

OLIGARCHY, CULTURAL WARFARE, AND STAGECRAFT IN WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

New Oligarchy, Cultural Warfare, and Stagecraft in William Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure*

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William Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* builds upon reception conditions in the Globe Theater to convey radical political messages to the audience. The drama successfully depicts the societal problems resulting from England's unique middle class expansion and heavily localized instances of cultural and class warfare. After providing substantial historical context, this thesis explains why the central villain, Angelo, embodies the severe nature of the new oligarchy. Furthermore, the problematic Duke represents crucial flaws inherent in paternalistic rhetoric that sustained institutionalized power imbalances. As social stratification continued to expand, state sanctioned abuses were inflicted upon the lower classes, including capital punishment, whipping, and lengthy prison sentences. Shakespeare speaks out against class oppression by manipulating his audience's collective emotions. Mistress Overdone, Kate Keepdown, and Pompey experience harsh reprimands, and their performances encourage sympathy from the groundlings. Lastly, carnival values are championed against local instances of oppression. This essay focuses on the importance of stagecraft and language, and the ways these techniques are politically valuable in Shakespearean drama.

Introduction

In Shakespeare's Globe Theater, his audience was emphatically not a passive, complying crowd. Impassionate political messages, sprinkled throughout the drama's many memorable speeches, were deliberately included at crucial moments, because they were meant for attentive audience consumption. Shakespeare's dramaturgy creates active, purposeful interactions between the audience and actors through mediums such as costumes, props, stage directions, notable silences, and deixis. Deixis required certain words and phrases to have vital contextual information available on stage so controversial political opinions could successfully be performed and absorbed by the audience.

By building upon these natural reception conditions, *Measure For Measure* offered its audience a profound and anti-authoritarian narrative, which criticized England's new oligarchy and simultaneously endorsed public opinion, particularly subtle underclass backlash. Shakespeare's drama successfully manipulates the audience's feelings toward local government figures. Additionally, *Measure For Measure's* subversive themes would have encouraged strong anti-authoritarian sentiments in the Globe's audience, especially among the systematically overworked and abused "groundlings." However, rebellious transgressions against stern members of authority are not the only intended responses stimulated within the crowd. The play's atmosphere would have evoked ample opportunities for audience members to experience sympathy for the play's poor men and women as well as uneasy dread that stemmed from the ways London's own localized oppression affected their personal lives, outside the "safety" of the Globe Theater.

In the drama itself, severe bouts of poverty, plagues, and wars take a heavy emotional toll on the city's population and create an exceedingly tense backdrop, which allows for the "new oligarchic figures," namely Angelo, to intensely maintain local order, suppressing individual parishes under "puritanical" proclamations. In many ways, Angelo represents a stern churchwarden or vestryman, an individual who is permitted a reign of unprecedented authority and inflict methodical crackdowns onto the suburbs. As Angelo remains in the forefront of this war against festivities, the Duke looms in the background as a master manipulator and relies on Angelo's efforts to restore order to a city that has fallen into a state of corruption. Conflict arises from Shakespeare's common and "bawdy" characters, all who are hostile to the new changes and attempt to strike back through witty dialogue and rebellious asides addressed directly to the audience. *Measure For Measure* explores an extreme situation of social warfare, which portrays England's current struggles, and manages to speak out against travesties the growing "middling sort" inflicted upon their own neighbors.

Historical Background

In *Measure For Measure*, a fictional representation of Vienna depicts London's current state of social affairs: continual poverty, warfare, capital punishment, and outbreaks of the sweating sickness. Elizabeth I's final decade as queen has been referred to as "the black nineties," a frenzied period "of immediate whippings on the open street, and even a killing season in the many months when martial law was unleashed."¹ While three percent of the population enjoyed aristocratic privileges, earning "splendid

¹ Fitter, Christopher. "Radical Shakespeare *I Henry IV*." *I Henry IV ; A Critical Guide*. (London: Continuum, 2011) 99.

opportunities . . . from their control of land”², most people’s wages significantly dropped as the cost of basic dietary staples rose. Failed harvests in 1594-7 resulted in “prices of cheaper foodstuffs [increasing] more swiftly than did those of more expensive food.”³ The price of wheat climbed from 17.61 to 36.56 shillings per quarter between 1592-94, and continued to soar in 1595 (40.32 shillings) and 1596 (47.61 shillings). The cost of barley, oats, peas and beans, all staple food choices of the poor, rose with each passing year.⁴ When the poor managed to pay for food, nourishment came primarily from a meager diet “of bread, cheese, lard, soup, small beer and garden greens.”⁵ Living conditions were equally deplorable. Residences consisted of “poor one-room cottages, with little furniture,”⁶ and no wealth was accumulated since the vast majority did not own property. “The groundlings” in the Globe’s audience would have comprised London’s youthful apprentices and simple urban labors, who worked long hours for very little monetary gain. Due to variations of trades and work hours, precise national incomes of England’s common labors are difficult to estimate. Yet Wrightson’s economic statistics, taken from multiple sources, provides us with a solid framework:

Dr. Bowden has calculated that a regularly employed man in the south of England in the early seventeenth century might earn a maximum of around £10 [and] 8 [shillings] a year, while Miss Clark’s estimate suggests a figure of around £9 on average. . . . As for costs of subsistence for an average family, various estimates suggest that around £11-14 would be necessary for food, clothing, fuel and rent in normal years, substantially more in times of scarcity and high food prices.⁷

² Wrightson, Keith. *English Society, 1580-1680*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003) 138.

³ Wrightson 133.

⁴ Youings, Joyce. *Sixteenth Century England*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 270.

⁵ Wrightson 43.

⁶ Wrightson 43.

⁷ Wrightson 42.

Actors delivering passionate speeches about the specific struggles of London's poor to "2000 or more commoners"⁸ would have aroused suspicion from local overseers, because of wide-spread apprehension about underclass rebellion. Selecting a suitable fictional location was necessary to express controversial messages to the public, and so many of Shakespeare's dramas take place in a foreign city or country. For example, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* voice English concerns yet take place hundreds of miles away from Southwark, being located in northern Italy's Venice and Verona. Quite a few plays, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Timon of Athens*, are not only set in another land but chronologically take place before the birth of Jesus Christ. Shakespeare's *mise-en-scène* of foreign lands and historical time periods may have been attempts to prevent London's official censor from eliminating radical political themes. *Measure For Measure*'s imposes London's chronic poverty, attack on festivities, and oligarchic suppression onto a fictional representation of Vienna.

The Duke explains the city's current problems directly result from strict laws not being enforced to dissuade offenders. Since criminal misbehavior is not punished, the city's morality has deteriorated and governmental authority has grown weakened. Yet Mistress Overdone provides a valuable perspective about Vienna's troubles, because she expresses genuine concern about social ills that devastated the suburban population. Throughout the play, Mistress Overdone functions as a critical "mouth piece" for much public opinion, because she speaks for London's downtrodden working class and explains their own fears for the future, without using elaborate metaphors to belittle their needs. Mistress Overdone's dialogue with Pompey offers a detailed description about

⁸ Fitter 108.

Vienna's recent history, stating the city has experienced troubling events under the Duke's reign.

During this exchange, there are no gentlemen or officers on stage so Mistress Overdone has an opportunity to speak freely to her social equal about her grievances: "Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with the poverty, I am custom-shrunk" (I.ii.68). War, sweat, gallows, and poverty were all social issues affecting London's political climate. In the years between 1585 and 1603, the government's "demands to . . . finance war effort in the localities were monstrous and relentless,"⁹ especially due to the fact that money was needed "in costal towns and regular milita rates [along with the total] costs of the regime's military commitments between 1585 and 1603 amounted to over £2.5 million."¹⁰ In the late 1590s, Elizabeth's wars in Spain and Ireland required copious recruitment of fresh troops for the army and navy. A single expedition to Cadiz in 1596 comprised of an army of "6300 men, grouped into eight regiments, each consisting of 750 men in seven companies . . . A third of troops were veterans whom Sir Francis Vere had brought from the Low Countries, with the remaining being new recruits."¹¹ Furthermore, in 1600, on-going conflicts with Spain and Ireland called for "2000 recruits . . . to Ostend [and] 5000 men announced for Ireland."¹² Mistress Overdone never bothers to discuss "enemy" countries, because the state's political adversary, an unnamed ruler in a faraway land, is irrelevant to her survival in the suburbs. For Mistress Overdone, prevailing economic conditions would

⁹ Hindle, Steve. *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640*. (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 53.

¹⁰ Hindle 53.

¹¹ Hammer, Paul E. J. *Elizabeth's Wars: Wars, Government and Society in Tudor England, 1544-1604*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003) 195.

¹² Hammer 224.

hinder her already limited ability to buy food and clothing not only for herself, but for Kate Keepdown and her illegitimate child. The tax burden would have been relevant to the groundlings' own lives; for instance, "Kent alone had to find some £107,000 in the years 1589-1604."¹³ This number is remarkable compared against a simple laborer's annual salary of £9-10. Heavy taxes to finance multiple wars meant less available money for poor families to spend on overpriced wheat and barley.

