



Charles Alston Collins, *Convent Thoughts*, 1851. Courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

SHAKESPEARE ON MONASTIC LIFE NUNS AND FRIARS IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

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In the opening scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (ca. 1595), Shakespeare inserts some anachronistic lines, excised “on pious and/or anachronistic grounds” by every nineteenth century production of the play except one (Griffiths 91). When Hermia refuses her father’s command that she marry Demetrius, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, warns her:

Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
Whether, if you yield not to your father’s choice,
You can endure the livery of a nun,
For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,
To live a barren sister all your life,
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
Thrice blessèd they that master so their blood
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
But earthlier happy is the rose distilled
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness (1.1.67-78)¹

What is remarkable about this passage, aside from the fact that it was always cut in nineteenth century productions, is its profoundly Catholic spirituality, its realistic distinction between married life as “earthlier happy” and monastic life as “blessed.” Shakespeare’s terminology suggests the distinction between the Aristotelian notion of happiness, which requires friendship and hence marriage, and the more complete but paradoxical New Testament notion of blessedness or beatitude (Mt 5:1-12), which is achieved through poverty, mourning, meekness, and the endurance of suffering. Renaissance philosophers and theologians were well aware of this distinction in relation to the *summum bonum* or highest good (Scmitt 318-19), but no sixteenth century Reformed Protestant would have described monastic life as blessed, much less “thrice blessèd.”

In the Shakespearean corpus as a whole, the treatment of Roman Catholic religious is exceptionally sympathetic.² Shakespeare treats

Franciscans particularly well, especially in view of the fact that, aside from John Ford, other English Renaissance dramatists form an “anti-fraternal tradition” which depicts friars as “duplicitous, immoral, and satanic” (Voss 5). Such hostile characterization is not the case, however, with Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Francis in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Friar Peter in *Measure for Measure* (Bevington 202; Milward 73; Voss 9). Nor is it the case with Isabella and Francisca in *Measure for Measure*. What this suggests, as some recent lines of investigation contend, is that Shakespeare seems to have come, in cultural terms, from outside the “golden academic triangle” of Oxford, Cambridge, and London.³ His favorable treatment of Franciscans is but one intimation of his cultural Catholicism, nurtured in the heavily Catholic counties of Warwickshire and Lancashire.

My intention in this essay, therefore, is to explore some important Roman Catholic theological dimensions of *Measure for Measure* having to do with monastic life, particularly its portrait of Franciscan religious, its representation of the sacrament of penance, and its concluding ambiguity regarding the Duke’s offer of marriage to Isabella. Some recent accounts of the play, taking their bearings from Reformed theology or secular assumptions, have claimed that monastic life is satirized or demystified (Gless *passim*, Diehl 395). But such readings encounter three insuperable difficulties. First of all, they do not harmonize well with Shakespeare’s generally favorable treatment of Franciscan nuns and friars, a favorable treatment poetically expressed in *Measure for Measure* when Isabella offers Angelo a bribe of heavenly “gifts”:

true prayers
 That shall be up at heaven and enter there
 Ere sunrise – prayers from preserved souls,
 From fasting maids whose minds are dedicate
 To nothing temporal. (2.2.157-61)

Second, Reformed readings do not account for Shakespeare’s departure from the anti-Catholic conventions of English Protestant drama. As I shall argue, it is clear that Shakespeare works against those conventions by inverting their main features. The most striking indication of this is his portrayal of nuns and friars as virtue figures over against a tradition that represented them as vice figures. Third, such readings overlook the significance of Shakespeare’s development of his sources. One would expect a Reformed Protestant or secular sensibility, whose intention was to demystify or satirize, to have taken advantage of the opportunity to allow Isabella

to lose her virginity and finally accept an offer of marriage. This is precisely what her counterparts do in the sources for the play. But Shakespeare transforms his heroine into a nun, a prospective novice of the Poor Clares, who preserves her virginity and does not marry. It is difficult to see this as demystification or satire. In short, readings based on Reformed or secular assumptions do not enable us to explain the basic features and nuances of Shakespeare's development of his sources, nor do they account for his adversarial relation to the English Protestant dramatic tradition.⁴

THE ANTIFRATERNAL TRADITION

First, then, in order to assess Shakespeare's portrait of Franciscan religious, it is necessary to investigate the relation of *Measure for Measure* to the antifraternal tradition. As the casual reader can see from the works of Boccaccio and Chaucer, the medieval tradition of antifraternal literature concerned itself with satirizing the moral failures of friars, particularly their sins of the flesh and their hypocrisy (Gless 61-69). With the advent of Reformed theology, however, the essential elements of the religious life itself came under literary attack, and such things as vows, the cloistered life, celibacy, and the priesthood were pilloried. In early Reformation drama, the conventional figure of the Vice was often portrayed as a Roman Catholic priest-player (White 171), and by virtue of their distinctive religious habits, the Franciscan friar and the cloistered nun became stage conventions (Pineas, *Tudor and Early Stuart* 23; Voss 5). In George Chapman's *May-Day* (1611) there is a telling reference to the convention:

Out upon't, that disguise [of a "friar's weed"] is worn thread-
bare upon every stage, and so much villainy committed
under that habit that 'tis grown as suspicious as the vilest.
(quoted in Miles 171)

Various other strategies were employed against stage nuns and friars – derogatory epithets, sarcastic asides, reversals of attitude, outright rejection of cloistered life, abusive flouting, physical punishment, and many others (Pineas, *Tudor and Early Stuart* 23-43).

