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TAKING DRASTIC MEASURES:
A CONTEXTUAL EXPLORATION OF MORALITY AND RELIGION
IN SHAKESPEARE’S MEASURE FOR MEASURE

By

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ABSTRACT

*Measure for Measure* is a complex play that deals with many socially charged issues of morality, religion and sexuality. In particular, the play emphasizes the issues of marriage, gender roles, and religious identity. Through an exploration of the Jacobean context of these issues, this thesis examines the play as a reflection of and commentary on the time period. Further, this project applies knowledge of these Jacobean cultural, moral, and religious ideals to a production concept of *Measure for Measure*. Ultimately, this production concept sheds light on the multitude of opinions and beliefs that were a part of Jacobean England’s culture.
INTRODUCTION

I. Intro
II. Review of Existing Scholarship
III. Description of Project
IV. Chapter Breakdown

“‘Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall…” (II.i.17)

I. Intro

William Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure has been a source of bewilderment to critics and scholars for centuries, due in large part to the ambiguous moral and religious attitudes displayed by the main characters in the play. These issues are complicated further by the fact that contemporary attitudes about morality do not necessarily conform to attitudes held by those audience members for whom Shakespeare was writing Measure for Measure. In other words, situations in the play that seem morally troubling to a twenty-first century audience may not have raised many eyebrows in Shakespeare’s day, and vice-versa; hence, the difficulties in reading the play outside of an Jacobean moral context.

The infamous “bed trick” scenes, III.i and IV.i, serve as a microcosm of these difficulties. The bed trick demonstrates how some of the otherwise more virtuous characters in the play are forced into morally questionable choices. The virtuous and pious novice, Isabella, has been fending off the sexual advances of the corrupt magistrate, Angelo, who is attempting to coerce Isabella into having sex with him in order to save her brother, Claudio, from execution. Isabella has refused Angelo’s advances, but true to his word, Angelo begins planning for Claudio’s execution. At this point in the story, the Duke (rightful ruler of Vienna who is in disguise as a Catholic friar) tells Isabella that he has an idea: Isabella should agree to Angelo’s lascivious demand, but send Mariana in place of herself. Mariana had previously been contracted to marry Angelo, but because her dowry was lost at sea, Angelo backed out of the marriage. Thus, by English common law, if Angelo and Mariana were to consummate their marriage by sexual intercourse, they would legally be married, a condition Mariana desires. Isabella and Mariana
organize the ins-and-outs (as it were) of their plan to entrap Angelo, and their scheme results in Angelo’s being forced to marry Mariana at the play’s end.

This is but one of the many problematic moral situations that arise in the play. This scene contains numerous aspects that are disturbing from a twenty-first century perspective: the fact that someone in a position of power would use his authority to attempt to coerce an (ostensibly) innocent woman into having sex with him, the fact that Angelo had jilted Mariana simply because her dowry had been lost, and the fact that Isabella – who is on the verge of becoming a St. Clare nun – would be so willing to engage in an act of sexual deception. At first, the reader/audience member is tempted to side with Isabella in this play, simply because she seems to be the victim, the innocent woman who is being subjected to a tyrannical abuse of power by Angelo. At the same time, this bed trick calls into question Isabella’s purity and Christian virtues since it depicts a nun who willfully participates in a situation that encourages sexual activity outside of wedlock, although it can be argued that she and Mariana participated in the bed trick because they had few other choices. Moreover, Isabella’s part in the bed trick aside, the fact that anyone – in this case, the Duke and Mariana herself – would be willing to trick Angelo into sleeping with somebody so that he would be forced to marry her seems rather morally corrupt as well; in other words, those who are seemingly on the side of right are, in some ways, no better than he whom they are attempting to trap in his own hypocrisy. Again, something that the bed trick scenes demonstrate prominently is that characters were often forced into morally compromising situations because of their limited choices. Therefore, one of the most important things that an audience member / reader can take away from an examination of the bed trick is that the sociopolitical climate in Measure for Measure – and thus, in Jacobean England itself – creates many of the morally problematic situations in which the characters find themselves in the play, and that this sociopolitical climate can be said to be as responsible for the moral issues in the play as are the individual characters.

An examination of this scene through the lens of sixteenth century Jacobean ideas of morality helps to clarify its significance. Because of English common law at the time, a course of action such as this bed trick has practical ramifications that escape a twenty-first century perspective. In its historical context, the original contract of marriage
between Angelo and Mariana might have been considered to be equal to an actual, legal marriage; therefore, their sexual activity does not unequivocally constitute sex out of wedlock. The somewhat obscure legal context suggests that the act of sexual intercourse between Angelo and Mariana would not necessarily have presented a moral dilemma when viewed by its Jacobean audience.

This scene, however, contains a number of morally ambiguous aspects that an understanding of English common law can partially – although not completely – help to clarify. In particular, issues of morality frequently overlap with religious identity – an issue that warrants closer examination, given the intensity of the religious controversy in England’s recent history at this point. Not only does an aspiring nun willfully participate in this deception, but one of her co-conspirators is the ruler of Vienna and is also disguised as a Roman Catholic holy man! Indeed, the whole bed trick is the Duke’s idea in the first place; when Isabella comes to Claudio to tell him that she won’t sleep with Angelo, and that therefore, he (Claudio) prepare himself to die, the Duke pulls her aside and says:

Go you to Angelo; answer his requiring with a plausible obedience; agree with his demands to the point: only refer yourself to this advantage, -- first that your stay with him may not be long; that the time may have all shadow and silence in it; and the place answer to convenience: this being granted in course, and now follows all. We shall advise this wronged maid to stead up your appointment, go in your place; if the encounter acknowledge itself hereafter, it may compel him to her recompense: and here, by this, is your brother saved, your honor untainted, the poor Mariana advantaged, and the corrupt deputy scaled. (III.i.241-50)

Not only is this bed trick the Duke’s idea, but he suggests it while in the guise of a friar. As if that were not enough, the Duke goes on to tell Mariana that her participation in this bed trick “’tis no sin,” as if wearing the habit of a friar grants him the ecclesiastical authority to make such a claim (IV.i.78). The Duke’s role in this bed trick illustrates another crucial issue in this play: not only is the issue of morality central to a discussion of Measure for Measure, but it is also impossible to discuss morality without addressing its interplay with religion in the play.
That many of the main characters engage in morally and ethically questionable behavior is indisputable. What I am interested in exploring, however, is the possibility that this play provides a critique of the moral and religious universe of Jacobean England in a dramatic format. The bed trick scenes in their entirety – and the effect that they have on the play as a whole – are emblematic of the way Measure for Measure comments on and possibly subverts notions of morality and religion. As I will argue in this thesis, the play stretched the limits of conventional and accepted moral and religious practice in such a way as to point to their failings and shortcomings. The goal of my project is to show how my production concept of excess illustrates the way the play makes use of religion and morality in a world in which Shakespeare’s audience might have understood it.

II. Review of Existing Scholarship

As with any project that involves considerable study of one or more of Shakespeare’s works, the first obstacle one must overcome is the sheer volume of material that has been written on Shakespeare over the past 400 years. Needless to say, it is difficult at best to write something about Shakespeare that nobody has ever said before. That said, scholarship and criticism on morality and religion in Measure for Measure can be classified into two groups: scholarship that looks at the play through the lens of modern, twentieth and twenty-first century values and views on morality and religion (this group includes, for example, scholars who use psychology as a means of explaining certain events in the play), and scholarship that attempts to examine the play through the framework of Jacobean society and conventions. As mine is largely an historical analysis of the societal factors that both influenced and were challenged by Measure for Measure, it is vital to separate scholarship that deals with contemporary reception theory from scholarship that retroactively applies a modern understanding of the human psyche to critical interpretations of the play.

If one is at all familiar with Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and other such prominent twentieth and twenty-first century scholars of sexuality, morality, and sexual power dynamics, it indeed becomes very difficult not to see Measure for Measure through a lens of queer theory, psychoanalytic theory, feminism, and so forth. This scholarship is nonetheless important to my work, however, because it helps to illuminate
recent productions of the play that have dealt with the complex moral and religious issues in a significant fashion. For instance, Gillian Kendall’s *Shakespearean Power and Punishment* discusses extensively Angelo’s aggression toward Claudio as something of a displacement of his sexual frustration with Isabella; he is unable to “brutalize” Isabella, so he seeks to brutalize Claudio instead. Kendall also speaks of the possibility that the Duke abdicates his post in Vienna because “his rod is more mocked than feared,” (that is, the people in Vienna no longer respect his rule) a condition that contains obvious sexual overtones. These works that speak of *Measure for Measure* in terms of sexual shame or sexual power struggles are many in number, but they are most useful to me only in my analysis of contemporary productions. Although they have extremely useful and enlightening things to say about morality in the play, works in this category tend to examine *Measure* by applying values and ideas that may or may not have been appropriate during Shakespeare’s time.

The scholarship that is more closely aligned with my current approach examines the circumstances surrounding the play’s inception. For instance, a rather popular theory is that Shakespeare was using *Measure for Measure* as a political statement, comparing Duke Vincentio to James I. Some scholars, such as Catherine Seidel, have argued that *Measure for Measure* was Shakespeare’s way of giving coded advice to the king about the dangers of closing the brothels and theatres in London. Sources such Seidel’s relate to the scholarly trend to connect *Measure for Measure* to sociopolitical events and contextualize the play within the world of moral and religious issues that were prominent in early Jacobean England. Since *Measure for Measure* deals with many issues of culture and morality, it lends itself to such discussions rather easily. Considering that *Measure for Measure* was written at a time in which the moral and religious issues in the play were also prominent issues for English society at large (e.g. the prevalent religious controversy that would have been all-too-familiar to an English audience), it is easy to see why much of the scholarship about this play connects the issues in the play with the actual issues of the time period.

More complex, though, is what the play appears to be saying about religion. The existing scholarship that connects *Measure for Measure* to the religious climate of the seventeenth century is virtually inexhaustible, and nearly every imaginable theory and
connection is proffered. The primary consensus, though, seems to be that *Measure for Measure* is in some way satirical of the religious and moral climate of the time; the differences of opinion have to do with what is being satirized and how. Clifford Leech says that the play paints a rather unflattering picture of organized religion in Jacobean times; because of the various transgressions of the three main characters – all of whom could be placed within some sort of religious framework – Leech goes as far as to call Christianity in the play “abhorrent” (154). Of course, some of the religious iconography of the play makes religious hypocrisy a legitimate concern as well: the Duke disguises himself as a friar, and Isabella – desiring to become a St. Clare nun at the beginning of the play – apparently decides against this sacred vow by the play’s end. A.P. Rossiter takes issue with Christian readings of the play for much the same reasons as does Leech. Rossiter believes that Christian readings of *Measure for Measure* are difficult, primarily because the “moral code” and the idea of justice are somewhat mercurial in the play; the person in power gets to set the moral code, so if that person’s morality does not coincide with someone else’s, what is there to say about morality that is definitive? This is what Alan Velie calls a startling “lack of human charity” in the play: an absence of forgiveness and gross abuses of power that disrupt the Great Chain of Being (50). These works speak to the difficulty in separating the issues of morality and religion in *Measure for Measure*, as Christianity during Shakespeare’s day was largely defined in terms of things that were believed to be in accordance with natural and moral law, and vice-versa. It is difficult to say which came first, however; natural law and notions of what is and is not morally acceptable or Christian interpretations of the honest and moral way one should live one’s life for God and Jesus Christ. Twenty-first century America, much like Jacobean England, is a society largely grounded in a Judeo-Christian ethos; the vast majority of the laws and customs in this country spring from what the Bible says is right and wrong,¹ as much as from social practice that is handed down over generations. Because of this, notions of morality and normative behavior in America are inextricably linked to religion, as they were at the time Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure*.

¹ The U.S. Constitution, for instance, makes a number of references to God, and the wording of many of the articles of the Constitution is quite similar to things one would find not only in the Ten Commandments, but also in the more legal books of the Bible, such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Thus, although the U.S. protects and advocates religious freedom and diversity, there is a certain religious sentiment written into the very laws of our nation.
III. Description of Project

What I believe sets my project apart from other scholarship I have examined is the way I plan to assimilate the relevant historical and cultural information about morality and religion in the play into a workable production concept for a hypothetical stage production of the text. In other words, this is a project that will culminate in a hypothetical production concept for the play, something that would be well suited to aid the staff of any production of *Measure for Measure*, particularly any production that chooses to emphasize morality and religion in the play (of course, I believe that it is virtually impossible not to emphasize those things in performance, but this is my own bias). An exploration of the moral and religious universe of Jacobean England has much to tell us about the play and some of its more troubling issues; in turn, a carefully thought out production concept very much can illuminate these issues of morality and religion in the play and bring them to the fore through dramatic presentation. Shakespeare’s plays were, after all, written to be performed, so I believe that it does the text a disservice to dissociate it from its moral and religious context, as well as removing it from its context as a piece of dramatic literature whose aim was performance.

*Measure for Measure* is a play that is quick to criticize several facets of society through character actions that may have been viewed as morally reprehensible. The play clearly is a clever subversion of some prevalent ideas of morality and of structures of organized religion at the time. The play remains ambiguous enough, however, to keep from leveling explicitly harsh judgments at any one social or religious affiliation; *Measure for Measure* is a comic play that subtly satirizes several groups of people and organizations. In other words, *Measure for Measure* deals with many issues that were – even in Shakespeare’s day – very hotly contested subjects, as I will explain more in the next two chapters. The challenge that I undertake in this project, therefore, is to find a production concept that helps to inform these moral and religious aspects of the play that make it so complexly layered and satirical of aspects of Jacobean English society. That is to say, I believe that my choice of using the production concept of excess for staging *Measure for Measure* will showcase the moral and religious issues that the play so cleverly critiques.
First, I need to clarify what I mean by “morality” in this project. I am referring first and foremost to issues of sexual morality, such as Isabella and Marianna’s bed trick, but also to issues of social and legal morality, i.e. natural law and justice. The latter is exemplified in Angelo’s corruption and abuse of power, as well as the Duke’s apparent eschewing of his position as leader of Vienna. This is also where religious hypocrisy interweaves with a discussion of morality, because one can see that religion in this play works not only as a moralizing device, but also as a symbol of status and social standing for some of the characters; Angelo, for instance, receives a highly exalted position because he is believed to be devout and morally-upright, so his moral/religious standing “earns him a promotion,” so to speak. Along with this idea of morality, of course, is the subject of religion in the play, which cannot be separated from the issue of morality. In particular, the religious affiliations of the main characters and the sort of commentary on organized religion that Measure for Measure seems to be making are the main issues I wish to address with regards to religion in the play.

Of course, Shakespeare’s works are products of the time period and culture in which they were written; this much is a given. However, Measure for Measure has always been a play that scholars and critics have had difficulty in explaining, both from the standpoint of moral and religious hypocrisy, and because of the rather ambiguous and puzzling moral universe that the characters in this play seem to inhabit. As the first two chapters demonstrate, an understanding of the play as a product of and commentary on its time period helps to reveals these many nuances.

IV. Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1 – Social, Cultural, and Moral Context for the Play. As I said earlier, in order to keep this project grounded in issues and socio-moral stances that would have been appropriate to the time period and society in which the play was written, it is important to examine and discuss the moral atmosphere and religious ins-and-outs of the time period to avoid ascribing any morals or beliefs to a culture to which they are not applicable. For example, I doubt that anyone in the Renaissance would have described Isabella and Angelo’s relationship as a “dynamic composed of a dramatic struggle of sexual politics and violence,” as one might see today in scholarship on the play. Indeed, they would
have had no idea what that means, and it describes a system of morals and values different from their own. This chapter is designed to expose just what commonly held morals and values of this time period were, primarily by closely examining treatises, letters, and religious sources from the time period.

**Chapter 2 – Textual and Contextual Explorations of Religion in Measure for Measure.**

This is perhaps the most important chapter, inasmuch as it is the one in which I will explore the heart of my project: the function, problems with, and analysis of issues of religion in the play. In particular, I will be exploring what the language and actions of the three main characters – the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella -- seem to be saying about the various religions that they could potentially be representing. I will use the considerable ambiguity surrounding Shakespeare’s life and religious beliefs as a case study, an example of the ways that the pervasive religious ambiguity of the time period affected people and situations. Therefore, this chapter’s function is the exploration of that religious ambiguity along with a discussion of how morality and religion intersect. In addition, this chapter proffers the idea that perhaps *Measure for Measure* escaped censure because it makes comic use of strife and turmoil that would have been omnipresent to many Jacobeans.

