

Article

The Machiavellian Spectacle in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract: In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare addresses a question that is both straightforward and hard to answer: how do we make people obey the law? Over the course of the play, this simple question gives way to a complex set of problems about human will, political legitimacy, and the origins of sovereign power. *Measure for Measure* is concerned with illicit activity and ineffective government. But in this comedy—this “problem play”—Shakespeare is especially interested in the political mechanism by which authority and obedience are restored. How is a delinquent population, used to license, brought under control? Shakespeare examines one strategy in this play, one he has seemingly adapted from the Florentine political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli. Multiple critics have recognized that the story of Duke Vincentio and his deviant deputy, Lord Angelo, bear a striking resemblance to the story Machiavelli tells about Cesare Borgia and Remirro de Orco in Chapter 7 of *The Prince*. Here, I build upon these analyses to offer a new account of Shakespeare's relationship to Machiavelli and political realism more generally. The Cesare story provides Shakespeare with an opportunity to explore how spectacle and theatricality can be used—not only to subdue an unruly population but to legitimate sovereign authority. However, Shakespeare delves deeper than Machiavelli into the mechanism whereby political authority is reestablished, first by considering the psychological conditions of the Duke's subjects (both before and during his spectacular display of power), and second, by emphasizing the need for individual citizens to will sovereign authority into being. As we will see, in Shakespeare's Vienna, order can only be restored once the delinquent people beg to be governed.



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1. Introduction

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare addresses a question that is both straightforward and hard to answer: how do we make people obey the law? Over the course of the play, this simple question gives way to a complex set of problems about human will, political legitimacy, and the origins of sovereign power. Impotent authority figures and rule-breaking are, of course, perennial Shakespearean preoccupations. Richard II, King Lear, and Prospero are all deposed rulers who are unable to maintain control over ambitious usurpers. *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* feature overbearing parents and disobedient young lovers. Shakespeare likewise uses “Machiavels”, such as Richard III, Edmund, and Iago, to explore the most radical forms of human deviance: individuals who reject not only convention but all legal and moral norms. *Measure for Measure* is similarly concerned with illicit activity and ineffective government. But in this comedy—this “problem play”—Shakespeare is especially interested in the political mechanism by which authority and obedience are *restored*. How is a delinquent population, used to license, brought under

control? Shakespeare examines one strategy in this play, one he has seemingly adapted from the Florentine political theorist Niccolò Machiavelli.

Multiple critics have recognized that the story of Duke Vincentio and his deviant deputy, Lord Angelo, bears a striking resemblance to the story Machiavelli tells about Cesare Borgia and Remirro de Orco in Chapter 7 of *The Prince*. As that story goes, Cesare took over Romagna and found it “commanded by impotent lords who had been readier to despoil their subjects than to correct them” (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 29). Borgia responded by deploying Remirro de Orco, “a cruel and ready man, to whom he gave the fullest power” (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 29). Through strict measures, Remirro established law and order in the previously disorderly Romagna. However, once this goal was achieved, Cesare worried that Remirro’s “excessive authority” would generate hatred amongst the people. Therefore, wanting to show “if any cruelty had been committed, this had not come from him but from the harsh nature of his minister”, Borgia had Remirro “placed one morning in the piazza at Cesena in two pieces, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife beside him” (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 30). So, like Shakespeare’s Duke Vincentio, Cesare (also known as Duke Valentino) appointed an excessively strict deputy—Remirro—to transform a disobedient and lawless population into an orderly one. Remirro succeeds through tyrannical means, imposing his will on the people of Romagna. As thanks for a job well done, Cesare executes Remirro and is consequently celebrated by the newly subdued people for ‘rescuing’ them from the cruel magistrate that he himself installed. According to Machiavelli, this episode illustrates a level of political acumen, cleverness, deception, and theatricality that is “deserving of notice and of being imitated by others” (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 29).

