disturbing incongruities in tone and content (that's the comic; see James G. Taaffe 166-7). There is general agreement that merely alternating comic and tragic material, as when Shakespeare places the porter's ribald lines (MAC 2.03) between the murdering of Duncan, and the discovery of the murder, does not make tragicomedy. Critical discussion is primarily about whether a play has successfully blended these disparate genres.

That definition of tragicomedy so satisfactory in the abstract is not always helpful in the particular. For example, critics differ about what constitutes a happy or fortunate ending. Vivian Thomas suggests that tragicomedy's complex mix is of particular interest to contemporary audiences disillusioned with the happy endings supposedly achieved via governments, religions, or marriages. Of the marriage of Helen to Bertram at the conclusion of *All's Well* she writes, "After three hours of observing the nasty little egotist, could anyone really feel that here is a man who will retain the tolerant and good humoured regime established by his father and continued by his mother?" (167)

Similar dissatisfactions with other characters (Isabella's frigidity, Cressida's infidelity), or features of the plot (bed tricks, endings featuring marriage as a cure-all, Pandarus's advice) have been as vigorously expressed. Sometimes the style of the plays is also condemned, although stylistic analysis lags behind other critical approaches.

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Marvin T. Herrick, after tracing the theory and practice of tragicomedy from classical times through the Christian Terence to the dramatists of 16th and 17th century Italy, France, and England proposes (with reservations) that seven of Shakespeare's plays be viewed as tragicomedies: Much Ado, Merchant of Venice, All's Well, Measure for Measure, The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline and Pericles. He bases that proposal on the fact that these plays contain at least some of the following elements of tragicomedy: noble and base characters, a variety of incident and diction, some use of soliloquy, oracle, chorus, and rhetorical, sententious speech (Tragicomedy 249-60).

I found the conventions of language use Herrick listed intriguing—if a play is a tragicomedy, shouldn't we be able to identify in it a mixture of the tragic and comic styles? Ignoring the sensible impulse to do a paper on something else—since there is so much disagreement about language conventions of genres, and the topic is too big for a short paper anyway—I propose to briefly explore aspects of the language in Measure for Measure that could be traced to the tragic or comic traditions. There are many that might prove fruitful; I've examined only one from each genre: the use of heightened language in the tradition of Senecan tragedy and the use of sexually equivocal language, part of the comic tradition.

The Senecan Style in Measure for Measure

Despite the disagreement about how English drama absorbed and changed classical traditions, I think it is safe to say that some of the appeal of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists lies in their linguistic dominance of a play. They are obviously the major characters—larger than life, sometimes nasty, big egotists. They have soliloquies or other long speeches in the Senecan style—verse that may include the use of emotive interjections, apostrophe, classical allusions, standardized horror words, hyperbole, detailed descriptions or comparisons, or a mixing of Germanic or colloquial and Latinate vocabulary (soriasmus). Their anger, madness, or obsessions are displayed in their language use. They give us the memorable, the quotable quotes: for example, here are two Senecan passages from Macbeth. In the first, 1.05.40-54, Lady Macbeth's working herself up for the murder of Duncan.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature

The influence of Senecan tragedy can be seen, for example, in the following passages (this list is not complete):

Hamlet 2.02.450-518—the player's speech, followed by Hamlet's working himself up to revenge in his soliloquy in 550-88.
Lear 3.02.1-24—Lear challenging the storm.
Macbeth 1.05.38-54—Lady Macbeth preparing for murder.
Othello 3.03.442-69—Othello and Iago swear revenge.
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and [it]! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunniest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, "Hold, hold!"

She appeals directly to forces of evil with the apostrophes, Come, you spirits, Come...
you murth'ring ministers. Come, thick night; she uses a sting of words connoting the horrible: mortal (41), direst cruelty (43), blood (43), fell (46), murth'ring (48), night (50), hell (51); and mingles phrases heavily Germanic with Latinate (soriasmus), e.g.,
Make thick my blood. / Stop up the access and passage to remorse. / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose (43-47).

In the second passage (2.02.54-60) we see Macbeth leaning toward madness with a list of his symptoms: jumpiness, viewing his hands as though they were not his own, the grotesque image in 56 of plucking out his own eyes (a metaphor for the horrified surprise that the hands are his?)