Mistress Overdone mentions war in the same breath as high-levels of local poverty. In England, the cost of warfare came at a heavier price than simply taxing its people. A sharp rise in crime burdened an already polarized social system. During England's military campaigns, hundreds of soldiers deserted their foreign posts and returned to their home country, but these men had no income to buy food, shelter, or other necessary materials to survive. Unsurprisingly, military disorders were common in the period, with troops "mutin[ing] in Chester in 1594, 1595, 1596, and 1600; in Bristol in 1600 and 1602; in Ipswich in 1595; and in Towcester in 1598; and there were significant military disorders in the capital in 1589 and 1598."¹⁴ England's wars had a direct impact on high levels of violence, because swelling numbers of "vagrants tramping and stealing their way across the country [contributed] to the general panic about petty crime in the suburbs of towns in the 1590s."¹⁵ In order to suppress organized riots and individual crimes, several commissions were issued for provosts-marshal to "execute summary justice"¹⁶ and restore peace to the communities. It was common for men to be hanged, without a chance to plead for mercy at court hearings. According to Keith

¹³ Hindle 53.

¹⁴ Hindle 54.

¹⁵ Hindle 54.

¹⁶ Hindle 54.

Wrightston, it is impossible to find a specific count for the number of unemployed soldiers, returning to face penniless hardships, but vagrants were undoubtedly an issue of national concern. In 1695, roughly ninety years after *Measure For Measure*'s first performance, "Gregory King reckoned that there were 30,000 vagrants (one for every 182 of the settled population in his estimates), but this is just a guess."¹⁷

War and poverty were not the city's only woes. Mistress Overdone's use of "sweat" has two critical meanings: "hard work that requires violent or strenuous exertion" and "a condition resulting from bodily heat." The latter definition references an illness called "sweating sickness" that impacted a significant percent of the city's overall population. According to the OED, sweating sickness was considered a "febrile disease characterized by profuse sweating, of which highly and rapidly fatal epidemics occurred in England in the 15th and 16th centuries." Not only would the sickness infect dear family members and friends, resulting in the devastating loss of personal relationships, but plague relief would impact Mistress Overdone and her brothel. The government required "justices to engage in 'unprecedentedly precise, expensive, and time-consuming regulation of local affairs.'"¹⁸ For example, justices were demanded to burn victims' bedding and clothing, and impose a very strict housing regulation that meant "boarding up . . . infected houses and [preventing] the mobility of victims within them."¹⁹ When added to the financial burdens of war, sweating sickness came at exceptionally high

¹⁷ Wrightson 149.

¹⁸ Hindle 169.

¹⁹ Hindle 169.

costs, because “markets were ‘spoyled,’ towns ‘abandoned of all wealthy inhabitants who fledd in refuge’ and those that remained died in huge numbers.”²⁰

Finally, Mistress Overdone’s mention of the gallows creates a highly problematic, even contradictory, statement when one considers the Duke’s later explanation for his departure. According to the city’s ruler, the laws have been neglected “for . . . fourteen years” (I.iii.23). Judging from the Duke’s anarchic representation, surely it would be safe to assume that Mistress Overdone would have no reason to mention the gallows at all. Her description reveals an ugly truth that the Duke undermines in his conversation with Friar Thomas: men and women were still regularly hanged. Hindle claims “[Elizabethan] law could be savage, for it was concerned with exemplary punishment of that minority of offenders who were brought before the courts. Felonies, which included most serious crimes and extended down to the theft of goods valued at more than one shilling, were punishable by death.”²¹

Mistress Overdone’s allusions to the plights of the poor speak out against political turmoil in England’s capital. The Elizabethan period was a time of overwhelming divisions between the rich, the poor, and ambitious middle class, being “undoubtedly richer than its early Tudor counterpart” yet characterized by “permanent deprivation, a structural characteristic which was . . . exacerbated by intersecting crises of war, dearth, and theft.”²² Mistress Overdone’s speech would have incited sharply empathetic emotions in the Globe’s audience. While the theater’s carnival atmosphere gave young apprentices a brief moment of freedom from domestic drudgery and financial woes,

²⁰ Hindle 171.

²¹ Wrightson 164.

²² Hindle 54.

Mistress Overdone would have reminded them of their lot in life. For example, Mistress Overdone's mention of "war" would have instantly provoked thoughts about press gangs and martial law, which were two understandable fears for poor young males living in London. Since Mistress Overdone's experience resonated with the groundlings' experiences, the audience's emotions would have been manipulated to sympathize with her.

Angelo and the Oligarchic Crackdown

As the city experiences epidemic poverty, casualties in war, unexpected deaths from sweating sickness, and harsh legal punishments, Angelo's unprecedented appointment and abuse of political power embodies a new localized oligarchy, one that attempted to crush formerly accepted carnival activities. In *Measure for Measure's* opening scene, the Duke makes a crucial decision to wander throughout his troubled city under a friar's hood and spy on his citizens. While he longs for Vienna's laws to be restored to their former power, the Duke has no desire to police the lives of the common people himself since he "ever loved the life removed" (I.iii.9). He would rather shift that burden onto another man. The Duke chooses to appoint Angelo into a temporary position and transfers political power ("in our remove be thou at full ourself" (I.i.43)) in the latter's hands, including the authority to hold court hearings, declare public proclamations, dictate orders to lower-ranking officers of the peace, and execute criminals on the axe man's block. Angelo's newfound office is created to maintain a high standard of localized propriety. While the most "obvious" evidence of Angelo's hypocrisy is his sinful willingness to bed Isabella in exchange for her brother's freedom, Shakespeare's language and stagecraft hints at Angelo's more subtle yet equally alarming

duplicities. It is through Angelo's behavior that Shakespeare contentiously criticizes London's severe churchwardens and overseers.

During the tense 1590's, a significant social phenomenon known as the "new oligarchy" emerged in the midst of plague, war, and poverty. This middle class effort sought to redefine previous balances of economic and political power. While the monarch remained as God's appointed ruler, poised at the top of the social pyramid, aristocrats needed additional assistance to exercise strict social control in order for state power to expand. The end result was an unprecedented emphasis on "participation in governmental processes of the upper ranks of the 'peasantry,' the so-called 'middling sort,' as presentment jurors in local courts, as churchwardens, overseers of the poor, and village constables."²³ These competitive positions afforded advantageous chances for middle class growth, providing self-serving opportunities for members of this new "pseudo-gentry"²⁴ to rise through the social ranks. While local economics varied in each specific township, the middling sort generally experienced:

dramatic rises in living standards, better housing and more elaborate furnishing, cash in hand for the purchase of land, the setting-up of sons and the marriage portions of daughters. [In summary], it offered new chances of upward social mobility both for themselves and their children, on whose education and advancement they laid out much of their new wealth.²⁵

Higher education and subsequent wealth encouraged the middling sort to turn their backs on their poorer neighbors.

Angelo ultimately embodies oligarchic mentality for the following reasons: he only gains power through a commission, his personality mirrors capitalistic aggression

²³ Hindle 12.

²⁴ Wrightson 148.

²⁵ Wrightson 232.

present within the middling sort, his harshness is acknowledged as “new” and “unprecedented,” and his cultural crusade focuses on formerly accepted practices in a local area. In particular, Angelo’s main goals center upon restoring sexual morality to the city’s suburbs, which contributes to the notion that he functions more as a parish officer than a secular justice of the peace. During England’s organized oligarchic suppressions, secular courts had a strong role in punishing criminals, but “the church courts were still performing the lion’s share of moral discipline, and the better sort who served as churchwardens were perfectly prepared to present numerous offenders despite the likely hostility to follow.”²⁶ Angelo performs this exact social role when he closes brothels and arrests Claudio, Mistress Overdone, and Pompey to answer for charges of sexual delinquency. His narrow focus on these specific characters hints at Angelo’s involvement in local government, not national. Likewise, Angelo never investigates secular disputes concerning vagrancy, theft, and military desertion.

In the opening scene, the Duke praises Angelo as a man with “morality and mercy in Vienna / Liv[ing] in [his] tongue and heart” (I.i.43-44). His impeccable qualifications are supposedly central reasons why he receives the Duke’s express permission to control Vienna in his absence. Although Angelo initially hesitates, wishing to be tested in a smaller way, he eventually accepts the commission. The Duke’s commission would have been relevant to the expansion of the middling sort and new oligarchy, because “commissions were peculiarly English both in their flexibility and in their rather curious central-local relationships, and they gave early modern states a palpability and presence

²⁶ Hindle 188.

in the localities that it could not otherwise have enjoyed.”²⁷ His acceptance advances his status, much like England’s churchwardens who “wielded authority on behalf of external powers”²⁸, and allows him to exercise local control over other citizens. The fact that Shakespeare chooses to devote an entire scene to this visible exchange of power, the Duke handing the commission to Angelo, supports the notion of the playwright creating a story with the purpose of critiquing England’s own tense political climate.