Norman N. Holland drew attention to the resemblance between Duke Vincentio and Cesare in 1959, arguing that Shakespeare likely encountered this story not in *The Prince* itself but in Innocent Gentillet’s 1576 “Anti-Machiavel”, a work that recounted Machiavellian arguments in order to refute them (Holland 1959, p. 16). Numerous critics have followed suit, noting the connection between these two narratives. John D. Cox has called it a “suggestive” connection that might point to Machiavelli’s influence on Shakespeare’s thought (Cox 2002, p. 112). Tim Spiekerman suggests the Duke’s plan with Angelo bears an “uncanny resemblance” to Machiavelli’s story about Remirro (Spiekerman 2001, p. 25). Conal Condren refers to the story as a “striking analogy” that renders Machiavelli’s *The Prince* not so much a source as a “morally ambiguating plot mechanism”. (Condren 2009, p. 164). Most scholars, however, have not advanced beyond simply *recognizing* this connection. Perhaps because the scholarly consensus suggests that Shakespeare encountered the Cesare story secondhand, and not from *The Prince* itself, scholars are reluctant to imagine Shakespeare as engaging Machiavelli’s illustrative anecdote directly.¹ There has therefore been some reticence among critics to treat *Measure for Measure* as an adaptation of, or a commentary on, this Machiavellian story.

However, in the early 2000s, several critics did begin to think more deeply about the implications of *Measure for Measure*’s seeming engagement with the Cesare story. In 2006, Pamela K. Jensen, for example, undertook a thorough comparison of the two stories. Her central claim was that Duke Vincentio’s “invisible government—his use of disorientation, impersonations, and deceit—has a very different character from Machiavelli’s” (Jensen 2006). The “crucial difference” between the two dukes is that Vincentio desires something other than “mere subjugation” or “obedience”. Jensen argued that Shakespeare’s Duke has “a real concern for justice”, whereas Cesare (and by extension Machiavelli) does not (Jensen 2006, p. 118). This is why “Marriage, not death” is Vincentio’s “chosen solution to the problems of the city” (Jensen 2006, p. 118). In 2009, Andrew Majeske argued that Vincentio resembles Cesare in his attempt to “refound the state” using “extreme, even shocking measures” (Majeske 2009, p. 169). The difference, Majeske argues, is that Vincentio is

able to refound the state with mercy, whereas Cesare uses murder. However, whether this deviation from the source material marks a disagreement between Shakespeare and Machiavelli, whether the change is necessary to meet the demands of the comedy genre, or whether it has some other root, Majeske does not venture to say.² Zdravko Planinc, in 2010, provided another thorough reading of *Measure for Measure*'s treatment of the Remirro story. He argued, contrary to Jensen, that Shakespeare's Duke is more like Cesare than unlike: "His charm, humour, and incisive intelligence should not lead anyone to assume that he is not ruthless".³ However, Planinc wrote that Shakespeare, who resembles Plato in his thinking, adapted the Cesare story "to show us just how nasty Machiavellian politics is" (Planinc 2010, p. 147).

Here, I would like to venture an alternative interpretation, one which builds upon these analyses but offers a different account of Shakespeare's relationship to Machiavelli and political realism more generally. One finds a certain anti-Machiavellian tendency in *Measure for Measure* criticism. Jensen, for instance, argues that Shakespeare is not like Machiavelli because Vincentio is unlike Cesare. Planinc argues that Shakespeare is not like Machiavelli *even though* Vincentio is like Cesare because Shakespeare holds his duke up for criticism rather than emulation. There is a tendency among critics to view Machiavelli as an apologist for tyrants and a corresponding reluctance to imagine that Shakespeare might be comfortable with deception, political violence, and the strategies associated with *realpolitik*. However, as I will outline here, Machiavelli's political views might be more nuanced—and closer to Shakespeare's—than we sometimes imagine. In this essay, I will suggest that the Cesare story provides Shakespeare with an opportunity to explore how spectacle and theatricality can be used—not only to subdue an unruly population but to legitimate sovereign authority. However, Shakespeare delves deeper than Machiavelli into the mechanism whereby political authority is reestablished, first by considering the psychological conditions of the Duke's subjects (both before and during his spectacular display of power), and second, by emphasizing the need for individual citizens to *will* sovereign authority into being. As we will see, in Shakespeare's Vienna, order can only be restored once the delinquent people beg to be governed.

2. Machiavelli the Moderate

Many scholars and readers of Machiavelli find his arguments objectionable. Leo Strauss, for instance, famously wrote that Machiavelli was "a teacher of evil" (Strauss 1995, p. 9). However, despite his reputation as the 'patron saint' of duplicity in politics, Machiavelli is not as relativistic or as supportive of tyranny as he is sometimes made out to be. A careful reading of Machiavelli's works actually reveals that he has a normative account of justice. The key to understanding Machiavellian justice is attending closely to his argument about popular hatred. Machiavelli argues in *The Prince* that princes should aspire to be both feared and loved. If they cannot be both, they should choose fear over love: "for love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you" (Machiavelli 1998b, pp. 66–67). However, above all, the prince should avoid the hatred of the people. Crucially, Machiavelli argues that hatred has predictable and consistent causes.