Whence is that knocking? / How is't with me, when every noise appalls me? Hah! they pluck out mine eyes. (2.02.54-56) After the plucking out of the eyes—which bloodyes the hands, as did murder--Macbeth borrows an image from Seneca's Hercules Furens and his Hypolytus, questioning whether rivers and oceans can wash guilt away, an expression of the enormity of his crime in global terms via soriasmus (making the green one red, a colloquial restatement of the multitudinous seas incarnadine.) Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine. / Making the green one red. (57-60)

Though the Duke is the major character in the play (he's given over 29% of the lines), his language in Acts One and Five, and in between, befits an administrator busy obscuring his own actions rather than a tragic hero wrestling with fate. His verse contains inverted syntax, copia (e.g., 1.01.3-15), and imagery that ranges from the abstract to the disjointed to the sexually equivocal (e.g., 1.03). Notice in 1.01.3-15, a passage so obtuse that editors suggest a lacuna in 8-9, the use of inverted syntax, pleonasm, abstract terms, pairs, and triads. The pairs and triads suggest balanced, reasoned speech, but the abstractions and inversions contribute to the feeling the reader has that the sense is vague—a typical response to the language of a bureaucrat.

3 See Jo-Ann Shelton, Seneca's Hercules Furens, 76-83, which discusses the imagery of the play which Shakespeare has, to some degree, paralleled in Macbeth, e.g., characterizing a warrior via metonymy as his hands. Note the use of hand here.

4 See James C. Bulman's The Heroic Idiom of Shakespearean Tragedy, 179. Bulman's discussion includes the standard topoi of Senecan drama.

5 Note in 1.01.26-45 the string of abstract entities: character, virtues, Spirits, Nature, scruple; the abstractions allow him to flatter Angelo in a semi-impersonal way. In 1.03 he first uses a sexually equivocal image in 1-6, "the dribbling dart of love... aims and ends of burning youth." Then in 19-31 he moves from bits and curbs to lions, fond fathers, to liberty, justice, babies, nurses, and decorum. Friar Thomas seems unimpressed by this confused partial explanation.
Duke. Of government the properties to unfold
Would seem in me t' affect speech and discourse,
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds, in that, the lists of all advice
My strength can give you. Then no more remains
But that, to your sufficiency, as your worth is able,
And let them work. The nature of our people,
Our city's institutions, and the terms
For common justice, y' are as pregnant in
As art and practice hath enriched any
That we remember. There is our commission,
From which we would not have you warp. Call hither,
I say, bid come before us Angelo.  (1.01.3-15)

The Duke does not intend to reveal his plans to anyone before he leaves. He's
described Escalus (3-13) as his obvious deputy, but then gives Angelo the authority:
Escalus' reply in 22-24 could be seen as politely noncommittal. Friar Thomas in 1.03,
however, does not so easily agree to give the Duke authority to pose as a Friar, and
the equivocal language used by Vincentio in 1-6 is not reassuring.

Duke. No; holy father, throw away that thought;
Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
Can pierce a complete bosom. Why I desire thee
To give me secret harbor, hath a purpose
More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends
Of burning youth.  (1.02.1-6)

The obvious sexual imagery is puzzling; has the Friar assumed that the Duke was
seeking romantic entanglements? Unlike the comic use of bawdy, this use seems not to
be presented for comic effect extrinsic to the plot. Vincentio strings images together
in 19-31 in an attempt to justify his actions: weeds in 20, to a lion in 22, fathers and
children, birch twigs and rods in 23-25, liberty (an abstract personified) plucks justice
(another personified abstraction) by the nose in 29, and in 30 the baby beats the nurse,
causing decorum (a personified abstraction) to tumble quite athwart. 30-31.

Duke. We have strict statutes and most biting laws
(The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds),
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,
Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave,
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threat'ning twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
[ Becomes] more mock'd than fear'd; so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.  (1.03.19-31)

Rather than using the images to explicate the problem or to lend heroic stature to his
deeds, the imagery, is repetitive and confused. Friar Thomas' dissatisfaction with that
explanation is clear in his pointed comment in 31-34 that it is the Duke's responsibility, not Angelo's, to restore justice and decorum.

His sententious couplets in 3.02 summarize the plot and the imminent bed trick, but could not be considered part of heroic idiom, nor do they really provide insight into his own character and motivation as do some protagonists' soliloquies. They are old-fashioned end-stopped couplets, neither inspiring nor emotive. It could be argued that his administrative language reflects the plot of the play—he is not in the extremities faced by Hamlet or Lear—but that won't make the couplets more palatable.