Throughout the play, the Duke uses “precise” to describe the full extent of Angelo’s puritanical personality. “Precision” characterizes Angelo as a quintessential parish officer, because of his “strict[ness] in the observance of rule” along with his “scrupulous” and “overly formal” qualities. However, other characters use the same adjective in order to reveal additional psychological layers hidden within Angelo’s personality and office. For instance, when Lucio discovers Claudio has been arrested for fornication, the gentleman refuses to believe Mistress Overdone, because “he [Claudio] promised to meet [him] two hours since, and he was ever precise in promise-keeping” (I.ii.61-62). By using “precise” to praise Claudio’s dedication to fulfilling promises, even as small as punctuality, Lucio essentially informs the audience that Claudio and Angelo both share abilities to strictly adhere to their personal obligations. It is ironic Claudio is considered “precise” like Angelo, but faces beheading in three days for impregnating Juliet. Additionally, Elbow accuses Pompey and Froth of being “precise villains” (II.i.51). Elbow’s character is prone to malapropisms, but it is important to focus on meanings hidden with his entertaining misuse. In this case, Elbow associates “precision” with villains or individuals who are naturally disposed to base and criminal actions.

²⁷ Hindle 6.

²⁸ Hindle 209.

Elbow comically degrades precision as a nefarious symptom that Angelo himself wishes to eradicate from Vienna.

Ultimately, it is Angelo's lust for Isabella that draws a direct parallel between himself and the men who he arrests for the same offenses, openly proving his willingness to succumb to physical temptation. There are no statistics concerning incidents of sexual deviances among members of the clergy and elected churchwardens, but historical evidence states clerical infidelities occasionally threw England's moral sphere into disarray. During Shakespeare's era, several legal charges were brought against ministers, lecturers, and vestrymen. Disreputable cover-ups took place to maintain public appearances, especially the notion about unquestionable propriety and godliness within England's hierarchical structures. A few examples of lechery in the early seventeenth century church included:

James Hatton of Tarporley, a 'reading mynister and notable whoremaster,' and Reginald Fulloflove of Motttram-in-Longdendale, 'vehemently suspected for keeping bawdy houses' . . . when the honor and credit of the gospel was felt to be paramount and secular and ecclesiastical authorities hushed up the sexual delinquency of ministers, as was the case of Thomas Elcocke, the puritan rector of Barthomley and Stephen Jerome, town lecturer at Nantwich.²⁹

While Angelo is emphatically not a minister, rather the embodiment of oligarchic crackdown, his sexual transgressions with Isabella, a nun, resembles a situation that would have shocked the city populace and forcefully called the government's moral authenticity into public question. Although many contemporary cases of sexual delinquency were successfully hidden from public view, Angelo's sexual threats against a powerless woman provides an accessible and visual example of a situation that would

²⁹ Hindle 187.

have been the “most notorious of all . . . sexual impropriety.”³⁰ In *Measure For Measure*, Angelo’s virtues are annihilated, and the Globe’s audience is forced to question the authenticity of their local churchwardens.

Shakespeare does not limit his condemnation to Angelo’s lust to skillfully avoid simplistic interpretations of his politically complex character. Subtler criticisms include his business transaction with an unnamed burgher, a lamentation about the unprecedented nature of his harshness, and a Justice expressing disgust for Angelo’s severity.

After the audience learns about Claudio’s impending execution, Pompey delivers news of a proclamation that will destroy Mistress Overdone’s business. According to Pompey, Angelo has ordered that “all houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down” (I.ii.80). Since Angelo has chosen to target the suburbs for his moral crusade, his actions directly mirror English churchwardens attempting to repress carnival activities and festive culture, especially swearing, dancing, and other rituals. Shakespeare’s Globe Theater was located outside of the city proper and south of the River Thames, in a London suburb called Southwark. The Globe’s location existed “beyond the writ of London’s Puritan governors [and] must have consolidated the sense of transgressive release [in the audience], as spectators wound their way in Bankside and other Liberties among whorehouses and gambling dens to the ‘gamehouse’ or ‘playhouse.’”³¹ Angelo’s narrow focus on the suburb’s destruction would have effectively crushed the lives of its inhabitants and removed establishments, such as brothels, where they could take part in leisure enjoyments.

³⁰ Hindle 187.

³¹ Fitter 107.

However, the proclamation contains more information about Angelo's regime than merely his desire to obliterate festive counter-culture. When Mistress Overdone questions the status of brothels located in Vienna proper, Pompey informs her these bawdy houses "shall stand for seed . . . they had gone down too, but that a wise burgher put in for them" (I.ii.82-83). The burgher never appears on stage, is given a formal name, or holds any titles or offices. A burgher is only "an inhabitant of a burgh, borough, or corporate town," but his wealth influences city law. Despite salaries of "wage-earners who made up half of the national population declin[ing]"³² to an abysmal amount, the burgher represents the historical fact that the 1590-1600s was "a general period of prosperity [for] great merchants of the urban elite, masters, and professional men."³³ Pompey makes a point to describe the burger as a "wise" man, not necessarily praising the man's good sense, but slyly acknowledging he possessed ample persuasive skills and money to convince Angelo or a subordinate to allow city brothels to remain functional for public use. The burgher's role is significant, because of a disputatious implication for London's citizens: once an individual reaches a certain rank in society, he is placed above the law's retribution. While appointed churchwardens function under the guise of a "moral reformation," they turn a blind eye to racketeering and tolerate transgressions committed by either wealthy gentlemen or prominent members of the "middling sort."

On multiple occasions, characters deplore Angelo's iron grip on their city and describe it as an unprecedented political occurrence, because of its geographically narrow and severe nature. Upon learning about her business's imminent closure, Mistress Overdone emotionally conveys her shock and horror to Pompey: "Why, here's a change

³² Wrightson 146.

³³ Wrightson 147.

indeed in the commonwealth. What shall become of me?" (I.ii.87). At this point, Mistress Overdone claims Angelo's rule will have far reaching results, which is made abundantly clear when she invokes an image of the "commonwealth" or "whole body of people constituting a nation." *The State and Social Change* classifies "commonwealth" as a term derived from both classical republicanism and Christian humanism, because it emphasizes the "mutual interdependence of all subjects within an organic social order [and] in this view, rulers and property owners were portrayed merely as temporary stewards, rather than in the absolute owners of their estates."³⁴ Angelo's appointment as a parish officer destroys any semblance of "mutual interdependence" that is built from acts of neighborly goodness existing between the rich and poor. Angelo's eagerness to tear down Mistress Overdone's brothel while turning a "charitable" blind eye to the burgher pouring money into city whorehouses represents an unquestionable shift from humanist philosophy to "local property-holders and power-brokers [having] a vested interest . . . in the redefinition of the disorders of their poorer neighbors as crimes and their sexual and marital misdemeanors as sins."³⁵ Neighborliness has no place in a new oligarchy fueled by a collective middle-class pursuit of economic wealth. Mistress Overdone's particular use of "commonwealth" also references a populist counter-definition in new Puritan propaganda, "which [endlessly] harped on the dangers to the 'commonwealth' of vice, especially sexual vice, and extremists advocated the death penalty for prostitutes."³⁶ An unprecedented change in the "commonwealth of vice," such as closing suburban brothels, depicts Mistress Overdone as a politically-minded

³⁴ Hindle 55.

³⁵ Hindle 178.

³⁶ Gibbons, Brian, ed. *Measure For Measure*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) Footnote 87-8.

character, who knows only a certain niche of the population will come under swift legal attack. Finally, Mistress Overdone's question ("what shall become of me?") is a remarkable bit of deixis because, while she directs the question to Pompey, her actor may take an opportunity to turn to the audience. She would directly ask the groundlings to provide her with answers. Her question throws her upon the audience's mercy and forces them to acknowledge her predicament, especially because the "groundlings" were also subjected to class-bias under the new oligarchy's methodological and local crackdowns.

