

“SEVERITY MUST CURE IT”:

Sin, Morality, and Politics in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*

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When Angelo in *Measure for Measure* urges that adultery is punishable by death, he argues that murder and what he calls the false coining of a human life are equivalent sins and that both are mortal. Unlicensed sex and illegal killing are equally damnable. His female opposite, Isabella, as much an absolutist as he is, seems to agree but with an important qualification: “‘Tis set down so in heaven but not in earth” (2.4.50). Will Tilleczek sets out to interrogate the role of aesthetic Christian morality as that plays out in the political sphere in Shakespeare’s most overt exploration of biblical themes. Through a detailed and perceptive analysis, he shows how much of the play is a working out of the ethical principles that Saint Paul articulates in his Epistle to the Romans and that Jesus expresses, somewhat more enigmatically, in the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. What Will demonstrates persuasively is that the absoluteness of Paul’s injunction to “mortify the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8.13) is unworkable in the realm of human law and politics and that the alternative of Christian mercy, however humane, is no more effective from a political perspective. The attempt to translate Christian morality into political practice, he concludes, results either in the tyranny and cruelty of an Angelo or in the moral laxity which predominates at the opening of the play and to which the Duke apparently returns, no further ahead, at its close. Isabella, in other words, is probably right.

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Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is a complex and problematic play, a “problem comedy” (c.f. Crewe xxxv). It is often perplexing, suggesting yet never neatly tying together a plethora of philosophical themes of sex, death, love, life, sin, and justice, to name a few. While the play may not offer a singular, coherent connection between these themes, one framework through which it can be interpreted is that of the relationship between politics and morality, with which many of the aforementioned themes interact. In this paper, I will argue that *Measure for Measure* is a critique of the political capacities of Christian morality, specifically the morality depicted in Matthew and Romans, and that Shakespeare ultimately demonstrates the incompatibility of this morality with state politics. The play deals with a markedly moral problem, namely the sinful sexuality of the Viennese citizens, and dramatizes the Duke’s attempt to solve this problem by reintroducing severe laws through an appointed deputy. The play thus dramatizes a moral dilemma, yet one which is approached as a *political* danger. This

danger is treated with a political campaign motivated by the moral tenets of self-renunciation and abstinence, attempting to activate this moral code within the citizenry. Ultimately, the Duke's intended campaign descends into a mess of confusion and tragedy, until he finally saves the citizens through mercy and forgiveness. However, he thereby succumbs to the very political-legal inaction regarding immorality that necessitated his campaign in the first place, and therefore the action of the play comes full circle. Thus, *Measure for Measure* demonstrates the impossibility and undesirability of instituting Pauline morality as a legal institution, and demonstrates that to do so is to relegate the state to either cruelty or inertia¹.

Measure for Measure begins with an overtly political scene, as the Duke transfers state power to Angelo in his professed absence. The Duke has "given [Angelo's] deputation all the organs / Of our own power" (1.1.20-1), and

¹ To say whether or not Shakespeare offers a preferable alternative to Christian morality in *Measure for Measure* is beyond the scope of this paper. For one example of such a suggestion, see Rowe, "The Dissolution of Goodness: 'Measure for Measure' and Classical Ethics". The author argues that Shakespeare is advocating the superiority of Greek ethics to Christian morality.

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has commanded the following: “In our [The Duke’s] remove be thou at full ourself” (1.1.43). The drama is thus instigated by the Duke’s political strategy, which involves deputizing Angelo, bestowing on him all the power of the state. The Duke explains the motives behind this strategy as follows:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs to headstrong
weeds,
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip
[. . .] So our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose,
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum. (1.3.19-31)

