

Article

“At War ‘Twixt Will and Will Not”: On Shakespeare’s Idea of Religious Experience in *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract: “Religions in Shakespeare’s Writings,” the title of this special issue, can prompt consideration not only of singular exceptions to the normative religious landscape but also of the ideas that support the banner under which a plurality of examples together may be described as “religious.” In recent years, readers of Shakespeare have devoted attention to exploring Shakespeare’s engagement with specific theological and sectarian movements in early modern Europe. Such work has changed how we view the relation between theater and its religious landscapes, but it may be that in focusing on the topical we overlook Shakespeare’s place among such sociologists and philosophers of religion as Montaigne, Hobbes, James, Weber, and Berger. To this end, I argue that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses law to synthesize certain aspects of religious experience from divergent corners. And drawing on descriptions of religion from anthropology and phenomenology, I suggest that Shakespeare unites his characters through patterns of action within this deadly exigency that demonstrate a shared experience of religion as a desire for salvation beyond the law.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Measure for Measure*; religion; law; guilt; phenomenology; anthropology; morality; Calvinism; Catholicism; agnosticism; atheism; Puritanism

I look to *Measure for Measure* for an example of religious experience conceived across denominations and expressions. That this play explores problems created by the enforcement of a Christian ethic is suggested in its title, and many have considered how individual theological perspectives such as Calvinism and Catholicism may help to explain its discomfiting combination of the abuse of legal authority, sexual aggression, religious doubt, and a denouement that alleges to resolve them all in the stratagem of the Duke. Yet my interest is less in the individual *kinds* of religion that are represented in the process than in how the play conveys religion as a generic *kind* of human experience. In this way, “Religions in Shakespeare’s Writings,” the title of this special issue, can prompt consideration not only of singular exceptions to the normative religious landscape but also of the ideas that support the banner under which a plurality of examples together may be described as religious. In recent years, readers of Shakespeare have devoted attention predominantly to the former endeavor, exploring Shakespeare’s engagement with specific theological and sectarian movements in early modern Europe. Such work has changed how we view the relation between theater and its religious landscapes, but it may be that in focusing on the topical we overlook Shakespeare’s place among such sociologists and philosophers of religion as Montaigne, Hobbes, James, Weber, Berger, and others. In addition to his manifest interest in examples of English encounters with other world religions, heresy, toleration, and agnosticism, does Shakespeare offer any accounts of religion (just shy of a capital “R”) as a world-making or socializing institution?

Still, I aim not to universalize religion as an ahistorical mode of behavior that transcends social circumstance, and so I turn to the play’s representation of law, for which scholars have provided many detailed synchronic and topical descriptions, as an expression of institutional religion and as a sounding board for characters’ unique struggles with guilt and salvation. I will argue that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses law to synthesize certain aspects of religious experience from divergent corners.

As a confessional crucible of sorts, law establishes a dialectic of morality and guilt in which characters' attempts to pursue justice ironically lead to condemnation and moral loss. Religion is involved both as a cause of this loss and as a recourse for it; religion is a psychological and interpersonal force that, like law, appears as both the problem and the solution. This essay begins by carving out space for Shakespeare's idea of religion among literature on Shakespeare's drama in religious contexts. It then addresses the pluralistic implications of its parable-like premise of the disappearing ruler. Next, I offer a reading of law as representing the experience of religion in *Measure for Measure*. Finally, drawing on descriptions of religion from anthropology and phenomenology, I conclude that Shakespeare unites his characters through patterns of action within the deadly exigency of guilt that demonstrate a shared experience of religion as a desire for salvation beyond the law.

1. Shakespeare, World Religion, and the Irreligious

The general question that motivates my reading of *Measure for Measure* asks whether Shakespeare's plays exhibit anything like an anthropology or phenomenology of religious experience. The potential anachronism of this effort is clearly visible. It is one thing to ask from the perspective of modern sociological developments if any overarching notions of religion as a psychological, legitimating, or noumenal force are to be found in the commercial plays of early modern England; yet it is another thing to consider whether writers like Shakespeare were aware of them. An interesting analog to this problem is the question of whether early modern writers entertained a worldview of atheism. For instance, did they transform Pyrrhonian skepticism or Lucretian materialism into a perspective on the universe as godless? On this topic, Eric Mallin recalls a lecture and accompanying dinner conversation between Stephen Greenblatt and his hosts in which the question of an atheist Shakespeare was posed. After "some polite hesitation," Greenblatt, himself convinced of widespread Lucretianism in the Renaissance, replies that atheism as we know it is beyond the scope of the issue: "But doesn't every gesture of unbelief articulate itself within the frame of a sectarian structure that determined it" (Mallin 2007, p. 2)?¹ Mallin's parenthetical response in his book, *Godless Shakespeare*, is equally thought-provoking: "(He really did say this, or something like it.)" The shock recorded in this statement is not informed by the opinion that the sectarian structures to which Greenblatt refers are irrelevant; rather, it expresses a desire to find a fuller and less contained explanation for the many loose ends in Shakespeare's plays that do not fit neatly into these structures—loose ends that, when interwoven, may appear to resemble something like an inchoate form of modern conceptions of godlessness.

The question of Shakespeare's potential atheism is perhaps more polarizing than the proposition that he had a higher-elevation view of the comparative social and epistemological structures of religion, but in some ways the latter are more difficult to describe. For while a term like "religion" in the early modern period referred primarily to devotion in a particular tradition or to whichever sect or theology someone was defending against the claims of alternative sects, terms like "irreligion" and "atheism" often carried negative or subtractive connotations—for instance, as non-white, heretical, or Muslim.² And with so many examples of professed piety available to Shakespeare and with the myriad reciprocal accusations of heterodoxy that flood polemical discourses of interreligious clash, the seeds of what we now think of as secular atheism may have emerged within such debates in latent forms of deism or spiritualism, for instance.³ In other words, an ideology of doubt leading to later systems of atheism may have been part of the swath of Christian explanations of the world from which we might extract an idea of religion—but such doubt nonetheless exists within religious experience. Wayne Proudfoot writes about the distance between modern explanations of religion and historical experience: "Members of the cultures whose myths and practices were now being interpreted as expressions of the religious

¹ See (Greenblatt 2011).

² Examples of the atheism as a range of religious and irreligious viewpoints can be found in (Hunter 1985) and (Robichaud 2013).