Perhaps the most effective anti-Catholic strategy used in Reformation plays, then, was to identify the conventional figure of the Vice with Catholic figures (Pineas, *Tudor and Early Stuart* 16). But Shakespeare's use of the Vice clearly does not follow Protestant lines. Rather than identify this stock figure with one of the Franciscan religious in *Measure for Measure*,

which is what we would expect if the play is antifraternal satire, Shakespeare identifies the Vice with a secular figure. Thus, as the comic focal point of the sexual intemperance endemic in Vienna, Lucio is given the role of Vice. He is not explicitly tagged in the manner of the personifications of the old Morality plays, but rather he is represented in the newer realistic style in which the Vice becomes “a dramatic symbol for the attitude or force within the kingdom which the dramatist wishes to single out as a basic cause of contemporary evils” (Winston 233-41). Finally, at the end of the play, when by means of multiple marriages restitution has been made for various sexual irregularities, Lucio is fittingly punished as the play’s scapegoat by being married to a prostitute. Significantly, none of the Franciscan monastic figures is punished for sins of the flesh or exposed as hypocritical.

But Lucio is not alone. There are other secular exemplifications of vice as well. The taxonomy of vice in the play can be found in the “Secunda Pars” of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, specifically under the virtue of temperance (2a2ae 146-58). Some suggestion of this taxonomy comes in the play’s final scene, when Isabella speaks of Angelo’s “intemperate concupiscible lust” (5.1.103), a precise Thomistic classification of lust as intemperance in respect to the concupiscible desire for sexual pleasure. On both the comic and serious level, this classification in its full form governs the play in some detail. As the action moves along, various instances of sexual irregularity are brought to our attention – Claudio has gotten Julietta pregnant, Angelo attempts to seduce Isabella, Lucio has impregnated and broken his promise to Kate Keepdown (3.2.194-96), and Angelo is found to be guilty of a “promise-breach” with Mariana. Thus Shakespeare depicts sexual intemperance in general (Lucio) and three of its various Thomistic species – fornication (Claudio), attempted seduction (Angelo), and sacrilege (Angelo; see Aquinas 2a2ae 154.1, 10). The representation is not rigidly schematic, as the compounded instance of Angelo indicates, but one can add prostitution (Mistress Overdone), drunkenness (Barnardine) and anger (Isabella’s defiant reaction to Claudio) to the species of intemperance depicted (see Aquinas 2a2ae 150, 158). Of course, the argument can be made that Shakespeare did not need the *Summa* in order to represent these commonplace species of sexual intemperance, but the precision of Isabella’s phrase about “intemperate concupiscible lust” (5.1.103) and the tight cluster of virtues and vices described by Aquinas (2a2ae qq. 146-58) and exhibited in the play (abstinence, fasting, sobriety, drunkenness, virginity, sexual intemperance, fornication, seduction, sacrilegious lust, clemency, severity

and anger) can hardly be coincidental (Beauregard, *Virtue's Own Feature* 139-55).

It is important to note that all these sexual sins are transgressions by secular characters who inhabit the secular sectors of the city – the court, the stews and the prison. By contrast, the four Franciscan religious pursue the contemplative life within the confines of the cloister, most pointedly in the case of Isabella, who embodies the virtue of virginal chastity. Aquinas' remarks are worth quoting:

...if a man abstain from bodily pleasures, in order more freely to give himself to the contemplation of truth, this is in accordance with the rectitude of reason. Now holy virginity refrains from all venereal pleasure in order more freely to have leisure for Divine contemplation... (2a2ae 152.2)

The traditional distinction between the active and the contemplative life is thus sharply reflected in the settings in monastery and convent, over against the court and prison. This distinction of course had little currency in Reformed circles.

Moreover, this distinction in the play's setting between the active and contemplative life is consistent with Shakespeare's treatment of the vow of chastity. For the Reformers, marriage was highly valued and consecrated virginity was considered impious, and it is therefore significant that a sense of the sacred permeates Shakespeare's conception of the vow of chastity. Shocked by his desire for Isabella, Angelo speaks of his "desire to raze the sanctuary" (2.2.178), clearly implying that Isabella's chastity is sacred. Contrariwise, what is striking is that all the transgressions of vows occur with the secular characters and not with the Franciscan religious. Claudio's "true contract" lacks the "denunciation of outward order," Angelo is guilty of "promise-breach," and Lucio has not kept his promise of marriage to Kate Keepdown (3.3.194-6). On the other hand, none of the Franciscan religious violates a vow of chastity, poverty or obedience. Thus the critical claim that they are satirized and demystified is without substance, and critics are driven to vague charges of "hypocrisy," disparity between "behavior and perfection," or failure to live up to "ideals of purity and holiness" (Diehl 404-5). These general charges lack the precision of the Reformers' objections to the cloistered life: the charge that vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience were hypocritically presumptive, and the allegation that monastic life is a "flight from the world." Shakespeare's play in effect reverses these charges by showing us Isabella maintaining her chastity while

both she and the Duke (with the help of the other friars) operate successfully in the world by bringing their virtue to bear on its problems.