The Duke’s immediate political problem is that the laws, not being enforced of late in Vienna, have become “more mocked than feared” (1.3.27). This has resulted in moral anarchy, in which the Duke has lost control of the conduct of his subjects. Liberty has clashed with justice as, in their free license, citizens pursue immoral actions without concern for consequences. The citizens’ vices are described as “weeds” which should have been kept in order by the law, but which, in the absence of law, have turned the state on its head. The Duke is faced with an inversion of order in

which “[t]he baby beats the nurse” (1.3.320), namely, the state has become weaker than its subjects, and in this faulty political state “all decorum” is lost (1.2.321). The Duke must therefore restore order in Vienna, and to do so he places Angelo in office. Because “’twas [the Duke’s] fault to give the people scope” in the first place, “[t]would be [his] tyranny to strike and gall them” in restoring order (1.3.35-6). In order to avoid the hatred of the people, then, the Duke has a pawn, Angelo, bear the burden of reinstating the strict laws that will inevitably provoke irritation. The action of the play is initiated by this political strategy, which is constructed to restore order to the state by reapplying strict government to the conduct of its citizens.

If Vienna’s political problem is the proliferation of license, vice, “evil deeds” (1.3.38), and especially “lechery,” which is “too general a vice” (3.2.95), then it must be noted that this political crisis is inseparably tied to a crisis of morality. If the Duke has chosen an explicitly political expediency to restore order, namely the reactivation of certain laws, he has done so in order to address the moral conduct of his subjects, especially their sexual activity. In this moral-political campaign, the Duke has

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chosen Angelo very thoughtfully as the perfect agent for his plan: “For you must know, we have with special soul / Elected him [Angelo] our absence to supply” (1.1.17-18); “We have with a leavened and preparèd choice / Proceeded to you [Angelo]” (1.1.51-2). It is not incidental that the Duke chooses Angelo for his deputy; it is a carefully considered decision. If the Duke requests, then, that Angelo “enforce or qualify the laws / As to [*his*] soul seems good” (1.1.65-6, my italics), this implies that the Duke has considered the kind of changes a soul like Angelo’s will make, and therefore that he knows Angelo’s soul to be the right one for his purpose, namely to end the moral anarchy of Vienna. What does the Duke know Angelo to be? He describes him as follows to Friar Thomas:

Lord Angelo is precise,
Stands at a guard with envy, scarce confesses
That his blood flows, or that his appetite
Is more to bread than stone. (1.3.50-3)

In other words, Angelo is a “man of stricture and firm abstinence” (1.3.12), and, in a political campaign that requires a war against license, sin and lechery, what better deputy to appoint than one who is himself entirely abstinent and

self-controlled? It is precisely for his *moral* qualities that the Duke selects Angelo as his deputy:

There is a kind of character in thy [Angelo's]
life,
That to th'observer doth thy history
Fully unfold. Thyself and thy belongings
Are not thine own so proper, as to waste
Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee,
[. . .] for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. (1.1.27-35)²

It is the *character* of Angelo's life, his moral virtue, for which he is chosen, even though Escalus himself is "first in question" in the art of politics (1.1.46), knowing the "nature of our people, / Our city's institutions" better than anyone else (1.1.9-10). In this campaign, strict morality is more important than the nuances of statecraft. The Duke wants Angelo's strict morality to be the principle of his political campaign against vice, to shine before him as

² It is significant that this quotation echoes Matthew 5, for reasons that will become clear. For now, let us just note the resonance between the Duke's, "for if our virtues / Did not go forth of us [. . .]" and Jesus' "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works" (Matt. 5.16). Shakespeare is making direct use of the Bible throughout *Measure for Measure*.

an example. He would have Angelo practice morality as a politics in order to solve the political problem of amorality.

We should be more precise here regarding the mode of morality that is at stake in the Duke’s campaign and in his choice of Angelo as the agent of this campaign. What kind of morality does Angelo demonstrate, and why exactly is the sexual vice of the citizens such a pressing moral dilemma for the Duke (e.g., 3.2.95)? Here it will be helpful to illustrate the parallels between *Measure for Measure* and Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, as the latter can account for the moral framework dramatized by the play. As a shorthand, we might term the morality common to these two works as *asceticism*, understood here as the renouncement of the self, of one’s earthly body, and of one’s appetites and lusts. Another helpful way to think about this mode of asceticism is, to use a Greek distinction, as a mode of self-control or continence, *enkrateia*, here understood in contrast to temperance or moderation, *sophrosyne*. Self-control or *enkrateia* would require one to master oneself and one’s pleasures forcefully, using one’s reason, the best part of oneself, to dominate the appetites. Moderation or *sophrosyne*, on the other hand,

connotes a friendly self-mastery, in which one does not forcefully rule oneself, but in which one's wisdom effortlessly guides one's conduct ethically³.