³ Such is the broad argument of (Gregory 2012).

dimension of human experience did not understand what was happening to them or what they were doing in these terms. Both *religious* and *experience* are relatively recent concepts, whose provenance is in the modern West” (Proudfoot 1985, p. xii). Moreover, because self-understandings of religious experience present moving targets even within a given historical setting, attempting to settle on any one moment when religion as such became a self-conscious phenomenon unlimited by but represented in various specific religious examples is an unrealistic and largely fruitless endeavor. One often cited work on the origin of religion in Europe as a moving target is Tomoko Masuzawa’s (2005) *The Invention of World Religions*, which discovers an idea of religion in seventeenth-century writings on the diversity of religions. In these historical texts religion appears in a common orthodoxy that rests at the center of various rhizomes of unorthodoxy and secularism.

Pluralism is one lens with which to examine historical conceptions of religious experience, and recent work has focused on the history of toleration as an attitude toward religion in the early modern period. “Toleration entails at a minimum the willingness to recognize and accept a degree of coexistence and pluralism,” writes Perez Zagorin (2003, p. 18). According to Zagorin, there are two predominant explanations for why toleration emerged in Europe: actual increase in unbelief on the one hand, and institutional activity motivated by political expediency and the retention of power on the other. He contends that neither explanation accounts for the rise of literature on toleration within Christian belief itself, that is, not as a compromise or solution to a problem but as a position advocated because toleration itself is a religious value. Zagorin is not alone in championing in this regard the writings of Sebastian Castellio—the Reformed theologian who famously opposed Calvin over the execution of the humanist, Michael Servetus, in 1553. Benjamin Kaplan criticizes such intellectual histories of early modern tolerance that focus on the writings of individuals like Castellio. Instead, he argues that “tolerance had a very concrete, mundane dimension. It was not just a concept or policy but a form of behavior, peaceful coexistence with others who adhered to a different religion” (Kaplan 2007, p. 8). Among Kaplan’s several examples of toleration are instances of opposing Christian denominations sharing church spaces for worship. Such scenarios lend themselves to phenomenological analyses of religion as surfacing in the sometimes unintended overlaps between different and even competing confessions.

Shakespeare scholars largely fall within the boundaries of these two views on early modern toleration—intellectual history and practical coexistence. Maurice Hunt argues that, whereas many have contended that Shakespeare exposes the social deterioration that results from intolerance because he himself lacked a passionate investment in any single confession, Shakespeare in fact held several strong beliefs within the spectrum of Protestantisms. Yet he articulates, or mediates, these beliefs by pointing to a centrist Reformational theology represented by theologians like Richard Hooker—and expressed, for example, in *Twelfth Night*’s Malvolio, a foil that points to Viola as an illustration of a more patient approach to religious reform (Hunt 2004, pp. 73–96). B. J. Sokol presents a more historicist perspective by situating Shakespeare among early modern writings that address a growing awareness about the varieties of religious practice, including Jean Bodin’s *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime* (1588–93), Edwin Sandys’s *A Relation of the State of Religion* (1605), and Leonard Busher’s *Religions Peace or A reconciliation, between princes & People, and Nations* (1614). Sokol concludes, for example, that Busher’s views “on religious diversity” best characterize Shakespeare’s: “For these exhibit bitter impatience with exclusive religious contentions or extremist demands, and thus imply that non-persecutory tolerance should trump all narrow sectarian aims” (Sokol 2009, p. 112).

Such writing on Shakespeare’s tolerance is roughly in line with recent years’ work on Shakespeare and religion in general. Critical opinion has moved predominantly away from the Catholic vs. Protestant problem and has also eschewed efforts to locate Shakespeare’s own confessionality, preferring instead a less denominationally defined sense of Shakespeare’s interest in religion as a dramatic and social motive. In this vein, Shakespeare’s topical engagement of religion is sometimes viewed as an implicit critique of religiously inspired cruelty and persecution, a criticism mounted

through Shakespeare's celebration of the artistic and theatrical power of religion.⁴ "How do Shakespeare's plays give dramatic, imaginative, and provocative expression to diverse early modern religious perspectives and faiths—some of them contradictory, paradoxical, and dissonant—without resolving them?," ask David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore in their introduction to *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion* (Loewenstein and Witmore 2015, p. 2). Scholars today generally find less promise in cohesive accounts of Shakespeare's representation of religion across works and characters and prefer instead to imagine his plays as "more granular" experiments with religion in context, "more likely to recognize eddies and cross-currents in early modern religious debates that cannot be captured in contrasts between 'Protestant' or 'Catholic' perspectives" (Loewenstein and Witmore 2015, p. 11). Still, as Arthur Marotti and Ken Jackson suggest, there may be some trace of religious experience itself that survives Shakespeare's mixings and subtractions: "The lines between secular and sacred, transcendent and immanent blur so continuously that we begin to doubt our own vocabulary and historical paradigms in our attempts to describe the strange otherness of Shakespeare's religion, the ways which he can, again, deliberately and systematically strip away the layers of religion until nothing is left—nothing except the desire for something more or better that cannot be fully disentangled from religion" (Jackson and Marotti 2011, p. 9).

2. The Parable of the Unjust Steward

Turning now to *Measure for Measure*, I follow up on this suggestion of a desire for something "more or better" that is the product of Shakespeare's representations of religion's failings and yet also remains a desire of and within religious experience itself. Is religion(s) in Shakespeare's writings really as strangely other as has been represented? As John Cox (2018) has observed in his review essay for this special issue, *Measure for Measure* features perhaps more than any other play in recent scholarship on Shakespeare and religion. This is partly because the play is rife with competing expressions of religion, especially those of Christian traditions and sects. For many, Angelo resembles a fervent, reforming Puritan. And Isabella stands in opposition to him as a novice in the Franciscan Order of St. Clare. Huston Diehl argues that Calvinism appears in the person of the Duke and that it emerges as an intermediary between the extremes of Catholicism and Puritanism, just as it did for James I and for the antitheatricalism debates in the Elizabethan period (Diehl 1998). Debora Shuger likewise notes that Shakespeare's respective representations of Puritanism in Angelo and of Calvinism in the Duke are far from straightforward as both characters exploit the tenets of their theologies to control others. They "map, as it were, the English political landscape in the years immediately before the antithetic pairings of Whig history—crown versus Parliament, absolute monarchy versus the ancient constitution, and so forth—come into play" (Shuger 2001, p. 68).⁵ Adding more theological perspectives to the collection, Adrian Streete and Jonathan Pollock detect the presence of Lucretian and Epicurean philosophies in the play, respectively. Streete argues, for instance, that "*Measure for Measure* dramatizes a Calvinistic world becoming Lucretian" (Streete 2015, p. 133).⁶ William Hamlin, moreover, observes that the crises of conscience that Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio undergo show affinity with Montaigne's views of the conscience as a "God-surrogate" and thus as a moral locus that opens to both humanistic and theological explanations (Hamlin 2014). Viewed together, such readings suggest Shakespeare's interest in comparative religious experiences as these characters' theologically and morally motivated actions overlap and contradict at moments that point to a common desire to

⁴ See (McCoy 2013).