Mistress Overdone is not the only member of the cast who expresses awareness about Angelo's unusual rise to power. After Lucio questions a cuffed Claudio whether Juliet is "with child" (I.ii.137), the recently arrested youth discusses the puritanical extremism inherent within Angelo's harsh laws and punishments. More importantly, Claudio places a great deal of emphasis on Angelo's role as a deputy, which according to the OED translates to "a person deputed to exercise authority on behalf of the sovereign or sovereign power." While Angelo is not a national ruler, the sovereign power (the Duke) has given him the abilities to suppress and punish his neighbors for the sake of capitalistic prosperity. In addition, over the course of his fifteen-line speech to Lucio, Claudio uses "new" twice ("new deputy" (I.i.138) and "new governor" (I.i.146)), "newness" once ("glimpse of newness" (I.i.139)), "newly" once ("newly in the seat" (I.i.142)), and "freshly" once ("neglected Act freshly on me" (I.i.152)). The contemporary importance of Claudio's repetitive speech about Angelo's "newness," along with its overtones of churchwardens and parish officers, would have been clear to the audience, given "the sheer *range* of personal conduct which was now subject to

regulation seems particularly novel [and] the *severity* of the sanctions and the frequency with which they were applied, were extraordinary by medieval standards.”³⁷

Shakespeare also conveys the exceptional aspect of Angelo’s unyielding nature through a very minor character: an unnamed Justice who silently remains on stage throughout the entirety of Pompey and Froth’s court hearing. After the court hearing comes to an unsatisfying conclusion, with Angelo, Pompey, and Elbow departing from the stage, the Justice suddenly informs Escalus that Lord Angelo is a very “severe” (II.i.242) man. The Justice’s opinion represents an internal strife between members of the new oligarchy and suggests the frightening magnitude of Angelo’s extremism. Additionally, the Justice’s non-speaking role in the court hearing is very significant, because, while Escalus lectures Pompey for his bawdiness and Angelo angrily wishes for a reason to “whip them all” (II.i.121), the Justice observes the case in absolute silence and does not speak until Escalus asks him for the time. This sudden question prompts him to offer his opinion about Angelo’s harshness. Ironically, at the scene’s conclusion, the Justice judges *Angelo’s* behavior rather than denouncing Pompey or Froth’s transgressions with Elbow’s wife. The Justice reverses the court’s entire dynamic and implies that if anyone should be justly punished for personal immorality, it is Angelo.

Framing actions are not a unique structure in Shakespearean drama. The playwright often uses this method to subtly speak about political concerns so he can successfully transmit important messages to the audience. For example, in *Henry V*, the young King wanders throughout the English military camp in disguise so he can converse with common soldiers. He comes across Williams and Bates, and argues with them about

³⁷ Hindle 177.

whether or not it is honorable to die for their king and country. Before the duration of this heated exchange, a military man named Alexander Court has precisely one line: “Brother John Bates, is not that the morning which breaks yonder?” (IV.i.85). He does not speak again, not even when Henry arrives on the scene, yet he remains on the stage. His silent actions could create the entire scene’s mood, because the man “may of course just sit; he may also sneer during the exchange, laugh derisively, turn his back on Henry, weep, or bite his thumb at the king.”³⁸ Similarly, the Justice could frown when Angelo hopes to find a reason to whip Pompey and Froth. This simple facial expression communicates disapproval for the government’s harshness to a large audience without drawing the censor’s scrutiny.

The Duke’s Paternalist Rhetoric

Shakespeare’s political criticism proves expansive in scope, because the playwright does not exclusively focus on the new oligarchy’s emergence and Angelo’s unquestionable role as the embodiment of this state sanctioned repression. In addition, the Duke exemplifies another form of societal control through several heated discussions about paternalism, which was based upon mutual obligations between unequal members of society. Paternalism “[was] conducted on terms largely . . . determined by the relative superior”³⁹ and “embraced gross inequalities and which was, in the final analysis, based upon the individualistic pursuit of self-interest.”⁴⁰ The Duke’s speeches and actions not only portray him as a man who ruthlessly pursues his own authoritarian rights, but comprise a critique of why it is problematic to assume paternalism meant “caring for”

³⁸ Fitter, Christopher. “A Tale of Two Branaghs: Henry V.” *Shakespeare Left and Right*. Ed. Ivo Kamps. New York: Routledge, 1991. 259-75.

³⁹ Wrightson 65.

⁴⁰ Wrightson 66.

those living in chronic poverty. In its most idealized form, paternalistic nobles and lords sought to control the lower class out altruistic fatherly duty and compassionate longing to take care of local commoners. This representation also classified the lower classes as naïve children, who required parental control to lead fulfilled lives. Multiple interactions between the Duke and Lucio, Mariana, and Friar Thomas, expose hypocrisies behind paternalism's pretenses, effectively explaining how these contradictions negatively impacted members of the working poor.

The drama's first example occurs after Angelo has accepted his commission and issued a proclamation, demanding the closure of all suburban brothels. After departing from the public sphere, the Duke meets Friar Thomas and speaks to him about Vienna's strict laws falling into disuse and causing the city's overall moral degradation. Throughout the course of their conversation, the Duke uses an extended metaphor to fully illustrate why lower class deference is an absolute requirement for rulers to maintain civic stability and cultivate an enlightened society:

Now, as fond fathers
 Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch
 Only to stick it in their children's sight
 For terror, not to use – in time the rod
 More mocked than feared – so our decrees
 Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
 And Liberty plucks Justice by the nose,
 The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
 Goes all decorum (I.iii.24-32).

The first three lines are direct references to paternalism, because the Duke draws parallels between the state's citizens and a father's children. In a typical domestic household, disobedient children were occasionally beaten for their misbehaviors, but historians have exaggerated parents' casual uses of severe discipline. Rather than shamelessly beating a

child for no conceivable reason, many moralists preached to fathers that “admonition should come first and that the rod should be used only as a last resort, and even then in moderation, and accompanied by an explanation to the child of the reasons for its use.”⁴¹

The Duke’s explanation reveals his callousness, which was severe even for the time period, because he insists on *immediate* use of the rod rather than alternative solutions. He also claims officials do not properly take advantage of their metaphorical rods since it is used to merely to inspire fear in local lawbreakers rather than brought in full force upon their bodies. He believes the simple threat of legal punishment would eventually make a mockery of the government’s abilities to follow through with punishment. Thus, his endorsement of harsh laws mirrors England’s own parliament acts “in the 1570s, the 1590s, and the [later] 1620s [when] the government resorted to draconian policies (the whipping onslaughts against vagrancy in 1572) [and the regime’s evident concerns] to vindicate its paternalistic credentials and . . . promote the governance of the self.”⁴² This representation of paternalism strays from the fatherly compassion and instead relies on sanctioned abuses.

The Duke creates another negative dichotomy about lower class freedom when he describes heated interactions between a baby and nurse. Instead of portraying the “baby” as a gentle and cherished infant, the Duke insists the baby is actually a wild, violent, and unrestrained creature. The frightened nurse is unable to defend herself against the small infant’s fists. In reality, the Duke’s exaggerated description of a baby beating a nurse creates an impossible situation, because an infant has no physical power over a fully-

⁴¹ Wrightson 124.

⁴² Hindle 173.

grown adult. This representation deliberately degrades the collective lower class and shows the social injustices in paternalistic metaphor.

The Duke's apprehension about insouciance of authority was a common sentiment felt by late Elizabethan governors as continual crises of war, dearth, and poverty impacted a vast majority of society. The upper class's apprehension of a full-scale riot sweeping through the nation transformed anxiety into a crippling hysteria, with "social values [such as honor and pride] . . . at least partially informed by a deep-seated sense of personal and societal insecurity, a perception that was particularly intense in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England."⁴³ It is therefore unsurprising that the audience's overall reception to the Duke's rationalization would have been strongly negative, especially regarding his concluding sentence: "and quite athwart / Goes all decorum" (I.iii.31-32). The Duke's obvious revulsion at a society lacking both civility and good breeding would have been a direct piece criticism flung at the theater, a place where festive culture dominated the atmosphere and overturned civil conventions a regular basis. The Duke's actor would further incite the audience if he chose that particular movement to look away from Friar Thomas and at the groundlings, who surrounded the stage, because then both his body language and speech would blame them for their undeniable contributions in allowing "Liberty" to subvert gentile honor.

Since paternalism heavily relies on the concept of "deference" between unequal members of society, Shakespeare's drama demonstrates the ways this class ideology further fuels stratification and fails promote justice. As he describe the necessity for strict laws, the Duke uses natural and wild images in the following metaphor: "we have

⁴³ Hindle 223.

strict statutes and most biting laws, the needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds, which for this fourteen years we have let slip, even like an o'er grown lion in a cave that goes not out to prey" (I.iii.20-24). According to the Duke, strict laws have always been a part of city government. Yet these regulations have not been enforced for over a decade and resulted in the city's downfall. His sentiments mirror Sergeant Christopher Yelverton's words to the House of Lords in 1598: "when . . . a common wealth is invaded by any newe and outrageous misdemeaneer, if there not be lawes to suppress it, it will endanger the state."⁴⁴ Like the Duke, Yelverton also legitimates severity in times of turbulence.

Despite the Duke's unrelenting wish to rule without personal error, he describes the city government as a "lion" and the ordinary citizens as "prey," which accurately represents the socially unequal roles inherent in paternalism. The Duke's figurative use of "lion" contains two very contradictory meanings: "the type of [person] who is strong, courageous, or fiercely brave" or "a fiercely cruel, tyrannical, or 'devouring' creature [person]." The dual meaning indicates that while the Duke longs for the government to control its city, out of a sense of brave righteousness, actually enforcing statutes could result in tyranny and backlash. When pertaining to humans, "prey" chiefly refers to "a person who is pursued or controlled by another, being [someone] who is easily deceived or harmed." The Duke categorizes the majority of the population as quickly deceived, implying many people are "oblivious to their needs" and require extensive care to conduct themselves like productive members of society.