To sum up thus far: Shakespeare reverses the main dramatic devices by which Reformed dramatists attacked Franciscan cloistered life, namely, by portraying them in the role of the Vice, by depicting their violation of vows (particularly chastity), and by showing them in flight from the world. With the monastic figures in *Measure for Measure*, however, there is no serious transgression of a vow, nor is there a flight from the world. Isabella (like her source figure) could easily have been made to sin against chastity and finally marry, and the drunken Barnardine could easily have been made a friar. Shakespeare declines to exploit these opportunities. Even further, as we shall see, he reverses other devices used against Catholic religious, whereby they were exposed as hypocrites, their deviousness and duplicity were made transparent, and their vows were repudiated in favor of marriage.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare's contemplative Franciscans have their faults. Awareness of the shortcomings of religious is, however, part of the pre-Reformation tradition of the English Morality play (Pineas, "English Morality Play" 160), and Shakespeare, like Chaucer, is not given to a naive idealism about contemplative religious life, as is evident from Lucio's proverbial remark "Cucullus not facit monachum [a cowl does not make a monk]" (5.1.271). Accordingly, Shakespeare characterizes Francisca as excessively precise about her rule, a light satirical touch that constitutes an acknowledgement that religious have their shortcomings. Perhaps more seriously, Isabella is technically guilty of lying and false testimony (3.1.266; 5.1.106),⁵ and Friar Peter pretends that the Duke is sick (5.1.157-8). But Shakespeare makes nothing of these dramatic deceptions, obviously because at their respective points in the action they are necessary to further the Duke's stratagem. If the matter must be considered from a moral standpoint, this insouciance about lying and deception would seem to best accord with the remarks of Aquinas:

As regards the end in view, a lie may be contrary to charity, through being told with the purpose of injuring God, and this is always a mortal sin, for it is opposed to religion; or in order to injure one's neighbor, in his person, his possessions, or his good name, and this also is a mortal sin, since it is a mortal sin to injure one's neighbor... But if the end intended be not contrary to charity, neither will the lie, considered under this aspect, be a mortal sin, as in the case of a jocose

lie, where some pleasure is intended, or in an officious lie,
where the good of one's neighbor is intended.

(2a2ae 110.4)

It is clear that Shakespeare is aware of the transgressive character of the stratagem of the bed-trick, for the Duke says to Isabella "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof" (3.2.258-60), but it is equally clear that what is morally paramount is not the deceit but the consideration of the benefits to be achieved. That is, from a purely moral standpoint, the intention and the good to be achieved ameliorate the defective and transgressive nature of the act.

Similarly, just as the monastic figures are not free of faults, so the secular vice figures are not without their virtues. Shakespeare does not have Lucio pursue vice with a rationalistic consistency, since this comic libertine displays compassion for Claudio, informs Isabella of her brother's plight, and helps her to argue her case more effectively. But again his benevolent actions are quite in accord with the dramatic tradition of the Vice who can "help as well as hinder" (Winston 236). In allowing the virtuous characters their faults and the vice figures their virtues, Shakespeare's purpose, then, was not to construct perfect exemplars of Franciscan religious life, or pure examples of sexual evil, but to render images of virtue and vice with some plausibility and verisimilitude. He neither idealizes his religious figures nor demonizes his vice figures.

NUNS

Granted that the main features of the anti-fraternal tradition are reversed by Shakespeare, it remains to see how these reversals play out in specific scenes dealing with nuns and friars. Much has been made of the play's fourth scene as an anti-monastic satire (Gless 103). To be sure, with the arrival of Lucio at the convent, Francisca pays an overly precise attention to the rule and expresses a degree of timidity before a strange man. But her timidity throws into high relief Isabella's virginal poise and self-possession before Lucio's bold cynicism about virginity:

LUCIO: Hail, virgin, if you be, as those cheek roses
Proclaim you are no less...

ISABELLA: You do blaspheme the good in mocking me.

(1.4.16-17, 38)

(Compare Aquinas' definition of blasphemy as "the disparagement of some surpassing goodness, especially that of God" 2a2ae 13.1). By characterizing Lucio as profane and cynical – two scenes before he has been consorting with the prostitute Mistress Overdone – Shakespeare precludes any disrespect for Isabella and her entry into monastic life. So also he defuses Lucio's impertinent ridicule of the good, one of the conventional methods employed by the Vice (Pineas, "English Morality Play" 162-3). Lucio's impertinence undercuts two other recent critical claims, in themselves too forced and recondite, that the scene is a parody of the Annunciation, with Lucio reminding us of the angel Gabriel, "my cousin Juliet" of Elizabeth, and Isabella of the Virgin Mary, and that it plays on the iconography of the saints' lives (Lupton 112-13). The parallels are too slight and unrealized to provide much parody, and Lucio's ridicule of the good simply serves to define his unsavory character. A more readily accessible and plausible source of typology exists in the dramatic tradition of the Vice, which would cast Lucio in the role of Lucifer, the tempter and the prince of lies (Winston 235). Lucio's name, his involvement in sexual vice, and his bold, cynical demeanor suggest this in much more forthright fashion.

Furthermore, there is much more to this convent scene than a simple touch of satire and profane mockery. This brief introductory vignette manifests the nascent virtue of Isabella, moved as she is by the desire for "a more strict restraint" and fewer privileges. In Aristotelian-Thomistic fashion, Shakespeare places Isabella between two extreme figures. She stands as something of a temperate mean between Francisca the timid rule-follower, who minces "may" and "may not" and recoils at the sound of a man's voice, and Lucio the sexual libertine, who is boldly contemptuous of virginity. If we were to apply the Thomistic taxonomy strictly, Isabella might be most accurately described as embodying the virtue of "honesty," one of the integral parts of the cardinal virtue of temperance. Its opposing extremes would be represented by Francisca as "shamefacedness" and Lucio as the vice of "intemperance." These three dispositions are discussed by Aquinas in sequence (2a2ae 142-45):

Taken strictly virtue is a perfection... Wherefore anything that is inconsistent with perfection, though it be good, falls short of the notion of virtue. Now shamefacedness is inconsistent with perfection, because it is the fear of something base, namely of that which is disgraceful. Hence Damascene says that shamefacedness is fear of a base action...