⁵ Shuger views Angelo's Puritanism as representing a political theology that contrasts with the Duke's. "But in addition, while angelo's hypocrisy is consistent [sic] with his (stage) Puritanism, his punishing of others for self-offenses means that he also stands for unjust or tyrannous authority—Luther's big thief—in contrast to the Duke as bearer of heaven's sword" (Shuger 2001, p. 68).

⁶ See also (Pollock 2013).

found and refound social interaction in worlds beyond the merely local.⁷ Through their dramatic contact with one another, Catholicism, Puritanism, Calvinism, Lucretianism, agonisticism, and other “religious” perspectives reveal one another’s limitations.

While the political authority of the Duke and his role as both judge and spiritual father in the final scene have led some to infer Shakespeare’s preference for Calvinism at least as a unifying or mediating theological and political middle, Shakespeare’s dramatic reflections on religious experience as such in *Measure for Measure* go further. Even in the trope of the disappearing ruler we can hear the echoes of a tendentious history of religious conflict that implicates Calvinism among other theological traditions in a desire for spiritual freedom that cuts across sectarian divisions. The Duke’s strategic retreat from Vienna draws on numerous biblical parables wherein workers and citizens are tasked with an act of collective stewardship and then finally revisited by the owner and either rewarded or chastised for their actions. The parable of the talents in the Gospel of Matthew begins by comparing the kingdom of heaven to “a man that going into a strange countrey, called his servants, and delivered to them his goods”; the man returns and praises the slave who was “faithfull in litle” (Matthew 25:14–21).⁸ Likewise the parable of the wicked tenants speaks of “a certaien householder, which planted a vineyarde, and hedged it round about, and made a winepresse therein, and built a towre, and let it out to husbandmen, & went into a strange countrey” (Matthew 21:33). The landlord sent his servants and his son to the property, but the husbandmen beat and killed them. Such parables regularly served for illustrations of the church’s stewardship of the gifts of God (and were sometimes deployed in colonial contexts to underwrite logics of European stewardship). In early modern interpretations, the master’s servants took many forms; they were variously cast as members the true church, martyrs on both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide, missionaries in hostile nations, or luminaries of reform.

Perhaps most directly reflecting the character of Angelo, the parable of the unjust steward tells of a rich man who calls his manager to account for his affairs after a period of absence or neglect (Luke 16:1–13). The manager quickly settles the debts of those who owe money to the rich man by accepting less than what is owed, and he is praised for his shrewdness. In his early polemical work, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, William Tyndale follows Luther’s lead in rejecting Roman Catholic commentaries that commend the steward’s positive work. The medieval *Glossa ordinaria*, for instance, downplays the underhandedness of the steward’s scheme, instead emphasizing God’s mercy for those who demonstrate such desire to be reconciled (*Glossa ordinaria*). Tyndale, however, differentiates between the steward’s actions and his inner motives, between his works and his faith in the Word of God: “That precious thing which must be in the heart, ere a man can work any good work, is the word of God, which in the gospel preacheth, proffereth, and bringeth unto all that repent and believe, the favor of God in Christ” (Tyndale 1831, pp. 88–89).

Shakespeare’s use of the disappearing ruler frames the play within this rhetorically malleable inter-ecclesial setting, but it is not a straightforward Calvinist illustration of God’s absolute power over history. Consider, for example, an overlooked but remarkable appearance of the disappearing ruler from the writings of Sebastian Castellio. Castellio sustained a debate with Calvin in print, instigated by Calvin’s execution of Michael Servetus in Geneva in 1553. In February of 1554 Calvin published *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra Trinitate, contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani*, in which he defended his condemnation of Servetus by exposing his heterodox Trinitarian positions. Later that year, Castellio wrote the anonymous *De haereticis* in response to Calvin. *Concerning Heretics* is an anthology of excerpted writings of theological authorities from numerous historical and contemporary contexts, such as the writings of Augustine, Erasmus, and Luther. Castellio also included quotations from Calvin’s own writings as well as from two pseudonymous entries written by himself. Each excerpt espouses relative leniency in handling Christians who are deemed to have errant theological views.

⁷ Writing about the turn to religion in literary criticism, Julia Lupton describes religion as “a testing ground for the struggles between the universal and the particular” (Lupton 2006, p. 146).

⁸ All biblical quotations are from the Geneva Bible.

Concerning Heretics is a seminal work of intra-denominational tolerance. He writes: “I can discover no more than this, that we regard those as heretics with whom we disagree. This is evident from the fact that today there is scarcely one of our innumerable sects that does not look upon the rest as heretics, so that if you are orthodox in one city or region, you are held for a heretic in the next” (Castellio 1935, p. 129).⁹ Castellio’s mixture of fictional authorial personas and excerpts assumed to be his own amounts to a rhetorical strategy that frames his arguments as universal, as if they emerge naturally from the very history of religious conflict itself. At the heart of its argument for non-violent regulation of doctrine is a description of Christian revelation as incomplete and inchoate, and his use of quotations from disparate sources gives the impression of the revelation of tolerance throughout the history of theological writing. Castellio’s tack is reminiscent of Montaigne’s arguments in essays like “That a Man ought soberly to meddle with judging of Divine Lawes” and “Of the Caniballes.”¹⁰ Montaigne, in fact, only once mentions Castellio by name in his essays in a somewhat esoteric reference to his poverty and hunger.¹¹

That Shakespeare, who we know was receptive to Montaigne’s ideas, may have been familiar with the French translation of *Concerning Heretics* is suggested by an uncanny use of the disappearing ruler in Castellio’s dedicatory epistle. Addressed to Duke Christoph of Württemberg, the epistle begins much like the steward parables: “suppose you had told your subjects that you would come to them at some uncertain time and had commanded them to make ready to go forth clad in white garments to meet you whenever you might appear. What would you do if, on your return, you discovered that they had taken no thought for the white robes but instead were disputing among themselves concerning your person” (Castellio 1935, p. 121)? Castellio translates the scenario with relevant severity by adding violence to the equation: “Suppose further that the controversy was being conducted not merely by words but by blows and swords, and that one group wounded and killed the others who did not agree with them.” And even more, each agent of violent religious conflict claims divine authority: “But what if these homicides claimed to have done all this in your name and in accord with your command, even though you had previously expressly forbidden it?” Castellio accuses those who punish Christian heretics with violence of pharisaical hypocrisy: “If anyone judge without mercy, with that same measure shall it be meted to him again” (p. 129). Shakespeare, of course, foregrounds this same maxim of reciprocal judgment, as the returned Duke sentences the wicked steward, Angelo:

“Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure.”