An additional case of the Duke abusing paternalistic rhetoric and not "caring" about commoners emerges when Lucio openly admits that he lied in a court hearing

⁴⁴ Hartley, T.E. ed., *Proceedings in Parliament of Elizabeth* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1981): 198.

overseen by the Duke. His deliberate deception released him from legal obligations to Kate Keepdown and her infant: “Yes, marry I did; but I was fain to forswear it, they would else have married me to the rotten medlar” (IV.iii.160-161). While the Duke must remain in disguise and cannot punish Lucio at this moment without sacrificing his grand scheme in the process, his language and behavior give a clear indication that the Duke cares less about Kate Keepdown’s struggles than he does about the slander Lucio attaches to his name. The Duke’s immense political sensitivity displaces his societal obligations of ensuring the common people receive justice. In the play’s first act, the Duke admits his want for an unblemished name. In his speech to Friar Thomas, the ruler stresses paternalism is important for a society to properly function, but in the same breath, the Duke speaks about self-serving desires to avoid being viewed as a hypocritical tyrant in his people’s eyes: “I do fear, too dreadful. Sith ‘twas my fault to give the people scope, ‘twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them for what I bid them do” (I.iii.35-38). Rather than express selfless paternal love for his people, the Duke frets about his own reputation and believes ruling without personal error is far more important than the welfare of Vienna’s population.

Furthermore Shakespeare manipulates audience emotion regarding paternalistic rhetoric when the Duke meets Mariana to discuss playing the “bed trick” on Angelo. In the scene’s opening lines, the gentlewoman demands for her servant boy to stop singing at once: “Break off thy song and haste thee quick away. Here comes a man of comfort, whose advice hath often stilled my brawling discontent” (IV.i.7-9). Songs and dances were often associated with the theater’s carnival spirit as well as other cherished and festive activities. It was customarily after the final act for many dramas to conclude with

an enjoyable musical number. At this juncture in the play, the singing boy offers a brief and joyous respite from endless court hearings, arrests, and prison sentences. However, at Mariana's bidding, the young boy ceases his song and leaves the stage for the remainder of the play. Mariana shooing away the boy in favor for a "man of comfort" implies music can never bring merriment to a person, especially compared against a wise father figure's advice. The gentlewoman's expresses extreme loyalty to paternalistic rhetoric, because she believes festive activities, such as music, should be eliminated since the path to finding joy in life rests with submitting to social betters.

The Duke manages to stir further agitation within the groundlings, replying: "'Tis good; though music oft have such charm to make bad good and good provoke harm" (IV.i.14-15). According to the Duke, music's charm is rooted in "badness" and trickery, ultimately deceiving the listener into believing harmful behaviors are honorable and desirable. At this moment, the audience's feelings are soured toward the Duke, who finds corruption in harmless leisure activities that temporarily free them from the "real world's" burdens.

Oligarchy's Repressive Crusade Against The Poor

England's new oligarchy was a unique result of an expanding middle-class, immense societal strain from war and dearth, and crippling fear of an organized and massive lower-class rebellion. All these factors "created pressure from above for the creation of a more ordered and stable society [and] spontaneous local efforts"⁴⁵ in the pursuit of stability. While the gentry and "middling sort" gained more lands and economic power, the living conditions of the lower class deteriorated at a rapid rate. In

⁴⁵ Wrightson 163.

England's metropolitan centers, it was depressingly common to see "the emergence of squalid overcrowded pauper suburbs" (Wrightson 148), which would have resembled the destitute characteristics present in *Measure For Measure's* own suburban neighborhood. In order to prevent further social unease, such as enclosure and grain riots, several local attempts were made to restrict the "most private spheres of [the lower class's] lives"⁴⁶, including their vocabulary marital opportunities, and recreational pastimes. These new collective attitudes eliminated opportunities for rich and poor to associate as neighbors, almost equals, in a celebratory environment. Furthermore, the clergy was unable to promote wakes and ales as charitable events meant to gather food for impoverished families, fueling an already devastating situation in times of rising food prices and low wages. *Measure For Measure's* dramatic plot parallels England's own class warfare, because Angelo's political and moral agenda has a very clear bias slanted particularly against the poor population.

Violent punishment is an immediate danger. On three separate occasions, Angelo, Escalus, and the Provost all threaten to whip Pompey for his unrepentant behavior. Shakespeare references "whipping" in many of his other plays to discuss the brutal punishment inflicted on men and women for the sake of maintaining order. In *King Lear*, the Fool speaks about whipping as a device used by the ruling class to suppress the poor, regardless of whether commoners behave in a subservient manner or not: "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'll have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace" (I.iv.142-145). The Fool clearly presents a despotic and impossible scenario for

⁴⁶ Hindle 187.

the poor to move forward with their daily lives without facing the whip. According to the Fool, it hardly matters if commoners chose to speak out or remain quiet. England's expanding middle class has already been granted the power to inflict punishment on their neighbors, and they do not need a logical reason to abuse it. Since he has been established a very aware character, knowing all the details about Angelo's proclamation, perhaps Pompey's outwardly resistant behavior stems from the fact that he already knows he would face legal abuse even if he submissively behaved in accordance to his rank.

Moreover, Lucio's appearance on-stage during Pompey's arrest elaborates on the advantages money had when facing punishment. While Elbow carts Pompey off to jail, the audience knows that an accused individual can request bail from the officer, provided they either have money to pay the complete amount *or* have wealthy friends to assist them out of their legal troubles. The mere concept of "bail" contains an inherent class-bias in the legal system since it provides a temporary escape from jail for wealthier individuals who have enough money to pay off the city government. When Pompey witnesses Lucio's unexpected entrance on stage, he cries out with sudden relief: "I spy comfort, I cry bail; here's a gentleman and friend of mine" (III.ii.37-38). Pompey has long acknowledged Lucio as a friend, because both characters frequent Mistress Overdone's house on a regular basis. Pompey desperately wants Elbow to know that Lucio is a gentleman who, not only has more wealth and prestige than the constable himself, but has enough money in his pocket to release Pompey from an extended stay in prison.

Various instances of Shakespeare speaking out against class-bias in the legal system occur in other dramas. In *Henry V*, after Henry insists the king "would not wish

himself any where” (IV.i.174) except on the battlefield, Bates rebukes him and states “then I would he were here alone; so should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor man’s lives saved” (IV.i.175-177). Since a ransom entails payment for the return of a hostile, aristocrats could be spared from death in times of warfare. If the French captured Bates or Williams, no one would offer to pay a ransom and the end result would unquestionably be death. The common soldiers are aware of how little their lives are worth, especially when compared to the king’s political “value.” Another example of systematic class-bias happens in *2 Henry VI*. Cade orders for a clerk’s execution after the man states that he can sign his name: “away with him, I say! hang him with his pen and ink-horn about his neck” (IV.ii.98-99). In these lines, Cade criticizes neck-verses or the benefit of clergy. When formally charged with a crime, clergymen could choose an ecclesiastical court under canon law rather than face a secular trial. A legal loophole allowed literate men to read from a Bible passage and ask for benefit of clergy whereas illiterate men and women had no opportunity to influence their court hearings.

There are many indications, typically within the unyielding harshness of Church courts, that forgiveness is not meant to be extended toward members of the “undeserving poor,” especially during such tense and hysterical times as the 1590-1600s. Elbow informs the disguised Duke that Pompey will face hanging for his lechery, stating “his neck will come to your waist, a cord, sir” (III.ii.36), which describes a horrific picture of Pompey hanging from the cord wrapped around the Duke’s waist. Instead of preaching about God granting forgiveness to sinners, the Duke speaks about his support for a lengthy prison sentence, because “correction and instruction must both work ere this rude beast will profit” (III.ii.29-30). Although the audience has been shown the friar’s true

identity, seeing a “holy man” praise Pompey’s prison sentence and possible death, would have created uneasy feelings and aroused distrust toward clergy. Clerical complicity in authoritarian harshness was commonplace in this period, because “the church hierarchy bolstered the ‘sagging authority’ of the spiritual courts by issuing ecclesiastical commissions to the bishops [and] these joint tribunals of ecclesiastical officers and lay magistrates enjoyed wide powers of imprisonment and estreat.”⁴⁷

After Elbow hauls Pompey off stage, another arrest immediately takes place for the audience’s visual consumption. Mistress Overdone appears on the scene along with Escalus, the Provost, and several unnamed officers. She confirms Lucio’s tendency to break promises to unprivileged individuals, who have placed their trust in him. Rather than meekly accepting her prison sentence, Mistress Overdone chooses to reveal Lucio’s unscrupulous nature to both the Provost and Escalus, declaring:

My lord, this is one Lucio’s information against me. Mistress Kate Keepdown was with child by him in the Duke’s time, he promised her marriage, his child is a year and a quarter old come Philip and Jacob - I have kept it myself - and see how he goes about to abuse me (III.ii.170-174).

