



Measure for Measure and the Mystery Plays

By Dr Beatrice Groves

The idea that Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic has recently become one of the most popular and hotly contested areas of Shakespeare studies, and many critics have suggested that Shakespeare's own beliefs underlie his trademark ambiguity of tone and the romance world of chantry chapels and wayside crosses inhabited by many of his characters.

One of the most attractive readings which the stress on Catholicism has brought forward is the idea that the repeatedly disrupted sacraments of *Hamlet* engage with the psychic rupture caused by the Reformation's abandonment of traditional mourning practices. These disrupted sacraments are focused particularly on death: the play begins with a mourning period interrupted by a wedding - 'the funeral baked meats/ Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables' - and one precipitating cause of its catastrophe is Laertes's anger at his father's obscure burial 'No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,/ No noble rite nor formal ostentation'.¹ Ophelia too is interred with curtailed obsequies and Hamlet dies with the words of the Catholic liturgy spoken over him by Horatio rather than a priest: 'Good night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest' (5.2.311-12) - an unmistakable echo (as was pointed out in the 1950s) of the Latin antiphon sung during the Requiem Mass: *In Paradisum deducant te angeli... aeternum habeas requiem* (May the angels bear you to paradise, and may you have eternal rest).² Likewise the weird focus on the ear in Old Hamlet's murder looks 'like a parody of confession' and also 'of extreme unction (symbolic anointing of the portals for the dying man's soul)'.³

The repeatedly maimed funeral rites in *Hamlet* reflect the world in which it was first performed, for with the destruction of the panoply of Catholicism, rituals become fractured and fragmentary. The words of the requiem are spoken by a friend rather than a priest, Ophelia sings 'lauds' over her own drowning body and Hamlet's father comes from purgatory to request a rather different sacrifice than the masses which were traditionally offered for the repose of souls. These distortions seem to brood over Protestantism's destruction both of purgatory itself and of the comforting and familiar rituals of death associated with the faith that

¹ *Hamlet*, 1.2.179-80, 4.5.211-13. All references to Shakespeare's plays, unless otherwise stated, are to: *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

² Peter Milward, *The Catholicism of Shakespeare's Plays* (Curridge: Saint Austin, 1997), p.45. See also: Maurice J. Quinlan, "Shakespeare and the Catholic Burial Services," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (1954): 303-306; Baldwin Peter, "Hamlet and *In Paradisum*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 3 (1952): 279-80.

³ James Nohnberg, 'Foreword' in {Curran, 2006 #1777}, xviii

the living could still assist the dead. The hero's famous stasis can itself be read as a reflection on the unavailability of official forms of mourning.⁴

One of the only certain biographical facts that connects Shakespeare with the old faith is that his father was presented for recusancy in 1592.

Criticism which is sensitive to the way that Shakespeare's plays engage with the religious obsessions and uncertainties of his time has much to teach us about his work. We need, however, to disentangle the acknowledgement of Catholic nuances in his plays from the search for the evidence about the beliefs of the writer himself and to recognise the cultural desires which underlie the Catholic Shakespeare, just as clearly as we can see the cultural conservatism which bolstered the 'Anglican' cricket-playing Shakespeare who preceded him. Shakespeare is at the heart of the canon in a period which is uneasy about canonicity. We can't do anything about him being a dead white male but his postulated Catholicism invests him with an exciting marginality. Entertaining a 'Catholic' Shakespeare is the intellectual equivalent of the visual effect of looking at the x-ray photograph of the Flower portrait: the shocked excitement with which we recognise the Virgin Mary behind the familiar hooded eyes of the Bard.⁵ When this x-ray photograph was taken of the Flower Portrait in 1979, the painting was believed to be a portrait of the playwright painted (as it claimed) in 1609 – and hence the original for the famous engraving of the author on the frontispiece of the 1623 first folio. However the 2006 National Portrait gallery's exhibition 'Searching for Shakespeare' proved conclusively that the painting was a forgery – the paint contains a pigment that was not manufactured until the 19th century.