But one who is perfect as to a virtuous habit, does not

apprehend that which would be disgraceful and base to do, as being possible and arduous, that is to say difficult for him to avoid; nor does he actually do anything base, so as to be in fear of disgrace. Therefore shamefacedness, properly speaking, is not a virtue, since it falls short of the perfection of virtue. (2a2ae 144.1)

As one of the integral parts of temperance, shamefacedness (*verecundia*) has none of the “spiritual beauty” characteristic of honesty (*honestum*), which springs from the honor attached to the excellence of virtue, “the disposition of the perfect to the best” [*dispositio perfecti ad optimum*]:

Now the disgraceful is opposed to the beautiful: and opposites are most manifestive of one another. Wherefore it seems honesty belongs especially to temperance, since the latter repels that which is most disgraceful and unbecoming to man, namely animal lusts. (2a2ae 145.4)

Fear of disgrace in failing to follow the rule seems to drive Francisca, while Isabella certainly seems her opposite in her more positive desire to pursue “the best.” As the embodiment of virginity, she naturally describes her brother’s fornication as “a vice that most I do abhor” (2.2.32), and so, when Claudio suggests she trade her virginity for his life (3.1.133-38 f.), her brief show of anger is more understandable. Obviously Shakespeare did not intend to illustrate Aquinas, but something close to this taxonomy seems to govern this scene.

Shakespeare quickly develops this embryonic scene by more precisely representing four virtues and vices allied to temperance, specifically severity and clemency, and virginity and lust (Aquinas 152-54; 157.1-2). An essential distinction between Catholic virtue and Puritan vice becomes apparent, when in the second act Shakespeare stages two agonistic confrontations or “contentions” focussed on these dispositions. The initial problem is the sexual transgression of Claudio in getting Julietta pregnant, and the question is whether to make an example of him. Shakespeare invites us to consider whether the proper response is severity or clemency. Angelo advocates severity for the sake of the common good of Vienna, while Isabella is moved to plead for clemency to preserve her brother’s life. A clear parallelism begins to emerge as Angelo, in Puritan fashion, continues to insist on the severe penalty of death, whereas contrariwise Isabella in her Roman Catholic habit advocates a more moderate penalty (“O let him

marry her"). Analogously, there is a contrast in penitential methods of controlling sexual transgressions. Angelo has previously subjected Claudio to a public shaming Puritan-style (1.2) and the Duke in Franciscan habit has privately heard Juliet's confession according to the Roman Catholic form of the sacrament of penance (2.3).

This contrast between Puritan severity and Catholic clemency continues to develop in subsequent scenes. Just as the first contention exhibits the severity of Angelo and the clemency of Isabella, the second contention underscores and develops another undeniable moral difference between these two main figures. In the guise of a novice of the Poor Clares, Isabella clearly embodies the virtue of virginity, one of the species of temperance. By contrast, Angelo, who like Isabella has been initially characterized as a severe ascetic, exhibits the opposing vice of lust. Significantly he is not a given a Franciscan habit but rather the sensibility (and in the BBC production the costume) of a Puritan. In the words of the Duke, he is "precise... [and] scarce confesses/That his blood flows or that his appetite is more to bread than stone" (1.3.50-53). To Lucio he is:

...a man whose blood
Is very snow broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense,
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge
With profits of the mind, study, and fast. (1.4.57-61)

This description is sharply and explicitly critical, rather than lightly satirical en passant as with Francisca. Since Angelo denies the "motions of the sense," he is at first depicted in terms of the Aristotelian-Thomistic vice of insensibility, the extreme opposite to the intemperance we see in Lucio. In its Elizabethan Puritan form, outward austerity was allied with precision, hypocrisy, and zeal for laws against adultery, all qualities portrayed in Angelo (McGinn 131-35; Hamilton 111-12). Paradoxically, Angelo is at first harsh and condemnatory in his precision, and then he easily swings from the vice of insensibility to the other extreme of hypocritical and intemperate lust. His encounter with the beautiful Isabella is the catalyst that quickly turns his precision into intemperance. For all the initial severity and asceticism of Isabella and Angelo, therefore, a sharp distinction emerges between her Roman Catholic virtue and his Puritanical vice. Again reversing the conventions of the antifraternal tradition, Shakespeare takes up the charge of hypocrisy usually leveled by Reformed theologians against nuns and monks and their vows of chastity, and directs it against a Puritan

sensibility. However, by discreetly not applying a religious label to Angelo, he indicates once more his interest in the exhibition of moral dispositions rather than the representation of theological polemics.