In *Measure for Measure*, both Angelo and Isabella are examples of asceticism and 'self-control'. As mentioned above, Angelo is chosen by the Duke for his "stricture and firm abstinence" (1.3.12); it is by renouncing pleasures of the flesh that he is a recognizably moral individual. As Lucio notes, Angelo does not suffer the "wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge / With profits of the mind, study and fast" (1.4.59-61). Through practices that train one in self-renunciation, such as fasting, Angelo has come to conquer the mortal pleasures, steeling himself against the stirring of passions. Morality here is achieved by exercising vigilant self-control, by wholly suppressing one's bodily lusts and desires. Isabella, who is preparing to enter a cloister, also practices this mode of asceticism. When

³ For a treatment of the Greek virtue *sophrosyne*, see Plato, *Charmides*. For a discussion of *sophrosyne*, *enkrateia*, and their role in *Measure for Measure*, see Rowe, "The Dissolution of Goodness: *Measure for Measure* and Classical Ethics" (26-7, 38).

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she promises to pray for Angelo, she notes that these prayers will come from “fasting maids whose minds are dedicate / To nothing temporal” (2.2.154-5). She too has renounced the “temporal” flesh and its pleasures through practices of fasting and self-control. The desire for the forceful suppression of the appetites is perhaps most clearly exhibited in the following words of Isabella: “And have you nuns no further privileges? [. . .] / I speak not as desiring more, / But rather wishing a more strict restraint” (1.4.1-5). Isabella wishes to have the most severe restraints placed upon her in order to assist in suppressing and renouncing her immoral desires. Thus in the case of both Angelo and Isabella, morality is achieved when one lives continually under the self-restraint which allows one to renounce his or her mortal flesh.

There is a common principle underlying both Angelo’s and Isabella’s strict morality, namely that the flesh is naturally sinful, which is well summarized by the Duke while in his Friar’s habit: “Thou [life] art not noble, / For all th’ accommodations that thou bear’st / Are nursed by baseness” (3.1.13-15). Life is ignoble because it has base origins in the act of sex. By nature, one’s life, understood as one’s existence

as mortal flesh and blood, is sinful and imperfect. Following this principle, Isabella can wholly agree with Angelo's prohibition against sinful sexuality, even while pleading for her brother's life: "There is a vice that most I do abhor" (2.2.29). Sex is a vice, which is to be purged from one's soul through the practice of strict self-renunciation. Thus Claudio understands well the nature of his arrest, and the moral principles on which Angelo's laws rest:

This arrest comes] [f]rom too much liberty, my
Lucio, liberty.
As surfeit is the father of much fast,
So every scope by the immoderate use
Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil, and when we drink, we die.
(1.2.124-29)

Liberty, in this system of morality, simply provides the scope in which sin will flourish. Since it is our nature as humans to be tempted by the evils of the flesh, only steadfast restraint can realign our souls with the proper course of virtue, namely abstinence and the renouncement of our mortal bodies. *Measure for Measure* thus dramatizes the morality of ascetic renunciation, and Angelo's rulership is

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motivated precisely by the need to restrain vice in the citizenry.