**Chapter 3 – Exploration of Themes of Religion and Morality in Performances of Measure for Measure.**

Because there is a great deal of ambiguity in some of the moral issues of the play (for instance, what is Isabella’s reaction to the Duke’s sudden proposal of marriage at the play’s end? Does she attempt purposefully to use seductive language while expressing her horror at Angelo’s proposition?), I believe that one of the best ways to evaluate morality and religion in *Measure for Measure* is to develop a production concept for the play that incorporates what I have gleaned about the all-important issues of morality and religion from my work with the first two chapters. Drawing from recent productions in which the moral/religious themes were emphasized, I will use this chapter to detail how I, as a director, would propose to establish and work through some of the more complex issues dealing with morality and religion in *Measure for Measure*. In particular, I believe that the moral and religious issues in this play center on the idea of
excess. In some ways, the issues of religion and morality are so oppressive, overbearing, and numerous as to become inescapable. This, therefore, is the production concept around which I will base this chapter. Although the earlier chapters of my thesis are more historical in nature and focus more on issues contemporary to Shakespeare and his audience, this particular chapter will allow me to incorporate some of the vast amount of scholarship that exists today about modern critical interpretations of *Measure for Measure* as well. An analysis of the ways morality and religion play out in contemporary productions will help to clarify the historical and cultural relevance of these terms.

**Conclusion.** I hope to demonstrate the necessity and value of a discussion of morality and religion in *Measure for Measure*. By performing a socio-historiographical study of the play and the issues surrounding both, I plan to demonstrate that Shakespeare’s work on this play was, to a large degree, an extension of conflicts and societal issues that not only affected people in Shakespeare’s London, but have continued to affect people throughout the world ever since. Moreover, I will use the considerable difficulty in classifying *Measure for Measure* by genre as a case in point of how the moral and religious issues in the play make the play problematic.
CHAPTER 1

Measure for Measure: A Contextual Exploration of Morality in Early Seventeenth Century England

Measure for Measure is a play that is often vexing to twentieth and twenty-first century audiences, readers, and critics. Much of this vexation is due to textual factors, events within the play that are difficult to interpret: “Those who dislike (Measure for Measure) are disturbed by Shakespeare’s apparent refusal neatly and satisfactorily to wrap up (the issues of rampant sexuality, deception, injustice, and death) by the end of the fifth act” (Kamps, Raber 1). For instance, a popular question about the play deals with the ending: what is Isabella’s reaction to the Duke’s unexpected and somewhat opportunistic proposal of marriage at the play’s end? He proposes marriage to her, and the text gives us no indication whatsoever as to what her reaction is. Does she accept? Does she acquiesce begrudgingly? Does she spit in his face and storm off the stage? Does she run to him and embrace him, thus ending the play in typical Shakespeare fashion – with marriages all around? All of the above are choices directors have made in productions of Measure for Measure in an attempt to fill in the gaps about this ambiguous and problematic ending.

However, there are also a great many extra-textual aspects of the play that make it problematic for many modern critics. In my view, the common thread that runs through most of these aspects is the difficulty in reconciling issues of morality in the play (such as the bed trick in which Isabella and Mariana willingly participate at the Duke’s provocation) with notions of morality that are present in twenty-first century America. In other words, I believe that there is a strong tendency to read Measure for Measure through a lens of twenty-first century morality, but such an impulse is best resisted; Measure for Measure is – possibly more so than any of Shakespeare’s other plays – a product of particular “events, controversies, and genuine uncertainties around the time of its making” (Kamps, Raber 7). In other words, Measure for Measure is steeped in an
historical moment that was charged with issues and notions of morality, many of which were quite different from those that abound today.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the play’s exploration of these issues, it is imperative that one consider the play in its historical, socio-moral context. It is that which I plan to undertake in this chapter. “The play and [its moral and historical context] share the same cultural fabric, and early modern English culture was just as eclectic and paradoxical in its views on topics such as marriage, justice, religion, prostitution, and sex as is Shakespeare’s magnificent play” (Kamps, Raber 8). It is my belief that untangling some of the more complex moral issues in the play – such as marriage, gender identity, and Jacobean notions of vice – will give modern audiences and critics a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which these issues worked in English society and will provide clues to contemporary perceptions of Shakespeare’s audiences.

The concept of morality is a difficult one to define in any time period or culture, and this is no less true of Jacobean England. However, I am not interested in the particulars of all of the moral ins-and-outs of Jacobean England; I am interested solely in those that pertain to larger issues within Measure for Measure. Therefore, my intent with this chapter is not to give a broad, general view of morality in Shakespeare’s England, but rather, a moral context for some of the predominant moral issues in the play. Therefore, my historical exploration of morality in sixteenth and seventeenth century England will consist primarily of issues pertaining to marriage, women’s roles in society and family life, sexuality and fornication, and prostitution/vice. Each of these issues is inextricably linked to an understanding of the moral universe of Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, because a contemporary understanding provides us with a window into how the play undercuts commonly held moral beliefs and attitudes of the time period.

For this section, it is necessary to assume – as I do – that although Measure for Measure is set in Vienna, the city of Vienna is meant to mirror Shakespeare’s London in its attitudes and cultural makeup. As he does with many of his plays, Shakespeare probably set the play in “transplanted London.” Such a deception could have kept the Master of Revels off Shakespeare’s back because it meant Shakespeare was not “overtly” meddling in local or national politics (Kamps, Raber 324). Vienna in the play does, nonetheless, have many similarities to London, but more importantly, this “Vienna”
seems to be dealing with many of the same societal, moral, and religious problems with which Shakespeare’s London was also dealing. Therefore, it is possible that Measure for Measure made use of “current events” in London in its characterization of “Vienna.” For instance, in the play, Angelo orders the brothels closed. In 1603 – the same year that Measure for Measure was written – the brothels in London were ordered closed and demolished to prevent the spread of disease by “dissolute and idle persons” (Seigel 82). This is but one example among many that shows how Vienna in Measure for Measure bears a striking resemblance to Shakespeare’s London in terms of some of the problems that arise in the play. Of course, Shakespeare often set plays in locations other than England, but I doubt very seriously that Shakespeare set plays in exotic locations for the sake of providing a change of scenery. Most likely, there was another reason for his setting Measure for Measure in Vienna, and I believe that reason was his ability to more easily create situations that provided commentary on the moral and religious struggles in England at the time.

**Conceptions of Marriage in the English Renaissance**

Why all the fuss about the issue of marriage in the play? Marriage is clearly a central theme to many of the characters and subplots in the play, and this preoccupation with marriage in Measure for Measure is typical of the time period; Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber in their book, Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts argue that “marriage in the Renaissance was not merely a social institution, but, some would argue, the social institution upon which all others depended” (181). Kamps and Raber go on to argue that the issue in Measure for Measure is not merely marriage but also the ways in which human nature is capable of subverting and circumventing the institution of marriage (185). Marriage was important for several reasons. It not only provided a proper legal and moral context in which a sexual relationship between a man and woman could exist, it was also the primary determinant in issues of property relations, not to mention matters of legitimacy of offspring.

In addition to these factors, marriage was also the source of considerable tension between the Church of England and the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church valued celibacy even above marriage, thus providing the basis for a celibate caste of priests and nuns. Although Catholics believed that marriage was acceptable and included it in their
sacraments, they also believed that it was for those of weaker faiths. Anglicans, on the other hand, attempted to reclaim the institution of marriage, placing it above celibacy. Their belief was that marriage was a human manifestation of the love between God and man. Hence, marriage was not only important to individual couples at this time for legal and moral reasons, but it also provided a means of differentiation between people of various faiths. This differentiation was an important part of a bitter religious struggle that continued for centuries between Catholics and Anglicans (again, an issue that I will discuss at more length in Chapter 2).

Perhaps one of the single most complicated issues to grasp both in Measure for Measure and in Jacobean English society is the way marriage was understood to operate. The reason for the complication and confusion surrounding marriage is twofold: First, a wide disparity often existed between the rules of marriage and what constituted marriage in English common law vs. the rules of marriage and what constituted marriage in ecclesiastical law, and second, even within these two categories, there were several types of marriage, several forms that engagements and marriages could take, and many different loopholes that one could use to circumvent either type of law. The lack of any sort of clear-cut authority of either ecclesiastical or English common law over the other only served to exacerbate the different definitions of the form and function of marriage. In this section, I unpack and clarify some of the many problems and difficulties surrounding the issue of marriage in Jacobean England. Then, I connect this understanding of their marriage laws and customs with the situations that arise in Measure for Measure.

Very clearly, the issue of marriage is prominent in Measure for Measure, most notably in the case of Claudio and Juliet, and to a lesser extent, in the case of Mariana and Angelo. Claudio, of course, is arrested and condemned for the sin of fornication because he has impregnated Juliet. However, Claudio claims that, in his defense, he had intended to marry Juliet, and that their nuptials had only been postponed because her dowry had not yet arrived. A twenty-first century audience might interpret Claudio and Juliet’s relationship as the equivalent of an engagement, during which time Claudio impregnated Juliet. They would not, however, be considered married by most twenty-first century, Western definitions of either legal or ecclesiastical marriage.
To a Jacobean audience, however, this may not have been such a cut-and-dried issue. The writer T.E. in his Law’s Resolutions of Women’s Rights from 1632 says that “this contract of coupling man and woman together, hath an inception first, and then an orderly proceeding” (T.E. 206). William Perkins, in his Christian Economy defines the process in a similar fashion: “Marriage hath two distinct parts, the first is the beginning; the second, the accomplishment or consumption thereof” (210). Whichever definition of the process that one chooses to accept, it is clear that English common law at this time considered marriage a two-part process, consisting first of a verbal promise to be married, followed by the actual, ceremonial process of making the vows “official.”

The gray area that causes many of the problems we can see in interpretations of Measure for Measure has to do with the Jacobean tendency to conflate the promise phase with the vows phase (the Jacobbeans commonly referred to the act of making the promise as a spousal, sponsion, sponsio, or sponsalia [T.E. 206]). William Perkins, for instance, speaks of two distinct ways that the contracting of marriage can be accomplished, heavily differentiated by semantics. A couple can either say that they will get married, future tense, or that they do take each other to be man and wife, present tense. This simple change in tense marked a huge difference between both the moral and legal weight assigned to the promise.

According to most writers of the time, the sponsion is best made in words expressed in the present time, de praesenti, and it should be contracted before fit judges and witnesses (Perkins 210). Making a promise in the future tense is not a binding legal or ecclesiastical promise between the parties involved. Perkins says that “by this form of speech the match is not made but only promised” (211). If a sponsion is made between a

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2 T.E., along with many other writers of this period, actual considered marriage to be a three-part process, consisting of the promise, the vows, and then the consummation of the marriage. I will address this later, as many writers believed that a marriage was not truly complete, and thus, not legally binding without the consummation of the marriage. Others, however, believed that the consummation itself was virtually sufficient for legal matrimony. Clearly, this has a great deal of resonance with many of the issues in Measure for Measure, particularly as it concerns the relationship between Angelo and Mariana.

3 This act of making sponsion is only an obligation, not an actual marriage. This form in the present tense is usually considered to be part of the promise phase and is not substituted for an actual wedding ceremony, except in rare cases.

4 Per verba de praesenti, which is Latin for “in words touching the present time.”

5 Per verba de futuro, which is Latin for, “for time to come.”
man and a woman *de futuro* and one of them makes a *de praesenti* sponsion with someone else before vows are exchanged, the *de futuro* sponsion is null and void. Moreover, *de futuro* sponsion often carried with it conditions that must be met before the couple could be wed. In this way, the *de futuro* sponsion operated more like a contract as we understand it than did the *de praesenti* sponsion, simply because the marrying parties in making *de futuro* sponsion would set terms — such as dowry — that must be satisfied in a certain way before the marriage could take place. If the terms were not met, then the sponsion would be void. Thus, sponsion made *de praesenti* is always preferred, and carries much more legal, moral, social, and religious authority.

English common law also placed a high priority on public and parental approval; hence the reason for the necessity of a separate marriage ceremony, even after the couple has made their *de praesenti* contract, saying, “I do take thee…” The law required that couples planning to be wed must make a highly public announcement about it weeks in advance — the process of doing so was called “banns” — so that the larger societal group could approve of the process (Kamps, Raber 182). Furthermore, it was believed that having time between the spousals and the actual wedding was helpful to the couple because it gave them time to think the match over carefully: “Actions of weight, before resolution, require mature deliberation” (Perkins 210). English custom also made it highly preferable — although rarely required — that the parents approve of the match and agree to the marriage, even if each of the marrying parties was of proper age to make the decision to wed — seven years of age, according to T.E.

So essentially, English common law placed a great deal of emphasis on societal approval and proper ceremony surrounding the act of marriage. Hence, the *de praesenti* spousal was always preferable over the *de futuro* contract; the *de praesenti* met more of the conditions that English society considered prerequisite for lawful matrimony. This issue of marriage, however, is a textbook example of the ways that religion and morality do not always intersect. The English church at this time, though it definitely preferred marriages that took place through the proper legal and religious channels, saw the laws — and hence, the process of marriage in general, as well as those things that actually constituted marriage — as much more flexible and open to interpretation. Henry Swinburne, who was responsible for writing much of the English canon law on marriage
at this time, makes an already opaque issue much more ambiguous in his *A Treatise of Spousals* (1686). For all of the emphasis that English common law placed on *de praesenti* spousals over *de futuro* ones, Swinburne argues that such semantic differences are not truly important:

Neither is it unknown to the youngest students in this faculty that words of future time do not evermore import spousals *de futuro*; neither words of present time always spousals *de praesenti*. Again, that some words are so untoward that it is a question of whether they make any kind of spousals at all, and contrariwise, some words so flexible that they may easily be stretched to make, either the one or the other… (214)

Swinburne, unfortunately, does not do much to clarify the above statement, save starting a discussion about what is necessary for marriage to take place and the difference in validity between secret and public spousals, a subject that directly relates to Claudio and Juliet in *Measure for Measure*. T.E. says that English common law held that secret sponsion is tolerable if and only if there are no other options. The difficulty that Jacobeans had with clandestine marriages – aside from their desire to have the marriage affirmed in front of parents and witnesses – was that marriages contracted in secret are much more difficult to prove. Swinburne claims that “secret marriages are done indeed against the law, but being contracted cannot be dissolved; yielding this reason, that because these solemnities are not of the substance of spousals or of matrimony, but consent only” (215). In other words, even though public marriages are absolutely preferable over clandestine ones, Swinburne is arguing that the church lacks the power to dissolve such a contract; as William Perkins argues, even though a *de futuro* spousal is not a legally binding contract of marriage, “the bond is in conscience precisely made before God, and so the contract is indeed made for the present time before God” (211). That is to say, the *de futuro* sponsion, although not legally recognized as wedlock, is still a binding socio-religious contract into which one does not enter willy-nilly, nor can one dissolve it willy-nilly.

This touches on perhaps the most crucial issue surrounding both Claudio’s and Juliet’s marriage and Angelo’s and Mariana’s marriage: what group of actions or words can truly, legally, or ecclesiastically be said to constitute marriage? I have illustrated that
English common law held that couples were required to make public spousal *de praesenti*, followed by a legal marriage ceremony whereby the spousal is made law. Perkins and Swinburne (and thereby, the Church of England), however, argue that the only thing that is truly required for marriage to take place is consent between the marrying parties before God: “Naked consent is sufficient to make spousals” (Swinburne 215). Moreover, William Perkins argues that if sexual intercourse occurs between those who have contracted to be married, “then the contract for time to come (i.e. *de futuro*) is, without further controversy, sure and certain. For where there hath been a carnal use of each other’s body, it is always presupposed that a mutual consent, as touching marriage, hath gone before” (212). This point was occasionally taken to such an extreme that if a woman were raped by her betrothed, they would thereafter be legal man and wife.