The initially startling image has therefore a matter of fact explanation. A portrait of Shakespeare was a more saleable commodity than a picture of the Madonna and child at that period. There is no mystery about the re-use of an old panel to bring a spurious age to the Shakespeare painting. Shakespeare painted over the Virgin and Christ child is not a secret code revealing his true faith but a vivid illustration of the indubitable truth that the present rises like a phoenix from the ashes of the past. Catholicism lies behind Shakespeare as surely as it lies behind his painted image, but not because it can be proved to be what he truly believed. Catholicism was the faith of England's past and whatever

⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.247 and passim; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), pp.312-22; Gerard Kilroy, "Requiem for a Prince: Rites of Memory in *Hamlet*," in *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.143-60; Laurie Maguire, "Actions that a man might play": Mourning, Memory, Editing, " *Performance Research* 7, no. 1 (2002): 74. My grateful thanks to Laurie Maguire for sending me this paper.

⁵ Paint analysis has proved conclusively that the Flower portrait is a nineteenth century image, and not early seventeenth century, as has been sometimes thought. See: Tarnya Cooper, *Searching for Shakespeare* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006), pp.72-75. For an earlier overview of theories about the painting, see: Paul Bertram and Frank Cossa, "'Willm(-) Shakespeare 1609": The Flower Portrait Revisited," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1986): 83-96.

Shakespeare's own doctrinal affiliations we should be neither shocked nor surprised to find Catholicism underlying his plays as well as his portrait.

Drama is a synthesis of visual and verbal and Shakespeare's dramaturgy is sensitive both to the intensely visual aspects of his Catholic cultural heritage and to the rich verbal texture of Protestantism with its long, punning sermons, catechising, Prayer Book and, above all, the Bible to be heard and read in English. Shakespeare enriched his plays through appropriating both the linguistic wealth of the English Bible and the theatrical splendour of the liturgy, images and mystery plays from England's recent Catholic past.

The rest of this talk will argue for this synthesis between the visual and verbal – for what we might call a small-c catholic response to the bible - in its suggestion that the return of Claudio in *Measure for Measure* draws on the emotional and dramatic power of the raising of Lazarus – familiar to Shakespeare and his audience through bible reading, mystery cycles and the fading visual culture of Catholicism

The title of *Measure for Measure* is drawn from a piece of scripture which lies at the heart of the problem of the proper relation between justice and mercy. It is spoken during the Sermon on the Mount and it enjoins mercy, and yet Jesus' injunction to forgive others is couched in language which recalls the syntax of the old 'eye for an eye' law of substitutionary justice.

This biblical title combined with Angelo's allusion to the Duke as 'power divine' at the play's climax has led some critics and directors to posit a connection between the Duke and Christ. As in this picture of a 1951 production in Stratford Ontario, directed by Tyrone Guthrie. Another strand of criticism has seen the Duke as an image of James, the new king who had come to the throne immediately preceding the first known performance of the play. On St Stephen's night 1604 James I sat down to watch a play which began with these words:

Of government the properties to unfold
Would seem in me t' affect speech and discourse,
Since I am put to know that your own science
Exceeds in that the lists of all advice
My strength can give you.

Measure for Measure begins with an address to Escalus purporting to instruct him about good government, while acknowledging that his 'own science' is so great as to need no such advice. (Escalus's name is an explicit gesture towards both the scales of justice and of the balance of the play's title: Measure for Measure). Simultaneously, the king sitting in the audience is greeted with words which recall the sermons on godly rule which had likewise been performed before him on his entry into England. Thomas Bilson assured James that in his discussion of the duties of a prince 'I may be shorter, because I speake before a religious & learned king, who both by pen and practise these many yeeres hath witnessed to the world, how well acquainted he is with Christian and godly

gouernment'.⁶ Preachers such as Bilson assured James that he had nothing to learn about good government, and then proceeded nonetheless to present him with their ideas. Shakespeare's play implicitly adopts the same strategy, addressing the king as one who is perfectly versed in this branch of learning, and then staging a searching exploration of the complexities of good government. *Measure for Measure*, like the proliferation of sermons and treatises which greeted the new king, exploits contemporary interest in the issue of godly rule at a historical moment when new modes of government seemed to be available (in that sense it could be seen as a highly topical play!)