Mistress Overdone’s statement illustrates Lucio as a lecherous man who would gladly formulate a brazen lie to escape marriage to Kate. However, regardless of Lucio’s behavior, Kate and her child would have undoubtedly suffered most under England’s illegitimacy laws. Illegitimacy rates were a prominent economic concern for the new oligarchy due to their unquestionable impact on local poor relief. According to religious moralists, rising illegitimate births were perennial problems, stemming from “‘whoredom,’ a sexual laxity alleged produced by a population which regarded sexual

⁴⁷ Hindle 179.

transgressions as merely the ‘tricke of youth.’”⁴⁸ As a way to prevent this contemporary moral crisis from ruining a parish’s economy, unwed mothers faced heavy fines, public whippings, which sometimes were inflicted on pregnant women, and imprisonment in a state-run bridewell or workhouse.

Empirical statistics clearly support the law’s swiftness and unfaltering brutality: “in the four counties of Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Somerset, and Warwickshire, at least 203 women were punished by Elizabethan and early Stuart magistrates for bastard-bearing. Of these, 112 (60 per cent) were incarcerated and a further 71 (35 per cent) were whipped.”⁴⁹ As an unwed mother, already working as a prostitute in a dejected state of poverty, Kate’s position under the harsh illegitimacy laws aroused horror from the women in the audience, especially prostitutes from nearby whorehouses located in Southwark.

In addition to facing life-altering punishments simply for being an unwed mother, Lucio’s broken promise of marriage illustrates another prevalent and tragic trend that ruined lower-class women. Wrightson cites the real life example of “Mary Foster and Edward Alexander . . . fellow servants in the Essex town of Witham . . . [despite plans to marry], he had moved on to service elsewhere when she discovered her pregnancy. [Some girls] were doubtless deceived by their suitors.”⁵⁰ In Lucio’s specific case, his ability to ignore Kate and his child, in spite of newfound moral legislation, is made possible because of his elevated social status. As far as illegitimacy laws were concerned, most unmarried fathers were called into court and simply given a “a bond not

⁴⁸ Wrightson 92.

⁴⁹ Hindle 186.

⁵⁰ Wrightson 93.

to re-offend”⁵¹, but, unlike the brutality inflicted on mothers, there was an on-going debate about whether justices of the peace had the power to order “the whippings of bastard-bearers [since some moralists believed that whipping was] a ‘slavish punishment not fit to be inflicted on gentlemen.’”⁵² This view is made clear in the play because Angelo and Escalus never directly threaten Lucio with whippings or prison sentences for his sexual liberties with women.

Yet this grim exchange also illuminates charitableness between people who are suffering together in dire straits. Mistress Overdone expresses a great deal of compassion toward other women. Even though her social “betters,” namely wealthy men, insist certain members of the poor are “undeserving” of basic governmental assistance, she still offers financial and emotional support to Kate and her child for almost an entire year. Mistress Overdone’s strong attachment to Kate Keepdown and her child is unsurprising because “women were [also]. . . likely to be involved in bread-and-butter [domestic] disputes [that] might have had political implications in the broader sense of the term.”⁵³ Her involvement in Kate’s domestic life stems from goodhearted desires to provide a warm family environment for Lucio’s child. Mistress Overdone’s charitable warmth is a common character trait of prostitutes in Shakespeare’s dramas. A primary example is Mistress Quickley, from Shakespeare’s historical plays *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV*. Mistress Quickley is very forgiving toward Falstaff’s transgressions and offers him an abundance of domestic creature comforts in her tavern, in spite of the man’s eager willingness to take advantage of her kindness.

⁵¹ Hindle 185.

⁵² Hindle 185.

⁵³ Harris, Tim. *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001) 18.

When Escalus responds to Mistress Overdone's accusations about Lucio, he does indicate that he personally disapproves of the gentleman's loose behavior. However, his answer is very curt and does not acknowledge Mistress Overdone's admirable effort to create a family for Kate and Lucio's child. Instead, he orders Mistress Overdone's immediate imprisonment and prevents her from asking for clemency: "That fellow is a fellow of much licence: let him be called before us. Away with her to prison, go to, no more words" (III.ii.175-176). Escalus's curtness informs the audience that while he wishes Lucio to appear in court, he makes no demands for his arrest nor does he send one of the many officers who are currently on stage to fetch him. Escalus's use of "let" or "to allow [or] permit" does not hold the same forceful connotation as "he must be called before us." Later in the play, Lucio mentions his earlier court appearance to the Duke: "I was once before [the Duke] for getting a wench with child" (IV.iii.158). Since this conversation happens well after Mistress Overdone's arrest, it can be reasonably assumed that Lucio has not been summoned to court to answer her accusations. Perhaps Escalus expresses lukewarm interest about Lucio's misbehavior because a gentleman begetting one illegitimate child was a common occurrence, given "a number of illegitimate births resulted from the classical circumstances of the sexual exploitation by masters or gentlemen of servants and social inferiors."⁵⁴ The jury's concern with a gender-specific agenda was only known to be flexible in notorious cases such as when "Thomas Greenhalgh of Atherton (Lancashire) had fathered seven bastards."⁵⁵ Since Lucio has not offended several times and the fact that court hearings could be costly endeavors, it is possible Escalus immediately removed Mistress Overdone from the scene, because

⁵⁴ Wrightson 92.

⁵⁵ Hindle 186.

“private prosecution was an expensive and troublesome matter . . . [if the loss or injury was small, the court case] might not seem worth the loss of time and money.”⁵⁶ It would not have been worth Angelo and Escalus’s time and effort to extend justice to a common prostitute.

After Mistress Overdone is arrested and taken to the bridewell, she never appears again for the remainder of the play. Pompey does not encounter his former boss inside the prison walls, despite coming across all of Mistress Overdone’s patrons. Her “disappearance” from the drama leads one to question the location of her cell inside the bridewell. Furthermore, the Duke never formally pardons Mistress Overdone for her “crimes” against the government, even though he publicly forgives the men - Angelo, Claudio, Barnardine, and Lucio - for their criminal misbehaviors. While statistics concerning incarceration of women varied from county to county, female sexual delinquency often resulted in a long stay in the bridewell, with “sentences for sexual immorality issued by Lancashire bench graduated between one and twelve months [and] the Somerset bench . . . similarly flexible about the degree of corporal punishment.”⁵⁷ Since Mistress Overdone was never formally pardoned, she could remain in prison for a year because she owned a bawdyhouse. Additionally, the justice system’s strong bias against lower-class women made evident, considering Barnardine’s willingness to commit murder can be forgiven over a woman who establishes a brothel to survive in the poverty-stricken suburbs. Shakespeare depicts a frightening society, where homicide is no longer more serious than running a brothel, to arouse the audience’s awareness about alarming political trends that affect their livelihoods.

⁵⁶ Wrightson 164.

⁵⁷ Hindle 186.

The concept of the “undeserving poor” also affects the ways other characters view Pompey. In the third act, Elbow arrests Pompey for “being a bawd” and immediately attempts to drag him off-stage to the jail, where he is doomed to spend the remainder of the play. Although most court cases associated with sexual delinquency were related to “bastard-bearing,” there are “sporadic references to other forms of sexual deviance . . . including brothel-keeping.”⁵⁸ Pompey’s officially works in Mistress Overdone’s brothel as a tapster, but Escalus, Angelo, Elbow, and the Provost place a great deal of extra emphasis on Pompey’s notorious role as a “bawd” in order to attempt to “legitimize their rule by persuading subordinates to adopt demeaning views of themselves and their own class.”⁵⁹ The Provost adopts this method when he threatens Pompey during his stay in the gaol: “your deliverance with an unpitied whipping; for you have been a notorious bawd” (IV.ii.10-11). His particular emphasis on “unpitied” promotes the idea that Pompey’s punishment should not excite compassion in reasonable and moral people, because he falls among the ranks of the “undeserving” poor and needs to be punished so societal order is maintained.

Pompey is called a “bawd” a total of fifteen times over the course of the play. “Bawd” refers to “one employed in pandering to sexual debauchery, a procurer.” Elbow claims Pompey attempted to recruit his wife into Mistress Overdone’s service although the constable cannot offer any solid evidence in response to Pompey’s dazzling wit. As an adjective, “bawdy” has a more broad definition, describing someone who is “lewd, unchaste, soiled, obscene, and filthy,” and Lucio even states Pompey was sexually deviant at birth, calling him “Bawd Born” (III.ii.61). Lucio’s opinions about personal

⁵⁸ Hindle 187.

⁵⁹ Harris 71.

characteristics based on one's class status resonate with sanctioned impulses to control the poor due to the fact that they were considered the "woorst and inferior sort of people."⁶⁰ Despite Lucio's own crimes, he feels entitled to demean others for the same sins.

