

# Measure for Measure: Tragedy and Redemption

Paul James Toscano

## INTRODUCTION

If there is anything that the great tragedies of the world seem to have in common, surely it must be unhappy endings. Do not the lovers die? Does not the king lose his crown? Are not the heroes doomed to wretchedness and defeat? And he that exalted himself, is he not abased? For most people, the word "tragedy" is synonymous with pessimism and despair. It conjures up vague remembrances of stormy plots, with sad and often violent conclusions. However, as surprising as it may seem, many critics, playwrights, actors, and theatergoers have managed to see piercing through the midnight darkness of tragic drama, such optimistic themes as faith, hope, resolution, and regeneration—all shining with the splendor of bright stars in a black, cloudless sky.

Herbert Muller, for example, points out that tragedy began as a literary device of individual expression "concerned with the most vital civic issue . . . the spiritual survival of the community."<sup>1</sup> Tragedy, he says, grew out of an annual religious celebration in honor of the Year Daemon, a god whose ritual conflict, death, and resurrection were seen by the ancient Greeks to hold some spiritual relation to the rejuvenation of nature, the regeneration of man, and the continuance of life and fertility. In time the God so honored was replaced by an individual of heroic proportions—a mythical or historical figure who loomed large in the minds of the people.<sup>2</sup> Whoever or whatever this hero was, he—like the Daemon—struggled in the press of destructive forces that he may have pulled down upon himself. And like the Daemon, his struggles led not *to* pessimism and despair, but *through* pessimism and despair to resolution

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Paul James Toscano is a law student at the J. Reuben Clark, Jr. Law School.

<sup>1</sup>Herbert J. Muller, *The Spirit of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

and regeneration—if not for himself, then for his fellows or his cosmos, but especially for all those sensitive witnesses of his plight.

Whether in old Athens, London, or New York the best tragedies have been, as William McCollum says, a “means not merely of catharsis, but of spiritual regeneration. . . . Like the rituals of the dying god, they represent death in order to promote life.”<sup>3</sup> However, this movement from darkness to light, from evil to good, from defilement to purification in tragedy has usually been very subtle, at least subtle enough that certain critics have been hard pressed to find it in such black tragedies as *Macbeth*, for instance. Nevertheless, the regeneration theme is there. It is what the story is all about. The whole thrust of the last scenes is to drive home the point that “cheaters never prosper.” The murderer is punished. The evil he unleashed finally destroys him. Because Macbeth is damned, Scotland is cleansed; the stage is swept of villainy, and goodness rings down triumphant to the thunderous applause of a grateful, if not purified, public.

Although, in *Macbeth*, the resolution springs, Phoenix-like, from the damnation of the hero, it may just as well have sprung from his purification as it does in *King Lear*, where, says Irving Ribner, “Shakespeare’s emphasis is upon the process of . . . penance and expiation for sin . . . [and where] the suffering Lear and Gloucester are presented with all the immediate intensity of which Shakespeare is capable in order to emphasize that the process is a purgatorial one.”<sup>4</sup> Though Lear’s tragic mistake precipitates the loss of all his earthly honors, temporal possessions, and worldly power, his fall is counterbalanced by his spiritual maturation. In the last scenes, we sense that his soul has been purged and his sins forgiven him.

Both Macbeth and Lear are tragic heroes, both make tragic mistakes, both take tragic journeys, both suffer and die. But *Macbeth* is the story of a man who loses everything in this world and the next and whose tragic journey ends in damnation. Lear, on the other hand, is a man who forfeits all he holds dear in this world to atone for his tragic flaw and tragic mistake; his journey ends in purgation. If some tragedies are resolved in damnation and others in purgation, is there no room in the genre for a play in which the tragic heroes journey through gloom, fear, wretchedness, and despair, but are in

<sup>3</sup>William G. McCollum, *Tragedy* (New York: MacMillan, 1957), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), pp. 116-17.



the end snatched from death and hell? Is there no room for a tragedy that ends in redemption?