FRIARS

When we turn from Franciscan nuns to friars, similar configurations of virtue and vice become apparent. Our first encounter with friars comes in the third scene. Duke Vincentio is talking with Friar Thomas, and their conversation is carried on in a respectful tone. In explaining his intention of posing as a friar, the Duke shows Friar Thomas great trust and very respectfully addresses him as “holy Father,” “holy sir,” “pious sir,” and “my father” (1.3.1, 7, 16, 39). This note of respect and trust towards friars continues in later scenes when the Duke confides in Friar Peter as his messenger (4.5) and appoints him as guide to Mariana and Isabella in their suit against Angelo (4.6.9-15; 5.1.20). In the guise of friar, the Duke himself is called “holy” or “good” some ten times (see Spevack under “Father” and “friar”). Contrariwise, Lucio refers to friars merely as “Friar” (3.2.76, 82, 85, 97, 101). Only once does he refer to the Duke as “good Friar” (3.2.173). In the final scene, he severely berates him as “a meddling friar,” “a saucy friar,” “a very scurvy fellow,” “a rascal,” “Goodman Baldpate,” “damnable fellow,” “a bald-pated, lying rascal,” and a “knave.”⁶

But obviously Duke Vincentio is not a true friar. He simply adopts the Franciscan habit as a disguise by which to observe “if power change purpose, what our seemers be” (1.3.54). He has been accurately described as a Counter-Vice or Anti-Vice, who uses his “craft against vice” (Winston 243). Thus, his disguise is employed as part of a political policy, which has as its end the discernment of character and the common good, rather than a fraudulent deception undertaken for evil purposes of seduction. The employment of disguise as a dramatic device again does not amount to a demystification or satire on monastic life. There is no suggestion of fraud here, no hidden villainies, no disparity between ideal and real practices, as there are in Boccaccio and Chaucer.

Perhaps even more importantly, since there is no textual indication of a change in costume, the Duke remains dressed in his Franciscan robes after he has been unhooded by Lucio (5.1.363). The retention of his Franciscan habit lends to the proceedings a certain religious authority. Indeed, it is clear that Shakespeare intends Lucio’s unhooding of the Duke as a reversal of the exposure of a friar. It also reverses the more general trope of Protestant apocalyptic exposure of Catholic corruption (Shell 23-32). Thus, Lucio’s

act of unhooding backfires, since it exposes the Duke in all his authority and undercuts the vituperative insolence of Lucio himself:

LUCIO: Come, sir, come, sir, come, sir; foh, sir! Why you bald-pated, lying rascal, you must be hooded, must you? Show your knave's visage, with a pox to you! Show your sheep-biting face, and be hanged an hour! Will 't not off?
[He pulls off the friar's hood, and discovers the Duke. Angelo and Escalus rise.]

DUKE: Thou art the first knave that e'er mad'st a duke.
 First, Provost, let me bail these gentle three [Isabella, Mariana, and Friar Peter].

[To Lucio.] Sneak not away, sir, for the Friar and you must have a word anon. Lay hold on him.

LUCIO: This may prove worse than hanging. (5.1.363-68)

Here laughter is directed at the consequences of Lucio's anti-Franciscan action. The exposure of "Friar Lodowick" brings Lucio some deserved punishment. It is inaccurate and misleading, then, to maintain that, in "using the clerical habit of the friar as a disguise that the Duke puts on and off and eventually discards, the play also demystifies monasticism, perhaps even reinforcing Protestant associations of friars with a fraudulent theatricality... and false disguise" (Diehl 395). The mere absence of the Duke's disguise in Act 4 scene 5 takes place without comment, and there is no textual evidence that the Duke discards the habit in the final Act. Neither scene carries any suggestion of demystification. If anything, friars and the Franciscan habit are associated with authority and truth, not with "fraudulent theatricality and false disguise."

Beyond the question of Duke Vincentio's disguise, there are the two important stratagems he undertakes: the bed-trick and the substitution of Ragozine's head for Claudio's. Only the first has received much critical attention. As a source for *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare used George Whetstone's *An Heptameron of Civill Discourses* (1582), in which the story of Promos and Cassandra is immediately preceded by the tale of Friar Inganno (N1r-N2r). Whetstone's narrative strategy (by way of Giraldi Cinthio) proceeds in three steps. First, Friar Inganno (Friar Fraud) tells Dame Farina that St. Francis means to visit her at night as Friar Inganno. Next, the Friar's deceit is discovered when Dame Farina tells her parish priest. When Friar Inganno returns that night, he leaps into bed with an ugly maid named Leayda, who has been substituted for Dame Farina. At

this point, the parish priest and others enter with candles and torches, and they begin singing “Salve, Saincte Francisce.” Finally, they bind and strip Inganno, lay him in a bundle of nettles, scourge him, and cover him with honey so that he is tormented by hornets, wasps, and flies. The exposure of Franciscan vice ends in punishment and laughter.

With Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, this three step process of stratagem, exposure, and punishment assumes a very different form. None of the Duke’s three stratagems – his disguise as a friar, the bed-trick, and his substitution of Ragozine’s head for Claudio’s – are evil in their intention. In fact all three stratagems are undertaken for good purposes, and with the help of Friar Peter they are turned to good account, so that they succeed in preserving life and bringing about marital union for three couples. As we confront the various sexual problems created by the main figures – Claudio’s getting Julietta pregnant, Angelo’s attempted seduction of Isabella, Lucio’s impregnation and broken promise to Kate Keepdown (3.2.194-96), and Angelo’s “promise-breach” with Mariana – Shakespeare makes nuns and friars virtuous accomplices who aid the Duke in his project and help to bring everything to a just and proper conclusion. There is no punishment of any friar figure, as there is of the secular figures. In short, the anti-fraternal tradition in which friars are exposed as immoral schemers is again turned on its head.