Then, Angelo, thy fault’s thus manifested,

Which, though thou wouldst deny, denies thee vantage. (5.1.414–16)¹²

The prominence of the disappearing duke parable in Castellio’s work prompts us to reconsider this titular phrase in Shakespeare’s play. Ultimately the Duke reverses his sentence—“Well, Angelo, your evil quits you well” (500). Significantly, Angelo’s evil is “quit” only because of the intervention of the Duke, because Claudio was not, in fact, executed as planned, and because the woman with whom he slept was Mariana and not Isabella. In short, his evil was “quit” *for him*, on his behalf, by the same legal authority by which he was condemned. Angelo is acquitted by returning his borrowed authority back to its home in the Duke.

⁹ On Castellio’s influence on religious tolerance in Europe, see (Zagorin 2003).

¹⁰ I’ve used the titles from John Florio’s 1603 English translation of Montaigne’s *Essayes*.

¹¹ “And it seemeth that this meanes of enter-warning one another would bring no small commoditie into common commerce and societie; for there are ever conditions that enter-seeke one another, and because they understand not one another, they leave men in great necessities. I understand, to the infamous reproach of our age, that even in our sight two most excellent men in knowledge having miserably perished for want of food and other necessities: *Lilius Gregorius Giraldu* in Italy, and *Sebastianus Castalio* in Germanie. And I verily beleeeve there are many thousands who, had they knowne or understood their wants, would sither have sent for them, and with large stipends entertained them, or would have convaied them succour, where ever they had beene.” From “Of a Defect in Our Policies” (Montaigne 1904, p. 267).

¹² All references to *Measure for Measure* are from (Shakespeare 2016).

Measure for Measure is certainly about the interrelatedness of religious conviction, state authority, and religious persecution, but one challenge with thinking about the play as a criticism of politico-religious violence is the fact of the Duke's agency on both sides of judgment, creating and resolving the circumstances that lead to Angelo's corruption. Still, the combination of the disappearing ruler trope and the specific conflict between the ascetic Catholicism of Isabella and Angelo's legalism, perhaps insinuating a representation of Puritanism, suggests that the notion of religious experience Shakespeare represents is always—like the Duke's agency—both the condition and the consequence of violence.

The notion that Shakespeare may be thinking dialectically about a common religious experience of violence is supported by a possible topical influence on Shakespeare's writing of the play. James Ellison has argued that Shakespeare was motivated in writing *Measure for Measure* by the state execution of two Catholics in York in 1604 (Ellison 2003). Queen Elizabeth had become more lenient toward Catholic observance in the last years of her reign, and presumably these executions signaled James's desire to reinforce regulation of religious conformity in his second year as king. A priest named John Sugar and his companion Robert Grissold were tortured and hung according to the familiar rituals used to make gruesome examples of heretics. Indeed, Shakespeare may be summoning the eruption of violence that resulted from James's attempt to reestablish the teeth of old laws when the Duke explains to Friar Thomas the reason for his departure:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs to headstrong jades,
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,
Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch
Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
More mocked than feared becomes; 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)

Ellison suggests that Shakespeare was influenced by the anti-Catholic drama of Bale and Lindsay from the middle of the sixteenth century. In these plays, would-be nuns are exposed and thereby rescued from the seduction of the Catholic Church. Yet one distinctive of *Measure for Measure* is that nobody converts. Angelo remains a Puritan; Claudio is not represented as resolving his besetting doubts; and while Isabella has an opportunity to leave her Franciscan order to marry the Duke, her silence suggests what Lupton has described as her "consent in reserve," where Isabella creates a negative space for "radical singularity" in the face not only of sexual coercion but also of religious compromise (Lupton 2005, p. 140). In *Measure for Measure*, executions are ordered but not conducted, and a possible conversion from convent life is not made. If the Duke reflects the omniscience and soteriological control of Reformed theology, then Shakespeare arguably does not represent such theology as a simple answer but instead pushes it into the fray.

3. The Spiritual Tyranny of Law

Law is the complicating factor that interweaves characters' Puritan, Catholic, Calvinist, and agnostic perspectives in *Measure for Measure*. The critical literature on law and Shakespeare

is too extensive to account for in this essay, but any consideration of religious experience in the play implies a correlation between religion and law, confession and judgment. We've seen how the arbitration of "measure for measure" gained new meaning in early modern intrareligious persecution, but the biblical precedent for the maxim in the Torah reminds us of its potential to invoke the universal or categorical. "Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; such a blemish as he hath made in any, such shall be repaid to him" (Leviticus 24:20). This portion of the book of Leviticus describes the laws given in response to the grave sin of blasphemy, and for this reason the reciprocal logic of "eye for eye" reaches beyond the immediate conditions of citizenship: "Ye shall have one law; it shall be as well for the stranger as for one born in the country, for I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 24:22). One of the connections between law and religion summoned in *Measure for Measure* is the effort both institutions make to conjure an experience beyond the local and circumstantial. The Duke's disappearance troubles this desire for the universal, since the play's opening situation makes much of the merely representative nature of Angelo's authority. Angelo's power is absolute precisely because the Duke is absent, because there is nobody to which the citizens can appeal and nobody to whom Angelo regularly reports. Claudio acknowledges as much:

Thus can the demigod Authority
 Make us pay down for our offense by weight.
 The words of heaven; on whom it will, it will,
 On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just (1.2.109-12)

Characters are confused about "Whether the tyranny" of Angelo's enforcement of fornication laws "be in his place/Or in his eminence that fills it up" (152). The Duke explains that he creates this distance between his person and the law on purpose:

I have on Angelo imposed the office,
 Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home,
 And yet my nature never in the fight
 To do in slander. (1.3.40-43)

Implied in the Duke's desire to keep his own "nature" unscathed is an acknowledgment of the "tyranny" of this strategy, and according to Lucio, the plan has worked: "His givings out were of an infinite distance/From his true-meant design" (1.4.55-56). All the more emphasis, therefore, is placed on the Duke's return. The final recognition scene discloses the identities of the Duke, of Mariana, and in a way also of Claudio who returns from presumed death. Yet where *The Winter's Tale's* Paulina and *The Tempest's* Prospero conduct their reunions through the guise of magic, recognition in *Measure for Measure* is circumstantial through and through. In fact, that is the point. Everyone, even the most pious, is guilty, if not for sexual sin or outright slander then for the crime of misrecognizing the Duke in disguise. "O, give me pardon," Isabella says to the Duke when he is revealed, "That I, your vassal, have employed and pained/Your unknown sovereignty" (5.1.388-89).

That his sovereignty is "unknown" creates both the need and the possibility for forgiveness. Such a representation of judgment as self-fulfilling obtains most clearly in Angelo's fall. He is the sinner described in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. It is through the covenant of law that Angelo is tasked with enforcing that he himself is condemned to die. "For the Lawe causeth wrath: for where no Lawe is, there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). Angelo's assumption of authority creates the temptation by which he falls. Law is thus a rich metaphor for religion in *Measure for Measure*, not necessarily for a specific theological expression that Shakespeare commends but for religion as a field of meaning making systems through which one experiences obligation to something universal. Shakespeare invokes the situatedness of law and its comprehensive judgment to express a universal desire for an authority beyond law, and the play gives voice to this desire in the language of religion. Judgment, in the forms of Angelo and the Duke, is thus transformed into theater by becoming self-consciousness

of its own self-fulfilling action. In body and appearance, the condemned person constitutes “a deictic component of judgment, an action-object whose verbal and nominal capacities transform judgment into theater by orienting it in time and space.” Like legal judgment, writes Kevin Curran, *Measure for Measure* generates “a choreography of adjudication grounded in the physical and ethical dynamics of mutual recognition and the corresponding possibility of new social formations.”¹³

A temptation arises to identify a specific religious or secular viewpoint that accounts for the correlation between law and religion, not only the destruction they cause but also their combined capacity for improving the lives of Shakespeare’s characters—re-enfranchising women, bastards, and bawds. I’ve discussed one popular explanation that looks to the Duke’s supreme authority as reorienting characters toward a common admission of guilt and a dependency on his—and thus, God’s—mercy. Another might be to pit judgment and religion in opposition as a representation of Luther’s exposition of the relation between law and gospel. While the latter explanation provides a theological reference for the universal guilt of the characters, it struggles to account for the heavy-handed theatricality that ties judgment and forgiveness alike “to the creative process itself”—that is, the Duke’s willing, often torturous, and ultimately redeeming duplicity (Haskin 1977, p. 360).

But *Measure for Measure* offers a fuller view of religious experience than any single “corrective” theological stance can represent. Specifically, Shakespeare shows that the play’s various religious positions have something in common: each is caught up in a dialectic of morality and guilt that over the course of the play creates a shared desire for salvation across religious expressions. The instrumental role of law in propelling this dialectic is epitomized in Angelo’s fall where Shakespeare uses a Pauline logic of guilt to entrap Angelo through his own pursuit of righteousness. But the reciprocity between morality and guilt appears in other characters as well. From the outset, even Lucio, the expressive and baroque bachelor, is attuned to the nuances of law as an institution that makes people common in their lack of innocence. Joking with the First Gentlemen, he quips, “Grace is grace, despite of all controversy. As, for example, thou thyself art wicked villain, despite of all grace” (1.2.23-25). To someone who is without grace, he suggests, any technical definition of grace is neither here nor there, echoing Claudio’s comment about the Duke’s authority in absentia: “on whom it will, it will” (111). With Angelo closing brothels in the city and arresting sex offenders, the subjects of Vienna feel as if they have been deceived by the law. The fruits of the very liberty that they exercised under the law has been turned into evidence against them. When Lucio asks Claudio where his “restraint” comes from, Claudio replies:

From 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 raven down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil, and when we drink, we die. (1.2.114-19)

The thirsty rat becomes the unruly infant in the Duke’s account of the problem:

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. (1.4.27-31)

¹³ Quoted from Kevin Curran, “The Face of Judgment in *Measure for Measure*,” forthcoming in *Face to Face in Shakespearean Theater: Ethics, Philosophy, Performance*, edited by Matthew J. Smith and Julia Reinhard Lupton, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

The Duke seems to understand that his challenge as a ruler results from the reciprocal enablement of liberty and condemnation. What should a ruler do when “liberty plucks justice by the nose”? He knows that he cannot simply and suddenly begin enforcing the law, but he is also leery of the kind of privative liberty that his subjects have begun to accept. The problem is one that long concerned theologians in discussions of purgatory and sanctification. Theological justifications for the doctrine of purgatory observed that people need actually to become righteous volitionally and not only to be counted as righteous forensically. Likewise, in Vienna people need somehow to come under the law without being destroyed by it.

Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope,
 'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them
 For what I bid them do. For we bid this be done
 When evil deeds have their permissive pass
 And not the punishment. (1.4.37-39)

How does one reinstate liberty in moderation without usurping the end of liberty in the process? The Duke's solution is to lie, to create a fiction of authority in Angelo—or more accurately, to make law into a fiction, a self-inflicting condition that leads its victims to desire something more.

The central situation of the Duke's deputizing and exploiting of Angelo is thus parable-like, and it affects nearly every major character and structural event in the play. For example, the notion that liberty creates guilt frames the opening of the play, when we learn of Juliet's pregnancy. Upon hearing Claudio's sentence, Juliet draws a correlation between her unborn child and the fate of its father: “Must die tomorrow? O injurious love, That respites me a life whose very comfort/Is still a dying horror” (2.3.40-42). Life leads to death, as liberty leads to judgment. Likewise, the bed trick that the Duke devises between Mariana and Angelo makes literal the decadent logic of liberty under the law. The Duke assures Isabella that “the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof” (3.1.245-46). In other words, Angelo will be guilty of the same crime for which he convicts Claudio. Morality (or liberty) and guilt stand in opposition but also in mutual influence toward one another. As the play progresses, morality and guilt move closer to one another to the point of virtual interchangeability when Angelo's temptation of Isabella consummates in his legal obligation to Mariana. The Duke expresses this chiasmic relation. Fornication “is too general a vice, and severity must cure it,” he says on one occasion (3.1.246). Then, on another, he conspicuously substitutes a fevered “goodness” for “vice”: “there is so great a fever on goodness that the dissolution of it must cure it” (3.1.354-55).