To this question many critics have answered no. Although tragedies are historically associated with themes of regeneration, critics have often objected to the idea of redemption tragedy because, as Karl Jaspers sees it, redemption is a Christian doctrine, and "Christian salvation opposes tragic knowledge. The chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without a chance of escape. Therefore, no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist."<sup>5</sup> Because Christ took the sting out of death, "no loss is permanent," says Richard Sewall, "no injustice without heavenly recompense."<sup>6</sup> D. D. Raphael notes that "tragedy is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic. The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal."<sup>7</sup> Harold Wilson believes that the Christian Providence will turn all evil to good and thus all tragedy to comedy.<sup>8</sup> Clifford Leech summed up this view when he said, "the tragic picture is incompatible with the Christian faith."<sup>9</sup>

According to these critics, no explicit resolution to tragedy is allowed. Thus *Macbeth* is a tragedy because we are not allowed to see the explicit triumph of justice in Scotland. Hamlet qualifies too; for although Fortinbras is introduced as a symbol of regeneration, we are not allowed to see that regeneration played out upon the stage. We see evil run its course. We see it purged or damned. We receive a statement that the kingdom of justice is at hand, but we never see that kingdom. Alfred Schlesinger observed that we are never allowed to see "the cosmos, the social order, the city state, bettered." We do not see the heroes in triumph.<sup>10</sup> Only as long as the resolution is implicit, as long as it is vague, as long as it is left unstated in the play, is it admissible.

Particularly repugnant to these critics is anything that savors of Christian redemption, which, they feel, detracts from the horror, pas-

<sup>5</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough* (London: Gallancy, 1953), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup>Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>D. D. Raphael, *The Paradox of Tragedy* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1959), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>Harold S. Wilson, *On the Design of Shakespearean Tragedy*, Text no. 5 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Clifford Leech, "The Implications of Tragedy," in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 222.

<sup>10</sup>Alfred Cary Schlesinger, *Boundaries of Dionysus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 8.

sion, and significance of the tragic spectacle. How, they ask, can the hero suffer tragically if he believes he will be rewarded for his troubles?

In answer to this question, Laurence Michel notes that even if the hero triumphs in the end, his "victory will not be won without spiritual anguish. His voyage will be that of an imperfect man in an imperfect world."<sup>11</sup> For the Christian tragic hero this voyage becomes doubly dangerous, for his salvific vision merely intensifies his tragic experience. He must live with the dreaded possibility of displeasing God, falling from grace, and incurring his wrath in hell. Sewall correctly saw that the Christian hero is "presented with a great, new dilemma; to believe or not to believe"; to cast off the old creature and be born again, or to languish in corruption. "This means suffering of a new kind," requiring a consciousness of sin unknown to ancient Greece. "It remained for the Christian tragedy to give full dramatic treatment to the guilty and remorseful soul."<sup>12</sup> He further observed that Christianity,

instead of negating tragedy or taking man in one leap of faith "beyond tragedy," . . . in actual practice, historically, has provided a matrix out of which has come, since the beginnings of the Renaissance, a prodigious amount of tragic expression. . . . It is the religions of the east, whose direction is toward nonbeing, the denial of the individual and of the reality of suffering and death, that have proved inhospitable to tragedy. . . . Though the Church is witness to a joyous miracle, it never blinked at the hard and bitter struggle of daily living.<sup>13</sup>

Michel observed that Job's story comes closest to a complete tragic action:

It is uncompromisingly grounded in religion, it is about religion. All Job's physical and material evils are correlatives to his vision of spiritual evil: he knows that his Defender liveth, his piety is strong and ardent, the spirit of God is in his nostrils, and yet the arrows of the Almighty are in him. God keeps away and will not answer him.<sup>14</sup>

The most outstanding classic example of this kind of suffering is Prometheus, whose triumph is morally absolute. But he pays

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<sup>11</sup>Laurence Michel, "The Possibilities of a Christian Tragedy," in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 222.