IMAGES OF AURICULAR CONFESSION:
JULIETTA, MARIANA, BARNARDINE

If Duke Vincentio’s Franciscan disguise and stratagems are questionable as instances of “demystification” and satire, the same can be said for the Duke’s priestly actions of giving pastoral counsel and hearing confession. The play presents the Duke counseling or confessing four characters, actions that are appropriate expressions of the play’s concern with the virtue of clemency. Juliet is the first to confess to the Duke as Friar, and she is treated rather gently and sympathetically. Next Claudio is counseled with the brilliant speech “Be absolute for death” (3.1.5 f.), encouraging him to face his impending death. The speech seems well-meant but somewhat severe. Although Claudio is initially persuaded, he relents and delivers an equally poignant speech “Aye, but to die” (3.1.119 f.), which significantly the Duke listens to from a position of concealment. From this point on, the Duke begins to display greater compassion and clemency. Isabella is aided in her predicament. Mariana is told that she has not sinned and is helped to achieve her desire. Barnardine is in such a state that his execution is put

off. And in the final scene the Duke manifests a “tempered judgment.” All of this seems in line with the general trajectory of the play as it moves from severity in the early scenes (with the Duke, Isabella, and Angelo) to a final clemency (with Isabella and the Duke).

But what of the representation of the sacrament of confession? The three confessional scenes, involving Julietta, Mariana, Barnardine and Duke Vincentio in his friar’s disguise (2.3; 4.1; 4.3), are obvious representations of Catholic sacramental practice. The primary indication of their Catholicity is of course the simple dramatic fact that they are conducted by a Friar, not a Protestant pastor. One obvious difficulty, however, is that the Duke is not a true priest. Although this provides a perfect occasion for demystification of the priesthood and monastic life, the absence of any attempt at dramatic exposure of the “fraud,” together with the favorable treatment of Franciscan religious and the regular reversal of anti-Catholic dramatic conventions, compels us to take the confession scenes as they are. Shakespeare makes nothing of this opportunity to demystify.

With respect to *Measure for Measure*, it is not difficult to determine which form of penance is represented, given the dramatic necessity of a selective representation (Beauregard, “Shakespeare Against the Homilies”). During the English Reformation, the conception of penance was altered from its medieval scholastic form, in which it was a sacrament composed of three parts or movements: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. That form required the precise enumeration of sins in an “auricular confession” to a priest, who gave absolution and assigned penitential acts of satisfaction. In its secularized Protestant form, however, it became a purely interior form consisting of four parts or movements: contrition, confession, faith, and amendment of life (*Certaine Sermons* 271). Confession was made to God, not to a priest. Auricular confession was merely allowed as a pastoral measure, and absolution was replaced by a declaration of forgiveness. Satisfaction or “doing penance” was dismissed as unnecessary and was generalized into “amendment of life.” Thus, what was previously a sacrament with a social and external dimension requiring a precise examination of conscience with the aid of a priest, became a completely privatized and interiorized exercise, which merely permitted and allowed for exteriorization in the form of auricular confession:

I doe not say, but that if any doe finde themselues troubled in conscience, they may repayre to their learned Curate or Pastour, or to some other godly learned man, and shew the trouble and doubt of their conscience to them, that they may

receiue at their hand the comfortable salue of GODS word:
but it is against the true Christian libertie, that any man
should bee bound to the numbring of his sinnes, as it hath
beene vsed heretofore in the time of blindnesse and igno-
rance. (Certaine Sermons 267)

The play presents a distinct contrast between two types of penitential action, one the public punishment imposed on sinners by the Elizabethan bawdy courts, and the other the private confession of sins characteristic of Catholic pastoral practice. Properly speaking, the first type is a juridical action, and the second is a pastoral one. Shakespeare seems sensitive to the historical consequences of the suppression of auricular confession, namely that since sexual incontinence was no longer controlled through the private confessional it had to be through public punishment. Thus, Claudio's public shaming as he is led through the streets clearly suggests English Protestant social and civil practice, significantly ordered by the Puritanical Angelo. But it cannot be construed as the first part of a single penitential ritual that is later completed by Juliet's confession and reconciliation (Hayne 12). Rather it provides a contrast with Catholic sacramental practice. With Juliet, there is clearly contrition and auricular confession to a Friar in Catholic fashion and in a pastoral rather than juridical context:

DUKE: Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry?
JULIET: I do, and bear the shame most patiently.
DUKE: I'll teach you how you should arraign your conscience,
And try your penitence, if it be sound,
Or hollowly put on...
JULIET: I do confess and repent it, Father.
DUKE: ...But lest you do repent
As that the sin hath brought you to this shame,
Which sorrow is always toward ourselves, not heaven,
Showing we would not spare heaven as we love it,
But as we stand in fear –
JULIET: I do repent me as it is an evil,
And take the shame with joy.
DUKE: There rest...
Grace go with you. *Benedicite!* (2.3.19-40).

Juliet makes an auricular confession to the Duke as Friar and "Father," complete with a suggestion of final absolution when the Duke bids her

“Grace go with you. Benedicite.” If the element of satisfaction is missing, still the representation is more in the Catholic than the Church of England form. Juliet is not simply showing “the trouble and doubt” of her conscience to her Curate or Pastor, or confessing to a layman. The Duke teaches her how to arraign her conscience and tests the authenticity of her sorrow, making sure she is not motivated by shame or fear, but by a real detestation of her sin. His role is that of authoritative teacher, director and priest, not that of confidante, advisor and pastor.