Law and liberty, guilt and morality, vice and goodness—such dialectical oppositions prove to be consumptive in the play. The two sides corrode one another. Moreover, if we consider the nature of their interrelatedness to represent religious experience across denominations in *Measure for Measure*, then we're left with something more like a spiritual need than a path to salvation. Shakespeare represents religious experience from the point of view of the wicked steward and his victims. Whether Catholic, agnostic, or Puritan, all are subject to the law as a self-fulfilling prophecy of guilt.

4. Shakespeare and Phenomenologies of Religious Crisis

What emerges as the destructive reciprocal relation between morality and guilt in *Measure for Measure* can be understood as an instance of the dialectic between the self and the world that informs explanations of religious experience. Sociological and phenomenological writing on religion often observes the self-reflexive nature of religious experience as a dialectic between belief and action, each through the other. Émile Durkheim writes that “Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain,” while “rites are the rules of conduct [or action] which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects” (Durkheim 1965, p. 56). Faith, then, is not only in the tenets expressed in a creed but in the

efficacy of the creed itself, in the behaviors through which we “place ourselves within their sphere of action, and that we set ourselves where we may best feel their influence” (Durkheim 1965, p. 464). The strength of a religion, in other words, can be measured by how well its belief tenets motivate and justify its actions, and, conversely, how well its actions bear out the plausibility of its belief tenets. We’ve seen how Shakespeare makes something like this dialectic explicit in the Pauline logic that underwrites the events of *Measure for Measure*. Max Weber has famously highlighted the influence of Pauline soteriological thought on the growth of secularism in the Renaissance. Weber’s theses about secularism notwithstanding, in *The Sociology of Religion* he outlines a connection between the Pauline dialectic and the anti-intellectualism to which Weber ascribes early Christianity’s growth in lower social groups. In this dialectic, “spirit is accommodated to the facts of the everyday world,” while at the same time, spirit is also sought for the promise of salvation (Weber 1963, p. 130). Paul mitigates the risk of Christianity appearing too mystical by presenting a theology that not only is accessible by those who are not religious elites or intellectuals but that also can be reinforced by the working lifestyles of most people in the Mediterranean world of his day. Weber observes that Christianity derived much of its evangelistic power from its coupling of an anti-intellectualist ethos with a consistent central emphasis on salvation (Weber 1963, p. 131). Thus formidable religion, as Weber describes it, involves a dialectic between faith and action whose animus (salvation) is so strong as to make the interchange between faith and action imperceptible.

Peter Berger builds on these earlier descriptions by suggesting that the dialectic between faith and action occurs not only on the social level but also at that of individual consciousness. He describes the interdependency of belief tenets and their corresponding real world actions as consisting of a symbiotic exchange between internalization and objectivation: “The individual encounters the [social] institutions as *data* of the objective world outside himself, but they are now *data* of his own consciousness as well” (Berger 1967, p. 17). The continuity between these two processes of world-making and self-consciousness is key, and the best way to protect it, to legitimate the relation between the self and the world, is to *forget* about it by creating institutions that help to cover up the traces of such contingencies. The more we are aware of the socialization of the self in religion, the less safe and real we experience ourselves. “Religious legitimations arise from human activity, but once crystallized into complexes of meaning that becomes part of a religious tradition they can attain a measure of autonomy as against this activity. Indeed, they may then *act back upon* actions in everyday life, transforming the latter, sometimes radically” (Berger 1967, p. 41). In particular, strong beliefs are made stronger when the actions they inspire are undertaken as if they were moral responsibilities that transcend the circumstances of any given scenario. Individuals ground a higher sense of duty and morality in roles that are alienated from the self, such as the duty of a mother toward a child. And religion, Berger avers, is the most effective institution for assuring these alienated roles wherein the “individual ‘forgets’ that his world was and continues to be co-produced by him” (Berger 1967, p. 85). In the world of the play, this may have been possible, we might imagine, in a past time when the Duke personally enforced laws with both justice and liberty, but his abrupt departure has made his subjects cognizant of the potential dissonance between justice and liberty. The socialization of the self has begun to work in reverse in *Measure for Measure*. Life in society, as religious life, has ceased to “act back upon” the past, providing ethical grounds for human interaction in the future; instead, the past is catching up with the present, as old liberties become new sins.

I suggest that Shakespeare is attuned to this very dialectic between the world and the self that many have located at the heart of religious experience, and I’ve argued that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare uses law as a way of exposing this dialectic. When it is made known to, or remembered by, the characters themselves, they undergo a crisis of faith. Another way to say this is that characters reach the limit of the dialectic of morality and guilt and thus find themselves in need of a stronger world and world-making capability in which to locate themselves as moral subjects. This phenomenon is perhaps clearest in Claudio’s crisis of faith. His sudden reflection on the unknowability of life after

death resembles a dialectical exchange between faith tenets and experience that has become endless and wayward. He captures the feeling in imagery of wind, uncontrollable movement, and anarchy:

To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world, or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling—'tis too horrible. (3.1.124-28)

He regrets asking Isabella to acquiesce to Angelo's demand for sex as he recognizes that such an act of exchange would, in fact, not allow him effectively to forget the reasons for which he loses faith in the hope of heaven. "I am so out of love with life that I will sue to be rid of it," he confesses to the disguised Duke (3.1.170–71). He knows now that the law is only a sign of his greater guilt and of the ultimately eventuality of his death.