<sup>12</sup>Sewall, *Vision*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup>Michel, "Christian Tragedy," p. 222.



heavily in bodily pain. Oscar Mandel tells us that the tragedy of Prometheus is consummated "regardless of what follows after. Only if angels interfered in time to prevent the suffering would tragedy be averted."<sup>15</sup> Both Job and Prometheus are tragic figures, and yet each in his own way knows he is immortal.

The question, "How can a tragic hero suffer *tragically* if he knows he will be rewarded for his troubles?" is a loaded one, predicated on an assumption (ringing with nihilistic overtones) that the catastrophe and agony of tragedy stem not from the flaw, fall, and suffering of the tragic hero, but from the imminent approach of oblivion—from the sense that all experience, both good and evil, is actually meaningless. But doesn't this assumption place too much importance on the hero's fate after death and not enough on his actual tragic sufferings in this world? A man suffers tragically not because he must eventually face hell, heaven, or oblivion, but because he must willingly pit his strength and will against terrible forces (that he may have unleashed upon himself) and endure mental or physical anguish. The belief of the Christian hero that his sufferings will end in heaven does as little to lessen this tragic experience as does the belief of the agnostic hero that his pains will end in the grave. It is well to remember that though Macbeth is extinguished and Orestes redeemed, both are tragic heroes.

What has resulted then from Greek, Hebraic, and Christian tradition is the idea of Christian tragedy, with its own peculiar tensions and stresses. The Christian must very often act on his own. He is often, as Michel observes, "perplexed in the extreme, and he must pay heavily for his transgressions, . . . because the whole scheme is being worked out in the world and in time; [because] there can be no abiding solution, there is room for the tragic response."<sup>16</sup> The Christian tragic hero believes that the world may ultimately be redeemed, but for the present he expects evil to abound. Michel sees in the world the inherent seeds of "destruction, danger, and hardship, but somehow, at the end there is life abundantly, blessedness, and rest. And this is a view of things in which the tragic sense of life can flourish."<sup>17</sup>

Tragedy, the spectacle of man seeking his own well-being, wittingly coming to grips with evil and with suffering, and fearing

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<sup>15</sup>Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 155-160.

<sup>16</sup>Michel, "Christian Tragedy," p. 221.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 217.

and trembling in the press of mysterious cosmic forces, depends not on the damnation, purgation, or redemption of the tragic hero, but on the nature of his dilemma and the way he comports himself as he seeks to extricate himself from it. If the tragedy is resolved in redemption, it will not lessen the tragic experience of the Christian hero, who must still move through glooms of despair and horror toward his apotheosis. Mandel points out that the saintliness of the tragic hero may

. . . entail a daily struggle and a daily wretchedness. If the good in him conquers, it does so like Antigone's exacting as its price all earthly happiness. True, such tragedies are invariably followed by the gathering-up of the soul to paradise, but these are post-tragic redemptions.<sup>18</sup>

"Tragedy and religion are not incompatible," says Michel, because "both insistently concern themselves with man's urge and desire to become god-like, . . . both feed on piety; both ultimately find the key to all problems in immortality; both come to terms with death."<sup>19</sup>

Embodied in *Measure for Measure* is a tragic action which ends in redemption for the tragic heroes. The first half of the play moves fast toward an unhappy ending. But at the moment when all seems lost, the catastrophe is averted, though Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio, the major tragic heroes, are allowed to believe the damage has been done and thus go through a period of tragic suffering wherein they learn the full implications of their flaws. Through this suffering, they are humanized and purged. When the humanization is complete and they are thoroughly prepared to meet their destiny, they learn that the catastrophe has been averted and, unlike Lear or Oedipus, they are redeemed both spiritually *and temporally*. They are snatched from death and hell so that the resolution of their tragic conflict is explicit and complete.