Somewhat similar are the cases of Mariana and Barnardine. Although Mariana does not confess to the Duke, he pronounces a judgment in assuring her that the bed-trick is “no sin” (4.1.72). As for Barnardine, using a clearly Roman Catholic term, the Duke intends to “give him a present shrift” (4.2.207), a term that suggests Catholic practice and does not occur in the Homilies. But amusingly Barnardine demands more time to prepare and refuses to “consent to die this day” (4.3.54-56). In short, in the Duke’s activity as Friar-Confessor, we observe the truncated representation of Roman Catholic sacramental penance or auricular confession. It is sympathetically presented, whereas the public shaming of Claudio is not. As a minor parallel to this depiction of the sacramental function of the Friar-Duke, it is worth noting that the marriage of Angelo is carried out off-stage by Friar Peter (5.1.377-79), manifesting once again the consistently Catholic mentality shaping the play.

CONCLUSION: MARRIAGE OR THE CONVENT?

The conclusion of *Measure for Measure* is notoriously ambiguous, and so it has been construed in various ways. The final scene raises two issues. Taken as a whole, it has been read as Isabella’s release from claustrophobic monastic confinement (Gless 213), as a Calvinistic public rehearsal of shame (Diehl 409), and as an exercise in judicial recompense for sexual crimes (Friedman 456). Read with its sources in mind and in concert with the play’s representation of various species of intemperance, the scene is most consistently read as a judicial proceeding involving punishment and clemency. Several acts of pardon and punishment occur. Having abandoned his initial policy of severity, Duke Vincentio pardons Angelo, Barnardine, Claudio, and Lucio. He also metes out a tempered punishment in the form of three rather sober marriages. Angelo is sent offstage to marry Mariana, Claudio is to marry Julietta, and Lucio is forced to marry the prostitute Kate Keepdown. The overall tone is markedly less celebratory and more sober than in the romantic comedies. In keeping with our account,

this sobriety of tone issues understandably from Shakespeare's concern with justice and clemency, with his working toward the representation of a final "tempered judgment" in the person of the Duke.

The second issue has to do with Isabella's response to the Duke's proffer of marriage. Again, several interpretations have been proposed. One critic sees Isabella as accepting the Duke's offer (Gless 212). At the other extreme, another sees Isabella as shocked, as resistant to being "an object of exchange in an economy of male desire" (Mullaney 110). A third critic reads the Duke's offer as an attempt to recompense Isabella for the slanderous dishonor she has received from participating in his scheme (Friedman 461). But for these conjectures there is no evidence in the text. The ending is conspicuously ambiguous.

Isabella's silence is remarkable in the light of other English Renaissance plays dealing with a similar situation. In Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594), Margaret after having taken her vows decides to leave the convent and marry Lord Lacy:

The flesh is frail. My lord doth know it well,
That when he comes with his enchanting face,
Whatso'er betide, I cannot say him nay;
Off goes the habit of a maiden's heart,
And, seeing Fortune will, fair Framingham,
And all the show of holy nuns, farewell.
Lacey for me, if he will be my lord. (Scene xiv, 86-92)

Similarly, in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* (1608), Millicent is a professed nun who decides to leave the cloistered life to marry her lover:

With pardon, sir, that name ["profest Nun"] is quite undone;
This true-loue knot cancelles both maid and Nun. (5.1.202-3)

Finally, in Whetstone's *Heptameron of Civill Discourses* (1582), one of Shakespeare's sources, Lucia Bella, a prospective novice like Isabella, is explicitly won over to arguments in favor of marriage:

Senior *Philoxenus*, by the vertue of this dayes exercise... so raysed the heartes of the companie, with the desire of Mariage, that *Lucia Bella*, who, in the beginning of Christmasse, was determynd to haue beene a *vestall Nunne*, now confessed that they were enemies to Nature, and not

ending implying marriage. In either case, he would have pleased his heterogeneous audience.

*

The prospect of a Roman Catholic Shakespeare will seem understandably distressing to those for whom Catholicism is “sectarian.” This fear of producing a partisan Shakespeare is largely unfounded. As I have suggested, the main focus of Shakespeare’s plays is on moral psychology, not on theology. In the main, the plays represent the virtues, the vices and the passions, not theological mysteries or doctrines. Moreover, by virtue of historical circumstance, Shakespeare is “universal” in that his Catholicism was largely suppressed and does not obtrude upon most of the plays. Nevertheless, it is ingenuous to suppose that the dogmatic oppositions between Catholic and Reformed had no impact on him and that we can place him somewhere along a spectrum of gradations of anti-Calvinism. In their individualistic assumptions about the complexities of religious belief, critics who adopt such positions fail to comprehend the corporate nature of Elizabethan religion, wherein the Churches defined the doctrines accepted by their individual members, and the interrelations between doctrines created a stable coherence. One would have paid the price of expulsion from the church community by expressing a *laissez-faire* attitude toward doctrine.

Behind the fear of a “sectarian” Shakespeare one can detect the sensibility of Kant’s “autonomous” individual – enlightened, sceptical, transcendent, isolate, free and independent of any historical determination.⁷ For such an individual religion is not only a sect apart from an undefined mainstream but also a superstition rather than a confrontation with the realities of suffering, sin and death. Thus, in the words of one critic, Shakespeare displays “an incomparable aloofness from all partisan religious issues” (Stevenson 80). Another characterizes him as “essentially secular, temporal, non-theological” and warns us against an “overly eager identification of Shakespeare’s plays with Christian teachings in general and with the Catholic tradition in particular” (Frye 7, 293). Most recently, Shakespeare has become, if not a subversive interested in questions of power and containment, then a sceptical, non-dogmatic Prince of Indeterminacy, a producer of “exploratory” plays, suffused with ambiguities, ambivalences, polar oppositions, dilemmas and insoluble moral complexities. The problem is, of course, that these Enlightenment and Modern Skeptical models simply assume a privileged position, projecting onto Shakespeare their own

sectarian doctrines and agenda. Hence, he is aloof, skeptical, indeterminate, and so on.