The prince should nonetheless make himself feared in such a mode that if he does not acquire love, he escapes hatred because being feared and not being hated can go together very well. This he will always do if he abstains from the property of his citizens and his subject, and from their women; and if he also needs to proceed against someone's life, he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it. (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 67)

This is akin to saying that there are certain acts that people always and everywhere find objectionable: theft, rape, and killing without justification. This is not the same as saying that some things are objectively right and wrong, but pragmatically speaking, it is not far off. We should pair this insight with Machiavelli's argument about the many and the great. Through *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli regularly sides with people over princes. He argues, for instance, that the desires of the people are more decent than those of the great.⁴ He also believes that people want to be free, and he himself expresses a preference for free states.⁵ Machiavelli consistently argues that people prefer peace and order to chaos and crime, and who would disagree?

The real thing that troubles us about Machiavelli, I suspect, is that he does not respect individual "rights". Human rights, of course, were not fully articulated as a political idea until the 17th and 18th centuries. Most people in the contemporary West are fixated on the individual as the fundamental political building block. By contrast, Machiavelli thinks and talks in terms of groups. This is what contemporary readers of Machiavelli find unnerving. It is not his toleration of violence that we abhor; for, if we are honest, we must admit that we all tolerate terrible violence all the time—both in faraway places and at home. Similarly, most sane people would accept that rulers sometimes need to authorize the use of extreme force in the interest of public safety and national security. And, like Machiavelli, most of us do not want morally rigid ideologues in positions of power; the majority of people consider prudence and adaptability to be political virtues. What actually troubles us is that Machiavelli says openly that individuals and small numbers of people ought sometimes to be sacrificed for the good of the whole. If one person is unjustly killed so that the many can live in peace, Machiavelli loses no sleep. One troublesome aristocratic family, one group of conspirators, one charismatic and outspoken critic of the regime: Machiavelli thinks that sacrificing such people is acceptable if the end result is general peace and freedom.⁶ This is the aspect of Machiavellian *realpolitik* that most readers find (justifiably) objectionable. For how can we be sure that the prince who is strategically executing troublesome individuals or small groups is any different from a tyrant?

Now, does Shakespeare share Machiavelli's views? Does he seem, like Machiavelli, to champion or celebrate leaders who make cold, dispassionate calculations about political costs and benefits, leaders who seem ready and able to use lethal force when necessity dictates? I suggest we can approach answers to these questions by examining Shakespeare's engagement with the Cesare Borgia story in *Measure for Measure*. Almost immediately, we will see some space open up between Machiavelli and Shakespeare, specifically around the question of the political and moral significance of *individual* people. Again, Machiavelli thinks in terms of groups. Shakespeare, by contrast, is very interested in individuals, and for him, it seems that obedience is a complicated *psychological* problem as well as a political one.

3. The Fallen Will

As both a dramatist and a political thinker, Shakespeare is interested in human will. *Measure for Measure* is a characteristic Shakespearean exploration of this facet of human psychology. The concern that permeates Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is how we are supposed to make people do things they do not want to do? "Of government the properties to unfold" is the first line of the play, signaling its investment in control and rule.⁷ And the inciting problem of the play is straightforwardly that the people of Vienna do not obey the law: they are ungovernable. Over the course of the play, we see various tactics employed to engender obedience and compliance. Claudio is arrested, made an example of to inspire fear in other citizens. Escalus threatens Pompey the bawd with whipping (2.1.238). The Duke, disguised as a Friar, uses counsel and religious appeals in order to moderate people's

behavior. When he visits Claudio in prison, for example, he tells the doomed man to think of heaven and ready himself for death. During this scene, the Duke functions like an external conscience, advising Claudio to weigh life as “a thing / That none but fools would keep” (3.1.7–8). Angelo uses tyrannical means in an attempt to subdue the will of Isabella, demanding that she “Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite” (2.4.162). The play is awash in attempted governance; it is filled with advising, threatening, extorting, warning, and arguing.