Critics have remarked upon the seemingly unorthodox mixture of comic and tragic in *Measure for Measure*. E. M. W. Tillyard, for example, says, "the play is not of a piece, but changes its nature half way through."<sup>20</sup> Act III, scene i, line 152 marks the division between the two halves of the play. From this point what has promised to be an "absorbing tragedy, dissolves into a comedy of in-

<sup>18</sup>Mandel, *Definition of Tragedy*, pp. 111-12.

<sup>19</sup>Michel, "Christian Tragedy," pp. 222-23.

<sup>20</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p. 123.



trigue."<sup>21</sup> The tragic action is altered by the workings of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent force in the person of the Duke. Roy Battenhouse points out that "by classical standards its art form is neither pure comedy nor pure tragedy, but an unorthodox blending of the two."<sup>22</sup> The first half of *Measure for Measure* sustains an unmistakable tragic structure leading toward the damnation of all the characters we value, save the Duke and Escalus. However, because we have been made aware of the secret presence of the Duke who is on hand "like power divine," to avert the disaster, we are assured "that a supreme power of good yet watches over this world; that evil has a line drawn around it and will be contained."<sup>23</sup> Yet Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio do not possess our vision; they do not know that their tragic dilemma exists within the confines of an overarching divine comic structure. They are examples of the Christian tragic hero. They possess a tragic spirit; they see themselves in a tragic light. For them the conflict, the anguish, the horror, and the impending doom exist unopposed by any merciful power. Resolution and redemption are merely afterthoughts. Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio must move through glooms of despair and horror toward their salvation.

But because Shakespeare has informed us, the spectators, that the tragic action takes place under the eyes of the benevolent Duke, because there is a "gap between our awareness and the participants,"<sup>24</sup> we can observe the early tragic development of *Measure for Measure* with a detachment and objectivity which elude all the persons of the drama except the Duke. Thus, though we are denied the full impact of the tragic effect, we are allowed, instead, to see a greater vision: *the kingdom of evil exists, controlled and limited, within a larger kingdom of good.*

#### ANALYSIS

In the early tragic action of *Measure for Measure*, attention is primarily centered on Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio. The Duke's role is subordinated during this half of the play where the main

<sup>21</sup>William John Roscelli, "Isabella, Sin, and Civil Law," in *University of Kansas City Review* 23(March 1962):221.

<sup>22</sup>Roy Battenhouse, "Measure for Measure and the Christian Doctrine of the Atonement," *PMLA* 61(1946):1030.

<sup>23</sup>Bertrand Evans, "Like Power Divine: *Measure for Measure*," in *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), p. 189.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>25</sup>Gerald Gould, "A New Reading of *Measure for Measure*," *English Review* 36(1923):232.

characters are fast led toward catastrophe. Speaking of Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio, Gerald Gould said that the flaws are not in the play, but in the characters.<sup>25</sup> In fact, these very flaws precipitate their tragic fall.

Angelo, as some have noted, does not know himself.<sup>26</sup> He refuses to recognize that he has repressed desires. He will not acknowledge that his blood is more than "snow broth."<sup>27</sup> He takes inordinate pride in his outward gravity. His reputation means much to him; he has a Pharisaic concern for outward appearance. He does not see the "hidden depravity" within.<sup>28</sup> He is well suited to governing by the letter of the law. He is capable of monstrous tyranny and abuse of power. His love of virtue is narrow, rigid, and unappealing.

Isabella's love of purity is possessed of a spirit devoid of "understanding, tolerance, compassion, [and] love."<sup>29</sup> To her, chastity is more an obsession than a virtue. She is an Hippolytus. When compared to the warm Mariana or the humane Juliet, Isabella seems to have little affinity with humankind. She is a merciless pleader for mercy whose harshness and selfishness alienate her from her fellows.

Her brother, Claudio, on the other hand, is all too human, too much in love with living. His fault does not rest so much in his transgression, but in his overweening fear of death. Had he been willing to die, the catastrophe would have been averted. In fact, had any of these characters repented of their mistakes in time, then the catastrophe would have been avoided, and, of course, the impact of *Measure for Measure* would have been lessened. But it is Shakespeare's playing of one flawed character against another that leads to the tragic deadlock of Act III, scene i.