Having dialogue take place within the local prison provides ample opportunities for Shakespeare to express commentary about England's operating bridewells, created ostensibly to stop a sudden rise in crime, but in fact, were meant to contain the rising tide of vagrancy. The bridewell's central objective was "'social transformation' in the contexts of the need for '[generalized] social discipline' and the 'emergence of an idea of deviance'"⁶¹ In *Measure For Measure's* gaol, the demographic mirrors a historically accurate population of a typical local bridewell. Pompey comically lists Mistress Overdone's patrons and their crimes, concluding with a politically-loaded statement: "all great doers in our trade, and are now 'for the Lord's sake'" (IV.iii.15-16). Although Pompey amuses the audience with his prattle about Master Caper, Young Dizie, and their companions' many scandalous acts, his last sentence, "for the Lord's sake," was commonly associated with "the cry of prisoners begging for charity."⁶² Mistress Overdone's former patrons have been effectively stripped of their freedoms and livelihoods, and now must beg the audience to release them from their pain.

In Pompey's speech, even with the exception of Lucio, not all of Mistress Overdone's former customers are serving lengthy sentences within the jail's formidable walls. The two unnamed gentleman, who cruelly joke about venereal disease located in

⁶⁰ Hindle 181.

⁶¹ Hindle 163.

⁶² Gibbons 170, footnote 16.

Mistress Overdone's hip, do not make another appearance in prison or at court hearings. Their notable absence leads one to assume they have escaped punishment at Angelo's hands and may have chosen to give patronage to the "legal" city brothels.

More significantly is the appearance of Master Froth in court and the way his social status shields him from harsh punishments at Escalus's hands. According to Pompey's recollections, Master Froth has recently received an inheritance from his dead father, a substantial amount worth "four score pounds a year" (II.i.109-110). In 1603, James I required all Englishmen, who had lands worth forty pounds a year to accept knighthood⁶³, placing them into the coveted realm of the gentry. Young Froth has received twice this amount and therefore, has established a modest income for himself, which benefits him in court. Master Froth's elevated social status explains why Escalus chooses to give an uncharacteristically light sentence. Instead of threatening to whip Froth into submission or sentence him to an extend stay in the local bridewell, Escalus bestows fatherly advice on the young man: "Master Froth, I would not have you acquainted with tapsters; they draw you, Master Froth, and you will hang them. Get you gone, and let me hear no more of you" (II.i.174-177). Escalus's use of "drawn" effectively removes any personal responsibility from Froth's actions. Instead Escalus deliberately chooses to pin all the blame on the tapsters' abilities to coerce and rein an otherwise respectable gentleman into a sinful place. Escalus's blanket degradation of tapsters must have included some amongst the groundlings.

Claudio and Juliet

⁶³ Gibbons, footnote 109-110

Yet, despite generous acts of leniency given to Froth and Lucio, the play's puritanical crusade is so extreme in nature that fresh enforcement of Vienna's old laws actually "break down" some established class barriers. The drama's focal point mainly revolves around the arrest of Claudio, who is categorized in the cast list as "a young gentleman." However, in spite of Claudio's relatively high place in the social hierarchy, Shakespeare implies the young man's finances and influential friendships are not plentiful enough to ensure his survival under the new oligarchy's moral crusade.

Before the events unfold in the drama, Juliet and Claudio have already decided to wed, but, according to Claudio, the couple chooses not to announce their intentions due to financial and social reasons:

This we came not to
Only for propagation of a dower
Remaining in the coffer of her friends,
From whom we thought it meet to hide our love
Till time had made them for us (I.ii.130-134).

Marriages in Shakespeare's England were based on many factors, namely economic gain, familial obligation, and personal love among common men and women. There also was "a great deal of 'homogamy' in [all] marriage[s]: like married like [meaning] all of the principal social groups were essentially endogamous, marrying within their own ranks."⁶⁴

Claudio and Juliet may be relatively close in social rank, but both money and societal approval prevent them from marrying yet in a formal ceremony. To receive a larger dowry and marry Juliet, Claudio must impress her "friends," who might be relatives and employers with vested interest in the marriage. While Claudio may have led a privileged life, especially compared against characters such as Pompey and Mistress Overdone,

⁶⁴ Wrightson 95

Shakespeare does not provide youth with any opportunity to pay bails or fines. Claudio's swift arrest purposely creates ideal reception conditions to frighten the men in the audience and tune them into Angelo's hypocritical and oppressive behavior.

At the time of his arrest, Juliet stands behind Lucio and the Provost. Even though her lover is about to be taken away to prison, she does not speak for the duration of the entire scene. Just like the unnamed Justice's notable silence in court, Juliet's own quiet appearance does not necessarily make her presence any less meaningful to the audience. At this point, the actor would have appeared heavily pregnant to convey to full emotional impact to the groundings. While Claudio laments about both his failure to contact the Duke and his impending death at Angelo's hands, Juliet would have been either lamenting in the background or quietly expressing her dismay through silent yet horrified facial expressions. The actor's goal would be to instigate an unspeakably deep sense of grief from the groundlings. Her actions, such as silently weeping or tearing at her hair, would have effectively portrayed the ways oligarchic suppression destroyed relationships and the spirits of individual people.

After Claudio's arrest, his sister seeks Angelo's audience so she can beg for his pardon. When Angelo's servant exits the stage to formally receive Isabella, Angelo has a brief private moment alone with the Provost, who asks "what shall be done, sir, with the groaning Juliet?" (II.ii.16). Angelo informs the other man that he must fulfill the following instructions: "dispose of her to some more fitter place, and that with speed" (II.ii.18-19) and "see you the fornicatress be removed. Let her have needful, but not lavish, means. There shall be order for't" (II.ii.24-26). Angelo does not mention Juliet's name or formal title, never calling her a "lady" to befit her rank, but instead he refers to

her as “the fornicatress,” a great source of immoral depravity. According to the OED, fornicatress has a far more severe meaning than a simply woman who is guilty of one act of fornication, which would imply Juliet succumbed on a single occasion, with her pregnancy a visible result of this isolated mistake. As a fornicatress, Angelo claims Juliet is a wretched creature who is *addicted* to sexual intercourse outside the sanctity of marriage. Therefore she deserves a severe punishment to maintain high moral standards in the city. Although Angelo allows Juliet to give birth to her child in a private comfortable space, which would have been a charity gesture for most unwed women, he never indicates what will happen to Juliet and her newly born infant. He gives orders to the provost, who transfers Juliet to a room in the prison. While she may not experience a cramped locked cell or gyves, Juliet still is sent to a place where a “substantial number of single mothers suffered hard labor and due correction for their lack of sexual restraint.”⁶⁵ Considering her friends originally disapproved of her marriage to Claudio, it is unlikely their influences will reduce or annul her sentence. Juliet’s severe treatment intended to terrorize the common women in the Globe’s audience. After all, if a gentlewoman is unable to escape from the new moral crusade sweeping across England, even when she attempts to use the image of a faithful and crying wife against them, then it is only a matter of time before continual social stratification completely devastate the lives of London’s working class women.

Theater & carnival values as a key part of counter-culture

The Globe’s primary clientele, the “groundlings,” largely consisted of youthful apprentices, prostitutes, gamblers, and other members who belonged to the city’s working

⁶⁵ Hindle 186

class poor. Their enjoyment of comical dramas was rooted in the fact that the theater offered them undeniable escapism from life's cruelty. Plays were cultural portals into another realm, set away from stern reprimands issued from London officials, legal troubles, and physical abuse experienced at the hands of their employers. The theater was cherished for its collective spirit of liberty, and "inscribed [Southwark] as [an] area of anomaly and arena of cultural ambivalence, open to forms of signification more contradictory, more extravagant and incontinent, than those allowed to manifest themselves within the city gates."⁶⁶ Since the Globe itself was located well outside London proper and attracted like-minded people to participate in its extravagant festivities, the plays not only offered escapism and critique of the new oligarchy, but also provided opportunities for collective and subversive releases directed against London's authority, including vestrymen and overseers. The theater glorified the same carnival values that were under organized attack. Additionally, the dreadful possibility of facing impressments or "press gangs" shortly after the drama's final act only served to fuel anti-authoritarian energy throbbing within the audience. These entrapments into England's military, where young men faced starvation and death overseas, were common in areas where large crowds gathered, including the Globe Theater. Carnival values comprised a counter-culture that dominated the theater's joyous and liberal atmosphere.

In particular, *Pompey* and *Mistress Overdone*'s small rebellious acts would have been readily embraced in the Globe. Contemporary political and philosophical writers may have preached loyalty to the crown, rigid roles predetermined for each social class, and the divine rights of kings, but those who lived in chronic poverty were fully aware of

⁶⁶ Mullaney, Steven. The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1995): 31

injustices dealt against them. Not everyone subscribed to official dogmas of the hierarchic order nor did they express unconditional adoration for Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Despite England's high illiteracy rate, including roughly "seventy per cent of the male population"⁶⁷, laborers and apprentices still gained valuable insight through listening to political rumors, especially in alehouses, and participating in seditious talk with their friends and neighbors. The majority of the population – whom some historians believe to have been politically unaware and entirely excluded from that realm – could powerfully express their opinion not only through rumor, but riots and protests. Shakespeare's Globe Theater offered a safe place for common people to come together, voice their political concerns, and speak out against repressive "authority figures" on stage, with little chance of facing immediate whippings for their presumptuous behavior.