Stated in brief, in *Measure for Measure* the self-fulfilling nature of law represents the experience of religion. I say this as a way of expanding rather than reducing the complexity of the correlation. As Angelo's hypocritical power (itself a fiction created by the Duke) infects other characters, the dialectic of morality and guilt devolves into various instances of exchange—this for that, sex for life, mine for yours. Such exchanges miscarry, and the comedy undergoes its structural *peripeteiae* through the corresponding collapses of mutual recognition between characters. Law fails to accommodate religion because it sabotages the call to a higher form of liberty by reducing the "other" to a currency for exchange. Paul Ricoeur describes the dialectic between morality and guilt in terms that reflect the decreasing aptitude of law to represent morality in Shakespeare's play. In his essay, "Guilt, Ethics, and Religion," Ricoeur differentiates between evil as it appears in paradigms respectively of guilt and of ethics. Experienced as guilt, the knowledge of evil promotes legalism. And with it, the sinner "enter[s] into the hell of guilt, such as St. Paul described it: the law itself becomes a source of sin. In giving a knowledge of evil, it excites the desire of transgression, and incites the endless movements of condemnation and punishment" (Ricoeur 1968, p. 106). Experienced ethically, the knowledge of evil becomes conscious of this "mortal circle," and the sinner discovers himself not only as guilty of evil but as both its cause and effect—a reversal of fortune related to *anagnorisis*, or dramatic recognition.

Angelo provides a pointed illustration of this movement from legalism to ethical self-condemnation. His pursuit of justice shows "a consciousness anxious to observe all the commandments, to satisfy the law in all things, without making an exception of any sector of existence, without taking into account exterior obstacles" (Ricoeur 1968, p. 105). Angelo's legalism outpaces his own moral uprightness and leads him to sin and condemnation. Having been exposed, he pronounces his own sentence:

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. Then, good prince,
No longer session hold upon my shame,
But let my trial be mine own confession.
Immediate sentence then and sequent death
Is all the grace I beg. (5.1.369-76)

Notice that Angelo imagines an existential guilt beyond his specific crimes—"guiltier than my guiltiness"—were he to continue to lie. He fears entering a state of guilt, as it were, as if having been fated to it from the beginning by the duplicity with which he exercised his newfound authority.

Hence, he views his actions as utterly discernable; his pursuit of moral uprightness was a mere smokescreen for his guilt. Yet there is also a measure of freedom in Angelo's confession. "Such is the first stage of reflection in the experience of evil: the reciprocal constitution of the signification of *free* and the signification of *evil* is a specific performative: confession" (Ricoeur 1968, p. 108). It's thus important to note that, despite his condemnation, the dialectic—the mortal circle—of morality and guilt through which Angelo falls is preempted, in a way, by his confession. The confession makes his guilt postdictably *avoidable*. Ricoeur writes, "It is because I recognise my 'ought' that I recognise my 'could.' A being who is obligated is a being who presumes that he can do what he should do" (Ricoeur 1968, p. 108). Angelo's assumption of responsibility for his action imagines a world in which his guiltiness is not predetermined—as we imagine a world in which the Duke does not depart.

And yet in reality, until the Duke forgives him, Angelo is still condemned to die. In Ricoeur's explanation, the existence of evil as a component of religious experience consigns the individual to this merely negative form of freedom, the freedom to confess, "to take upon oneself the origin of evil" (Ricoeur 1968, p. 107). But as demonstrated in the example of Angelo, to do so is to relinquish any claim to forgiveness under the law. He is now cognizant of the world-making function that law served for him, and since, as deputy, he embodied that law, he is no longer able to see goodness as alien to him, as obligating him from the outside. The dialectic has been exposed. His confession does not remove him from the sphere of guilt, but it enacts his recognition of the need to be outside of it. And it is in this proclamation of need that Angelo glimpses a new freedom, a new identity for himself which he experiences as alienated from his current position, something that can obligate him from without. It only exists here as a desire, a form of contrition, but it differentiates itself from a merely ethical attitude and brings him into the company of Isabella, Claudio, the city's pimps and bawds, in a common experience of religion.

5. Recognition and the Desire for Salvation

Religious experience for characters like Angelo and Claudio becomes self-conscious for them as their appeals to morality come full circle back to their guilt, as they become aware of their complicity in making the world that condemns them. Furthermore, the privative nature of ethics created by the dialectic of morality and guilt that is operative in *Measure for Measure* manifests dramatically in the failure of mutual recognition between characters. That is, a symptom of the need for salvation in the play manifests when we see a character refusing to be acknowledged by another. As Stanley Cavell has described it, breakdowns in mutual acknowledgment result not from the fact that one lacks sufficient knowledge of the other but that, despite having relatively little knowledge of the other, one claims to know too much.¹⁴ One claims certain knowledge of the other, turning the other into a form of currency or equivalency, disallowing the other from being anything besides an alter ego.

Transposed onto the dialectic of guilt in *Measure for Measure*, we see this effect in Angelo's blackmailing of Isabella, where a false equivalency is drawn between a life and a sexual act. In effect, Angelo makes too much of his authority and stretches the limited moral reach of the law into the realm of metaphysics—claiming that Isabella's sin will atone for that of Claudio. At the outset of Isabella's petition to Angelo, she distinguishes herself by acknowledging the psychology that besets the Pauline dialectic of law and guilt:

There is a vice that most I do abhor
 And most desire should meet the blow of justice;
 For which I would not plead, but that I must;
 For which I must not plead, but that I am
 At war 'twixt will and will not. (2.2.30-34)

¹⁴ See (Cavell 2003).

Angelo's judgment on Claudio pulls Isabella out from her cloister and into a cycle of *woulds* and *musts*. Isabella references Paul. "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (Romans 7:15). The subsequent verse in the Epistle to the Romans, however, foreshadows Angelo's abuse of this universal position: "If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good," in other words, consenting to the law's condemnation. Moments later Angelo rejects this internal conflict by equating will with necessity, viewing his desires as determining his actions: "Look, what I will not, that I cannot do" (53). Isabella's response is to implore reciprocal recognition: "If he had been as you, and you as he,/You would have slipped like him, but he like you/Would not have been so stern" (65–67).