This is the most critical point in the play. Shakespeare has thrust his characters into a dilemma from which they cannot possibly extricate themselves. Angelo, at the first "prompture of the blood" (II, iv, 173)<sup>30</sup> gives his "sensual race the rein" (II, iv, 160) and demands Isabella's body for Claudio's life. And though he recognizes the evil within him, he cannot turn back; he lacks all clear-

<sup>26</sup>G. Wilson Knight, "Measure for Measure and the Gospels," *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen & Co., 1949), p. 85.

<sup>27</sup>Edward L. Hart, "A Mixed Consort: Leontes, Angelo, and Helena," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, no. 1 (Winter 1964), p. 76.

<sup>28</sup>Evans, "Like Power Divine," p. 191.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>30</sup>William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 1103.



headedness. To repent would mean to abdicate, and his inordinate concern for appearances would not allow him to do that. Isabella's rigid chastity will not allow her to succumb to his demands. And so, it seems that Claudio has become an unfortunate pawn, caught between uncompromising demand and unyielding refusal.

It is fairly clear to the observer that this situation is far from comical. It is, in fact, tragic. If Isabella refuses to submit to Angelo, Claudio will be executed—a harsh punishment for the crime he has committed. Moreover, Angelo would be morally guilty of murder (albeit clothed in the robes of justice), for he would be executing the man to revenge himself upon the unwilling Isabella. On the other hand, if Isabella submits, she would be shamed; Angelo would be culpable before the laws of both man and God, and Claudio would forever bear the onus of having been liberated at the price of his sister's chastity. What is to be sacrificed? Isabella's virtue or Claudio's life?

There is only one way out of the dilemma: Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio must each repent. Angelo must conquer his lust for Isabella; he must be purified; he must learn to live life on a higher plane. Isabella must also learn humanity; she must somehow obtain a more compassionate view of the world. And Claudio must learn that slavery is worse than death and that the readiness is all.

However, the characters are powerless to act wisely. They need help. They need to suffer the tragic remorse and pain which comes as a consequence of their flaws without putting themselves beyond redemption. They need to be humanized by the buffetings of evil without being damned. In Act III, scene ii, Shakespeare begins to manipulate his characters through a tragic-in-divine-comic structure so that they may undergo just such an experience.

At the moment of greatest alarm, when disaster seems inevitable, the friar-Duke appears on the scene and begins taking an active part in the drama. We know that somehow he will avert the catastrophe and save the characters from each other and from themselves. However, the characters are aware of none of this; for them the tragedy continues. From this point, the spectator is watching tragic action taking place within an enveloping, divine-comic structure.

At the beginning of the play we learn that the Duke is concerned about Vienna, for the laws go unobserved and "athwart goes all decorum" (I, iii, 30-31). Something, he feels, must be done to rectify this intolerable situation. He has decided to abdicate for a

time in favor of Angelo, his deputy, who is well suited to letter-of-the-law rule:<sup>31</sup> "We have with a leavened and prepared choice/ Proceeded to you, therefore, take your honors" (I, i, 52-53). The Duke, then, retires hastily, leaving the tragic developments to run their course. But rather than quitting the city, he remains to observe secretly the actions of his deputy and of his subjects. Although he plays no active part in the play until Act III, his passive presence is a constant reminder that the tragic action of the early scenes takes place in a divine-comic setting.

After Isabella's thundering denunciation of Claudio's weakness in Act III, the Duke, who had been eavesdropping on their quarrel, sets in motion the divine-comic operations that will lead to the humanization and redemption of the tragic heroes.

