

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Measure for Measure*, presented by Lantern Theater Company in Philadelphia,
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Directed by Charles McMahon. Scenic design by Dirk Durossette. Costume design by Janus Stefanowicz. Lighting design by Drew Billiau. Sound Design by Mary Kate Smyser. With Chris Anthony (Claudio), Kirk Wendell Brown (Escalus), Ben Dibble (Angelo/Abhorson), Adam Hammet (Pompey), Claire Inie-Richards (Isabella), Anthony Lawton (The Duke) replaced late in the run by Charles McMahon, Jered McLenigan (Lucio), and Charlotte Northeast (Mistress Overdone / Francesca / Elbow / Provost / Mariana).

In the last moments of the performance, Isabella stared down at the kneeling Duke, his hand outstretched, her mouth agape, her eyes wide with blatant, baffled disgust at his proposal: ‘what’s mine is yours, and what is yours is mine’ (5.1.530).¹ There was a long pause. Then, not quite shouting, but loudly and clearly, she exclaimed, ‘What the fu...’ Bells tolling into the blackout cut off the final consonant, but there was no doubt what it would have been. The audience, myself included, laughed and applauded this fitting conclusion to a bold production of Shakespeare’s problem comedy.

Director Charles McMahon (who also assumed the role of the Duke after the departure of the original actor) certainly embraced both the ‘problem’ and the ‘comedy’ in this play’s conventional categorization. The production leaned heavily into the script’s satirical elements, and overall this approach was effective. Occasionally, however, the satire seemed to cross into farce – more silly send-up than sharp critique. For example, McMahon quickly established the character of the Duke as a less than ideal leader. The

¹ Act, scene and line references refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2008).

way he stared into the audience as the first lights came up, looking bemused and hesitant, gave the impression of someone who struggled to make up his mind. He hurried through his appointment of Angelo as deputy and fumblingly handed Angelo and Escalus the wrong scrolls assigning their duties, prompting the two men to trade papers, shaking their heads. I chuckled at this amusing bit of business illustrating the Duke's absent-mindedness, but I also wondered whether it was necessary. Might it not undermine any attempt to explore more seriously the nuances of the Duke's character if he were merely, or even mostly, just a goof?

Similarly, and shortly thereafter, Charlotte Northeast's performance as Francesca in 1.4 was cartoonish. She spoke with breathy dismay, fanning herself vigorously at the thought of seeing a man. Still, she stayed on stage for the duration of Isabella's conversation with Lucio, mostly staring at the ground, but stealing occasional, covert glances and reacting with visible discomfort to the Lucio's multiple innuendos. Again, it felt unnecessarily exaggerated. As the dramaturg's program note itself observed, the order of Poor Clare was notoriously severe, and I might rather have sensed some nuance of that severity, rather than a caricature of a nervous nun.

Yet in these early moments, director McMahon was setting a tone that continued consistently and built to the point that the farce crossed right back into satire – so ridiculous, it became sobering. For example, the character Barnardine, a potential manifestation both of grim social commentary and broad humor, was rendered as broadly as I can imagine, but also sharply critical. Played off-stage, never actually appearing in the flesh, Barnardine's gruff protestations against his own execution got laughs, but without a (condemned) body to connect to the voice, the idea of the cruelty in the situation was surprisingly emphasized. Rather than diminishing the impact, the absurdity of the physical absence of the actor heightened the effect.

Another of the production's provocative devices was to show explicitly the changing of actors from one costume to another, assisted by stage crew. This Brechtian acknowledgment of the performance framework (also indicated by the abstract, minimalistic set and light design that contrasted with the detailed turn-of-the-twentieth century-period-specific costumes) assured the audience that we were supposed to recognize actors playing multiple characters. But it also foregrounded the performative natures of many of these characters, sometimes underscoring the fundamental differences between character functions, sometimes suggesting that those functions might be interchangeable. Sometimes both. For example, when Angelo transformed to Abhorson, we may have been reminded that the difference between executor (of policy) and executioner (of people) might be not much more than posture and props. The effect

was most pronounced in Charlotte Northeast, who played by far the most parts: Mistress Overdone, Francesca, Constable Elbow, the Provost, and Mariana. A skilled performer, Northeast invested each character with distinct traits, but, again, the juxtaposition of, say, the bawd and the nun or the bumbling constable and the steady justice might only be a difference between bustier and wimple, between a swagger and a shuffle. To me this seemed a poignant if subtle commentary on the actual interchangeability of otherwise apparently opposite social roles.