The combination of this latter point about sexual consummation with the questionable legal and ecclesiastical authority of a *de futuro* sponsion creates the inherent and problematic contradiction inherent in the marriages between both Claudio and Juliet and Angelo and Mariana. Claudio says of Juliet, “upon a true contract / I got possession of Juliet’s bed. / You know the lady; she is fast my wife, / Save that we do the denunciation lack / Of outward order” (1.ii.118-22). What the audience learns from Claudio is that he and Juliet have made a *de futuro* contract of marriage, one that is dependent upon the delivery of her dowry by her kinsmen6. By English common law, Claudio and Juliet’s *de futuro* contract is insufficient for marriage, particularly considering that it was made in secret. However, as long as the conditions of a *de futuro* contract can be achieved, Swinburne argues, then Claudio’s and Juliet’s relationship could be considered a marriage, particularly by Perkins’ above statement that matrimony is assured when the betrothed have sexual intercourse, as Juliet and Claudio clearly have (214-15). Therefore, according to English common law, Claudio and Juliet were not properly married, and thus were guilty of fornication as Angelo says. According to the law of the English church, the bond that existed between Claudio and Juliet *was* sufficient to constitute matrimony, although the method by which they went about their espousal was frowned upon heavily.

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6 Although there is much emphasis on dowry in *Measure for Measure*, and indeed, in England as a whole at the time of the writing of the play, T.E. claims that dowry is not necessary for marriage: “Though dower cannot consist without marriage, yet marriage may well stand without dower” (208).
This ambiguous and problematic situation is a particularly poignant example of the way Shakespeare was using *Measure for Measure* to comment upon the inherent conflict in the moral and religious structures of his time period and society; the situation that exists between Claudio and Juliet is so ambiguous as to make it virtually impossible to discern whether the couple is correct in saying they were married or whether Angelo is correct in saying that they are guilty of fornication. The contradictions infusing the various definitions of marriage at the time gives each party a reasonable case in arguing their side. In other words, Claudio is correct – at least in a moral sense – in arguing that his sexual act with Juliet was fine, since he got possession of her bed through a true contract. However, Angelo is correct too in his thinking that Juliet and Claudio were never *completely*, legally married within the confines of a *de praesenti* contract. In this case, the vagaries of the English law only exacerbate the difficulties in figuring out who has the moral and legal high ground.

Furthermore, Angelo is involved in another disputed marriage of his own in the play. The situation between him and Mariana appears also to have been a *de futuro* sponsion, one that also was conditional upon the delivery of her dowry. When her dowry was lost at sea, Angelo backed out of the marriage. Although a modern audience would be tempted to scorn Angelo for not following through on his engagement to Mariana, I have demonstrated amply above that Angelo’s decision to void his *de futuro* contract with Mariana – though perhaps cowardly and self-serving – would not have been legally or morally wrong or even reprehensible. The reason for this is quite simply that their sponsion was only valid if the conditions of it were met. Since they were not, though through no fault of Mariana, it was perfectly acceptable for Angelo to invalidate his marriage contract to her.

That part is easy enough to understand, although it requires a little explanation for a modern audience to grasp fully. The real difficulty in understanding the relationship between Angelo and Mariana deals with the bed trick. As with Claudio and Juliet’s marriage, there are several factors that intersect with the bed trick and Mariana and Angelo’s marriage contract. At the time that they have sexual intercourse in Act IV, Angelo and Mariana are not under the confines of the *de futuro* contract, though they were at some point prior to the play’s events. Perkins’ argument that their sleeping
together constitutes a lawful marriage between them makes this an open-and-shut case… or does it? The wrinkle with that explanation is that there is no consent involved on Angelo’s part. Mariana – for reasons that surpass the understanding of many critics and readers – is still in love with Angelo, despite the fact that he jilted her for a lack of dower; Angelo, however, believes that he is sleeping with Isabella, not Mariana. Perkins’ claim that a couple sleeping together can be said to constitute matrimony depends on two factors: one, that both parties consent to the contract, and two, that such a contract exist. The former is entirely absent in this case, and the latter is questionable at best. Merely because a contract had existed in the past does not mean that it still applies; as a matter of fact, the law at the time would tend to point towards the contrary. Thus, it is shaky at best to argue that the bed trick traps Angelo in a legal marriage to Mariana; it is, at worst, a flat-out fallacy to claim so. So when the Duke says that Mariana’s involvement in the bed trick is “no sin” because of “the justice of [her] title to him,” he is incorrect and morally wrong to advocate sexual intercourse between these two individuals; he is essentially supporting and advocating fornication in this instance. And what’s more, he does so in the costume of a Roman Catholic friar, a predicament that may have been very popular with some in Shakespeare’s audience and decidedly unpopular with others – an issue to which I will return in chapter 2.

**Women and Gender Issues: Problems with Isabella, Mariana, and Juliet**

As any gender theorist or feminist scholar could attest, the roles of women in society and in their own personal lives has been evolving almost ceaselessly throughout much of recorded Western history. Indeed, the twenty-first century view that women are equally as capable, intelligent, and independent as men is a fairly recent idea, and it is one that many would argue has yet to take hold fully. The ways that women were defined in the distant and not-so-distant past are, therefore, quite different in some cases from the current perceptions. This marked shift in the perception of women’s roles becomes particularly relevant to my discussion of *Measure for Measure* because two of the main characters – Isabella and Mariana – seem to defy the expectations of other characters in the play, perhaps because their attitudes about their own sexuality and freedom are considerably more liberated than was generally common or acceptable in Jacobean England. Particularly where Isabella is concerned, Shakespeare seems to have
been well ahead of his time in terms of endowing her with the capacity for considerable logic, rationality, independence, and (for the most part) a well-defined sense of right and wrong. In this section, I will explore the ways women were viewed in society and marriage in order to point out how Isabella and Mariana both conform to and challenge these ideas, as well as what a modern audience can learn from their deviations from normal behavior. I will also explore the issue of premarital sex as it pertains to Juliet and, to a lesser extent, Claudio.

Perhaps the most important issue, one that supersedes or encompasses most other ideas about women at this time, is the fact that women were defined according to their marital status throughout their lives. This was due in large part to women’s inability to own property or support themselves at this time; if they were not, in some way, attached legally to a man, they would be helpless and destitute. As a result, the “acceptable” roles a woman could occupy, vis-à-vis her marital status were virgin/maid, wife, or widow. As a young girl, a female would be protected and cared for by her father. By a certain early age, a woman was expected to be married. If a woman was not married once she was of age, it was expected that she was either still a virgin, or had outlived her husband. When a woman did not fit precisely into any of these three roles, there could be confusion about where she fit in; such confusion is explicit in the Duke’s appraisal of Mariana in Act V:

DUKE: What, are you married?
MARIANA: No, my lord.
DUKE: Are you a maid?
MARIANA: No, my lord.
DUKE: A widow, then?
MARIANA: Neither, my lord.
DUKE: Why, you are nothing, then, neither maid, widow, nor wife?
(V.i.177-83)

The Duke’s reaction to Mariana here is telling; she is literally “nothing” if she is not a maid, wife, or widow, and so she would have been in the eyes of the law. Because she had been engaged to and jilted by Angelo, however, Mariana defies classification in terms of her marital status; both Mariana and Isabella exist in a kind of sexual purgatory for this reason.
Angelo makes a similar claim against Isabella when he is trying to seduce her; essentially, he argues that a woman is defined by sexual activity (the only acceptable form of which existed within the confines of marriage), and that since Isabella does not and has not engaged in sexual activity, her status as a natural woman is in question: “Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you’re none. / If you be one, as you are well expressed / By all external warrants, show it now / By putting on the destined livery” (II.iv.135-9). Although the Duke’s aims in questioning Mariana presumably are altruistic and Angelo’s derision of Isabella has but the aim of getting her to sleep with him, the tactics and reasoning behind each are the same: a woman is defined by her connection with a man, either legally or sexually, and the line differentiating the two is often blurred.

This categorization of women into acceptable norms of behavior reflected a pronounced anxiety on the part of men about the need to control women’s sexuality and the belief that women led men astray: “Popular sentiment held that women were deceivers and seducers in the tradition of their mother, Eve, the instruments by which the Devil entered men’s lives” (Kamps, Raber 186). The church did nothing to dispel these notions of the sinful nature of women; in Richard Day’s *A Prayer Against the Flesh* (1602), Day exhorts Christians to resist the sinful nature of “our first parents,” i.e. Adam and Eve, and he refers to Eve as the “rebellious flesh” who was matched against her “superior and ruler” (221). Furthermore, the marriage ceremony in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* exhorts the husband to be “head” of the woman in the same way that Christ is the head of the church” (Church of England 217). The argument that the church – and thus, men in English society – made was that women, being the weaker sex, were more prone to temptation and therefore required legal union with a man to keep them from falling into lustful rebellion.

By that same token, men were reminded, then, to be strong and to try to resist the sexual advances of women, whose very natures are sinful and would seek to corrupt men: “Husbands were to ‘master’ their wives, educate them in their duties and keep them on the straight and narrow” (Kamps, Raber 188). If men were unable to control their women, they put at risk the legitimacy of their heirs, a subject about which there existed already considerable controversy and apprehension on the part of men. Although the
regulations on premarital sexual activity were rather stringent, the law tended to look the
other way on the issue of premarital sex between those who were already contracted to be
married; indeed, bridal pregnancy seems to have been a rather frequent occurrence during
Shakespeare’s time, particularly among the lower classes, and it usually did not carry the
stigma of “fornication” that premarital sex acts occurring outside of a contractual
obligation would have. Indeed, the issue of bridal pregnancy, is one with which
Shakespeare appears to have been quite familiar, because – taking into account the
questionable and uncertain nature of any historical records – he apparently obtained a
license to wed Anne Hathaway in November of 1582, but their first child was born a
mere six months later (Kamps, Raber 190).

Indeed, the anxiety over the issue of reproduction stemmed from the combination
of anxiety over the issue of inheritance/legitimacy of one’s heirs and the inherently
lustful and sinful nature of women. As I mentioned above, one of the primary aims of
marriage ostensibly was to keep women’s sexuality in check and to keep them “honest.”
Unfortunately, however, this anxiety about the sinful nature of women often did not end
after a woman was married. It was believed that women were, of course, “too weak or
irrational to control their own desires [. . .] Marriage is supposed to control this side of
women’s character, but marriage is too complex to secure easily” (Kamps, Raber 191).
Jacobean notions of bastardy were simple: if a child was conceived in the womb of a
mother who had been chaste before marriage, then the child was considered to be a
benefit to society and thus, a legitimate heir; otherwise, a child would be outside of the
legal obligation of his father to protect and provide for him/her, and would “have to rely
on the provisions made for them through charity” (Kamps, Raber 188). Thus, not only
would a cuckolded man face the possibility of a lack of a legitimate heir, but moreover,
the bastard child would then be a burden on society. Moreover, the prevailing fear was
that such bastard children would “have no place” in society as they grew older, and they
would thus become the underworld of society in adulthood: “pimps, cheats, whores,
bandits, and vagabonds” (Kamps, Raber 188). As if the issue of bastardy were not
problematic enough, there were differences of opinion between civil and canon law about
what constituted bastardy: “Civil law [. . .] made distinctions among kinds of bastards
predicated in part on the intention of the copulating pair regarding matrimony and, like
canon law, allowed for the post-matrimonial legitimation of hitherto illegitimate children” (Kamps, Raber 190). Clearly, the proper martial roles, sexuality, and reproductive purity of women were of considerable concern to men at this time, and this concern is manifested throughout Measure for Measure.

For starters, it is interesting to note how the values systems of Jacobins apparently intersect with those of a twenty-first century audience on the issue of bridal pregnancy. The complexities of Jacobean attitudes toward bridal pregnancy make it difficult to discern what, if any, conclusions one can draw from the text about the degree of offense that Claudio and Juliet have committed, however. If, as Kamps and Raber claim, bridal pregnancy was common and tolerated, then Jacobean audiences may have viewed Angelo’s actions towards Claudio and Juliet as excessive. Because premarital pregnancy is something of an everyday occurrence in twenty-first century life, it is a subject that virtually escapes notice any more, and I rather doubt that it would have been as insignificant to Shakespeare’s audience. However, the claim that bridal pregnancy was not necessarily always viewed as fornication raises interesting questions about the way audiences would have reacted to the degree of “sin” committed by Juliet, and to a lesser extent, by Claudio. Juliet, being a woman, would have been likely to have been blamed more for the pregnancy, simply because it was believed at that time that for a woman to conceive, she must experience the proper amount of “heat” (i.e. sexual pleasure), and thus is at fault for her conception because she enjoyed her sexual activity (Kamps, Raber 192). In other words, although readers in the twenty-first century would be likely to assign equal blame to Claudio and Juliet for her pregnancy out of wedlock, it is important to remember that differences in Jacobean understanding of sexuality and biology could well have provoked a different reaction from audiences at that time.

Even within the play itself, there are different opinions about the extent of Juliet’s sin. The Duke believes that Juliet’s sin is worse than Claudio’s, speaking of the ever-so-common view at that time that women are more inherently lustful and sinful than men. Lucio, however, treats Juliet’s pregnancy with much more kindness than does the Duke or Angelo – who calls her a “fornicatress” (II.ii.26) – because Lucio says Juliet essentially has good breeding. Lucio, however, is not the most morally upright character in the play, and thus, we are probably not to take his value judgments as representative of
the majority of Jacobean society. These findings suggest that Jacobean audiences would have perceived Angelo’s harsh denunciation of her as somewhat excessive, even by their comparably more rigid moral standards on the issue of sexuality.

Isabella is another character who is difficult to make peace with, in terms of issues of her sexuality and womanhood. Isabella is a character who has often been maligned in recent scholarship, not only for her occasionally pompous piety, but also for her own questionable morality (e.g. her participation in the bed trick). Shakespeare scholar G. W. Knight says that Isabella lacks “human feeling,” that she has “sex inhibitions,” and that her supplication to the Duke at the play’s end is a fitting outcome for one so proud and high-and-mighty (93). Isabella likely would have seemed a hypocrite to a Shakespearean audience for some other reasons. For one, a woman who spoke out loud a great deal was often perceived as being open to intercourse, either verbal or sexual (Kamps, Raber 201). Isabella’s long, flowery speeches to the Duke and Angelo (which are suffused with rather suggestive imagery), though beautiful Shakespearean language, nonetheless would have raised eyebrows among Shakespeare’s audience members as to whether or not Isabella was a “proper” woman. While it is true that many Shakespearean women exist outside of this designation as “proper” women, it is still worth noting that a strong, sexual, proactive female protagonist would not have been insignificant (and might even have been scandalous) to many in Shakespeare’s audience. Moreover, Isabella’s status as a strong and independent woman can be much called into question if one believes that she accepts the Duke’s proposal of marriage at the play’s end; in so doing, she would, obviously, be turning her back on a spiritual quest that was, at least at one point, very important to her.

It is an interesting puzzle to think about whether or not Shakespeare’s audiences were supposed to like Isabella (again, bearing in mind that the value of authorial intent is questionable at best); if, in fact, Shakespeare set Measure for Measure in “transplanted London” as I hypothesize above, Isabella’s being in a convent would not have made her extraordinarily popular with a predominantly Protestant audience. Moreover, a theoretical reason for her joining the convent in the first place is her rejection of the traditional hypocrisy and patriarchy of society. However, there were very few institutions more patriarchal in nature than organized religion in the seventeenth century,
even when one is surrounded solely by women; in joining the convent, Isabella is essentially rejecting one patriarchy in favor of another.

In all of these things, Isabella shows herself to be a woman who eschews the traditional roles that women usually occupy, roles in society, in marriage life, and in religious life. Angelo claims that she is unnatural because she will not sleep with him, but a Renaissance audience might have seen her as unnatural for many reasons, not the least of which were her rejection of traditional sexual and social norms in favor of marching to her own drummer. Isabella, however, is not the first such Shakespearean woman; one can see these attributes in many female Shakespearean characters, such as Rosalind, Lady Macbeth, or even Beatrice. Nevertheless, Isabella defies categorization in any sort of “typical” womanly role – again, as do many Shakespearean women characters – and as such, she is something of an easy target for scholars and critics who argue that she is a hypocrite. However, it is important to remember that it is equally as easy to argue that Isabella is forced into some of her more morally questionable behaviors by the situations in which she finds herself and in which other characters place her, rather than some sort of inherent moral reprehensibility on her part.