More seriously, such positions fail to address current research in a convincing way. With the recent surge of revisionist scholarship in English Reformation history, in Renaissance philosophy, and in Aristotelian virtue ethics,⁸ there is a need to reposition Shakespeare in historical context. The one account of Shakespeare that remains unexplored is that he was a “church papist;” yet recent evidence increasingly indicates that he was precisely that.⁹ And it can be argued that such a profile can incorporate and explain the subversive politics, the theological allusions, the moral complexities, the strategic ambiguities, all in more perfect alignment with biographical facts. We have seen the alternative – a bowdlerized Shakespeare, transcending theology and history, scandalizing nobody and “equally accessible to Christians and to the virtuous heathen” (Frye 272). But, as Gary Taylor has astutely pointed out, such a vacuous Shakespeare is an historical blank and an illusion, the child of sceptical scholarship (313). Such a sterilized figure, purged of any entanglement in history, does not allow us to explain the “single blessedness” passage in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the nuns and friars in *Measure for Measure*, or the Purgatorial background in *Hamlet*, not to mention other allusions in the plays to auricular confession, penitential satisfaction, merit, the Virgin Mary, intercessory prayer, prayers for the dead, and pilgrimage – all the theological doctrines and practices that were anathema to the Reformed Churches in general and the Church of England in particular. It is impossible, moreover, to reconcile the Reformed theology of the Homilies and the *Thirty-Nine Articles* with Shakespeare’s plays, and most especially with *Measure for Measure*. However, it is much easier, as I have argued, to reconcile him with Roman Catholic theology. Imposing evidence of this is apparent in the favorable representation of Franciscan monastic life in *Measure for Measure*.

NOTES

- 1 All quotations of Shakespeare's plays are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, updated 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1997).
- 2 Thus, David Bevington points out that "Shakespeare's *King John* avoids all suggestion of moral laxity in the monasteries" (197). The treatment of cardinals and bishops is another matter, but they are criticized for their "moral crimes and political meddling, not for doctrine" (201). Bevington sees this as evidence of "mild anticlericalism," although by this reasoning Shakespeare's criticism of kings would make him antimonarchical as well. In any case, "mild anticlericalism" stemming from political meddling by the church hierarchy fits the profile of a moderate "church papist," as Peter Milward suggests in the most comprehensive and judicious treatment of the subject (*Shakespeare's Religious Background*, 68-84).
- 3 For a summary of recent scholarship on the subject, see Beauregard, "New Light," 159-60. See especially Gary Taylor, "Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton," *English Literary Renaissance* 24 (1994): 283-314, esp. 290-98; and Richard Wilson, "Shakespeare and the Jesuits: New connections supporting the theory of the lost Catholic years in Lancashire," *Times Literary Supplement* (Dec. 19, 1997): 11-13.
- 4 Likewise secular readings which claim that the play mocks virginity and is hostile to all religion are unconvincing in their excessive ingenuity and in their conspicuous inability to offer evidence from a significant Elizabethan intellectual, ethical, or dramatic tradition. In the tradition of enlightenment rationalism, their basic assumption is that Shakespearean drama, like Greek tragedy, must be subversively at odds with religion, misconceived as myth and superstition. Convinced that minds of a high order cannot subscribe to a religious conception of the human condition, proponents of this notion discount obvious evidence to the contrary, e.g., the glaring examples of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. They bracket off the general religious orientation of Elizabethan and Stuart culture, not to mention its Christian "worldview," as if it did not exist. Taken to its logical conclusion, the secular claim leaves us with the mandarinic postulate that Elizabethan audiences were largely uncomprehending, duped by an "enlightened" sceptic who had no integrity whatever in throwing them sops like the Ghost in *Hamlet* and the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. This enlightenment rationalist discomfort with Shakespeare's world-view and the concomitant inability to come to terms with it thus forces the projection of a secular agenda onto Shakespeare, cloaked in an engaging style, spiced with cynical assertions and sustained by intimidating appeals to fashionable authorities, a rather amusing irony for "autonomous" minds. Finally, as David Cressy has observed of Foucault's unhistorical assertions, "it comes down to evidence versus agenda" (130).
- 5 By refusing to exchange her chastity for her brother's life, Isabella has been accused of sin and a "lack of charity" (Gless 127-32, Velie 47, Hunter 217-

- 18). This simplistic and absurd charge ignores the consequences of such a forced capitulation – the abuse, degradation, and violation that Isabella would undergo. Realistically, as the subsequent action explicitly indicates, such a “sacrifice” would in fact not save Claudio’s life. Angelo orders Claudio killed anyway.
- 6 5.1.132, 140-41, 291, 312, 334-35, 347, 360, 361.
- 7 This mentality seems to be in recession and in the process of being replaced by a conception of the individual in relationship with nature and community. See J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* and Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*.
- 8 For recent studies in the English Reformation, see Margo Todd, ed. *Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1995). For recent bibliography on Renaissance philosophy, see the Charles B. Schmitt, et al., eds. *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. For virtue ethics, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* and Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Philosophy: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*.
- 9 See footnote no. 3.

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