In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare engaged with the contemporary debate over godly rule by creating a central character whose quasi-divine attributes mirrored the contemporary concern that a ruler should emulate God as far as possible. I hope to put the interpretations of the Duke as a 'God-figure' into sharper focus and show how this identification can both compliment and implicitly criticise the king. The dominant narrative of *Measure for Measure* would have flattered James, if he had recognised in the Duke (who creates a happy ending by his judicious tempering of justice with mercy) a projection of his own aims and desires. More fundamentally, however, the play problematised the contemporary theory of government which conflated human and divine law. Angelo's story can be recognised as an explicit warning against Puritan rule, but behind this straightforward satire is an implicit critique of any rule which attempts to collapse the distinction between the person and the role of those who, as James was fond of saying, 'sit in the Throne of God'.⁷ The aspects of the Duke which have a quasi-divine resonance seem to compliment such divine right thinking, but constant thwarting of his plans - above all their foundering upon the solid, comic rock of Barnadine - subtly suggests that the divine pattern cannot find a simple analogue in an earthly ruler.

Measure for Measure is one of a cluster of plays performed before the king shortly after his accession which have a disguised protagonist. One of which is Middleton's *Phoenix* in which the good prince Phoenix, is about to inherit the throne from someone who has ruled for 'forty-five years' (1.1.7), exactly the

⁶ Thomas Bilson, *A Sermon Preached at Westminster before the King and Queenes Maiesties, at Their Coronations on Saint Iames His Day, Being the Xxv. Of Iuly. 1603* (London, 1604), B7^v. See also: Richard Eedes, *The Dutie of a King, Preached before the Kings Maiestie in Two Sermons, in Six Learned and Godly Sermons: Preached Some of Them before the Kings Maiestie, Some before Queene Elizabeth* (London, 1604), F2^v-F3^r; Elizabeth Pope, "The Renaissance Background of 'Measure for Measure'," in *Aspects of Shakespeare's 'Problem Plays': Articles Reprinted from Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.61.

⁷ *The Political Works of James I: Reprinted from the edition of 1616*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918), pp.14, 333. See also: Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and its Late Mediaeval Origins," *Harvard Theological Review* 48, no. 1 (1955): 65-91; Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp.65-84.

length of Elizabeth's reign.⁸ The play flatters James through this reference to a fresh new ruler and by quoting from *Basilicon Doron*, James book on kingship - which had been *the* publishing event of 1603. Middleton makes his strategy of praise unambiguous by naming his play and his protagonist after a bird that symbolised both Christ and James: (the latter because Jacobean apologists changed the fact that James was not Elizabeth's direct descendant into a matter of praise, by claiming that he was Elizabeth reborn: a phoenix rising from her ashes).⁹ Middleton greeted the new king with a play in which a perfect prince, just about to begin his rule, dispenses absolute justice while going about his subjects undetected. When Phoenix reveals himself, the malefactor whines in submission before a godlike king: 'tread me to dust, thou in whom wonder keeps! Behold the serpent on his belly creeps' (5.1.165-66). The ruler's actions and power are godlike, his name is a mystical name for Christ and these attributes reflect praise onto the new king whom he also figures.

Disguised ruler plays such as *Measure* and *Phoenix* drew on the legend of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus, which was made fashionable at this time by James's own penchant for going undetected about London.¹⁰ The contrast between Elizabeth's love of show and spectacle and James's evident dislike of it, made the disguised ruler a useful way to praise the new royal style. It also fed into James's desire to be praised as a godlike king. The idea of a monarch watching and judging his subjects unbeknownst to them, and then revealing himself and justly punishing and rewarding them was a story drawn from ideas of divine omnipotence and immanence, culminating in the last judgement. James's shyness could be made into a matter for praise if connected to this quasi-godlike ability to watch and control his people unobserved. Royal dissimulation was connected to the divinity of the ruler through the ancient idea of the Mystery of State which argued that the obscurity and ineffable quality of the gods must be imitated if a ruler is to retain respect and power.¹¹