Mariana, by contrast, is someone who arguably makes much more of an attempt to follow society’s plan for women. She was publicly disgraced and humiliated by Angelo, yet she continues to love him faithfully. Some critics have even gone so far as to categorize her as the virginal savior of marriage in Measure for Measure. Mariana certainly makes much more of an effort at traditional femininity than does Isabella, although Shakespeare’s audience still may have found her problematic as well. Nevertheless, she does not set well with modern audiences, possibly because modern productions – owing at least somewhat to her unpopular reputation with critics – often portray her as something of a doormat.

Furthermore, Mariana is not the most moral of women either. She willingly participates in the bed trick as well, sleeping with a man who was not legally her husband. Granted, as I have previously explained, it is true that there were certain situations in which a betrothed couple could, in effect, render their marriage legal through sexual intercourse. However, the shaky part of that argument is that although Angelo and Mariana at one point were contracted to be married, their de futuro contract is null and
void if a provision therein is not met; clearly, the dowry provision was not met. For as much as the Duke claims that Mariana’s participation in the bed trick is no sin and will make her marriage to Angelo complete, he does not seem to have much conviction in that statement; at the play’s end, he is quick to announce that Mariana and Angelo should be married by the Friar. Clearly, the *de futuro* contract plus Mariana’s and Angelo’s sexual union is not actually enough to make them man and wife, and the Duke evidently knows it. Although the men’s actions subjugate the women and force them into compromising situations (the bed trick is clearly the Duke’s idea, after all), the women in the play do not seem to fit into what would be considered “proper” roles for women and thus, they exist in a space that is somewhat outside of definition. In other words, the women are, for various reasons, not within “traditional” definitions of wife, mother, etc., so perhaps this lack of definition makes it easier for them to break down barriers and behave in unconventional ways.

**Prostitution and Vice**

The issue of vice in *Measure for Measure* – specifically as it concerns the issue of prostitutes, pimps, and bawds – is of lesser importance to my discussion of morality in the play, as none of the main characters of the play truly can be said to exist in the seamy underworld of Vienna. However, the play includes characters, such as Lucio and Mistress Overdone, who trade on vice, and the issue of prostitution is also closely aligned with marriage and, of course, the issue of gender identity in the play. Not only do contemporary critics of Jacobean England allude to the pervasive misogyny of the time that often forced women into prostitution, but also, many women turned to prostitution out of a sheer lack of other options: “Clearly, a number of young women were abducted and forced into the life (of prostitution); others, fearing starvation and with no legitimate occupation open to them, turned to the life out of desperate need and were exploited by their pimps and brothel madams” (Kamps, Raber 262). This statement arguably paints a much bleaker picture of the life of prostitutes and pimps than does the depiction of this life in *Measure for Measure*. Lucio, for instance, is commanded to marry “any woman wronged” by him at the play’s end, a fate that he considers to be on par with “pressing to death, whipping, and hanging” (V.i.508, 520-1). Clearly, his stance is that his life of
bawdry is much preferable to him than having to be married, certainly not a ringing endorsement of marriage in a play that already creates many quagmires around that issue. Indeed, the so-called “vice characters” in the play do not seem to be unhappy with their lives or socioeconomic situations for the most part. Granted, the vice characters could be dismissed as comic relief or as foils. However, the close association of brothels with theatres in Renaissance England provides interesting content for the portrayal of these characters. Both the public theatres and the brothels existed on the other side of the Thames from London proper, presumably so that they could be outside of the legal jurisdiction of the city. More than their geographical proximity, however, was the financial proximity of theatres and brothels; both Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn, prominent theatre owners in Shakespeare’s day, owned brothels as well (Kamps, Raber 252). This perhaps explains the somewhat gentle and comic nature with which the vice characters are treated by Shakespeare in Measure for Measure.

Indeed, although prostitution and bawdry are clearly frowned upon in the play, the play seems to make little distinction between sexual acts of prostitution and other sexual acts. In some ways – especially as far as Angelo is concerned – all sex is fornication in the play, and all of it is detestable. Furthermore, nobody is really punished for prostitution in the play other than Lucio, and his punishment is no worse than marriage (which he, of course, practically considers to be a fate worse than death). If anything, one could argue that the only people who end up worse than they began in the play are Isabella and Mariana, whose honor has been compromised through the play’s events. Stern words serve as the only punishment for the vice characters in the play, so it is rather intriguing that the supposedly moral and upright characters incur more punishment than do those who are operating outside the law.

All of these issues – marriage, women’s roles, and vice – are closely interrelated in Measure for Measure. Indeed, in order to understand one of these issues, one must have some familiarity with all three. Marriage is far from championed in the play, and very little in the play’s course of events makes marriage appealing. However,

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7 The characters in the play that might fit this description are certainly not vice characters in the sense of a morality play; I do not intend to compare them to morality play archetypes.
8 However, even though prostitution was illegal, authorities often looked the other way about it, much as they did about theatre (which was not illegal, but also not generally considered to be a “nice place to go”).
Shakespearean comedies usually end with people being married off, and *Measure for Measure* is no exception. However, the marriages at the play’s end feel forced, both figuratively and literally; Angelo is forced to marry Mariana, Lucio is forced to marry a whore, and depending on how one interprets the play’s ending, Isabella is somehow compelled to marry the Duke. This forced feeling is no doubt augmented by the lack of “traditional” or “proper” women in the play; Isabella and Mariana (although she to a lesser extent) march to the beat of a different drummer, Juliet was impregnated before being lawfully married, and the rest of the women occupy positions in life that do not command respect. It is easy to see how these issues give each other more credence with respect to the play, and when viewed in conjunction, they give each other added relevance. An understanding of the moral universe of *Measure for Measure* can do much to illuminate some of the more problematic issues in the play. In my next chapter, I will be exploring the issue of religion and religious hypocrisy insofar as it concerns the three main characters in the play.

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9 The ending has, of course, long been a source of considerable contention. Isabella never replies to the Duke’s proposal, and there are no stage directions that indicate that she nods in assent, storms off the stage, spits in his face…etc. Because of the nature of verbal contracts at this time, however, if Isabella so much as gestures assent to his proposal, there exists between them a valid contract of marriage (Kamps, Raber 200)
CHAPTER 2

“The Devil Can Cite Scripture for his Purpose”: An Exploration of the Religious Context of Measure for Measure

As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the issue of morality in Measure for Measure is a complicated and troubling one. Equally as troubling and problematic in the play is the issue of religion. Many of the characters claim to be faithful adherents to religion and morals, and yet, Isabella, the Duke, and Angelo are responsible for committing deeds that go against the tenets of moralism and of the prevailing forms of Christianity in seventeenth century England; namely Protestantism, Puritanism (a more strict branch of Protestantism), and Catholicism. Nevertheless, Measure for Measure managed to contextualize these organized religions in such a way as to simultaneously critique their faults, point out their hypocrisies, and avoid being critically explicit enough to have gotten its author in trouble with loyalists to one particular faith or another (save the Puritans, who did not believe theatre to be acceptable in the first place). Measure took advantage of the pervasive religious strife in England at the time to satirize the hypocrisies and shortcomings of organized religion.

How, then, was Measure for Measure able to play fast-and-loose with critiques of issues of religion while remaining ambiguous enough to avoid political and religious retribution? The answer to that question lies in the extreme religious turmoil and ambiguity that existed at the time of Shakespeare’s writing Measure, the political and religious climate of which Shakespeare himself was a product. The rapid oscillation from one established religion to another in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was brought about by quick turnaround in the monarchy and Parliament, and this religious instability provided the perfect environment for Measure to comment on the considerable religious tumult that existed in England at that time, using the characters of the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella. In this chapter, I first discuss the background of religious and political instability in Jacobean England (and before). I then explore this issue of religious ambiguity further by using William Shakespeare himself as an in-depth case
study of this religious ambiguity; he himself can be said to have been both a product and promulgator of it. Finally, I demonstrate how these themes of religious controversy suffuse the text and characters of Measure for Measure.

**Background on Explosive Socio-Religious Climate in Jacobean England**

Indeed, the political and religious climate in England during the early seventeenth century was unstable and challenging at best. In 1534, some seventy years prior to the first performances of Measure for Measure, Henry VIII initiated a split with the Catholic church, establishing an English national church of which he could be at the head: the Anglican Communion. This was one of the more monumental changes that occurred throughout Europe as a result of the sweeping Protestant Reformation. People in England were forced to convert to the national religion of England, lest they face imprisonment or even death. Not long after Henry’s death, his daughter, Mary, took the throne. Mary, a devout Catholic, sought to reestablish Catholicism in England, so she set about reversing many of her father’s decrees. The result was that many English people who failed to convert to Catholicism were burned or beheaded on charges of treason; hence Mary’s more popular moniker, “Bloody Mary.” After Mary’s death just five years after she had taken the throne, Elizabeth I took the throne and rescinded Mary’s Catholic legislation, thus reestablishing Protestantism and the Anglican Church in England. Like her predecessor, Elizabeth was known to imprison or behead those who would not convert back to Protestantism. The Act of Uniformity (1559) even forbade Catholics to practice their faith and they were actually “obliged to attend the Anglican service every Sunday or be fined” (Raffel 37). Elizabeth’s successor, James I, ascended to the throne of England in 1603, shortly before Measure for Measure is believed to have been first performed; James I, like Elizabeth, believed strongly in Protestantism.

However, there was still a great deal of religious unrest in England. A large contingent of people in the country believed that England should revert to Catholicism, and they sought to do whatever was necessary to accomplish their goal, up to and including attempting to assassinate James I. In 1605, just one year after Measure for Measure is believed to have been first performed, Catholic conspirators attempted to blow up Parliament (along with James I) in the now-famed Gunpowder Plot, but their attack was thwarted. Many Catholics petitioned James I so that they might be allowed to
worship as Catholics in secret, or at the very least, remain non-practicing Catholics who would not be compelled to attend Anglican church services. It is widely believed that John Shakespeare, William Shakespeare’s father, was aligned with the Catholic faith. Naturally, there were many such people in England at the time – Catholics who converted to Anglicanism in name only, yet maintained a staunch allegiance to Catholicism. Called recusants, these Catholic dissenters generally tried to escape governmental notice, lest they be fined or otherwise sanctioned for their beliefs. However, all of these measures proceeded with little success, as England has remained an Anglican state ever since.

Puritans, conservative Protestants, also found themselves at odds with James and many of his policies; chief among them was his support for the theatre, which Puritans viewed as “immoral” (Mutschmann 101). As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, the theatre was not seen as the most moral of institutions in Jacobean England, none the least of the reasons for which was the close alliance between many theatres and brothels in England at the time. Moreover, Jacobean notions of sexuality made it incredibly unseemly for men to be dressing up as women on stage, which was, of course, the custom in Shakespearean acting.

This switching back and forth of state-sanctioned religion – first England was Catholic, then Protestant, then Catholic again, then Protestant again, all of which could have happened within one person’s lifetime – undoubtedly confused English citizens to the point of making it difficult even for individual citizens to decide what they believed and to which religious ideology they belonged. This confusion also meant that each citizen was a religious hypocrite in a manner of speaking; the constant switching from one religion to another – though compulsory by the monarchy – would have made it extremely difficult for any one person to remain devoutly committed to one religion or set of values and beliefs. This oscillation between deeply held beliefs is one measure of hypocrisy (a theme that recurs in Measure for Measure). Many citizens did as John Shakespeare did: they continued to convert to the state-sanctioned religion when forced to do so, but they continued to practice their own preferred faith in secret. Such recusancy was difficult to detect or prosecute, so there was little incentive for recusants to convert willingly to Anglicanism.
Relatively speaking, the differences between the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church are almost nonexistent. Both churches celebrate the same seven sacraments (Matrimony, Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Orders), they both use the Old Testament, New Testament, and Apocrypha, and the processes of ordination are virtually identical in the two churches (Anglicansonline.org). Anglicanism is largely an offshoot of Catholicism that came into existence because of prevalent dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the Catholic doctrine and practices during the Renaissance. The actual differences between the two faiths, however, are very small, and deal mostly with the structure of power within each of the two churches. In the case of Catholicism, the head of the church is the Bishop of Rome, otherwise known as the Pope. With the Act of Supremacy in 1534, Henry VIII established the English monarch as the head of the Anglican Church, a distinction that remains today (although only symbolically). The true spiritual head of the Anglican Communion is the Archbishop of Canterbury; however, the Anglicans do their best to decentralize power within their Communion to the point that power in the church “flows from the edges to the center” (Anglicansonline.org). In other words, although the Anglicans have much of the same structural and sacramental makeup as do the Catholics, Anglicanism claims that it makes a stronger attempt at decentralizing power. There are other minor details that differentiate the two faiths as well (for instance, Anglicans do not perform a mass, nor do they celebrate Eucharist in Latin, and Anglicans ordain women and allow priests to marry), but many of these are details that came into play only after Shakespeare had been dead for many years.

It is significant to note, then, that these very minor differences between the two faiths were enough to warrant executions and religious persecution on both sides for centuries. And yet, people were willing to die for the right to celebrate these very small differences in Jacobean England. Such was the explosive socio-religious climate in which Shakespeare wrote Measure for Measure and upon which Measure for Measure was a reflection.

Since Shakespeare himself grew up in the midst of all of this religious uncertainty, it is unsurprising that scholars have had difficulty in defining Shakespeare’s own religious beliefs. For centuries, theorists and scholars have attempted to claim that
William Shakespeare undoubtedly was Protestant or undoubtedly was Catholic, using his writings and scant evidence about his personal life to prove their theorems that his Catholicism/Protestantism is reflected in his plays. However, to date, “nobody has uncovered any reliable information on Shakespeare’s religious beliefs” (Raffel 35), and it is unlikely that we will ever have a definitive answer as to Shakespeare’s religious affiliation. It is, nevertheless, a natural scholarly tendency to attempt to answer these perplexing questions, despite the fact that a twenty-first century audience understands the play and its themes through its own set of experiences and expectations. Therefore, it is important to remember that although we are unable to view an historical text such as Measure for Measure through any lens other than a twenty-first century one, our views and attitudes towards the events of the play may not be at all representative of the attitudes of the playwright or of the populace for whom he was writing the play. It is understandably difficult to refrain from projecting twenty-first century ideals and morals onto this text, because I believe that there is an almost overwhelming urge on the part of scholars to project their own time’s and culture’s views, ideals, and expectations onto historical works of literature and drama.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to dissociate Measure for Measure from the society in which it was written, and the play has much to tell us “about the playwright and his cultural setting – whether Shakespeare was aware of telling us these things or not” (Cox 44). Furthermore, Measure for Measure places the pervasive religious ambiguity of the time period in which it was written into a dramatic context, so there is much to be gained from an analysis of the religious strife of the time period, particularly where it intersected with Shakespeare's own life. As a matter of fact, Shakespeare himself serves as a case study of the difficulties that one has in sorting out the religious ambiguities and changes in Jacobean England.

This viewpoint presupposes that Shakespeare’s religious affiliation and his other influences matter to a thorough analysis of his works, but I believe that the more important issue is the fact that Measure for Measure is an interesting play that centers around moral and religious strife and hypocrisy that makes use of the considerable religious strife over different notions of religion that were prevalent in Jacobean England: “It was an age in which religion mattered supremely, to the individual as to the nation”
Therefore, the most important two issues that I wish to investigate are: how can Shakespeare be shown to be an example of the difficulty in clarifying Jacobean religious attitudes, and how does Measure for Measure use these contemporary religious difficulties to paint a satirical picture of religious life in Jacobean England?