What is notable about all of these strategies, however, is that they are almost entirely ineffective. People in Vienna view Claudio’s arrest as unfair and unreasonable, not as instructive. Pompey says to Escalus that achieving sexual moderation in Vienna is effectively impossible; it would require that the government “geld and splay all the youth of the city” (2.1.219–20). Claudio, afraid and desperate not to die, begs Isabella to give in to Angelo’s prurient desires mere moments after receiving the Duke’s Christian counsel:

Sweet sister, let me live.
What sin you do to save a brother’s life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue. (3.1.135–8)

Isabella, for her part, finds a way of subverting Angelo’s predatory plot: she sends Mariana to sleep with him instead. Thus, arrests, threats, preaching: all of these strategies prove futile in *Measure for Measure*.

Over the course of the play, Shakespeare reveals human will to be an extremely complex mechanism. For instance, people in this play are often unable to control *even themselves*. Because Claudio and Juliet are unable to restrain their physical desires for each other, Juliet becomes pregnant and their future is thrown into doubt. Angelo is overwhelmed by his appetite for Isabella, despite his reputation for moral purity and strictness. In prison, Claudio tries to bend his will towards heaven but fails to remain steadfast in the face of death. The people of Vienna are tied in knots; they seem to suffer under urges and addictions that they cannot themselves control. When Isabella chastises her brother, she says, “Thy sin’s not accidental, but a trade”. (3.1.153). Her invective might be applied generally to the whole population. Even the Duke seems to struggle to do what he wants to do. He wants people to obey the law; by his own admission, it was his “fault to give the people scope” (1.3.35), but he finds that he cannot achieve this goal—at least through ordinary means. Either because he has been habitually merciful (1.3.23–31), or because he has been inclined to solitude and pious philosophical contemplation (3.1.488–89), the Duke has been reluctant to enforce Vienna’s “strict statutes and most biting laws” (1.3.19).⁸ In his essay “Transgression and surveillance in *Measure for Measure*”, Jonathan Dollimore suggests that the crisis and social disruption in Shakespeare’s Vienna is essentially manufactured: “Whatever subversive identity the sexual offenders in this play possess is a construction put upon them by the authority which wants to control them” (Dollimore 1985, p. 73). However, the problems attendant upon conflicted and broken human will appear to be real concerns in the play.⁹ It is perhaps the case that the sexual dalliances of Vienna’s citizens do not constitute an existential threat to the state, but the intractable problem of government and self-government is presented in the play as a real problem. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare depicts the problems of government and self-government as extraordinarily hard to solve. And that intractability can be traced to the brokenness of human will.

The play thus presents the audience not only with a political dilemma but also with a moral dilemma to which Christian grace seems like an obvious solution. That *Measure for Measure* is invested in questions about Christian theology is obvious. As Stacy Magedanz notes, *Measure for Measure* is “the only one of Shakespeare’s plays to carry a biblical title” (Magedanz 2004, p. 317).¹⁰ Two of the play’s principal characters are a novice nun and a

duke disguised as a friar. The other principal character, Angelo, is characterized by his puritanical religious zeal and has a reputation for extreme, almost inhuman, piety; he “scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone” (1.4.51–3). All of the play’s plots revolve around transgression, punishment, forgiveness, and redemption. The belief that humanity is “fallen” and by nature morally deviant is fundamental to the play’s meaning. Through this lens, the illicit sexual desire that permeates the play is evidence that human beings lack the capacity for moral self-government. As Condren suggests, “government is, after all, about dealing with, by and for the fallen” (Condren 2009, p. 164). Perhaps the people of Shakespeare’s Vienna cannot help but be sinful, and perhaps their only salvation is God’s mercy. In the face of so many failed attempts to govern and moderate the wickedness of Vienna’s citizens, this may be the play’s message. Indeed, the pious Duke’s dramatic intervention at the play’s conclusion has sometimes been read as an image of the way divine grace works.