At a fundamental level the story of the disguised ruler dramatises the hope that God's omnipotence will finally be realised in ultimate justice for all men. The godlike aspect of the ruler who comes to dispense justice at the end of the play is made explicit in Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), Shakespeare's source play. The disguised duke is Shakespeare's addition to this source - in *Promos and Cassandra* the Duke really leaves and only discovers what has happened when he returns. Shakespeare also places his Duke in a role of preserver given to God in the earlier play, by making him become the agent of

⁸ Kamps, Ivo. "Ruling Fantasies and Fantasies of Rule: *The Phoenix* and *Measure for Measure*." *Studies in Philology* 92, no. 2 (1995): 248-73., p.253.

⁹ *Law Tricks*, a 1604 play with a disguised ruler, also makes frequent mention of phoenixes (Day, John. *Law Tricks by John Day, 1608*. Oxford: The Malone Society, 1949. ll. 1067, 1224, 1281).

¹⁰ Pendleton, Thomas A. "Shakespeare's Disguised Duke Play: Middleton, Marston and the sources of *Measure for Measure*." In "*Fanned and Winnowed Opinions*": *Shakespearean Essays Presented to Harold Jenkins*, edited by John W. Mahon and Thomas A. Pendleton, 79-98. London: Methuen, 1987., p.80-7

¹¹ Donaldson, Peter S. *Machiavelli and the Mystery of State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971.

Marx, Steven. "Holy War in *Henry V*." *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995): 85-97.p.188, 215-6; p.93.

the Claudio-character's reprieve from his death sentence. In *Promos and Cassandra* the Jailer explains to his prisoner: 'for God it was, within my mind, that did your safety moue.'

Angelo's capitulation before the Duke is likewise saturated in religious language that has been taken as evidence that the Duke personifies God by those who wish to read the play as a Christian allegory:

O my dread lord
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness
To think I can be undiscernible,
When I perceive your Grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes. (5.1.364)

The king was a natural subject for Christian allusion because of the ubiquitous analogy of divinity and majesty. A central idea within this is the parallel between twin-natured kingship, a human man and an immortal office, and the two natures of the God-man Christ. Some advocates of the theory of the King's two bodies argued that for this reason: 'the king is the perfect impersonator of Christ on earth' and 'present[s] on the terrestrial stage the living image of the two-natured God'. The Christ-like ideal that all Christian rulers should emulate is something that the Duke appropriates when he (apparently) brings Claudio back from the grave.

This dramatic feat was something that James also had seemed to achieve in his theatrical show of clemency towards the conspirators of the Bye and Main Plots and there does seem to be a possible connection between James's stagey last minute reprieve of the men who had plotted to kill him just after his accession and the last judgement-like Act 5 of *Measure*.¹² Each of the conspirators Sir Griffin Markham, Lord Grey and Lord Cobham were led out on to the scaffold individually, believing that those before them had been executed, and were then pardoned at the last moment. The theatricality of this pardon is underlined by two eyewitnesses - Dudley Carleton and a certain 'T. M.' who likewise connected James's inscrutable mercy with divine kingship: 'in this late Action.. this blessed King hath not proceeded after the manner of men and of Kings, *sed caelestis Iudicis aeternis Regis more* [but in the manner of the heavenly judge and eternal King]'.¹³ Dudley Carleton's eyewitness account also explains that because each

¹² Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford, 1988/99., pp.136-7; Bernthal, Craig A. "Staging Justice: James I and the Trial Scenes of *Measure for Measure*." *Studies in English Literature* 32, no. 2 (1992): 247-69.; Lake, Peter with Michael Questier. *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England*. London: Yale University Press, 2002., p.678.