Evans notes that "the Duke entails the practice by which multiple ends can be accomplished, . . . [Claudio] saved . . . [Isabella's] honor untainted . . . and the deputy scaled."<sup>32</sup> The Duke also intends to purify Angelo and Isabella by providing them with an experience designed to purge them of their flaws without endangering their souls. In addition, the Duke wants "to prove that mercy is superior to retributive justice."<sup>33</sup> Because the Duke has a gentle nature and is incapable of harshness, he chooses to rehabilitate rather than to punish. His subjects have abused his mercy and ignored his laws, but he does not abandon them. They remain all-important to him. He is in no way irresponsible. By abdicating for a time, he allows justice a chance to gain the upper hand, but he stands nearby to see that it does not subvert mercy and grace.<sup>34</sup>

By keeping Isabella ignorant of Claudio's salvation from death, the Duke is able to teach her charity and put her to the test by asking her to forgive the man whom she thinks has killed her brother. By allowing Claudio to believe that he must face the executioners, the Duke teaches him courage and resolve in the face of death. By allowing him to think he has deflowered Isabella and murdered Claudio, the Duke provides Angelo with the tragic experience by which he learns to know himself. By allowing justice to have full power in Vienna, the Duke proves that his policy of mercy is best, though mercy cannot be allowed to rob justice. It is the Duke who

<sup>31</sup>Robert Ornstein, "The Human Comedy: *Measure for Measure*," *University of Kansas City Review* 24(1957):21.

<sup>32</sup>Evans, "Like Power Divine," p. 200.

<sup>33</sup>John Wasson, "Measure for Measure: A Play of Incontinence," *Journal of English Literary History* 27(1966):2.

<sup>34</sup>Ornstein, "The Human Comedy," p. 19.



initiates the tragic development within the comic structure to provide a learning experience for his deputy and his subjects. For as both D. L. Stevenson and J. A. Bryant have noted, *Measure for Measure* is the story of man, who "falls from grace, comes to know himself under the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, and finds redemption under the dispensation of grace with the return of the Lord in the full light of morning."<sup>35</sup>

The methods the Duke employs to save the tragic figures are remarkably similar to the ways in which Christ saves his subjects. Though the Duke does not himself act as a scapegoat, he thwarts sin and death by means of scapegoats, namely: Mariana, who had legal rights to Angelo's bed, but whom Angelo rejected after her dowry was lost at sea; and Ragozine, a pirate who, fortunately, died in prison just prior to Claudio's scheduled execution. By substituting Mariana in the place of Isabella and by substituting the head of Ragozine for the head of Claudio, the Duke prevents the loss of Claudio's life, Isabella's chastity, and Angelo's soul. Robert Ornstein observes that "in the denouement the intricate pattern of devious substitutions reverses itself until all identities are restored and Vienna returns to its customary habits and business."<sup>36</sup>

The Duke's scapegoat-like substitutions are not the only developments in the comic structure which bear a relationship to the idea of Christian atonement. The Duke, himself, is a symbol of divine power.

By his condescending act at the beginning of the play, he sets in motion the whole of the action. He is the creator of the dramatic structure. He manipulates the plot so that the tragic-in-divine-comic design brings about the humanization he desires. He, like Christ, tests his subjects. He is called "Your Grace," an obvious pun. He tells Claudio to think more on death than on life; for, as Christ has said, he that seeks his life shall lose it, but he that loses his life shall find it. Claudio responds to the Duke's advice with a paraphrase of the scripture: "To sue to live, I find I seek to die,/And, seeking death, find life. Let it come on" (III, i, 42-43). The Duke rebukes Lucio (Lucifer?) the disbeliever and cynic. He hears confession. He forgives sin. He is the embodiment of Church and State. He makes a surprise appearance at the end of the play analogous to the second coming. He performs a final judgment in the

<sup>35</sup>J. A. Bryant, Jr. as quoted in D. L. Stevenson, *The Achievement of Measure for Measure* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 107.