The regime of morality implemented by Angelo resonates with St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in which the themes of the naturally sinful flesh and the need for self-renunciation are dominant. For Paul, the sinfulness of the flesh, of our mortal bodies, is a constant force and an antagonist to our better selves, namely our mind and spirit: “I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom. 7.23). Sin is the “law” of our mortal bodies, and thus our bodies are a kind of captivity in which we are doomed in spite of ourselves. The sins of the flesh must therefore be renounced, and through faith in God we must turn away from our mortal selves: “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. [. . .] For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom. 8.6-13). To live carnally, pursuing bodily and especially sexual desires, is to live sinfully. To be saved, we must “mortify” our mortal flesh, or in other words we must entirely extirpate the sinful desires and deeds which

are wholly of the body and therefore immoral. One must not make “provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13.14); one must not live in such a way as to seek or obtain the fulfillment of bodily lusts. Rather, Paul exhorts us to “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God [. . .] [a]nd be not conformed to this world” (Rom. 12.1-2). Paul’s morality, then, requires that we exercise violent constraint over our mortal selves, practicing complete and utter renunciation of the desires thereof in order to be saved. These precepts are clearly mirrored in the figures of Angelo and Isabella, who have renounced the pleasures of the body, lived in total abstinence, and practiced rigid self-control in order to “mortify” their bodily impulses.

Thus the Duke’s political strategy, executed through the abstinent figure of Angelo, implements a recognizably Pauline schema of morality. For the Duke, lechery “is too general a vice, and severity must cure it” (3.2.95), and “strict statutes and most biting laws” are “needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds” (1.3.19-20). In other words, if liberty will certainly nurture vice, then what is required to curb the proliferation of vice is the application of strict restraints. Only in this

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way will the citizens be led to exercise the degree of self-renunciation necessary to become moral subjects. Angelo is therefore the perfect agent of this new law, as he himself exercises the moral law of self-refusal in his own asceticism. There is a connection in the Duke’s plan, then, between the moral and the political: it is a political strategy with moral ends and a moral schema enforced by political power; the pattern of asceticism and self-suppression determines both the character of the law and its moral goals. The moral subject is the one who suppresses his mortal desires, and in order to instigate this process, the law itself suppresses, through fear and restraint, the scope given to vice.⁴ Shakespeare provides a humorous example of this governmental technique at work when Lucio, pushed to moral conduct by the law’s ban on sexuality, begins to force continence on himself: “I am fain to dine and sup with water and bran; I dare not for my head fill my belly; one fruitful

⁴ We can note here that the use of threats and fear as deterrents of immorality is quite consistent with the Pauline conception of a God who threatens “[t]ribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil” (Rom. 2.9).

meal will set me to't" (4.3.152-4). The law must suppress vice by motivating self-suppression.

Shakespeare demonstrates throughout the play, however, that ascetic morality is faulty both personally and politically. As a personal practice for extirpating sin, asceticism is critiqued most notably in Angelo's hypocritical lust for Isabella. While Angelo may have an "unsoiled name" for "th' austereness of [his] life" (2.4.154), it is crucial that he is not experienced in overcoming temptations. Before meeting Isabella, he has yet to be faced with a temptation as great as his lust for her: "Ever till now, / When men were fond, I smiled and wondered how" (2.3.185-6). Thus, when he meets with a truly great object of desire, he is unable to control himself. While austerity and self-suppression may often be successful, when they do finally yield they often reveal a weakness even more extreme than the strength of one's self-control (c.f. Rowe 23). This is precisely what happens to Angelo. As soon as the yoke of self-renouncement is loosened by his desire for Isabella, this sexual desire takes over Angelo's soul and is mutated to gross proportions:

I have begun,

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And now I give my sensual race the rein.
Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite,
Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes,
That banish what they sue for. (2.4.158-162)

A morality of self-control is a morality of all-or-nothing. One is either entirely free of sin or entirely sinful, and thus Angelo, the most austere of ascetics, slips heavily into the opposite extreme of pure sinfulness. If the flesh is by nature fallen, then all that is required is the slightest slip for one to return to one's natural state of sinfulness. This slip is precisely what Shakespeare dramatizes in Angelo's monstrous turn-around. Asceticism “banishe[s] what [it] sue[s] for” (2.4.162), because if we are subject to “the law of sin which is in [our] members” (Rom. 7.23), then our only expediency is to banish the very sinfulness of our nature, or else to fall under its spell. Thus asceticism is subject to the greatest lapses in virtue.⁵

⁵ As Nietzsche would later comment, “The same expedient – extirpation, castration – is instinctively chosen in a struggle against a desire by those who are too weak-willed, too degenerate to impose moderation upon it: by those natures which need La Trappe” (53). Shakespeare anticipates this criticism in the violent hypocrisy of Angelo.