As stated, the theater was presently under moral attacks fueled by the local overseers. Acting tropes were banned from performing in certain parishes alongside of other festive activities, which included "wakes, ales, greens, may games, rush bearings, bear baits, love ales, bonfires, gaming, piping, and dancing."⁶⁸ While the unyielding restrictions were justified as necessary means to uphold godliness, especially on the Sabbath, "Merry England's" downfall can be subscribed to "political and religious factors"⁶⁹, including widespread poverty and fear of rebellion. By eliminating theatrical performances and other forms of carnival activities, the new oligarchy attempted to destroy opportunities for the lower class to develop neighborly bonds, congregate in groups, and discuss current events. The restrictions heavily depended on local authority's

⁶⁷ Harris 6

⁶⁸ Hindle 188

⁶⁹ Hindle 188

willingness to enforce them. For example, in the 1590s, Shakespeare could not even put on plays in his hometown, Stratford-Upon-Avon, due to severe regional enforcement, yet he still found a receptive audience in London's Southwark.

Despite *Measure For Measure*'s problematic ending, namely the Duke re-exercising his absolute power, many rebellious acts are littered throughout the play and seek to subvert the established order. On numerous occasions, the actors speak directly to the Globe's audience members. Shakespeare's skillfully placed stage directions, especially his "asides," provide ample encouragement for the groundlings to collectively stand strong against England's oligarchy and its quest to eliminate festive culture from their personal lives.

After Pompey tells Mistress Overdone to ignore Angelo's proclamation and not give up her trade, she goes on to follow the tapster's advice and pointedly refuses to change her profession in spite of Angelo's determination to rip down suburban brothels. When her former place of business is demolished, Mistress Overdone immediately chooses to open a brand new establishment, much to Elbow's immense frustration. In court, he raves about Mistress Overdone's unwillingness to follow the law, calling her, "a bad woman, whose house, sir, was, as they say, plucked down in the suburbs; and now she professes a hot-house; which I think is a very ill house too" (II.i.58-61). Mistress Overdone's adaptive resistance, changing her place of business and referring it as a "hot-house," drives forth the point that local officers faced challenges when attempting to enforce morality. While "only a few of the participants in the Commons debates questioned the merits of interference by the state with the habits of the individual on principle, they must have been all too aware of the sheer difficulty of regulating personal

conduct through the courts.”⁷⁰ At the time of the hearing, Angelo’s proclamation has failed to achieve its immediate goals. Upon learning Mistress Overdone opened another house rather than submit to the law, the audience must have cheered.

In particular, Pompey offers the groundlings a heartening image of a common man who uses festive activities to fuel counter-culture ideals against the new oligarchy’s dominance. On several cast lists, Pompey is identified as a clown, which is significant because “on the Elizabethan stage, the clown [was] one of the major representatives of popular culture.”⁷¹ When Elbow brings Pompey before Angelo and Escalus to answer for grave criminal charges, Pompey’s political wit and verbal resistance astoundingly strike back against societal and legal repression, in spite of the consequences. Pompey especially focuses on “morality” and its subjective relationship with governmental dictations about what behaviors should be considered morally righteous or revolting. As previously stated, England’s local overseers made a conscious effort to distinguish between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, and used these categories to control the lower classes and define “morality” in accordance with their own self-serving economic goals. Pompey takes a bold stand against this practice in his memorable court scene.

In the beginning of this scene, Escalus puts forth several charged questions about morality and the law, hoping to provoke Pompey into contemplating demeaning thoughts about himself and his associates, a tactic often used to encourage deference toward their “betters”: “How would you live, Pompey? By being a bawd? What do you think of the trade, Pompey? Is it a lawful trade?” (II.i.192-193) Pompey chooses not to answer most

⁷⁰ Hindle 187

⁷¹ Laroque, François. *Shakespeare’s Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 34.

of Escalus's inquiries and replies concisely to his interrogations with six word retort: "If the law would allow it, sir" (II.i.194). Pompey presents the law as a fickle entity that can easily change to permit certain behaviors. Unlike Escalus, he does not believe the law should ultimately dictate one's personal life. Additionally, Pompey's refusal to answer Escalus's questions about the morality of a bawdy life proves the tapster is a character who is far "less preoccupied with common ideals of charity, harmony, and reconciliation than [his] own security and self-interest."⁷²

During his court hearing, Pompey questions Escalus about the city government's upcoming goals for the future, openly pondering if the officers intend flex their power in order to "geld and splay all the youth of the city" (II.i.197-198). While "geld" and "splay" (or "spay") literally describe removal of sex organs and destruction of fertility, the definition figuratively illustrates an unspecific and non-sexual act that deliberately enfeebles a person or group of any essential part needed to survive. In this case, Pompey not only asks about literal spaying, but the new oligarchy's intention to remove carnival culture from the common folk's daily lives. Pompey's question harbors a great deal contempt toward Escalus and Elbow, a reaction "informed by a scorn for magisterial activism which arose from the popular conception that pastimes were *theirs* to be enjoyed and that *their* constable should defend them from the officiousness of magistrates."⁷³ Even though Pompey focuses on age rather than economic class, the actor could still sweep his arm and gesture to the groundlings when he mentions "the youth of the city," connecting his current situation with the groundlings' own struggles to uphold festive

⁷² Hindle 232

⁷³ Hindle 202

activities that their churchwardens and overseers sought to destroy in their attempts to climb the social ladder.

When Escalus brusquely denies Pompey's claims, the tapster wittingly offers an ironic prediction, concerning the city's near future. Instead of complying with Escalus's and Angelo's demands for piety, Pompey defends carnival behavior as an essential cornerstone for society's expansion. He insists that legally restricting lechery among the lower classes will have a negative effect on the city's birth rate and result in a sharp decline in youthful and healthy men and women who are fit enough to contribute toward the economy. In ten years, the government will not only revoke their morally righteous law, but also offer a high salary for the city population to re-embrace acts of fornication:

If you head and hang all that offend that way but for ten year together,
you'll be glad to give out a commission for more heads. If this law hold in
Vienna ten year, I'll rent the fairest house in it after three pence a bay. If
you live to see this come to pass, say Pompey told you so (II.i.205-209).

Pompey's political prediction would have stirred a great sense of delight and amusement in the audience, because he emphasizes the lower class's importance to the nation's overall wellbeing. Furthermore Pompey's description of "the fairest house in [Vienna] after three pence a bay" would have definitely had a tantalization effect on the groundlings. Although social mobility was possible, especially among wealthy merchants and other members of "the middling sort," the sharp rise from a tapster to the owner of the "fairest house" in the city would have been a remarkable and inconceivable occurrence.

Escalus responds to Pompey's prediction with swift cruelty, uttering usual threats of whippings and other acts of government violence. While he initially seems to comply with Escalus's demands, a skillfully placed aside proves Pompey remains stubborn man

who has absolutely no intention of submitting to Escalus's bloodthirsty intimidations: "but I shall follow [your good counsel] as the flesh and fortune shall better determine. [aside] Whip me? No, no, let carman whip his jade, the valiant heart's not whipped out of his trade" (II.i.216-219). Pompey expresses disgust toward Escalus's responses and firmly states that a whip exclusively belongs to a carman or owner of an ill-tempered nag. Pompey's metaphor reduces Angelo and Escalus's brutalities, supposedly "righteous" under the law, to an impatient "carman" assaulting his animal. Additionally, rather than refer to himself as "bawd" and belittle his station in life, Pompey claims his path in life requires a "valiant heart," meaning that he is not merely a rabble-rouser, but a person who "possesses courage, especially acting with or showing bravery in a fight or on the field of battle." Valiance marks him as a man who has "great worth and merit," especially compared against Angelo and Escalus. Pompey's metaphor disparages the endless punishments of whipping, reducing their power to inspire fear in him, because although whips leave deep scars on one's back, it is physically impossible to whip a person's heart or one's inmost thoughts or feelings. The law may force a person to outwardly comply with its unreasonable demands, but the intellectual and emotional mind remains free from the churchwardens' prying fingers. During the aside, Pompey could face the groundlings directly. With wide and excited eyes, he could share his seditious secret about the law's inability to infiltrate the heart and mold an individual's political stances. The audience would have been very receptive to Pompey's statement and humiliation of Escalus, because "far from creating a godly commonwealth, the reformation of manners

frequently brought authority into contempt, and often foundered to ‘a chorus of mocking laughter.’”⁷⁴

Through framing actions, deixis, stage directions, and other dramatic functions, Shakespeare’s *Measure For Measure* successfully puts on a performance about an extreme representation of a capital city controlled by a local oligarchy that desires to restore rigid order at the common people’s expense. Shakespeare’s fictional representation of Vienna unquestionably mirrors current trends responsible for the troubling plights of London’s poor. *Measure For Measure*’s characters successfully manipulate the audience’s reactions and emotions on several different occasions, and these ideal receptive conditions are constructed within the theater to effectively raise acute awareness about the recent cultural crusade waged against well-loved festive activities, which included theatrical performances.

⁷⁴ Hindle 232

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