**Case Study: William Shakespeare and the Difficulty in Determining his Religious Affiliation**

I intend to explore this issue first by illustrating the fact that scholars lack any conclusive evidence for arguing definitively that Shakespeare was more Catholic, Protestant, Puritan, or Agnostic than anything else. In the case of a play like Measure for Measure, the fact that the characters’ religious beliefs and affiliations are so ambiguous is what makes the issue of religion in the play much more interesting; it is clear through an inquiry into Shakespeare’s own religious beliefs and the ephemeral nature of established religion in Jacobean/Jacobean England that the prominent religious turmoil is reflected in the beliefs and actions of the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella. For example, many English citizens likely were still loyal to Catholicism during the reign of James I, and therefore, they would have welcomed the opportunity to criticize the seemingly Protestant Angelo who shows himself to be a moral hypocrite through his coercion of Isabella. On the other hand, those English citizens who despised Catholicism would be able to point to the fact that the Catholic Isabella is guilty of committing actions in the play that are not befitting a nun. Seemingly using the religious ambiguity of the time to its advantage, Measure for Measure is a play that deals with religion in such a way as to have “something for everyone”; the religious turmoil during the time that Shakespeare was writing Measure for Measure gave the play unique agency to be able to criticize both Catholicism and Protestantism. Therefore, I will first establish what little evidence there is about Shakespeare’s religious beliefs, and then contextualize it within the larger realm of religion in England in the seventeenth century. Finally, I explore the ways in which the characters and situations in Measure for Measure illustrate the substantial religious ambiguity in Jacobean England. In particular, I focus on such characters as the Duke, Isabella, and Angelo. I believe that Measure for Measure is a play detailing the unappealing sides of religions in Jacobean England.
Before entering into this argument, however, I would like to detail briefly some of the works of other scholars who are exploring this issue of Shakespeare and religion in Jacobean England. Many scholars, such as Heinrich Mutschmann, Velma Richmond, and Thomas Carter believe that most of the evidence points to Shakespeare’s having been a Catholic, largely because of some things about Shakespeare’s upbringing and family that point to Catholicism. However, others such as Burton Raffel, Anna Swardh, and Beatrice Batson believe that Shakespeare was no more likely to have been Catholic than Protestant. Regardless, there is considerable scholarship on religion in Shakespeare’s plays and the ways in which religion in his plays comments upon religion in his time period. Catherine Seidel, for instance, theorizes that Shakespeare wrote Measure to show James I the potential consequences of closing the brothels (and thus, the theatres), and Vivian Thomas argues that Shakespeare’s problem plays were all spawned by a culture in which religion and morals were indeterminate and fluid. Certainly, the time in which Shakespeare was writing was a time period defined by great religious unrest and Shakespeare was himself an embodiment of the ambiguity that characterized the time.

There seems to be very little doubt that Shakespeare was a Christian, however, and not a Gnostic. His life and his works are suffused with much Christian imagery and a very obvious familiarity with Christian traditions and practices. Therefore, most scholars seem to agree that “there can be no serious doubt that he was a Christian right up to the end” (Mutschmann 375). But aside from the fact that he was a Christian, what else do we know? To be sure, Shakespeare’s formative influences were both Catholic and anti-Catholic. And furthermore, “there can be little doubt that religion mattered supremely to Shakespeare. This is a point on which most scholars are agreed, but opinions have differed widely as to the precise nature of his beliefs” (Mutschmann v). In fact, so little is known about William Shakespeare’s religious beliefs that many critics have opted instead to investigate Shakespeare’s father’s religious beliefs, hoping that the apple did not fall very far from the tree, so to speak. However, John Shakespeare, like his son William, had a religious track record that seems to deny our twenty-first century attempts to put the label of either “Protestant” or “Catholic” on him. One of the most popular theories is that John Shakespeare was a recusant, a non-practicing Catholic who refused to convert to Protestantism (Carter 14); when Elizabeth I took the throne, there were
many Catholics who did not want to convert to Protestantism, and many such recusants eventually were exiled from England for this refusal to obey the royal prerogative. What may be closer to the truth is what many theorists and scholars, such as the Reverend Thomas Carter, a Protestant minister, believe: John Shakespeare was in fact a Protestant, though he “nourished a latent attachment to the old religion (i.e. Catholicism)” (181, parenthetical explanation mine). However, during John Shakespeare’s adult life, displaying pro-Catholic sentiments in heavily Protestant England was a decidedly bad move; Elizabeth I was known for imprisoning, fining, or in very rare cases, executing those who refused to convert to Protestantism. Although I believe that John Shakespeare was most likely a Protestant based on the evidence I have seen, I rather doubt that he was anything as extreme as a Puritan, because he also displayed some clearly Catholic attitudes throughout his life as well.

Other scholars – such as Heinrich Mutschmann – are not convinced by this argument, however: “The influence of [William Shakespeare’s] home was wholly Catholic and that of his school predominantly Catholic (even if exerted under cover of a pretended conformity)” (83). Mutschmann believes that if Shakespeare’s father was a Protestant, it was only to keep from getting into trouble with the crown for secretly being a Catholic at heart. Mutschmann, like many other critics, believes that Shakespeare’s upbringing was of an almost entirely Catholic nature. Shakespeare’s grammar school in Stratford was decidedly Catholic, though Mutschmann argues that Henry Heycroft, the vicar of Stratford while Shakespeare attended grammar school there, was decisively anti-Catholic, and Shakespeare would there have learned Anglican traditions and practices (83). Moreover, later in his life, Shakespeare was profoundly influenced by the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare’s patron, who was a staunch Protestant. Records also show that William Shakespeare was baptized, married, and buried in Anglican ceremonies. Clearly, William Shakespeare (like many others in Jacobean England) was familiar with and was influenced by cultures, traditions, and beliefs of both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. However, based on the sparse historical evidence that exists, it is really a very tenuous argument at best that claims that Shakespeare was either a Protestant or a Catholic, because we simply do not know enough to prove either claim.
This lack of evidence does not stop some critics from attempting to prove their theories about Shakespeare’s religious affiliations, though. Heinrich Mutschmann, though he makes a pretense at exploring every possibility, clearly believes that Shakespeare was a Catholic despite any evidence to the contrary. Mutschmann cites Shakespeare’s obvious familiarity with and use of six of the seven holy sacraments in his plays as proof that Shakespeare must have been Catholic (214). However, though descendent from the Catholic Church, the Church of England employs the same sacraments that the Catholic Church does, and in much the same way as Shakespeare utilizes them in his dramatic works. Further, Mutschmann argues Shakespeare’s family was Catholic and that many of his formative influences were Catholic as further proof that Shakespeare must have been Catholic too (377). However, this argument proves nothing about Shakespeare’s own beliefs; it only informs us of his influences, which were clearly a mix of Protestantism and Catholicism, not solely one or the other. Mutschmann also argues that Shakespeare would have been inclined to be predisposed against the Anglicans, because the Puritan-heavy Anglican government in England was opposed to the theatre, which was Shakespeare’s profession (101). However, James I vigorously supported theatre as an art form, as indicated by the proliferation of court masques during his reign, so I find it unrealistic to claim that Shakespeare would have been inclined against Protestantism simply because Puritans in Parliament opposed theatre on the grounds that it was immoral.

In fact, Mutschmann even goes so far as to conclude his discourse with the claim that the idea of Shakespeare being a Protestant is ridiculous and that “no scholar of any note has ever taken it seriously, and it is safe to prophecy that no one ever will” (Mutschmann 375). However, the fact that Mutschmann feels the need to so vehemently deny Shakespeare’s Protestantism shows that clearly, some scholars have taken such a notion seriously. Mutschmann’s feeble attempt at objectivity includes acknowledging Shakespeare’s inclusion in several sacraments in the Anglican Church, such as baptism, marriage, and burial, but he argues that Shakespeare’s participation in these Anglican sacraments is not “irrefutable” proof of his Protestantism (376). On the latter point, I completely agree with Mutschmann, though I would argue that although these things do not provide indisputable evidence that Shakespeare was a Protestant, they also fail to
provide indisputable evidence that he was not. Simply because it cannot be proved beyond a doubt that Shakespeare was Protestant does not make him Catholic by default, and the reverse is also true.

I have included this rather extensive discussion of the existing scholarship about Shakespeare’s religious origins because I want to emphasize the fact that Shakespeare was virtually a personification of the religious ambiguity that characterized Jacobean England. At the same time, however, I want to suggest that in writing Measure for Measure, Shakespeare was criticizing members of the Catholic, Protestant, and Puritan factions of society, all of whom were accusing the others of hypocrisy, and all of whom were guilty of hypocrisy themselves. In other words, it is possible that Shakespeare’s own vague religious affiliation\(^\text{10}\) made it possible for him to satirize the societal problems with religion and comment on issues within both Protestantism and Catholicism. This is but one possible theory that connects Shakespeare’s personal life with the play itself; however, there is little doubt that Measure for Measure itself mirrors many of the religious issues with which Shakespeare himself would have been dealing in Jacobean England.

Moreover, all of the aforementioned controversy about Shakespeare’s religious beliefs is significant in terms of contextualizing Measure for Measure – the fact that so many scholars have attempted to prove their respective theories about Shakespeare’s religious beliefs is demonstrative of the pervasive anxiety that society has about attempting to pin people down into specific classifications; in this case, religious classifications. Whether Shakespeare was Protestant, Catholic, Gnostic, or anything else, it is unlikely that it will ever be proven definitively either way, and even if it were to be, would it really change the way society views his plays today? Nevertheless, there is a predominant cultural tendency to determine into what classifications and groups a person

\(^{10}\) The vagaries of Shakespeare’s religious affiliation are twofold. First, there is the problem that ALL Shakespeare scholarship faces: the issue that many historical documents and records of Shakespeare’s life have been lost over the centuries. However, most scholarship also seems to agree that even during his lifetime, Shakespeare played his religious cards close to his chest; much like his father, the recusant John Shakespeare, William Shakespeare was not one to make his religious beliefs widely known during his lifetime. There is much speculation that Shakespeare, much like his father, nurtured a latent attachment to Catholicism, but there is, of course, no definitive proof for this claim. Therefore, it must be noted that our lack of knowledge about Shakespeare’s religious affiliation is not wholly the fault of a lack of extant biographical information, but rather, the fact that such definitive information likely never existed.
falls. The ambiguity of Shakespeare’s religious identity resonates throughout the following discussion of the main characters in the play.

**Measure for Measure: The Text, its Main Characters, and Satirizing Religion**

Interestingly enough, the only major character in *Measure for Measure* of whose religious affiliation we can be certain is Isabella. It is certainly possible to assume that the Duke is Catholic because he picks the guise of a Friar to observe incognito the goings-on in Vienna. And indeed, the Duke even attempts to offer prayer in Act IV while disguised as a holy man, so it is clearly plausible that the Duke has some connections to Catholicism: “Sir, induced by my charity, and hearing how hastily you are to depart, I am come to advise you, comfort you, and pray with you” (IV.iii.40-1). However, this is never explicitly stated in the play, so it is impossible to know for certain what the Duke’s religious affiliation is.\footnote{Many scholars also believe that Shakespeare modeled the Duke after James I, a point to which I will return shortly.}

Angelo’s religious beliefs are also difficult to determine. I have read the works of many scholars and critics on this point, and many of them are fond of calling Angelo a Puritan, a “Puritan” in this case being defined as “a catch-all term for those English Protestants who believed that the Church of England had not gone far enough in distancing itself from the church of Rome and its liturgical practices” (Kamps, Raber 330). I see no textual evidence for this claim. Certainly Angelo is a “precise” individual who believes himself to be of very strong moral fiber, and his iron law is indicative of his moral rigidity (up until the point at which he shows himself to be a hypocrite by trying to seduce Isabella). His campaign against brothels, bawds, and vice in general is indicative of the Puritan attitude towards these things, and indeed, Angelo is, in attitudes and morals, more like a Puritan than a Catholic or a “run-of-the-mill” Protestant. Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that Angelo’s actions and views likely would have been considered extreme by many in Shakespeare’s audience, who likely “would have considered a death sentence too severe a penalty for Claudio’s crime” (Kamps, Raber 330). If Shakespeare’s intent was to show Angelo to be a hypocritical Puritan, however, he would not have been alone in his views. Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, for instance, was written to please James I by satirizing Puritans as greedy and immoral, and
many of Shakespeare’s other contemporaries were fond of railing against Puritans, if for no other reason than the fact that the Puritans’ campaign against the theatres was an attempt to destroy their livelihood as playwrights. Again, however, there is no specific textual evidence to prove that Angelo is a Puritan, or even a Protestant.

Isabella is the only one whose religious association is undeniable; when we first encounter her, she is in the process of completing her vows in a convent of the Order of St. Claire. Without a doubt, Isabella is a Catholic, and on the verge of being a nun at that. It is significant that Measure for Measure showcases characters of vague religious origins alongside a character whose religion is firmly established very early on in this play that is so charged with religious imagery, themes, and problems. However, given the facts that Isabella is a Catholic, Angelo seems to be a Puritan from his actions, and the Duke’s behaviors are rather religiously ambiguous, the play contains established characters whose various religious affiliations make possible a critique of both Catholicism and Protestantism. As the first part of my case study in this matter, I will examine the character of the Duke.

It is a common opinion among many scholars, including Catherine Seidel, that Shakespeare intended the Duke to be largely representative of James I. If we are to assume that the Duke is representative of James I, it is certainly odd that he spends most of this play pretending to be a Friar, considering that James I was very opposed to Catholicism; though we may not be certain of the Duke’s religion, the king’s was not in doubt. As I mentioned earlier, Seidel also believes that Shakespeare intended Measure to be a cautionary tale for James about the potential consequences of closing the brothels in London. As the businesses of theatre and prostitution were often allied physically and financially in seventeenth century England, Seidel argues that Measure was Shakespeare’s way of showing the king how disastrous it would be to close brothels in London (and hence, cripple the theatres). In the play, however, it is the stern Angelo who closes the brothels in Vienna, not the Duke, but as the character of Angelo is shown to be morally-bankrupt in Measure, it would have been a decidedly bad move for Shakespeare to have made Angelo resemble James I in any way; furthermore, if we are to believe that Angelo is a Puritan, it is also quite unlikely that Shakespeare modeled him after James I, given the king’s dislike of Puritans as well. However, this closing of the brothels as part-
and-parcel of Angelo’s larger plan to stamp out sexual vice in Vienna entirely ends up causing a great deal of resentment and unrest, particularly among Mistress Overdone and Pompey (obviously), but also Lucio. Moreover, it is because Angelo sets himself so squarely against any sort of sexual vice that his own transgressions against Isabella are magnified when they are brought to light. In II.i, Angelo says to Escalus that he hopes that he would be treated with the same strictness of the law were he to be guilty of lechery: “For I have had such faults; but rather tell me, / When I that censure him do so offend, / Let mine own judgment pattern out my death / And nothing come in partial” (II.i.28-31); it is only by the grace of the Duke that Angelo is not put to death for his treachery at the play’s end.

However, the Duke cannot rightly be said to occupy the moral high ground throughout Measure either; it is he who proposes the idea of the bed trick to Isabella and Mariana, for instance, as I mentioned in Chapter 1. Although this bed trick is proffered as a solution for Angelo’s having jilted Mariana years earlier when her dowry was lost, the fact remains that the Duke – who is disguised as a Friar at this point – suggests that a woman (Isabella) should deceive Angelo into having sexual intercourse with another woman (Mariana) so that he will be compelled by law to marry her. Claudio and Juliet were not legally or religiously married in any unequivocal sense of the word, and neither were Angelo and Mariana. Yet, the Duke – pretending to be a Friar – indicates that the most expedient way for things to be morally straightened out is for Mariana to commit a sexual act outside of wedlock. This seems to be to be rather a blatant commentary on the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church; although we have no definitive evidence of the Duke’s religion, he is nonetheless in the guise of a Friar when he makes such a proposition with a very questionable moral basis. The very idea that a Catholic holy man would encourage a woman to have intercourse outside of marriage paints a rather unflattering picture of Catholicism (despite the fact that the Duke is, of course, NOT a Catholic holy man).