Since ascetic morality serves as the pattern for Angelo's legal campaign against vice, it is not surprising that this political dimension, too, ends in failure. Just as he has lived to extirpate desire from his life, Angelo's laws are meant to extirpate sexuality from the city. One of the primary ways in which this is attempted is by shutting down the brothels: "All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down" (1.2.94-5). This is a political rendering of Jesus's saying, "if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast *it* from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not *that* thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt. 5.29). In Matthew, just as in Romans, one must be rid of one's temptations by removing them at their very roots, purging them in their entirety by renouncing mortal temptations altogether. Angelo attempts to exercise such a purgation by banishing illicit sexuality in the city. To banish the brothels and to punish all those who undertake immoral acts is a means of instituting the morality of ascetic suppression at the political level. However, as several citizens are aware, such a tactic is doomed to be ineffectual. As Lucio says, "it is impossible to extirp it [lechery] quite, friar, till eating and

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drinking be put down” (3.2.97-8). If sex is sinful, it is nonetheless a sin that is too widespread, too close to the nature of human beings (even Paul calls this sinfulness our nature) to be curtailed by a suppressive law. Thus if the law is to be effective in plucking out the offensive vice, it will have to do more than shut down the brothels. It will have to pluck out, to kill those members of the social body who offend, and thus death will be the necessary result of an absolute censure of carnal activity. As Pompey says, unless Angelo “mean[s] to geld and splay all the youth of the city,” he will have to “head and hang all that offend that way” until the city is so depopulated that he will “be glad to give out a commission for more heads” (2.1.227-29). To target vice at the political level through a program of total extirpation will inevitably pit morality against human life, as human life itself is the condition of sinfulness in this moral schema. This dilemma is symbolized by Pompey’s conversion from “unlawful bawd” to “lawful hangman” (4.2.13-14): if vice is to be sufficiently (which can only mean entirely)

suppressed, the business of death will increase in inverse proportion to the business of sex.⁶

Thus *Measure for Measure* questions this morality which demands that one pluck out the offending member, that one “mortify the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8.13) in their entirety to reach salvation. This morality requires that one is either entirely sinful or entirely moral, and as such it is too absolute; it risks personal folly and political tragedy. As Escalus says, because Angelo’s course of action does not moderately “cut a little,” it will “fall and bruise to death” (2.1.5-6). At this point, however, one may object that Shakespeare is criticizing Angelo, and not Pauline morality itself; that the problem has arisen precisely because Angelo’s rule does not conform to Paul’s teaching or the teaching of Jesus, insofar as it

⁶ Again, Shakespeare seems to be dramatizing here a danger in Christian morality that Nietzsche would later attack: “[It] is said, with reference to sexuality, ‘if thy eye offend thee, pluck it out’ [. . .]. The Church combats the passions with excision [. . .] – it has at all times laid the emphasis of its discipline on extirpation [. . .]. But to attack the passions at their roots is to attack life at its roots: the practice of the Church is *hostile to life*” (Nietzsche 52). To this extent, we can note the language used in the injunction to “mortify the deeds of the body, [so that] ye shall live” (Rom. 8.6-13). Here bodily death is life, as bodily life (which must be sinful) is death.

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makes use of the law, while salvation can be achieved only through faith. However, it is not the case in either Romans or Matthew that the law is meant to be replaced by a principle of faith: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3.31); “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I [Jesus] am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matt. 5.17). If the law alone is insufficient for salvation, then faith does not simply replace, but rather supplements the law, placing the crucial moment of salvation not in the external but the internal adherence to the law (see Matt. 5.28). It is still the case that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Rom. 7.12). The point is not that the laws may be disobeyed, then, but that something more than mere outward obedience is required. As political authorities, it is the business of the Duke and his deputy to ensure that the citizens first of all obey the laws so that they may be saved, and in this they are entirely in line with Paul’s teachings:

[T]he powers that be are ordained of God. [. . .]
For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to
the evil. [. . .] For he is the minister of God to
thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil,

be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain:
for he is the minister of God, a revenger to
execute wrath upon him that do evil. (Rom. 13.3-
4)

Because Angelo is ruling in accordance with virtue and in the name of God, he is justified, according to Paul, in using wrath to govern the citizenry and to teach them virtue. If his rulership is problematically absolutist, then, it is nonetheless not because Angelo distorts Pauline precepts, but because he adheres to them. His failure is thus an evaluation of the political difficulties of this morality.

