The politics of plot: Measure for Measure and the Italianate disguised duke play

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In considering the intertexts of Measure for Measure, the radical expansion of the role of the Duke is the most striking innovation that Shakespeare makes in his appropriation of the traditional monstrous ransom story. Previous versions of the tale represent the Duke, or monarch, as an a posteriori judge, punishing the corrupt official after the fact for his lewd treatment of the condemned criminal’s wife. What Shakespeare does instead, by placing his Duke in the disguise of a friar, is give the head of state an active role in the outcome of the action. Rather than responding to events, the Duke of Vienna covertly manipulates them, becoming the most prominent character in terms of the number of lines allocated to him by the dramatist. The surveillance of the Duke, staging the standard happy ending of New Comedy, ensures that the moral integrity of his government and the physical integrity of Claudio and Isabella are never really at stake, in contrast to the betrayed promises, executed husbands, and violated wives of the sources. The play becomes about the tension between the public performances of the ruler, observed by ‘millions of false eyes’, and the maintenance of power by covert direction, exposing the corruption of Angelo and the treasonous slanders of Lucio. The Duke continually defines his public role in theatrical terms:

I love the people
But do not like to stage me to their eyes.
Though it do well, I do not relish well
Their loud applause.

(1.1.68–71)

Yet, although he resists casting himself as an actor, he does relish a behind the scenes role in determining the outcome of the action, gleefully recounting how his ‘craft against vice’ will force an unwitting Angelo to ‘perform an old contracting’ via the bed-trick (3.1.531, 536). The use of a disguised duke, reflecting dramatic strategies current amongst Shakespeare’s contemporaries, changes
the focus of the established ransom story from Isabella's moral crisis to the voyeurism of the ruler. After the Duke's proposal of marriage at the end of the play, a significant departure from the traditional resolution of the erstwhile victim's plight, the conspicuous silence of Isabella embodies the inherent generic tensions between the concern with power in the disguised duke plot, the challenge to oppressive authority in the ransom story, and the celebration of individual choice in standard New Comedy.

Critics of Measure for Measure have felt obliged to acknowledge the manner in which Shakespeare's revision of the Duke's role places the play within a so-called 'theatrical vogue' that emerged in the first 'five or six years' following the accession of James I to the English throne. Historical evidence and claims in the frontispieces of published editions make it clear that, prior to the staging of Measure for Measure before James on Boxing Day, 1604, there had already been court performances of Thomas Middleton's The Phoenix and John Marston's The Malcontent. Each of these works treats disguise as an opportunity for political reform, where the ruler must abandon the flattery and isolation of the court to discover abuses in secret. While Measure for Measure went unpublished until 1623, Marston's tale of Genovese court intrigue was one of the most influential and popular works of the time, a success on the public and private stages and available in three published quartos in 1604 alone. The persistence of the disguised duke plot in subsequent years, becoming the object of self-conscious parody in comedies such as Edward Sharpham's The Fleire (1606) and John Day's Humour Out of Breath (1608), underlines its utility in dealing with issues of corruption and royal authority. None the less, in stating that 'the disguised ruler was fashionable in the theatre', traditional studies have not gone on to consider how Shakespeare's version of an established narrative structure with such explicit political concerns fits within the dynamic appropriation, citation, and revision of the structure in the plays of his contemporaries. What is at stake in such an approach is the extent of audience recognition of generic intertextuality, involving specific dramatic conventions and ideological issues. For although regular theatregoers may not have recognized the relationship of the ransom story to individual sources, such as a novella in Cinthio's Hecatommithi, the disguised duke plot of Measure for Measure draws on the immediate context of the evolving Jacobean theatre repertory.