Furthermore, it is also significant that the Duke – who, although he is dressed as a Friar, is NOT a Friar – attempts to behave as a member of the Catholic clergy; perhaps the implication here is that Catholicism is inherently corrupt and that it is merely a show with no real substance. The Duke does stop short of performing any sacraments while dressed as the Friar, but he does offer to give prayer with Barnadine in IV.iii, as I
mentioned above. He also attempts to comfort the wary Mariana about the bed trick against Angelo by telling her that it is not a sin: “fear you not at all / He is your husband on a pre-contract: / to bring you thus together ‘tis no sin, / Sith that the justice of your title to him / Doth flourish the deceit” (IV.i.71-5). He also does this in II.iv when he says to Juliet, “I’ll teach you how you shall arraign your conscience / And try your penitence, if it be sound” (II.iv.21-2), saying that he’ll help absolve her of her sin of having premarital sex with Claudio. Both of these instances of pretended priestly behaviors show the Duke (and perhaps the Catholic Church itself) to be hypocritical and inappropriate. Further adding to his hypocrisy, the Duke returns at the play’s end to adjudge Angelo a hypocrite when he himself has been guilty of moral and religious hypocrisy and deception throughout the play. Though the Duke may be said to represent James I, he is certainly not without his vices, nor is the ecclesiastical institution that he represents as Friar Lodowick.

The Catholic Isabella, though she is ostensibly a paragon of virtue and the damsel in distress in Measure for Measure, is guilty of moral and religious hypocrisy as well. In joining a convent, she presumably intends to live her life by upholding strict moral standards for herself, much like the strict standards Angelo attempts to impose on Vienna. However, the play conveys a sense of distrust toward characters like Isabella and Angelo who endeavor to live their lives by rigid moral codes and rules. And indeed, Isabella’s moral indignation at Angelo’s proposal is certainly understandable, but her reaction is that she would rather die than sleep with Angelo to save Claudio. This is a somewhat contradictory attitude, because her objection to sleeping with Angelo is that in doing so, she would be profaning her body; to Catholics, the body is the temple of the soul. However, to Isabella, destroying that temple entirely (either through suicide or execution at the hands of Angelo) would not be as egregious an offense before God as would committing an illicit sexual act with Angelo. Her religious ire and repulsion at the idea are easy to comprehend, but her attitude seems to be one of answering/deflecting one potential sin with another – an idea that pervades the character of Angelo as well. Furthermore, although the idea of sleeping with Angelo to save her brother from

12 In fact, Angelo and Isabella are actually quite similar characters, save the fact that one is set up to be a “villain” and the other is the “good” character.
execution is repugnant to her, she expresses little resignation about performing her part in the bed trick on Angelo, an act whose moral and religious basis I have already established to be extremely dubious.

Moreover, Isabella, though she may be virtuous on the whole, is exceedingly pious and holier-than-thou on more than one occasion in the play. When Angelo will not relent on Claudio’s death sentence in II.ii, Isabella offers to “bribe” him by praying for him. Her naivete in this matter notwithstanding, it is significant to me that this would-be nun is of the opinion that she might get her way with Angelo by offering to pray for his obviously corrupt soul. Further, when she goes to discuss this proposition with Claudio in III.i, she attempts to project her own morals and religious indignation onto him in an attempt to shame him for even suggesting that she might go along with this plan that could save his life: “Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice? / Is’t not a kind of incest, to take life / From thine own sister’s shame?” (III.i140-2). When he expresses doubt at Isabella’s honor being more valuable than his life, she is surprised at him because she assumes that since she would rather die than commit this sin, he too would rather die than see her commit the sin. When Claudio asks her to reconsider the deed, she becomes very angry with Claudio and even calls him a coward, failing to see the irony in thus designating him. As with the character of the Duke, Isabella’s actions represent Catholicism as hypocritical and high-and-mighty, because Isabella (Catholicism) displays much piety but arguably lacks true virtue underneath it. Again, Shakespeare was not and is not tied definitively to Catholicism, so he was perhaps more able to level harsh judgments at members of that faith in this play without fear of supremely negative consequences.

Of course, in a society like Jacobean England in which such a premium was placed on chastity and marriage, Isabella’s chastity was one of the most important virtues she possessed, so Shakespeare’s audience likely would have supported Isabella in her choice. However, the fact that she was put into such a situation to begin with is indicative of the world of Measure for Measure; Isabella was driven to the point of choosing between sacrificing her virtue and sacrificing her brother’s life. It is difficult, therefore, to completely blame Isabella for her anger at the fact that she was put in such a situation to begin with.
Protestantism (and particularly Puritanism) does not go unchallenged in this play either. Angelo’s deeds in the play are definitely not reflective of moral and upright living. His proposed adultery with Isabella is certainly the most obvious example of his moral hypocrisy; he even goes so far as to acknowledge that his proposed tryst with Isabella would be a sin: “Might there not be a charity in sin to save this brother’s life?” (II.iv.63-4). More importantly than that, however, is Angelo’s attempt to punish vice with vice. Vienna had fallen into lawlessness, so when he took over, he imposed unfair standards of strict moral rigidity, even sentencing Claudio to death for something that previously had not been a capital offense. However, “the law that condemns Claudio [. . .] is Puritan in nature” and predated Angelo’s reign of terror, but Angelo merely chooses to enforce the law (Kamps, Raber 331). Nonetheless, Claudio sinned in committing adultery with Juliet, so Angelo offers Isabella the chance to sin with him to remove that sin from her brother. Indeed, Measure for Measure shows that Claudio was pardoned through sin. Because of the bed trick that the Duke, Isabella, and Mariana cooked up, Angelo is shown to be a hypocrite, and thus, Claudio is free to marry Juliet (something he wanted to do anyway). The idea of trading sin-for-sin, vice-for-vice is pervasive in Measure for Measure, because all three of the major characters are guilty of employing this strategy at some point. The Duke even is implicated in this in IV.ii when he helps convince the Provost to drop Pompey’s charges if he will commit a sin for them: helping to execute prisoners. This particular action on the Duke’s part makes him particularly problematic, not only as a moral figure, but as a leader in general. The idea that each of these three major characters – likely of differing religious orientations – seem to have the mind set that sin-for-sin is an equitable trade shows that Measure for Measure was not above criticizing with parity many religions for their hypocrisy.

Indeed, I believe Measure for Measure to be a rather scathing commentary on Catholicism, Protestantism, and even Puritanism. I believe that although it is difficult to tie Shakespeare to one religion, he presumably was influenced by all three of the above, just as he was undoubtedly influenced by the English monarchy’s inability to sort out the confusion and conflation of the values and morals of different religions. I believe that

13 Because Angelo makes no outward pretensions at Catholicism as do the Duke and Isabella, I will assume for the purposes of this discussion that Angelo is at least Protestant, if not a Puritan. I acknowledge, however, that this is not proved by the text.
*Measure for Measure* capitalizes on this ecclesiastical pandemonium with its own religiously ambiguous three main characters. The Duke shows the hypocrisy and questionable morality of Catholic clergy and Catholic doctrine because he is involved in some questionable behaviors. Similarly, the Catholic Isabella is shown to be less virtuous and pure than she would appear to be on the surface because of her sexually charged language, her selfishness, and her implication – and tacit agreement – with Mariana’s bed trick. The presumably-Protestant Angelo provides with a critique of that religion, showing as it does, his willingness to punish people for sex outside of wedlock while refusing to hold himself accountable for the same behavior. I think it is quite possible that Shakespeare was able to escape retribution for writing such things because of both his own religious ambiguity and the religious ambiguity of the time period in which he debuted *Measure*. Arguing that *Measure* is a critique of organized religion would not possible were not each of the three main characters so closely tied to religion and morals – Isabella is a nun, the Duke disguises himself as a Friar, and Angelo proposes to institute new laws in Vienna to curb lawlessness and immorality. I believe that it is no coincidence that this play appeared at a moment in time in which religion in England was anything but certain and definite; *Measure for Measure* made use of this uncertainty to capitalize on the general discontent with and confusion over organized religion in Jacobean England because it is a play that detailed the hypocrisies and immoralities of the three main religious sects in England at the time. In my next chapter, I will demonstrate how the moral and religious issues in *Measure for Measure* can best be illuminated through a production concept.
An interesting paradox about staging Shakespeare’s plays is that the aspect of his works that makes them easy to produce in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the same aspect that causes many production teams a great deal of difficulty in staging his plays: the plays’ cultural, religious, social, and even moral adaptability and relevance. In other words, Shakespeare’s plays are indeed easy to produce and are easy for modern audiences to relate to because they deal with themes that are central to human nature; I think it would be fair to say that in the 400 years since Shakespeare wrote his plays most humans have been able to identify with the greed, love, anger, despair, and so forth that are so prevalent – and so well expressed – in Shakespeare’s works, and thus his plays are continually produced year after year. People continue to come to see these plays because they identify with the characters and the situations in which they find themselves throughout the course of the plays’ events: “Anyone wishing to demonstrate that the content of Shakespeare's plays can be as topical as tomorrow's headlines need look no further than Measure for Measure” (Evans 1). Shakespeare seemed to be chronicling life on stage.

However, the relevance that has made these plays popular throughout time is a double-edged sword. If one is attempting to produce a Shakespeare play, it is often helpful to be aware of the moral and religious overtones of the time period in which it was written; remaining cognizant of the cultural and societal factors that could have influenced the play and the playwright can help inform production choices and make them stronger. In other words, the seeming relevance of most of Shakespeare’s works can be tricky, simply because it is important to remember that cultures have changed since the writing of Shakespeare’s plays, as have notions of morality. If one wishes to produce a work of Shakespeare, this is a difficulty that a director must overcome in order to make deliberate choices and to avoid erroneously attributing standards and values to characters and actions in the play, standards and values that may not have been consistent
with those of Jacobean society. Of course, these measures of historical relevance are largely unnecessary unless one is attempting to set the play within its “proper” historical context, which is a choice that many directors nowadays eschew. However, even if one is attempting to remove a Shakespeare play from its historical moment in time and cultural history, an awareness of the culture and time period that produced the dramatic literature can often be helpful to an understanding of a production.

In the preceding two chapters, I have delved into the moral and religious culture of Jacobean. It is, of course, completely unnecessary (and somewhat irrelevant) to attempt to set every production of this play in the moral and religious universe as scholars think it might have been understood by Shakespeare’s audience; such an interpretation would be predominantly lost on a twenty-first century audience anyway, as I have demonstrated aptly in previous chapters. Therefore, unless one were attempting to communicate morals and religious ideals with Measure for Measure in such a way that only an Jacobean audience would have understood them, these factors that I have researched in the preceding chapters seem to have little practical value when it comes to staging a present-day production of Measure. However, this research into the customs and values of Jacobean society – when viewed in conjunction with a recent production history of the play – brings to light a common thread that seems to run through successful recent productions of this play; thus, the historical research illuminates issues that many modern productions have picked up on in staging Measure for Measure. In other words, the historical background of some of the more prominent moral and religious issues in the play helps to showcase what does and does not help these issues play on stage in modern productions. And indeed, Measure for Measure plays extremely well with modern audiences:

Political corruption, sexual scandal and hypocrisy in high places intertwine in its provocative plot about the impact of a public campaign to dictate private morality. Little wonder Measure for Measure has become one of the more frequently produced of Shakespeare’s plays in recent years. (Evans 1)

My examination of recent production reviews, coupled with my historical research into the moral and religious universe of Jacobean England has culminated in a production
concept that encapsulates much of what makes this play so appealing to modern audiences: the idea of moral and religious excess.

In my opinion, the most pervasive moral and religious issue in the play is the idea of excess. When one thinks of excess, it is all too easy to jump to societies of great excess, gluttony, sexual freedom, etc. such as Babylon or the great Roman Bacchanalics. While this type of excess is certainly present in *Measure for Measure*, it is not the entirety of the excess that is present. Excess is overabundance, a surplus, an overindulgence, and in the case of this play, it is not merely an excess of vices as in the case of Bacchanalics or Babylon – it is an excess of almost all aspects of morality and religion. That is to say, not only is there an excess of licentiousness, greed, or religious hypocrisy, but there is simply **too much** moral uncertainty and unease, too many conflicting religious ideals. Moreover, the aforementioned hypocrisy of some of the main characters helps to demonstrate the notion of excess too, because their hypocrisy can be connected to their being forced into situations that are at odds with their ostensible moral beliefs.

As a hypothetical director of *Measure for Measure*, this idea of excess is the most prominent, overarching theme that I would want to communicate to an audience. Moreover, through my extensive research into the moral and religious universe of the play and of the time period in which it was written, I believe that exploring a production concept of excess is a useful lens through which to present these issues in a new and relevant light for a twenty-first century audience. I will detail how this notion of excess characterizes moments and characters in the play shortly, but first, a brief production history of *Measure for Measure* will be helpful to illustrate how I arrived at the idea of excess as my production concept.

Indeed, I have read reviews of nearly one hundred productions of *Measure for Measure* throughout the U.S., Europe, and Canada over the last twenty years, and the nearly unanimous opinion in each of these reviews is that *Measure for Measure* is a play that is predominantly concerned with questions of morality and religion; many of the reviewers go so far as to rate the effectiveness of the production by how satisfactorily it deals with some of the more prominent moral quagmires that the play presents: “*Measure for Measure* is often referred to as a problem play. If it is, (John Dove, the director) offers
no solutions” (Marlowe 23). Sam Marlowe here argues that this July 2004 London production of the play was ineffective because it refused to deal with the play’s inherently problematic nature. He goes on to say that the production was incapable of elucidating the play's difficult blend of bawdy comedy and disturbing social engineering without turning the whole affair into little more than a pantomime [. . .] Maybe Dove believes this lightness of tone makes this an authentic Jacobean reading of the text; maybe he's right. But it strips the play of dramatic intensity. (23)

Clearly, Marlowe believes that this production was unsuccessful because it failed to address the moral issues of the play – the very problems that have often earned Measure for Measure its “problem play” status – in favor of making a light-hearted, poetic piece of fluff, a decision that Marlowe believes to have been miserably inadequate in terms of exploiting the dramatic potential of the play.

Another reviewer, Charles Spencer, in reviewing a May 2004 production by the Royal Shakespeare Company says that director “Sean Holmes's production of Measure for Measure, one of the most darkly comic and morally ambivalent of all Shakespeare's plays, is a dismayingly feeble affair, woefully lacking in drama, atmosphere and the troubled sexuality that drives the piece” (16). Once again, this is a reviewer who is dissatisfied with the production of Measure for Measure that he saw because he felt that the production failed to address the problems of morality, religion, and sexuality that make the story of Measure for Measure so compelling; indeed, these seem to be themes that Shakespeare himself found to be compelling, because he adapted them directly from Cinthio’s Epitia. Spencer’s and Marlowe’s reviews are but two of many I have seen that bemoan productions’ ineptitude or flat-out lack of dealing with the foremost issues of morality and religion in Measure for Measure; these reviewers – I have to say that I agree with them wholeheartedly – argue that if one is to mount a production of this play and do it any justice, one must not only consider the moral and religious issues the play raises, but one must almost emphasize these things in production to achieve the best results. Otherwise, a production is likely to be described thus:

A fascinating and curious entry, (this production of) Measure is inconsistent, especially in comparison to Shakespeare's greatest works. It
has several gripping scenes and a few boisterously comic ones - but the overall effect is of an uneven work that shifts tone drastically between its early and late scenes and never fully exploits its dramatic potential. (Evans 1)

Regardless of how one chooses to address them, the issues of morality and religion in productions of Measure for Measure are ignored or deemphasized only to the detriment of the production itself.

As I mentioned before, almost all critics and reviewers of productions of Measure for Measure view it as a play that is concerned with issues of morality and religion above all others. As such, the most common weakness that reviewers and critics find with productions of the play is their tendency to shy away from these issues, or to fail to address them fully and satisfactorily. My production concept simultaneously incorporates the critics’ prevailing viewpoint that morality and religion are the two central issues in the play while taking this argument a step further. Not only are morality and religion central to an understanding of the play, but it is the sheer overabundance of morality and religion in the play that drives the world of Vienna in which these characters live.

That there is an element of moral and religious corruption in Measure for Measure is difficult to dispute. However, the moral corruption does not adequately express what is going on in the play, what drives the action of the main characters. Rather (and this hits at the very core of my production concept), Measure for Measure and the world of Vienna in the play is a world of moral and religious excess, as I mentioned above. Indeed, I believe this idea of excess to be an extremely viable production concept, particularly as likely provides designers with something useful with which to work in creating the world of the play. The moral and religious issues and problems in Measure for Measure all seem to stem from the fact that there is simply too much – too many moral issues, too many religious beliefs, too much corruption, too much sex, etc. The excess is pervasive, and it touches almost every character and major theme in some way.