Isabella then intensifies this call for mutual recognition by substituting herself for Angelo. "I would to heaven I had your potency/And you were Isabel" (68–69). It is now the position of the intermediary for the condemned that Isabella asks Angelo to imagine. Put yourself in the position not of the accused, she says, but of the third-party who also sees the accused as an other but instead asks for forgiveness. If this is a subtle reference to the Mosaic role of Christ as intermediary, then it becomes explicit in Isabella's appeal to God not only as the absolute judge but as the ultimate other:

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
And He that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. How would you be
If He, which is the top of judgment, should
But judge you as you are? Oh, think on that,
And mercy then will breathe within your lips
Like man new-made. (2.2.74–79)

Isabella's desperate petition resembles Castelli's writings against Calvin. "O Creator and King of the world, dost Thou see these things," writes Castelli in the final paragraph of his dedicatory epistle (Castelli 1935, p. 134). Isabella represents herself as God's intermediary—God's spy, if you will—not singularly but universally, as an example of "all the souls" who are in need of mercy. In this light, Angelo's sexual aggression toward Isabella does not arise from an isolated desire but evolves from Isabella's call for reciprocal recognition, as a corruption of it. In the soliloquy that divides the two phases of Isabella's petition, Angelo appears to entertain her appeal to God as the absolute other:

When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects. Heaven hath my empty words,
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel. Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew His name,
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception. (2.4.1–7)

Here the consumptive dialectic of morality and guilt is exposed—"Heaven in my mouth." Angelo's image of eating God is provocative. It is both eucharistic and blasphemous—"I did but only chew His name." The image of eating God enacts the very dialectic that haunts religious experience in *Measure for Measure*. David Goldstein has described how Shakespeare's imagery of eating reflects a Levinasian stance on the need for mutual recognition through the ultimate demand of the other as vulnerable to destruction, starvation, and domination: "What brings together also tears apart. Eating with is also eating of" (Goldstein 2018, p. 238). In this way, Angelo depicts his desire for Isabella as blasphemy. When Angelo finally succumbs to the desire for domination, he proffers his bargain in a dialogue that explicitly reverses Isabella's terms of mutual recognition, offering one "stain" for another:

ANGELO

'Tis all as easy
Falsely to take away a life true made
As to put metal in restrainèd means
To make a false one.

ISABELLA

'Tis set down so in heaven, but not in Earth.

ANGELO

Say you so? Then I shall pose you quickly.
Which had you rather, that the most just law
Now took your brother's life, or, to redeem him,
Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness
As she that he hath stained? (2.4.45-54)

Concepts such as piety or mercy lose purchase in the asymmetrical relation of domination that Angelo proposes. In this exchange, he says, "Were equal poise of sin and charity" (67).

It is no coincidence that the two scenes that lead to Angelo's statement of blackmail build through subtle undertones of seduction, as if toward sexual climax. It may be that the dramatic mode of intercession involves an inherent vulnerability, even sensuality, that legal relations cannot accommodate on their own. Intercession appeals to a kind of human intimacy beyond the law; it asks for one person to imagine himself alongside or even within the other. "Because intercession is the act of taking on another self," writes Devin Byker, "giving voice to the desires of another, it imbues a keen awareness of the world and a sensitivity to worldly circumstances—circumstances that crucially define the manner in which speech and action can be understood and, consequently, judged and evaluated" (Byker 2016, p. 427). Shakespeare asks his audience to imagine how intercession before the law suggests forms of sexual submission and seduction. Lucio implores Isabella to press, "touch," Angelo further: "Ay, touch him: there's the vein," and Isabella responds with the unintentionally titillating reference to her argument breathing through the "lips" of Angelo, "Like man new-made" (2.2.71, 78–79). "Go to your bosom," she continues, "Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know" (137–38). The recurring imagery of moral anatomization forces Angelo to recompose himself in an aside, straightening his jacket, wiping his sweat: "She speaks, and 'tis such sense/That my sense breeds with it" (142–43). He experiences Isabella's intercession as unrepachable and, thus, irresistible, capturing the broad and suggestive meanings of rhetoric that breeds with sense as so many figurative, physiological, cognitive, and sexual *conceivings*. Indeed, sex is a common denominator that traverses the dialectic between law and condemnation.

Measure for Measure ends with a final reversal of action that reestablishes the world-making facility of religion outside the law. Alongside Claudio's surprising request that Isabella acquiesce to Angelo's proposal, one of the most shocking acts in the play is Isabella's intercession for the life of Angelo. At this point Isabella still believes her brother to be dead, and the Duke perpetuates the fiction by offering a consolation of an afterlife without sin: "That life is better life past fearing death/Than that which lives to fear" (5.1.400-01). Isabella kneels with Mariana and asks the Duke for clemency:

My brother had but justice,
In that he did the thing for which he died.
For Angelo, his act did not o'ertake his bad intent,
And must be buried but as an intent

That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects,
 Intents but merely thoughts. (5.1.451-56)

There is nothing uniquely Catholic in Isabella's act. Instead, her appeal lifts itself to a register above the fiction that the Duke has created, namely, by acknowledging and then rejecting the sexual *quid pro quo* for which Angelo is condemned. His intention did not materialize in coerced sex with her; yet she dismisses the fact that Angelo went beyond the stated intentions of the bargain by nevertheless ordering Claudio's execution. One way to explain this is that Isabella leaves the enforcement of justice upon Angelo's "intent" to God, and this deferral of justice was commonly accepted for rulers.¹⁵ Yet taking into account Shakespeare's attention to the overlapping, often conflicting, yet universal desire for freedom that characterizes anthropologies of religious experience, Isabella's plea for mercy on Angelo can be read also as an expression of her own desire for a moral identity beyond the law. She seeks to appease the law—Claudio had "*but* justice"—but also to discover a point of view that takes its cues from a higher obligation, a duty that imposes itself from beyond the mortal circle of morality and guilt (my emphasis). Entreating the Duke side by side with Mariana, her argument "requires that we think of freedom under the sign of hope," under the sign of some desire to which all of the play's theologies and confessions lead (Ricoeur 1968, p. 113).

6. Conclusions

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare uses theater as a forum for testing the capacities of judgment for representing religious experience. The play presents characters from a variety of religious perspectives, but all of them find themselves bound by the law—including the Duke whose very fiction of withdrawing from Vienna is a solution to a problem that exploits the scapegoat of his deputy, Angelo. The drama begins with guilt, and despite their sometimes contradicting interpretations of the law as a moral denominator, Isabella, Claudio, Angelo, and the Duke all lose faith in their respective grounds for moral obligation. I've suggested that the dialectic of morality and guilt that characterizes this failure of the law reflects a common religious experience: the desire for salvation characterized by the need to forget one's complicity in making the law by which one is judged. Shakespeare represents this crisis of religious experience within the constraints of theater and namely through the corrosion of reciprocal recognition under the influence of the legal fiction that the Duke devises. Religion is both within and beyond the law. It is a world-making tool that turns against the characters of *Measure for Measure* when they become too conscious of their connivance in its workings. What the characters need is to forget again. And this is the main intention, at least, of the Duke's legal fiction.

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¹⁵ See (Gless 2016, p. 206).

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