¹³ M., T. *The Copie of a Letter Written from Master T.M. neere Salisbury to Master H.A. at London, concerning the proceeding at Winchester; where the late L. Cobham, L. Gray, and Sir Griffin Marckham, all Attainted of hie treason were ready to be executed on Friday the 9. of December 1603: At which time his Maiesties Warrant, all written with his owne hand, whereof the true Copy is here annexed, was delivered to sir Benjamin Tichbourne high Sherife of Hampshire, commanding him to suspend their execution till further order*. London, 1603., B^v, B2^r.

of the conspirators thought the previous one had died, this meant that when they were all bought out and pardoned Grey, Markham, and Cobham 'looked strange one upon the other, like men beheaded and met again in the other world'.¹⁴ Claudio's reprieve has been read as indirect praise of James's clemency to these conspirators. The ability to bring someone back from the dead is, however, not a kingly virtue but - as the published account makes clear - a godly one and it is as an allusion to Christ's bringing a brother back from the dead that Claudio's reprieve is presented in *Measure for Measure*.¹⁵

In addition their knowledge of the Raising of Lazarus from their Bibles, Shakespeare's audience may have come across the raising of Lazarus in the painted walls and stained glass which were not entirely destroyed by the Reformation – as is shown by the iconoclasm and whitewashing that took place during the Commonwealth and in the nineteenth century. They may also have seen the event enacted on the stage during mystery plays – which declined during the sixteenth century, but were only finally stamped out in the seventeenth century.

The connection between the raising of Lazarus and the return of Claudio is created by – a previously unnoticed - textual echo. When Lucio meets Isabella mourning for her brother he says to her: 'by my troth, Isabel, I loved thy brother; if the old fantastical duke of dark corners had been at home, he had lived' (4.3.155). In the gospel story of the raising of Lazarus Jesus has likewise left and is not present when his friend is in most need of him. When Jesus returns Lazarus has died, and his sisters say to Jesus: 'Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died'.¹⁶ The statement is repeated by both Martha and Mary, and the powerful words of faith and reproach have become well known. Lazarus's story prefigures the resurrection, and so despite being only in John's gospel it has become an essential part of the Easter story. All the mystery cycles have a play of the raising of Lazarus; the author of the N-town cycle in particular expands the gospel account. The words of Martha and Mary here are even closer to Lucio's words than those of the Gospel: 'Ah! gracious Lord, had you been here,/ My brother Lazare this time had lived.'

Another textual connection between the two moments resides in the fact that Duke states that Claudio will be hidden away for four days (4.2.159) and Lazarus, likewise, remains in the tomb for four days (John 11.39). This is a memorable length of time because it is surprising. The Evangelist clearly intends the raising of Lazarus to prefigure the Resurrection, and hence the reader expects three days, rather than four, to have elapsed since Lazarus's death.

A striking visual similarity between the two events is found in the kneeling women. In the Chester play Mary sinks to the ground in her grief for her brother, declaring: 'Here will I sitt and mourninge make/ tyll that Jesu my sorrowe slake'

¹⁴ Lee, Maurice, ed. *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603-1624: Jacobean Letters*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1972., p.51.

¹⁵ James, King. *The Essays of A Prentise, in the Divine Art of Poesie*. Edinburgh: Thomas Vautroullier, 1585), F^r-2^v.

¹⁶ John 11:21 and 32. This connection has not been noticed before.

(13.325-6). When Jesus arrives Mary prostrates herself before him: 'Tunc Maria videns Jesum prosternat se ad pedes' (13.417). This kneeling is not mentioned in the bible, but it became ubiquitous in depictions of the event: one woman is usually more prominent - in the Lazarus story this is the Magdalen - and in *Measure for Measure* this is Isabella. But Martha and Marianna are both kneeling too. The modern theatre places huge emphasis on Isabella's posture - often making her wait extraordinary lengths of time before kneeling, and this powerful stage image is an important part of the staging of this scene. It is also an important part of the depictions of the raising of Lazarus - often at the very front of the picture.

Another visual connection lies in the 'muffling' (5.1.484) of Claudio, a word which might mean just a head covering, but could denote the kind of binding that Lazarus would have been clothed in the mystery play.¹⁷ A swaddled upright figure, which is how Claudio might have appeared, would have been particularly reminiscent of Lazarus, as, in keeping with Jewish burial traditions, almost all pictures of the moment tend to show the corpse upright.