This excess is manifest in many ways, from the multitude of marriage laws and acceptable forms of matrimony to the plethora of organized religions that can be said to
be represented in the play. It is almost as if the play is unable to settle on just one morally or religiously acceptable form of marriage to sanction. There were too many moral options, too many acceptable alternatives. Either that, or none of the forms of marriage was complete enough for all parties to agree on its cohesiveness and utility. Whichever way one chooses to view it, however, it is evident that marriage – in addition to licensed sexuality both within and outside of marriage – had a multiplicity of meanings depending on in what context it was viewed. Furthermore, although the inclusion of both high-class characters and lowbrow vice figures could be said to be a realistic cross-section of society, the fact remains that the world of Vienna in Measure for Measure is a world that seems to be filled with a great deal of graft, corruption, and illicit sexuality.

The references to the latter are particularly abundant in the play, not only through Angelo’s monstrous advances towards Isabella or Juliet’s premarital pregnancy, but also through the play’s rather heavy emphasis on prostitution through the characters of Mistress Overdone, Pompey, and Lucio. The very profession of prostitution itself was a trade based on excess; the basic underlying principle of prostitution is that people – mostly men – are unable to control their illicit sexual desires, so they require an outlet for doing so: Kamps and Raber say of Jacobean moralists, “Even the few who defended prostitution in print did so without contradicting prevalent views about women’s – and to a lesser degree, man’s – essentially sinful nature” (263). Therefore, the numerous references and heavy emphasis upon prostitution in the play are signs of what sort of a world this is: Vienna is a place characterized by excess of desire and sexuality.

For that matter, illicit sexuality that is not subsumed by the definition of prostitution is also common in the play. The play reveals several instances of sexual activity that occur outside of wedlock (what constitutes sexual activity out of wedlock is, of course, debatable, as I discuss at length in Chapter 1). However, Juliet and Claudio clearly engaged in sexual intercourse, because Juliet is pregnant. The audience also knows that Angelo engages in sexual intercourse with Mariana at the end of the play (despite the fact that he does so unknowingly, the fact remains that the woman with whom he is planning to have intercourse at this juncture is also one to whom he is not married), and whether he had a past contract of marriage with her or not, the fact remains that he is not currently married to her at the time he engages in sexual intercourse with
her. Again, this idea of sexual excess is common in the play; there is the impression that sexual activity within the bonds of legally and religiously sanctioned matrimony is not enough for most of these characters. They must somehow overreach these societal norms placed upon sexuality because their wants and desires are in excess of what is considered acceptable by society.

The feeling of excess that characterizes the city of Vienna as a whole in Measure for Measure also suffuses each of the individual characters as well. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Jacobean notions of sexuality and conception would have influenced greatly their perception of Juliet’s pregnancy; common beliefs at the time held that a woman could only conceive a child if she truly knew sexual pleasure (i.e. the pleasure of orgasm). For Jacobians – as well as for those in the world of Measure for Measure – a woman in Juliet’s position knowing the requisite pleasure for conception would have been excessive. As with the aforementioned vice characters and the trade of prostitution in Measure for Measure, Juliet’s pregnancy is representative of her excessive desire; her contract to Claudio was, in some sense, not enough for her. Thus, she decides to go outside of the legally and morally sanctioned means of sexuality (i.e. marriage) and have a premarital sexual encounter that ultimately leads to her pregnancy. As such, one way that I would visually convey Juliet’s excess in production would be to have her visibly showing her pregnancy, unable to cover up or hide her premarital excess.

Claudio’s excess in this matter can be characterized in much the same way as Juliet’s, although the Jacobians likely would have viewed Claudio’s position more sympathetically than Juliet’s. Once again, however, Claudio’s contract to Juliet was not enough for him; he and Juliet were filled with a sense of haste and thus exceeded the bonds of moral and religious constraint that characterize the marriage process. I am not intending to be particularly hard on Juliet and Claudio; indeed, premarital sex was quite common in Renaissance England, much as it is today. However, I am merely trying to represent how Claudio and Juliet fit into this broader picture of excess that Measure for Measure paints for us. Although they merely get caught and punished for a sin/wrong that many others commit, they are in this way made to be scapegoats for the excesses and licentiousness of Vienna.
This notion of scapegoating is particularly relevant to Claudio vis-à-vis Angelo, whom I will discuss momentarily. Because Vienna had fallen into lawlessness and disorder, Angelo felt the need to rein in the moral excesses and wantonness. This situation with Juliet and Claudio practically falls into his lap soon after he assumes his duties from the Duke; what better way to stamp out lawlessness and lust by making an example of someone? This is where it becomes particularly relevant that Claudio and Juliet are being punished for an oft-committed sin, and that the primary wrong that they have done is getting caught. Their sin is certainly a result of their being outside of the boundaries of the law, or of exceeding the standards of proper moral conduct for a betrothed couple. However, Angelo’s reaction too is rather excessive, considering that he is willing to put Claudio to death just to make an example to other, much worse offenders.

I will discuss Angelo in more detail shortly, but I wish to discuss first the other two main characters – the Duke and Isabella – and the ways they are characterized by excess. The Duke is excessive in primarily two ways. First, the audience learns that he is excessively permissive of lewdness, wantonness, and other unlawful and immoral goings-on in Vienna. It is possible that he simply does not take his position seriously, or that he is simply inept as a ruler. Whatever the reason, though, the audience learns right away that the Duke is handing control of the city over to Angelo because he realizes that Angelo may be better able to restore order and lawfulness to the city. So, the Duke has gotten himself into trouble for being tolerant, almost to a fault.

The other way we see excess in the character of the Duke is in the way that he feels the need constantly to interweave himself into the moral and religious dealings of the other characters in the play. His decision to disguise himself as a Friar, for instance, showcases his inability to recuse himself from the moral and religious lives of Claudio, Juliet, Mariana, and Isabella (in whom he apparently begins to take a more than spiritual or moral interest). He constantly offers advice – solicited and unsolicited – to other characters in the play, even going so far as to suggest the idea of the bed trick to Isabella and Mariana. Aside from the fact that such a suggestion is probably immoral (and possibly even sacrilegious, given the fact that he is dressed in the habit of a Friar), he is also guilty of implanting these ideas into the other characters’ heads in an attempt either
to test Angelo or to prove him unworthy of the trust that he, the Duke, placed in Angelo by appointing him. Either way, the Duke’s actions are indicative of excess, whether it be an excess of pride, excess of cynicism, or simply an excess of nosiness. Because of his liberality in governing Vienna – and his tolerance towards many issues when compared to Angelo – it may be appropriate to costume the Duke as something of a hippie, or a flower child, with long hair, bell-bottom pants, etc. The idea would be to make him appear to be irresponsible and inept as a major ruling figure, and the guise of a hippie would likely evoke those stereotypes for many audience members. The Duke’s disguise as a Friar, however, should be a very obvious disguise, one that should not be able to fool anyone. This is because the Duke has not earned the right to “play the part” of a Friar; he is merely making a show of it, and this can be echoed in his costuming.

Isabella and Angelo are rather similar in the ways that they are indicative of this notion of excess. As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, there is a tendency on the part of scholars to compare Angelo and Isabella, largely because they are both self-proclaimed paragons of virtue and chastity and are rigid in their respective beliefs. As in other Shakespearean works, there seems to be an inherent distrust of individuals who are extremely absolute or fixated on certain things. Furthermore, many scholars dislike both Angelo and Isabella for their rigidity; clearly, we are meant to dislike Angelo for his hypocrisy, but a dislike for Isabella seems to be not quite as obvious or understandable. Critic David Stevenson has even gone so far as to suggest that a “partial not-liking of Isabella is written into the play” (83). I believe that this dislike of Isabella has a great deal to do with what could be considered her excessive pride, vanity, and piety. Many critics and scholars have thought of Isabella as selfish for refusing to sacrifice her virginity for her brother’s life. Whether one agrees with those interpretations or not, the fact remains that Isabella is proud of her morals and her much-vaunted faith in Catholicism. There would be no reason to criticize this aspect of her character but for her involvement in morally questionable activities, such as the bed trick. Therefore, Isabella is excessive in the play almost because she seems to be too good, in a way that is too good to be true. If Isabella is meant to counter Angelo and his monstrous actions by being a perfect example of chastity, purity, and Christian love, she merely succeeds ultimately at being more like him in her moral rigidity; she “out-Angelos” Angelo. This
is not to say that Isabella is a hypocrite on the level of Angelo; it is important to remember, however, that Isabella is implicated in some morally questionable behaviors, even though her involvement therewith may be related to her limited range of choices.

The character of Angelo is an interesting microcosm of the larger notion of excess in the play as a whole. On the surface, the way Angelo affects and is affected by excess is rather ironic. Ostensibly, Angelo is installed as the temporary ruler of Vienna because the implication is that the Duke’s lax rule has allowed the city to fall into disorder and lawlessness. In other words, because the Duke failed to keep law and order, Angelo has been brought in to reestablish it. But Angelo himself is characterized by excess: his punishments of sexual offenders are considered by all to be excessive, his own morals and beliefs are extreme – even Puritanical?? – but most importantly, he pushes himself so far to the moral right that he makes himself a ridiculous hypocrite when he does not follow in his own life the moral guidelines of which he has always been such a strict champion for others. Again, this notion of hypocrisy is connected with Angelo’s excess; because he says one thing and then does another, he makes too many impressions and his excess is an excess of moral ideals. It is ironic, therefore, that the character charged with ridding the city of excess turns out to be not only incapable of doing so, but also a part of the problem. His desire for Isabella and his willingness to abuse his power to get her, coupled with his ardent stance as a pure moralist makes Angelo a walking contradiction, somewhat of an embodiment of the way this excess characterizes the other characters and Measure for Measure as a whole.

I think it would be an interesting notion to use visual and thematic similarities in the characters of Isabella and Angelo in staging a production of this play. For instance, they could both be dressed alike – let us say for argument’s sake that both are costumed in white (clichéd as that may be) and are very clean-cut, a marked contrast to the Duke. There are many parallels to be drawn between the two characters in terms of their language, their moral rigidity, and their strong belief in justice, so I believe that a production should take the next step in creating some degree of thematic unity in making them appear all the more similar on stage as well. I think it would be very interesting to somehow stain Angelo’s costume with Barnadine’s blood at some point to give the audience a visual reminder of his hypocrisy and ruthlessness. Perhaps this can be done
with Isabella’s costume as well, using Claudio’s blood. Of course, Claudio is not actually killed in the play, so perhaps it would be possible to have Claudio accidentally cut his hand in a scene with Isabella, thus smearing his blood on her outfit as well. Again, although Claudio does not die and although Isabella would not have been directly responsible for his death even if he had, one can certainly make the argument that Isabella was in a position to save him and did nothing. Furthermore, the staging could also reinforce similarities between Angelo and Isabella; perhaps they have similar mannerisms or nervous ticks. All of this may be unnecessary to my idea of thematic unity, and it may be too harsh a criticism of Isabella. However, this is merely an example of a way that I believe Isabella and Angelo should be linked by visual design elements on stage.

Not only is this concept of excess prevalent in Measure for Measure in terms of the way it affects moral issues, but this excess also permeates the play in terms of the wide-ranging religious excesses in the play. As with the moral excess in the play, it often seems as though there is simply too much religion in the play, in terms of the variety of conflicting religious ideals and beliefs espoused by the various main characters. In one sense, it can certainly be argued that there is a disproportionately large number of religious faiths represented in the play. Isabella is clearly a Catholic novitiate; Angelo is often likened to a Puritan, possibly more for his moralistic strictness on issues of sexuality and vice than for actual religious professions on his part; the Duke, of course, is a character about whom many different religious contentions could be made – much like William Shakespeare himself: either that he is a Catholic as well (this argument is aided by his disguising himself as a Friar), that he is a Protestant, or that he is a Gnostic or Puritan. The audience is able to learn very little of this information definitively, however, save the fact that Isabella must be Catholic. Regardless, however, the fact remains that there is an abundance, an excess of different faiths in Measure for Measure.

Furthermore, the role that religion itself plays in the story of Measure for Measure is arguably excessively large. The Duke, for instance, picks the habit of a Roman Catholic Friar for his disguise. The argument made in the text for his assuming this habit is that disguising himself thus will make it easier for him to move about incognito to observe the various goings-on in Vienna after he has abdicated his power. That argument
is sound enough, but it is interesting – and unlikely to be coincidental – that he picks the guise of a holy man in the same religion as young Isabella. The Duke could have disguised himself as a number of different things to elude detection and escape notice; he could have disguised himself as a blind beggar like Poor Tom / Edgar in *King Lear*, for instance, and he would hardly have received much notice from anyone. However, the Duke’s decision to disguise himself as a monk infuses the play with a great deal of meaning – particularly for a Jacobean audience – in a play that already teems with religious references. Most likely, everyone in Shakespeare’s audience would have had some sort of reaction to the Duke falsely dressing himself as a Catholic Friar; the Protestants in the audience ostensibly would have been less inclined to side with the Duke, and the Catholics in the audience might silently cheer on this seemingly pro-Catholic turn of events. Not only are the Duke and his actions thereby connected with the much-demonized organized religion of Catholicism, but also he is subtly connected to Isabella, the other main outwardly religious figure in the play. So perhaps religious iconography can play a dominant role in the set design of this production; Roman Catholic and/or other Christian iconography subtly or not so subtly placed within the set pieces could be a useful way visually to tie in the theme of religion.

Many of the prevalent themes and images of the play can also be helpful to a production concept that emphasizes this idea of excess. Clearly, there is a theme of excess that runs throughout the play, but as excess is my entire production concept, I find it helpful to flesh out other, smaller themes that are also part of this larger theme of excess. For instance, the dichotomy of chastity vs. sexual freedom is a major theme in this play that I have discussed at length. The excesses conveyed in sexual freedom are obvious, and chastity is the lack of such excess. Along with this dichotomy is the idea of marriage, which is vitally important. Marriage is so necessary to this play because it strikes a balance between the excess of sexual freedom and the strictness of chastity. Marriage, in other words, is a happy medium, a matrix in which a couple can enjoy sexuality while stopping short of the excesses of total carnal freedom. As I have gone into considerable detail on Jacobean attitudes towards marriage in the preceding chapters, it should be self-evident that marriage is of considerable importance in this play.
Moreover, the connection between these two themes – the theme of marriage and the theme of chastity vs. sexual freedom – is an idea around which much of the action and conflict in Measure for Measure is built. That is to say, where one finds one of those two themes in the play, one often finds both. The issue of Claudio and Juliet’s sexual freedom is only especially of concern to Angelo because their sexual excess occurred outside of wedlock. The same can be said of Lucio, who frequents the brothels. And how is he punished for his sexual excesses? He is punished for his sexual freedom by being forced to marry any woman that he has wronged. The implication is clearly that marriage is an institution that exists primarily to reign in the rampant, excessive, animalistic sexual impulses of men, who have no control over them; marriage is a society-driven device that is necessary if men wish to be simultaneously sexually active and moral. So not only is the connection between the themes of marriage and sexuality vs. chastity evident from the text, but so too is the way these two themes and the connection between them relate to the larger theme of excess; sexual freedom and chastity exist at opposite ends on the continuum of acceptable, moral sexual activity, and marriage is the framework that combines the two in a happy medium.

The play also contains many images that evoke the idea of excess. A prominent example of a recurring image of this sort is the imagery of disease. This imagery appears most frequently in the play in the scenes with Lucio, the Bawd, and Mistress Overdone. Allusions to syphilis (including the terms “sweating” and “hot houses” because syphilis made people feel very hot) and venereal disease in general abound; in I.ii, Lucio says of Mistress Overdone, “I have purchased as many diseases under roof as come to…” Later in that same scene, the Bawd says, “What with the sweat (from the venereal disease) [. . .] I am custom-shrunk.” This image of disease – and particularly venereal disease – is pervasive in the play, and imagery of this sort appears almost every time that Lucio, Mistress Overdone, or the Bawds are on stage.