For example, in *The Wheel of Fire*, G. Wilson Knight argued that the “play tends towards allegory or symbolism” (Knight 1930, p. 80). And the play does seem to offer up a kind of Christian allegory in its finale. In this reading, the Duke is an image of God Himself, and his complicated plans are indicative of providential foresight that allows for the salvation of virtuous people while preserving their free will. As John Wasson writes, Vincentio’s function in the play is “to demonstrate the validity of the Christian doctrine that mercy is greater than retributive justice” (Wasson 1960, p. 262). We might even interpret Isabella’s marriage to the Duke as a symbolic fulfillment of her aspiration to be a bride of Christ.¹¹

However, one weakness of this interpretation is that Shakespeare does not typically employ allegory. In my estimation, the play is not so much an allegory for God’s government as it is a story about a ruler pretending to be God in order to address the problem of the unreliable will. Consider that the Duke’s choice of disguise as a friar is *strategically* invaluable. Through his disguise, he is granted privileged access to the worries, urges, and confessions of his people. Perhaps, as Jensen suggests, “By knowing his subjects’ hearts and minds, the Duke can be more responsive to their real needs, bringing both others and himself to greater self-knowledge” (Jensen 2006, p. 121). From this perspective, the Duke is concerned not just with crime prevention but with the education and improvement of citizens’ wills and the proper direction of their desires towards good ends in the Aristotelian sense. But the tactical aspect of the disguise seems more important than its educative aspect. Through the friar costume, the Duke achieves something approximating omniscience: “Bring me to hear them speak, where I may be concealed” (3.1.52). At the play’s conclusion, the Duke reveals that he knows everything; he has seen all and heard all. The characters learn that their secret transgressions and sins are not, in fact, secret at all. The Duke masquerades as a friar and puts himself in a position to evaluate the content of other people’s souls. For example, Mariana, Angelo’s jilted fiancée, describes the Friar as “a man of comfort, whose advice / Hath often stilled my brawling discontent” (4.1.8–9), and at the end of the play, the Duke announces that, while disguised, he has heard Marianna’s confession and can attest to “her virtue” (5.1.530). Perhaps the Duke is meant to remind audiences of the Christian God, but that does not mean he necessarily functions as an image of God. Given the play’s engagement with the Cesare story—most evident at the beginning and end of the comedy—we should consider that the Duke’s likeness to divinity is not so much religious symbolism as it is an exploration of political performance. After all, in the Cesare story, Machiavelli outlines just how effective it can be when a ruler appears and behaves *like a god*.

4. A Machiavellian Spectacle

Can Duke Vincentio be a symbol of Christian grace and a supremely talented Machiavellian at the same time? It is doubtful that Christianity can accommodate itself to Machiavelli's teaching. However, from a Machiavellian point of view, it may be possible for a ruler to assimilate and instrumentalize Christianity. Certainly, the ends of the well-run Machiavellian regime—peace, order, security, and prosperity—are not antithetical to Christian doctrine. And we need to look no further than Henry V to find a Shakespearean example of the marriage between Christian faith and Machiavellian *realpolitik*. I suggest we ought to approach Duke Vincentio as another such figure—one who strategically embraces religion in order to achieve his political goals. In marrying *realpolitik* and Christianity together, Shakespeare may not even be deviating from Machiavelli at all. I am persuaded by Vicky B. Sullivan, who argues that Machiavelli himself was not irreligious. Sullivan contends that Machiavelli demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance and significance of ritual and religion to people and states. She has persuasively argued that Machiavelli was not a pagan but also not a Christian in the ways we might expect. Instead, she claims that Machiavelli looks to reinvent Christianity as a “ruling power”, capable of reinforcing and supporting human government (Sullivan 1993, p. 273). Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle echoes this assessment, arguing that “the function of Machiavelli's religion” is “to bind the populace with awe and fear in ceremonial cohesion by observance of sacrificial rites and by respect for oaths, auguries, and signs” (Boyle 2004, p. 236). According to Sullivan, in his *Discourses*, Machiavelli attempts to reimagine Christianity to serve more earthly ends. He borrows the models and structures of Christianity—notably styling his ideal prince after the omnipotent Christian god—but he wants to focus people's attention exclusively on “earthly punishments and earthly rewards” (Sullivan 1993, p. 279). I submit that this Machiavellian Christianity might be the most accurate framework for interpreting the Duke's intervention at the end of the *Measure for Measure*.

Machiavelli's interest in the political utility of religion is clearly visible throughout his *Discourses*. In a chapter praising Rome's second king, Numa Pompilius, for example, Machiavelli affirms that religion is necessary to “maintain a civilization” and celebrates Numa for introducing piety to “a very ferocious people” (Machiavelli 1998a, p. 34). He goes on to say that the introduction of religion to Rome “was among the first causes of happiness of that city”:

For it caused good orders; good orders make good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy success of enterprises. As the observance of the divine cult is the cause of the greatness of republics, so disdain for it is the cause of their ruin.