The iconographic representation of Lazarus swaddled in graveclothes stresses the most important part of his character - his intimate association with death. When Claudio comes back - as it seems to the other characters - from the dead, he does not speak. Shakespeare intimates Claudio's closeness to death through this silence. Speech in Shakespeare is a sign of being alive and participating fully in human life. Characters whom others had thought dead - such as Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV part 1* or Hermione in *Winter's Tale* - are asked to speak to prove their reality. This is proof that Claudio, however, is neither asked for nor gives. Alone among the many Shakespearean characters who apparently return to life when others had thought them dead (and incidentally Shakespeare is almost inordinately fond of the resurrection motif, for that includes Hermione, Juliet, Imogen, Thaisa, Emilia, Falstaff and Hero) Claudio does not speak. And, in the bible Lazarus, likewise, does not speak after his resurrection.¹⁸

The Towneley play, however, makes a striking deviation from this traditional quietness. The Towneley playwright has interpolated a monologue of 134 lines, which is in effect a traditional lyric about death. Lazarus's passionate, personal response to death is something that Claudio shares. Claudio has the most powerful and haunting monologue on death that Shakespeare - or perhaps anyone - ever wrote. Claudio, unlike Lazarus, has no knowledge of death, but he speaks of it with the same passionate intensity.

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become

¹⁷ In *Henry VI part 2*, Suffolk in disguise is described as being 'muffled up in rags' (4.1.46).

¹⁸ N-town - check Chester and York.

A kneaded clod.

(3.1.117)

The Towneley Lazarus speaks of the horrors of being 'closid colde in clay' (l. 127) with the same enclosing alliteration as 'cold.. become/ A kneaded clod'. They share fears of cold, rotting and becoming like the wind, and most powerfully, a synaesthetic horror of the dead body being able to feel like a living one. The parallels illuminate an aspect of Claudio's character which he shares with the traditional Lazarus: an intimate knowledge of and preoccupation with death.

Christ reveals his godhead through this, his last and greatest miracle before his resurrection. Bringing Claudio back on stage is also part of Vincentio's revelation of himself in full ducal splendour and the proof that he has been among them all the time, working for their good. The textual connections created by Lucio's and the Duke's words, strengthened by the visual similarities of the kneeling women and the muffled figure, bring forward the possibility of the reappearance of Claudio as an allusion to the raising of Lazarus. But the Duke's imitation of Christ's action is a mere shadow of it: he has not raised Claudio from the dead, merely kept him concealed so that he can seem to have done. Jesus responds to the grief of Lazarus's sister by raising him from the dead. The Duke in the same position leaves Claudio hidden away so that he can apparently bring him back to life at a more strategically dramatic moment. Lucio's twisted biblical allusions bring forward the true model of divine kingship which the Duke tries to emulate but cannot attain. The biblical model helps to bring redemptive closure to the Duke's actions, but it also underlines his failure to attain what he hopes to achieve except through deceit. Peter Lake (in his fabulously named book the *Antichrist's Lewd Hat*) argues that 'one of the central ideological tasks being performed by the play is the exposure and critique of a whole series of confusions and confluences between human and divine law and authority... including the theoretical works on the nature of kingship and good government produced by James I himself'. I think that biblical echoes are one way in which this takes place. The uncomplicated mapping of divinity onto kingship - of a king who can be in equal measure just and merciful - is shown to be an impossibility as the Duke must resort to disguise and stratagems to accomplish what Christ did through sovereignty of nature. *Measure for Measure* explores the fissures that result when the gospel's radical message of mercy is negotiated in the fallen world of human law and order. The practicalities of judicial mercy, which must be faced by a king who wants a Christ-like rule, are confronted in the awkward and often unsettling comedy of Shakespeare's play. While ostensibly praising James, the Christian allusions are actually a subtle critique of his belief in a monarchy that could resemble divinity.