<sup>36</sup>Ornstein, "The Human Comedy," p. 16.

last act wherein he tempers justice with mercy. He prevents the triumph of sin and death (i.e., the seduction of Isabella and the execution of Claudio). He provides opportunity for his subjects to mature and progress, and he ultimately restores order to the chaotic state of Vienna. In addition, he visits the spirits in prison; he replaces Angelo's Mosaic code with a law of grace, and, finally, he caps off the action with the announcement of his intended marriage to Isabella which, in a way, suggests the metaphorical union of Christ, the Bridegroom, (i.e., the Duke, himself) and the Church, the Bride, (i.e., Isabella) at the consummation of all things. Of the Christian motif in *Measure for Measure*, Wilson Knight commented that "there is no more beautiful passage in all Shakespeare on the Christian redemption than Isabella's lines to Angelo":<sup>37</sup>

Alas, Alas!

Why, all the souls that were forfeit once,  
 And He that might the vantage best have took  
 Found out the remedy. How would you be  
 If He, which is the top of Judgment, should  
 But judge you as you are? Oh, think on that,  
 And mercy then will breathe within your lips  
 Like man new-made. (II, ii, 72-81)

#### CONCLUSION

*Measure for Measure* reflects the true human predicament from a Christian viewpoint; man's life is tragic because he lacks vision and cannot perceive the divine-comic structure of the universe. He is subject to sin and death. And though he can be made more deeply spiritual through his suffering, he cannot, through his sufferings alone, make a complete and satisfactory restitution for the effects of his sins, nor can he conquer death. Like Angelo, Isabella and Claudio, he seems trapped in a dilemma from which he cannot extricate himself. It is only through the instrumentality of a superior power (like the Duke) that man may be saved from his weakness and mortality.

When viewed structurally, *Measure for Measure* is clearly not a comedy at all, not even a tragi-comedy, but a tragedy within a divine comic structure. As Dante journeyed through hell and purgatory to heaven, so Shakespeare journeyed through different, though related, dramatic structures. Since damnation, or even purgation, is unacceptable from a Christian standpoint, because both fall short of satisfying man's need for inner purity and outward perfection,

<sup>37</sup>Knight, "Measure for Measure and the Gospels," p. 75.



Shakespeare, in *Measure for Measure*, has exploited, if not created, a tragedy-in-divine-comedy in which man is led through conflict and pain to an explicit spiritual-temporal redemption.

When the structure of *Measure for Measure* is recognized for what it is, some of the major "problems" of the play begin to evaporate. The division between the two parts of the play is not a mistake, but is part of the tragic-in-divine-comic structure. We begin to see that Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio are flawed, not because of the dramatist's oversight, but because they are tragic figures with tragic flaws, who make tragic mistakes and work toward their own defeats. We can understand why the Duke is passive in the early tragic scenes of the play. We can appreciate more fully the intrigues by which he humanizes his subjects and allows them to suffer tragically while carefully leading them to triumph. We can more easily accept the minor difficulties which perhaps may have caused Shakespeare to strain a little in the areas of characterization and motivation so that the all-important tragic-in-divine-comic structure could be maintained throughout the play. We see that the bed-trick, so objectionable to some critics, proves to be a masterful transition, binding the tragic and the divine-comic elements of the play. This little ruse on Angelo not only sets in motion an action which saves Claudio's life, advantages Mariana, softens Isabella, redeems Angelo, and restores a mercy-tempered justice to Vienna, but it also reflects, in microcosm, the scapegoat theme that forms a major part of the Christian tradition so intrinsic to the play.

Because we know the Duke is on hand to avert the catastrophe, we are prepared for the deliverance of the characters in the final scene. The denouement in Act V merely fulfills the promise of redemption received at the beginning of the play. The ending is not a *deus ex machina* because we know the Duke was working toward this end all along.<sup>38</sup>

*Measure for Measure* is a tragedy with an explicit resolution for which we are prepared from the beginning. The tragic structure of the play is couched comfortably in a large, enveloping divine-comic context. And though some critics might object to the wedding of tragedy and comedy in *Measure for Measure*, it is this very union which affords us the pleasure of witnessing both the tragic humanization and the divine-comic triumph of its characters. What Shakespeare has given us in this play is a measure of tragedy for a measure of comedy.

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<sup>38</sup>Ornstein, "The Human Comedy," p. 21.