(Machiavelli 1998a, p. 35)

For Machiavelli, good religion is *instrumental* to a well-ordered state; its purpose is to facilitate good governance and public obedience. As Timothy J. Lukes writes, in religion, Machiavelli finds “a political tool” to “arouse extra-political sanctions for wholly political operations” (Lukes 1984, p. 268). This instrumental account of religion is evident later in *Discourses* when Machiavelli recounts how the Samnites made their soldiers “promise to the gods” to sacrifice themselves on the battlefield “with words of execration and verses full of fright”; those who refused to swear this oath were “at once killed by their centurions[.]” Through the “ferocity of the spectacle”, the Samnite soldiers are made more courageous, and their political obedience takes on a sacred character. This, according to Machiavelli, is an example of “religion well used” (Machiavelli 1998a, pp. 43–44).

In Machiavelli's Cesare anecdote, we see how a leader, by pretending to be a god, can use spectacle to restore obedience to a disobedient population. Nicole Hochner draws our attention to the religious quality of Cesare's strategy. She likens Remirro to a “scapegoat”

who “purges the community from destabilizing humours”. In Hochner’s ritualistic analysis, there is a religiosity to the Duke’s execution of his deputy. It allows Cesare to “consecrate his authority” (Hochner 2009, p. 583). Indeed, when Remirro’s body is discovered, Machiavelli tells us the people of Romagna are left “at once satisfied and stupified” (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 30). The spectacular placement of Remirro’s dismembered corpse, Machiavelli suggests, consolidates and solidifies Cesare’s authority over the once unruly citizenry. The power of the episode is not simply the violence, but the shocking way in which the disembodied Cesare who *has Remirro placed* instills a sense of dread and wonder in the people. This is textbook Machiavellian leadership insofar as the ideal for the Machiavellian ruler—an ideal which is extremely difficult to achieve—is to pair fear *with* love and thus to achieve a status akin to that of a deity.

In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, the structural parallel to this part of Machiavelli’s story occurs in the final scene when the Duke reappears to depose his deputy, Angelo, and administer justice. The Duke’s return is undoubtedly theatrical, as numerous critics have argued. Marvin Rosenberg writes that the conclusion of the play features a “great public spectacle the Duke has arranged around himself” (Rosenberg 1972, p. 51). George L. Geckle similarly describes the play’s final act as a “spectacular public trial” as “spectacularly dramatic” as the conclusion of *The Winter’s Tale* in which a statue seemingly comes to life (Geckle 1971, p. 168). Magedanz argues that unlike Borgia’s stunt, the Duke’s finale represents a “spectacle” of “forbearance, not of brutality” (Magedanz 2004, p. 332). Planinc says the Duke “decides to make the spectacle of his return a religious as well as a political event” (Planinc 2010, p. 159). For Harvey C. Cole, the “patently self-conscious staginess” of the climax is on full display (Cole 1965, p. 429).

The effectiveness of the Duke’s performance is most clearly illustrated by Angelo’s desperate prayer, uttered in response to the revelation that the sovereign has been watching all along from the shadows. Angelo addresses Vincentio as if he is speaking to an all-seeing, all-knowing deity:

O my dread lord,
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness
To think I can be undiscernible,
When I perceive your grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes. (5.1.368–71)

Importantly, the godlike quality of the Duke’s power is precisely connected to his performance. For the Duke does not simply return and reveal that he was hiding and listening the whole time; his performance is far more complex and, indeed, confusing. He begins the scene as an unsympathetic judge, ridiculing Isabella and Marianna for accusing Angelo of assault and dishonesty. The Duke denounces both women, even though he himself—as the Friar—was the one who arranged their appearance and scripted their petitions. As the Friar, he says to Isabella, “Before the Duke, and to the head of Angelo / Accuse him home and home” (4.3.140–41). But in public, as the Duke, he says, “By heaven, fond wretch, thou know’st not what thou speak’st, / Or else thou art suborned against his honour / In hateful practice” (5.1.106–8). Moreover, even after the Duke’s disguise has been revealed, he persists in the cruel lie that Claudio has been executed:

Your brother’s death, I know, sits at your heart,
And you may marvel why I obscured myself,
Labouring to save his life. . .
...
It was the swift celerity of his death,
Which I did think with slower foot came on,

That brained my purpose[.] (5.1.390–97)

The moment in the play that is most analogous to the revelation of Remirro's corpse is the miraculous 'resurrection' of Claudio. It is this moment that renders Isabella speechless—satisfied and stupefied. This revelation—that Claudio is alive when he was thought to be dead—is a demonstration of the Duke's power to be sure; but it is not a demonstration of his power to raise the dead—that is something only the real God can do. The power the Duke has demonstrated is a power to baffle and confound the will of his subjects. In the final scene, people literally do not know what they are doing. They are caught in a plot that the Duke has orchestrated and which they do not understand. Their lack of understanding is demonstrated repeatedly: first, when it is revealed that the Friar is, in fact, the Duke and again when it is revealed that Claudio is alive. Why then, did Isabella accuse Angelo? What was she doing when she begged for the Duke to show mercy to a man who she thought killed her brother but did not? Human agency, will itself, appears to be an absurdity in the face of the Duke's theatrical devices.¹² In one sense, the only will functioning at the end of *Measure for Measure* is Duke Vincentio's. Everyone else is simply following directions.

From a Christian perspective, the insufficiency of law is the justification for mercy, just as the insufficiency of human will creates the need for divine grace. But Shakespeare reveals another side to political mercy: the cry for mercy is an implicit cry for the will of the sovereign to be separated from the law, for the will of the sovereign to be released from the bonds of law. As a consequence, the sovereign comes into possession of a radical kind of freedom. From a Machiavellian perspective, this is a formalistic way by which the ruler might acquire for himself both love and fear. This allows him to overcome the limitations of circumstance and to more freely exert control.¹³ The plea for mercy issued by Isabella is especially poignant. Marianna calls on Isabella to beg with her for Angelo's life, "Sweet Isabel, take my part: / Lend me your knees, and all my life to come / I'll lend you all my life to do you service" (5.1.431–33). The Duke makes clear what Marianna is asking and, in a sense, the terms to which Isabella is agreeing: "Should she kneel down in mercy of this fact, / Her brother's ghost his paved bed would break / And take her hence in horror" (5.1.434–36). Again, the Duke is lying here. He knows Claudio is no ghost. But he highlights the extraordinary lengths to which Isabella is willing to go, to beg for forgiveness for her would-be abuser, a betrayer who, she thinks, has orchestrated the execution of her brother. Insofar as will does express itself in the play's final moments, it appears in the form of a surrender. Both Lucio and Angelo beg for death in this final scene. The Duke spares both, but in begging for the Duke to exert his authority in this way, they implicitly legitimize his power over life and death in Vienna.

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, sovereignty is not constituted by the submission of will to a collective or composite will, as it is in the social contract tradition; rather, a sovereign allows the insufficiency of the law to produce cries for mercy. By crying for mercy, the individual wills that the sovereign will become unbounded from the law, that the sovereign move beyond the limits established by precedent, or the law, or the people. In effect, through the cry for mercy, the citizen wills sovereign will into being; the people will that power take on a form that is embodied in a prince, not an institution.¹⁴ As Elizabeth Hanson describes it, in the conclusion of this play, we see "the establishment of the Duke's political supremacy over his people as an ontological difference through a spectacular demonstration of his knowledge of their true natures" (Hanson 2010, p. 259). In 1950, Wylie Sypher wrote skeptically that "the Duke, attempting measure for measure, adopts a comic policy of misrule. His mercy is a sanction of license, a withdrawal of all law whatever, except his own good will" (Sypher 1950, p. 270). This is exactly what the Duke means to achieve, although my sense is that the emphasis at the play's conclusion is less

on the tenuousness of the Duke's achieved order than it is on the totality of his control. The marriage proposal that ends the play is the final demonstration of the Duke's power. Isabella does not reply: her will has effectively been absorbed by her sovereign.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli's chapter on love and fear begins with a discussion of cruelty and mercy. Before arguing that fear is more reliable than love, Machiavelli makes the case that cruelty is more effective than mercy for achieving public order. In fact, he contends that cruel princes are actually *more merciful* than merciful princes. Princes who incline towards mercy "allow disorders to continue, from which come killings or robberies", which harm "a whole community". By contrast, the cruel prince harms only the lawbreaker and spares the general public from general lawlessness (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 66). Machiavelli actually uses Cesare's Romagna strategy as an exemplar here: "Cesare Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and to faith" (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 65).