This image signifies the idea of excess in two primary ways. First, the obvious implication with this rampant venereal disease is that it represents that widespread sexual wantonness that is occurring in Vienna. Because of the widespread illicit sexual activity, sexual disease plagues those who engage in sexual activity without discretion. On the religious side one can view the presence of venereal disease as something of a divine
punishment for the insatiable sexuality of Vienna. The imagery of disease can also be said to represent the chaos occurring within the leadership in Vienna (i.e. the Duke leaves his post and the hypocrite Angelo takes over). In other words, the state is unhealthy due to its excesses as are many of its inhabitants. So this image of disease is another way in which the idea of excess is represented in the text; inhabitants of Vienna are diseased because of their immoral sexuality, and their society is diseased from within because of the lack of structured leadership.

The final piece of the puzzle with which I believe one must concern him/herself in developing a production concept for Measure for Measure is the way one chooses to stage the final scene. This is a scene that has baffled directors for centuries, primarily because the text gives the reader very little information, and because the characters’ actions seem not to be in accord with their previous actions in the play. All we know is that the Duke essentially proposes to Isabella, saying to her, “Dear Isabel, / I have a motion much imports your good; / Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline, / What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine” (V.i.532-5). There is no indication whether or not Isabella responds in the affirmative; indeed, she does not respond at all, because two lines later, the play ends. Directors have tried staging this scene many different ways; some have Isabella run into the Duke’s arms and embrace him; some have her stand there, completely puzzled by this proposition; some have even had Isabella spit in his face and walk off stage in a huff.

I believe this scene to be yet another example of the excess that characterizes this play. Indeed, it is this scene that scholars often cite when designating Measure for Measure a “problem play”: the Duke’s interest in Isabella seems rather sudden, and certainly unprovoked. She has given no indication throughout the play that she has recanted on her desire to become a nun, nor has she indicated that she has any particular liking for the Duke. How could she when the Duke has been in disguise throughout most of the play?! So the Duke’s proposal to Isabella at the play’s end seems forced and out-of-place.

However, there is the tradition in Shakespearean comedy that the play ends with marriages (or at least proposals of marriage). With that fact in mind, the play is simply following form by doing what comedy is supposed to do at its conclusion. It is almost as
if the play is trying to fit into genre box of comedy, but it tries too hard. The fact that this proposal of marriage happens so suddenly is almost metatheatrical in the way that it almost has a comic effect from being so ridiculous. Indeed, the ending of Measure for Measure could be compared to Corneille’s Le Cid, which technically followed all of the neoclassical rules, but in so doing made a mockery of them; the play’s insistence upon following the comic tradition of marriages to close out the play undermines this selfsame tradition. It is not convincing as a traditional comedy ending; it is too sudden, too haphazard, too much of a deus ex machina. In other words, the play seems to be trying too hard to fit into the comedy genre, but the fact that it tries so hard does nothing to make it more convincing; rather, it just makes the ending seem absurd.

In keeping with this idea of excess, I would stage this problematic final moment with Isabella angrily storming offstage after hearing the Duke’s proposal. The ending seems to me to be flouting the convention of ending plays with happy marriages, so I see no reason not to address this discrepancy head-on by showing Isabella to be unwilling and defiant towards this unexpected turn of events. Moreover, such an action from Isabella would be more in keeping with her somewhat excessive piety; she spends much of the play championing her virtue, and she is arguably too proud to sacrifice her body under any circumstance. So why should this attitude change suddenly at the play’s end? This is an example of how this concept of excess can help to clarify problematic staging moments in the play.

So again, conceptually, the most vital piece of mounting a production of Measure for Measure is being aware of this pervasive excess in the play. It is not as though the play seems unnecessarily heavy with religion or religious issues, because the issue of religion would have been highly important to Shakespeare’s audience, particularly because of all of the religious turmoil that occurred constantly in their own lives. But for a play that, on the surface, does not purport itself to be a morality play or a religious allegory, Measure for Measure seems to be rather preoccupied with morality and religion. So in putting my production concept into action, it would be important to me to

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14 Indeed, all of the marriages that are to take place are arranged at the same time at the close of the play, including Mariana’s marriage to Angelo. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the Duke’s argument to Mariana that her sleeping with Angelo would be no sin is a little shaky, given how quickly he marries her off as soon as he gets the chance to do so.
both convince my actors of the weight of this excess and to see this excess represented visually.

As far as specific ideas for visual design elements I would like to see in my own production of Measure for Measure, I do not have many in mind; that is something that is up to the respective designers to determine. However, a few general design concepts come to mind. I think that the idea of excess is very easy for a designer to convey visually and aurally. For instance, Angelo could be costumed very decadently with rich textures and colors, or he could be put in a very flashy costume, one almost resembling a pimp. Since Shakespeare plays almost always utilize a unit set, it could be a very large and imposing structure, almost oppressive and overbearing in size. At the same time, there could be many nooks and crannies for characters to hide, for I believe that many of the characters conduct clandestine business throughout the play. Again, the design elements should reinforce the idea that this is a world of excess, a world where something just feels wrong because there is simply too much. I am reminded of a particular film version of Macbeth, starring Judy Dench and Ian McKellen. The coronation scene is filled with this very bright and cheery music, but it is unconvincing as far as making the moment seem cheerful or otherwise good. In this case, the music is just a little too cheerful, too bright to be believable, and this represents the fact that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s façade of the perfect monarchy and marriage is crumbling. I visualize the design elements working in the same way in my production of Measure for Measure, because all of the design elements can reinforce the idea that the world of Vienna in this play is one of excess.

The above are just some sample ideas of the ways I think that the excesses can be represented through the design elements. What I am most concerned about is addressing and emphasizing these prominent issues of morality and religion head-on, without being afraid to ask the difficult questions about why this play is so preoccupied with morality and religion. All too often, productions of Measure for Measure refrain from foregrounding these issues in production, a decision that I believe to be detrimental to the dramatic potential of this work.

Although some of the specific moral and religious attitudes and conflicts that existed in the seventeenth century have changed significantly since then, this is still a
play driven by moral and religious excesses. As I mentioned above, the productions in recent years that fail tend to be the ones that shied away from these issues in the text, rather than challenging them and forcing audience members and critics alike to make a decision about whether they do or do not agree with the characters’ actions and the play’s moral and religious outcomes. I believe that using historical research like mine can make it easier for a production team to focus these issues more clearly for a modern audience, even if not every specific production wishes to highlight a Jacobean understanding of morality and religion. Although such an understanding is not necessary for the development of an effective and entertaining production of *Measure for Measure*, the research I have done can provide a key source for creative inspiration in the formulation of a production concept.
As I have said a number of times, I believe that it is impossible to discuss *Measure for Measure* without dealing heavily with the issues of morality and religion in the play. Scholars often run into difficulty classifying *Measure for Measure* by genre, simply because of the problematic moral and religious situations and character traits in the play. It follows many of the conventions of comedy: marriages at the end, a more-or-less happy ending, and occasional comic banter and situations. Mariana and Angelo are slated to be married at the play’s end, the Duke has just proposed to Isabella as the play is winding down, and Lucio is ordered to marry anyone who claims to have been sexually wronged by him. Claudio, who had been imprisoned for fornication and was thought to have been killed turns out to be alive and is freed, and Isabella escapes the compromising situation in which Angelo places her. And, of course, the scenes with Lucio and Mistress Overdone are often very comic in stage portrayals. These are all characteristics of typical Shakespearean comedies. As a result, it is usually classified as such; it is the latest of Shakespeare’s comedies and his only Jacobean comedy.

However, there are a number of twists that make this play less convincing as a traditional Shakespearean comedy. For instance, the characters defy classification as “good” and “bad” characters. Of course, Shakespeare rarely writes characters that are black-and-white, good or bad characters; even Iago and Caliban are difficult to dislike completely, because they display softer, human characteristics at points throughout the plays. But Shakespeare’s “good” characters in comedies rarely leave audiences scratching their heads, wondering just how good and virtuous they really are. Benedick and Beatrice, for instance, despite their constant bickering are indubitably comic characters; moreover, they are indisputably “good” characters in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The same could be said of Antipholus of Syracuse and Antipholus of Ephesus in *Comedy of Errors*; they might be rather stupid, inane characters, but they are almost consistently well meaning and their actions rarely – if ever – have lasting, negative repercussions.
No such characters exist in *Measure for Measure*; the main characters are, without exception, characters who not only have flaws, but also characters whose actions and words occasionally make one question just whom exactly the audience / reader is supposed to like in this play. Isabella and the Duke are probably the most likely candidates for characters whom the audience is supposed to like and side with, but because of the various morally and religiously compromising situations in which they put themselves throughout the play, it is difficult to embrace them wholeheartedly. Isabella, because of her participation in the bed trick and her refusal – though understandable – to help her brother escape from his dire circumstances wins her no points with the audience. Especially where the bed trick is concerned, audience members can be left wondering whether or not Isabella might be more of a hypocrite than a virtuous would-be novice. The Duke is little better. Instead of dealing with the mess that Vienna has become, the Duke temporarily abdicates his position to a puritanical tyrant. As if that were not enough, he then goes into disguise as a fraudulent Friar, willfully handing out morally and religiously questionable advice to many of the other characters. It is even he who first suggests the idea of the bed trick to Mariana and Isabella, telling Mariana that participating in such an act would be no sin. It is somewhat ironic and significant that the Duke and Isabella ostensibly are characters whom the audience is supposed to like; these characters’ actions and inactions often make it difficult to do so.

Moreover, the Duke is often thought to have been either Shakespeare’s dramatic manifestation of James I or his willful insertion of himself into one of his works.15 If the former were true, it would be a dicey proposition at best for Shakespeare to have created a somewhat dislikable and hypocritical character modeled after James I. It is unclear from the beginning, however, whether or not the audience is supposed to like or respect the Duke. Shakespeare stops short of making him a completely reprehensible or unlikable character, but as with other characters and aspects of *Measure for Measure*, there is just something a little “off” about the Duke that keeps him from fitting into the mold of typical Shakespearean comic characters.

15 Other scholars often argue that Prospero from *The Tempest* is actually Shakespeare’s literary manifestation of himself in one of his plays.
Isabella is another example of a character who, were this play like most other Shakespearean comedies, would be a likable protagonist. She from the outset seems to be the paragon of virtue who will overturn all hypocrisy and whose morals will stand up to the corruption that runs rampant in Vienna. Instead, she becomes assimilated into this culture of hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy, and the audience can end up thinking that she is just like the rest of the characters who participate in questionable and morally problematic situations. Again, *Measure for Measure* is overturning conventions – conventions that Shakespeare himself had established in his works, whether intentionally or unintentionally – in the character of Isabella as with the character of the Duke.

Another issue with *Measure for Measure* that complicates comic conventions is the ending. I have discussed this issue at length in the preceding chapters, so there is little need to go into detail in discussing here. However, the difficulty that many scholars and directors have had in dealing with and resolving the Duke’s puzzling marriage proposal and Isabella’s apparent lack of response is another microcosm of perplexing and problematic moral situations that make *Measure for Measure* difficult to classify. Isabella has given no indication anywhere in the play that she has changed her mind about entering convent life, so why does the Duke assume that she will abandon that quest simply because he desires her hand in marriage? If she is unwilling to do so, this proposal paints the Duke in a morally and religiously problematic light for attempting to coerce Isabella away from what she viewed as her true spiritual calling. However, if she does assent to his proposal, it puts her in the morally and religiously compromising position of being the character who reneged on a very important and life-changing sacred decision. Either way, the ending is another example of an issue in the play that causes a problem because of the moral and religious implications associated therewith.

As I argued in my first chapter, an exploration of *Measure for Measure*’s Jacobean sociopolitical context provides alternative perspectives of these issues. This is especially true of the issue of marriage, which exists in several forms throughout the play. Nowadays, the typical understanding of marriage is rather cut-and-dry: two people are either married or they are not. However, what constituted matrimony in Renaissance England – either ecclesiastical matrimony or secular, state-sanctioned matrimony – was very different from what constitutes matrimony in twenty-first century America. There
were many intricacies in the law that dealt with semantic differences and levels of intent involved in marriage proposals. Furthermore, what constituted marriage in a church setting may not have been sufficient to constitute legal matrimony to the city of London or the country of England. Therefore, Claudio’s claim that he and Juliet were basically as good as married when they had sexual relations is actually not too far off; the fact that they had contracted to marry and were awaiting her dowry gives her premarital pregnancy a degree or two more of legitimacy, even though it technically still was considered to be premarital. Claudio and Juliet’s situation is a key example of an issue in the play that becomes more complex when framed in its Jacobean context.

However, the light of contextualization does not illuminate every morally problematic issue in the play from a twenty-first century perspective. For instance, the fact that the Duke claims that Mariana sleeping with Angelo is no sin because they had previously been contracted to marry is a fraudulent interpretation of the laws that existed at the time – convoluted and obtuse though they may have been. If a de praesenti marriage contract existed between Angelo and Mariana at the time of the bed trick, then the Duke would be correct: Angelo and Mariana’s sexual act would then have been simply considered to be consummation of the marriage. However, the de futuro contract that existed between Angelo and Mariana was of a conditional nature – it was based on conditions that were not met, and it was, by English common law, therefore null and void. Thus, this bed trick situation is one morally and religiously problematic issue in the play that is not made to look any better when viewed in its Jacobean context, regardless of the vagaries of the English marriage laws at the time.

This and other situations in the play are indicative of the pervasive moral and religious excess in Measure for Measure. Angelo is at first excessively strict which then proves him to be that much more of a hypocrite when he falls. Much the same can be said of Isabella, though her fall is much more subtle than is Angelo’s. The ending of the play does not quite fit within the bounds of typical Shakespearean comedy because it is “too much”; it almost seems as if Shakespeare was trying too hard to make Measure for Measure fit into the conventions of comedy, regardless of whether or not the events of the play up to that point warranted such a tidy resolution. Either that, or Shakespeare was attempting to make fun of this convention of Jacobean comedy – a convention that
Shakespeare himself used often in his earlier comedies such as *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and so forth. And of course, the city of Vienna itself is something of an embodiment of the excess of all of its inhabitants; it was perceived as a modern-day Babylon where vice and excess are rampant. As I argued in my third chapter, I believe that a production concept centered on the idea of excess has a great deal of dramatic efficacy because of these qualities in the text.

*Measure for Measure* is certainly a challenging play; it is one that has kept scholars and directors alike on their toes for centuries. It is my personal belief that if the play were exceedingly easy to decipher and understand that it would not have earned the popularity that it currently enjoys. Indeed, *Measure for Measure* is, as time goes by, becoming one of the more commonly performed plays of Shakespeare’s, and most reviewers tend to agree that audiences enjoy the play because of the moral and religious situations that hold a great deal of relevance even today for audiences. A successful production of this play will call attention to the many problematic and intricate moral and religious situations that arise in the play without transforming the play into a dark and sinister world. Although the play is certainly not without its hidden corners, it is most assuredly a comedy, and it is my belief that it is one of Shakespeare’s better ones. Perhaps it does not fit neatly into the box of traditional Jacobean comedy, but Shakespeare was known for pushing boundaries and stretching limits throughout his life. He was a playwright who was supremely gifted at writing actual human emotions and situations onto his pages. The words, syntax, and context for some of his plays may now be significantly different from his world, but his plays continue to resonate year after year because audiences flock to see humanity portrayed onstage, a task at which William Shakespeare was virtually unparalleled.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John A. Greer was born in Nashville, TN and raised in Bowling Green, KY. His parents were, and still are, professors of psychology at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. After graduating sixth in his class from Bowling Green High School in 1998, John enrolled at Vanderbilt University in Nashville in the fall of 1998 where he majored in English Literature and minored in Music and in Theatre. John spent all four years of college as a member of Vanderbilt’s only all-male a cappella ensemble, the Vanderbilt Dodecaphonics, even serving as musical director from 1999-2000. While at Vanderbilt, John also participated in many shows as an actor, electrician, scenic carpenter, and publicity director with the Vanderbilt University Theatre. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree, cum laude, in 2002, John went on to work as a business sales associate for Dell Computers and as a legislative researcher for the Tennessee General Assembly in Nashville for a year before enrolling in a program of graduate study at Florida State University. In the spring of 2005, John graduated from Florida State with a Master of Arts degree in Theatre Studies, summa cum laude, from the Florida State University School of Theatre.