One may also object that Angelo's reign is both cruel and ineffectual because he misinterprets what it means to judge measure for measure, and therefore lacks mercy. That is, Angelo argues that all should be judged equally and consistently before the law:

You may not so extenuate his offense
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.
(2.1.27-30)

Thus it is to Angelo's credit that, once he is discovered to be a hypocrite, he begs to the end for death and not mercy (5.1.472-5). However,

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one may therefore think that to pattern out death because all should be judged equally, without exception, is to misinterpret Jesus’s sermon on the mount, in which he says the following: “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. [. . .] Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matt. 7.1-12). Certainly Isabella, though often wavering in her evaluation of Angelo’s laws, at times calling it a “just, but severe law” (2.2.41), does often ask Angelo to be merciful and to judge not (e.g. 2.2.136-41). If to provide mercy in all situations is closer to Jesus’s teaching, however, it must be noted that this understanding of morality will provide an equally faulty political principle. At the end of the play, the Duke does indeed distribute mercy towards all offenders. However, does this not leave the play to end exactly as it had begun? Was the problem not addressed precisely that, through merciful legal laxity, a vice offensive to the tenets of Christian morality was allowed to flourish?

What Shakespeare demonstrates is not that Angelo’s is a faulty understanding of

measure for measure judgment, but that this moral principle offers two equally problematic political implications. That is, one is trapped between either following Angelo's style of judgment, which is indeed consistent with measuring others as you should be measured, namely by placing all under an equal law and therefore submitting the commonwealth to painful suppression; or otherwise following the path of mercy and forgiveness which, while perhaps engendering less pain, will nonetheless block the efficacy of any legal-political attempt to institute morality. Once again, the problem is that absolutism is engendered by *either* understanding of measure for measure: all are subject to a law, or none are; but neither way cultivates goodness politically. Ascetic morality translates, politically, to either cruelty or non-intervention.

Thus, in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare examines the merits of Pauline morality by placing it in a complex relationship with politics. Vienna is suffering from a moral plague, in which sexual activity has far deviated from the Christian precepts of self-control and renunciation of bodily pleasures. The ensuing drama takes the form of an

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attempt to correct this moral deficiency through a political campaign that will attempt to cultivate virtue in the citizenry. Angelo is chosen as an agent of this moral order, which is to be pursued through a legal avenue motivated by the virtues of abstinence, self-control and asceticism. However, just as Angelo soon slips into vice, unable to remain entirely chaste and therefore becoming entirely sinful, his political project is doomed to failure. The law is trapped in a snare of harsh and lethal justice; mass suffering ensues, and therefore the political project of morality becomes self-destructive. Ultimately, the Duke must resort to an attitude of mercy regarding sin, and therefore the play ends exactly as it begins, the Duke having made no headway in his political experiment. In his introduction to *Measure for Measure*, Jonathan Crewe makes a comment which touches on this difficulty in the play's structure: “Few critics have argued [. . .] that the play effectively closes the gap between biblical precept and social implementation. Perhaps it is the difficulty of doing so that *Measure for Measure* highlights above all” (xlvii). Indeed, what Shakespeare demonstrates is that Christian morality, as evinced in Matthew and Romans, cannot be

translated into effective political practice. To do so would force either political cruelty or laxity. Thus, *Measure for Measure* presents a critique of a Christian morality that prevents the governing of its own subjects, forcing a gap between virtue and politics. The very character of ascetic morality prevents its cultivation through the venue of politics.

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