After 260 lines of prose in the scene, a significant portion of it Pompey's and Lucio's derogation of the Duke and his administration, the first few lines of verse are confusing—is Vincentio referring to himself or to Angelo as the one bearing the sword of heaven?

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe;
Pattern in himself to know,
Grace to stand, and virtue go;
More nor less to others paying
Than by self-offenses weighing. (3.02.261-266)

His condemnation of Angelo in lines 267-282 clears the initial confusion, but the lines contain no heroic imagery, no heightened diction other than the verse sometimes considered little better than doggerel. This is not the speech of a tragic hero.

Shame to him whose cruel striking
Kills for faults of his own liking!
Twice treble shame on Angelo,
To weed my vice, and let his grow!
O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side!
How may likeness made in crimes,
Making practice on the times,
To draw with idle spiders' strings
Most ponderous and substantial things!
Craft against vice I must apply.
With Angelo to-night shall lie
His old betrothed (but despised);
So disguise shall by th' disguised
Pay with falsehood false exacting,
And perform an old contracting. (3.02.267-282)

Much of the Duke's language throughout the play is devoted to furthering the plot or untangling it, not to the typical tragic protagonist's anger, madness, revenge, or soul-searching. Perhaps his most Senecan use of language is in his role as Friar giving sententious Stoic (albeit Christianized) advice to Claudio in 3.01.5-41: Be absolute for death; either death or life / Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life; / If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing / That none but fools would keep.

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6 See for example Macbeth 5.05.1-28; Lear 2.04.149-54; Hamlet 3.03.73-96.
Generally the Stoicism in the Senecan style receives less attention than the heroic idiom; but it is there, as in HAM 3.01. Notice the argument format; imagery of life/death as a dream; the antithetical, the view of life as useless; the nobility in facing death bravely.

While we may admire the Stoicism of the warrior--Antony, Macbeth, or Othello--which propels him to greater acts of courage, the Stoicism used to reconcile victims of apparent injustice may not be recognized or may seem anticlimactic.\(^7\) Though Claudio gives Stoic reply, "I humbly thank you" (41-3), he does not believe himself guilty (1.02.145-171), seeks Isabella's help (3.01.111-35), and, unlike Othello, has no last grand speech to punctuate with his death (OTH 5.02.338-56). He is a lover, not a warrior.

I think that some of our disappointment with the play is in the frustration of our expectations that the protagonist use grand Senecan style. The plot does not give the Duke and his audience a cathartic experience, nor does his language establish him as predominately admirable. We may almost agree with Lucio that "It was a mad fantastical trick of him to steal from the state, and usurp the beggary he was never born to," but we are uncomfortable laughing at our tragic heroes. If he can't act the part of a hero, it would be nice to have him talk the part.\(^8\)

The Use of Sexually Equivocal Language in Measure for Measure

Early in the play (Act I, Scene 2) Lucio shows himself to be the master of bawdy. He banters with two gentlemen about the effects of venereal disease and puns with Mistress Overdone when she announces that Claudio has been imprisoned for Juliet's pregnancy (1.02.1-110). Their openly frivolous, cynical attitudes toward sex not only reflect the theme of the play but also are uncomfortably paralleled by the more subtly equivocal words and images of the Duke, Isabella, Angelo, and Claudio.

Bawdy is used in the tragedies to provide comic relief,\(^9\) openly sexual language to represent madness. Lear, for example, rails against sexuality as part of his disillusionment with family and society (4.06.109-67). Hamlet uses sexual language to convince Ophelia he is mad (3.02.245-51); Ophelia's madness is expressed in the ballad of the betrayed maiden (5.05.23-66). In the comedies we expect a certain amount of bawdy

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\(^7\) Stoic warrior speeches include ANT 4.24; MAC 5.08.27-34; and OTH 5.02.338-56. Braden suggests that the Stoicism of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in 3.01.55-87 and some of his other speeches has not been recognized (216-23).

\(^8\) Isabella, though widely considered an unsympathetic character, is given the most memorable lines in the play, 2.02.73-79:

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,  
And He that might the vantage best have took,  
Found out the remedy. How would you be  
If He, which is the top of judgment, should  
But judge you as you are? O, think on that,  
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man new made.