Measure for Measure seems to mount a defense of mercy, but it is a defense on political—not religious—grounds. In Shakespeare's play, mercy—especially when mercy is begged for—empowers and legitimizes the Duke's authority. In the very moment characters like Mariana, Isabella, and Lucio beg the Duke for mercy, they *will* him to exert extra-legal power over them. For Machiavelli, to show mercy is to appear dangerously irresolute; it is a sign of weakness (Machiavelli 1998b, p. 72). In Shakespeare's play, a duke initiates (or perhaps even *orchestrates*) a crisis. That crisis generates a general cry for mercy, creating the conditions whereby the will of the people is surrendered to the extra-legal authority of the sovereign. And thus, through a strategic use of mercy, Shakespeare's Duke is able to become the kind of quasi-divine prince that Machiavelli reveres most highly.

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Notes

- ¹ I too have been guilty of this omission. While I have attempted to put Shakespeare and Machiavelli "into conversation" with each other, I have not thought carefully enough about the implications of the Remirro de Orco story in the context of *Measure for Measure*. See *Shakespeare between Machiavelli and Hobbes: Dead Body Politics* (Lanham: Lexington, Moore 2016).
- ² Majeske says Vincentio deviates from Borgia's pattern because "Angelo's harshness is not arbitrary or widespread like Remirro's", but this does not tell us much about why Shakespeare alters the story in this way (175).
- ³ In Planinc's assessment, the Duke is committed to changing the temperament of his people because the state is transitioning from peace time to wartime (150–51).
- ⁴ "Besides this, one cannot satisfy the great with decency and without injury to others, but one can satisfy the people; for the end of the people is more decent than that of the great, since the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed" (39).
- ⁵ See, for example, *Discourses*, Book I, Chapters 4, 5, 16, 17, and 18.
- ⁶ In some ways, the ending of *Measure for Measure* is a bizarre and total inversion of this Machiavellian paradigm because at the end of this play, no one is sacrificed or made an example of. Even Barnadine the unrepentant murderer is pardoned!
- ⁷ For a discussion of the ambiguity of this line, see (Condren 2009, p. 158).
- ⁸ Knight's assessment in generous though perhaps not unpersuasive: "His government has been inefficient, not through an inherent weakness or laxity in him, but rather because meditation and self-analysis, together with profound study of human nature, have shown him that all passions and sins of other men have reflected images in his own soul" (86).
- ⁹ It is notable that Isabella seems drawn to the votarists of Saint Clare precisely because she desires that "a more strict restraint" be placed upon her. She is grasping for some external authority to help her better govern herself (1.2.4). But even if this is an

effective solution for her, a life of celibacy and prayer cannot be a *general* remedy available to all since, as Benedick says in *Much Ado About Nothing*, “The world must be peopled” (2.3.213–14).

- 10 The title is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (7:1–2).
- 11 Feminist scholars have critiqued the Duke’s matrimonial strategy at the end of the play. Marcia Riefer, for example, argues, “In the course of the play, Isabella changes from an articulate, compassionate woman during her first encounter with Angelo (II.ii), to a stunned, angry, defensive woman in her later confrontations with Angelo and with her imprisoned brother (II.iv and III.i), to, finally, a shadow of her former articulate self, on her knees before male authority in Act V”. See “‘Instruments for Some Mightier Member’: Instruments of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Riefer 1984): 158.
- 12 The deliberate cultivation of absurdity might explain the Duke’s perplexing decision to free the unrepentant Barnadine at the play’s conclusion as well.
- 13 The armed prophets that Machiavelli famously celebrates in Chapter VI of *The Prince* are notable because they emerge from crises. The Duke effectively creates a crisis from which he can rescue his people. This is arguably the implication of Machiavelli’s teaching and perhaps the lesson of the Borgia episode. Turmoil and disorder creates an opportunity to dramatically reorganize a community.
- 14 This may be in tension with Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s work, especially in *The Discourses*, seems to emphasize the importance of transitioning from princes to institutions. This is the more reliable path to good governance and human freedom. However, for Machiavelli, it is clear that princes or authoritarian rulers are sometimes necessary to apply strong medicines and set states on the right course.

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