Even apart from social commentary, the production was full of strong performances. McMahon himself presented the Duke as borderline incompetent, but also intensely sincere. His speech to Claudio in 3.1 appeared an earnest effort to convince the prisoner of the benefits of an early death – there was no cynicism at all in his delivery. (Chris Anthony's Claudio, whose acting style was well suited to the Lantern's small space, provided some amusing facial reactions to the Duke's speech.) The Duke's shock at Angelo's promise reneged in 4.2 was pronounced, and the hopeful way he said 'O, death's a great disguiser' (4.2.161) showed just how naïve he was, maybe especially since his own 'disguise' as Friar Lodowick required complete suspension of disbelief. Apart from his brown robe, he did nothing at all to change his appearance, and the only reason his fellow characters didn't recognize him was because the world of the play required so.

The seedy underworld was superbly represented by Adam Hammet's brash Pompey, but especially by Jered McLenigan's Lucio. McLenigan produced a steady flow of innuendo spoken with sustained, suggestive vocal sibilance and accompanied by lewd gestures, as when he graphically mimed masturbation to illustrate 'motion ungenerative' (3.1.356). Yet his most impressive moment was when, responding to Isabella's hesitation to confront Angelo, Lucio dropped the lilting vocal affectation, pointed firmly to her and said with simple, flat conviction: 'Our doubts are traitors, / And make us lose the good we oft might win, / By fearing to attempt' (77-9). It's one of my favorite lines in Shakespeare, and I've never heard it delivered better, especially in contrast to McLenigan's predominant attitude of desultory insincerity.

Ben Dibble's Angelo and Claire Inie-Richards' Isabella were distinct and internally consistent performances. Even so, I didn't care for all their acting choices. For example, Dibble invested the deputy with more outward expression than I would prefer. His several solo speeches began already at fever pitch and only climbed higher, to the point of shrieking with self-loathing. I would have preferred fewer emotional fireworks, as was the case in his comparative calm when he reacted to Isabella threatening to 'proclaim' him (2.4.151). There was no explosion, just a chilling, soft chuckle: 'Who

will believe thee, Isabel?’ (2.4.154) he asked quietly, walking slowly towards her. I have seen productions in which this speech accompanied acts of sexual assault, but Dibble’s Angelo only lightly cupped Isabella’s chin, turning her face to meet his. His still, looming frame around her, and the coolness of his voice were menacing without being melodramatic, and I wish more of his work had been in this vein.

Isabella’s reaction to Angelo’s threat here was strong, as was her subsequent, passionate speech. Unlike with Angelo, I preferred this energy to Inie-Richards’ tendency towards understatement. For example, the way she matter-of-factly corrected Lucio in 1.4 – ‘you do blaspheme the good in mocking me’ (1.4.37) – showed no real affront. It was as if she were correcting a child’s poor table manners, and Inie-Richards used the same tone to say ‘Th’impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies’ (2.4.101) – without poetry, without feeling. I suspect this was a deliberate choice, to demonstrate Isabella’s emotional repression, and it made sense, but I wanted a few more moments of outward turmoil. I did very much enjoy the pause she put between ‘he did show me / The way... twice o’er’ (4.1.37-38) to highlight, albeit dryly, her disgust with Angelo’s extra effort.

But this Isabella’s most memorable line was her last. While many might argue – and often I would agree – that there’s no need to add to Shakespeare’s text, in this case, I approved. There was no attempt to suggest these were Shakespeare’s words. It was clear here that the script had been altered from the original to include Isabella’s emotional subtext; there could be no doubt about the decision to depart from the literal Shakespeare, while staying within the realm of reasonable interpretation.

Finally, I tend to read most of Shakespeare’s comedies as problematic to some extent, but *Measure* is certainly more so than most. It remains excruciatingly relevant, especially given the recent #MeToo movement. McMahon acknowledged the same in his program note, mourning a society suffering from ‘systemic corruption and grotesque self-interest’. With that world as background, what other response to the Duke’s reprehensible abuse of power could be more appropriate than Isabella’s (interrupted) last words?