\(^9\) For example, MAC 2.03.1-41 (the Porter's scene); the Fool's comments in LR 1.04.51-2; 203.122-6; ROM 1.01.32; 201.6-41. It can, of course, be argued that the bawdy serves as commentary on the other action of the play.
that seems neither to move the plot along nor to reflect the theme—it’s there to elicit laughter, as in the bawdy punning in *Love’s Labours Lost*. Comic witbouts—flying—are amusing for their creativity, an earthly creativity which values a witty, well-timed insult. Some of the sexual language of the comedies has been interpreted as a celebration of the pleasures of the marriage bed, which should not appear incongruous in plays ending in marriages all around.¹⁰

But in *Measure for Measure* both sexually equivocal language and bawdy sometimes play different roles. The Duke’s status as a good ruler is undercut by the sexual imagery in his speeches in Act One (the *dribbling dart of love*—1.03.02), by his inability to do more than sputter about Lucio’s affectionate slanders in 3.02.114-86, and by Lucio’s reducing him and Escalus in Act Five to delivering straight lines for equivocation. Lucio’s persistent use of sexually equivocal language, especially in 5.01, undermines the Duke as status as an admirable protagonist, and marriage as a suitable cure for sexual liberty. Lucio speaks unbidden seven times (5.01.74-85, 127-49) during the Duke’s staging of Isabella’s grievance against Angelo, then five more times during Mariana’s testimony. As Mariana reveals the Duke/Friar’s plot, Lucio undercuts the importance of the charge by eliciting laughter.

*Mari.* My husband bids me, now I will unmask.

[Unveiling.]

This is that face, thou cruel Angelo,
Which once thou swor’st was worth the looking on;
This is the hand which, with a vow’d contract,
Was fast belock’d in thine; this is the body
That took away the match from Isabel,
And did supply thee at thy garden-house
In her imagin’d person.

*Duke.* Know you this woman?

*Lucio.* Carnally, she says.

*Duke.* Sirrah, no more!

*(5.01.206-15)*

Again and again Lucio speaks enough to make the major characters look silly.

Lucio’s opinions of the Duke, Isabella, and Angelo are not so different from those of others, except that he couches his opinion in overtly sexual language—he refuses to be polite; he makes explicit the sexual senses implicit in the language of others.¹¹ In this way he invites the audience to see them as ridiculous seemers, an unpleasant proposition for those who prefer to accord them more dignity. He moves easily between the social outcasts and the nobility, exhibiting his cynical view of sexuality for both groups. He is capable of referring to sex as "a game of tick tack" (1.02.190) or speaking of it with respect: "your brother and his lover have embrac’d" (1.04.40). By insistently interjecting bawdy lines in the final scene of the play, Lucio reduces the tone of solemnity and

¹⁰ See AYLI 5.04.108-46; MV 256-307; MND 5.01.363-422; and TMP 4.01.75-138 (a pastoral comedy?).

¹¹ Compare his description of Angelo and the Duke in 3.02.88-184 *passim* with opinions of Angelo expressed by the Duke in 1.03.12, 50-54, by Angelo in 2.02.161-86, inferred from Escalus’ lines in 2.01.1-32; expressed by Isabella 2.04.139-54, 5.01.28-119 *passim*. Angelo and Escalus in 4.04.14, the Duke as Friar in 5.01.292-322; his description of Isabella as cold 2.02 *passim* is echoed by many critics.
marrs the Duke's affable solutions. By the end of the play Lucio has the Duke tacitly agreeing with his condemnation of forced marriages:

Lucio. Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging.
Duke. Slandering a prince deserves it. (5.01.522-24)

By play's end we are not convinced that the Duke, who cannot by command stop Lucio's bawdy, has accomplished his task of restoring order to his city. Lucio challenges the Duke's linguistic dominance of the play with his ability to use the Duke's words to produce laughter, thus controlling the focus of the audience. This linguistic challenge prevents the ending from fully satisfying the comic convention; we feel that just as the Duke must yet again promise to explain his actions, Lucio will continue to demonstrate his taste for the equivocal.

This short examination of aspects of comic and tragic styles in MM is incomplete, but it may offer a possible explanation for some of the dissatisfaction critics and audiences feel for the play.

The Duke's sententious Stoicism and Lucio's relentless bawdy are not the elements of the language of tragedy and the language of comedy that we expect or find satisfying. In this tragicomedy the language conventions have been given a twist, leaving both the tragic and the comic mere shadows. Their intensity is lost, and that may account for our lukewarm response.

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12 There is a similar use of bawdy in the last lines of AWW and TRO.
REFERENCES