By the time that Beaumont wrote The Woman Hater, usually dated 1607, the Italianate disguised duke play had become a cliché. Indeed, his preface openly concedes a lack of originality: 'a Duke there is, and the Scene lies in Italy, as those things lightly we never miss.' The startling effect of the opening scene, where the Duke of Milan asks some courtiers to discern his latest covert commerce, is contingent upon entrenched audience expectations. The courtiers, obviously frequent theatregoers, immediately assume that their ruler
must be preparing 'to cure / Some strange corruptions in the commonwealth' (1.1.11–12). The speculation onstage about a 'weightie court plot', adding to the impression given by the prologue, encourages a complacent acceptance of the work's generic affiliation (1.1.9). The Duke, however, abruptly dismisses any political motives: 'You are my friends, and you shall have the cause; / I breake my sleepes thus soone to see a wench' (1.1.28–9). The parodic implications of the ruler's anticlimactic denial of political reform are telling when placed alongside the self-justifications of Shakespeare's Duke, who denies 'that the dribleling dart of love / Can pierce a complete bosom' (1.3.2–3). For the ruler of Vienna, disguise is a pretext for reconstructing order in an upside-down society where

liberty plucks justice by the nose,
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.

(1.3.29–31)

Yet, despite the extent of his declared ambitions, Shakespeare's Duke ends up seeking a woman as well.

Apart from its critical insight, underlining the tension between politics and romantic comedy, Beaumont's parody presupposes an audience capable of appreciating the misleading allusions to a typical disguised duke plot. What stands out in the theatre's treatment of political disguise, as the opening of The Woman Hater suggests, is the focus upon reform and surveillance within the context of a specific Italian city state. In The Phoenix, for example, the future ruler of Ferrara qualifies himself for power through his effort 'to look into the heart and bowels of [the] dukedom, and, in disguise, mark all abuses ready for reformation and punishment'. The portrayal of a vigorous young prince eager to stem the corruption permitted by his predecessor would have appealed to the hopes of domestic reformers in the immediate aftermath of the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne. Yet placing the action in Ferrara, a state which lost its independence in 1598 after the failure of the ruling Este family to produce a suitable heir, adds particular resonance to Middleton's handling of the potential dangers of royal succession. For although Marston took care to deny the relevance of location in his prologue to The Malcontent, disclaiming any topical references even to distant Genoa, the Italian settings of such plays exploited the historical and cultural associations that individual states had already acquired in England. It is significant that The Fawn (1604), Marston's second use of a disguise plot, features another Duke of Ferrara's surreptitious observation of the court of Urbino. The decline of the two states, as Thomas Gainsford noted in The Glory of England, provided a cautionary vision of failed leadership and the loss of sovereignty: 'you see, how pitifully Ferrara and Urbine have lost their reputation of
courtshippe, and offered their coronets on the altar of Clergie man's usurpa-
tion. Marston’s contemptuous depiction of Urbino, the state that Baldassare
Castiglione presented as a model for courtly conduct and judicious govern-
ment in Il Libro del Cortegiano, forms an integral part of his satiric strategy.
The disguised ruler’s study of Castiglione’s court, consistent with the frequent
mockery of the precepts of ‘the absolute Castilio’ in other plays and satires by
Marston, exposes the ‘A, B, C, of courtship’ as mere sycophancy. The argu-
ment of the play becomes how the Duke of Ferrara learns good government
from the errors he finds in Urbino: ‘Another’s court shall show me where and
how / Vice may be cured’ (2.1.565-6).

Marston’s approach to the standard disguised duke plot, siting the surrepti-
tious investigation of the ruler in a different state, dramatizes the process of
cultural comparison implicit in the English fascination with the Italian politi-
cal scene. The fragmentation of the Italian nation into ‘royall That and
Duchie This’, as William Warner put it in Albion’s England, gave domestic
political theorists a laboratory of failed statecraft. In spite of all the pre-
occupation in the culture at large about Sir Politic Would-bes eager to emulate
the sprezzatura of Castiglione and the subtle schemes of Machiavelli, early
modern English political writing deals with Italian practices as cautionary
models of how not to govern a state. An understanding of what had gone
wrong in Italy, as the title of an abridged 1591 translation of Guicciardini pro-
mised, was ‘verie necessarie for Parliament, councell, treatises, and negotia-
tions’. Through the study of the ‘mutation, disorder, and utter ruine’ of individ-
ual Italian states, Thomas Bedingfield notes in dedicating his 1595 translation of
Machiavelli’s Florentine History to the Lord Chancellor of England, those
‘be called to the consultation of publike affaires and government’ could better
avoid the causes of ‘domestical discords’.

Enterprising courtiers made careers by displaying their knowledge of Italian
political failures. On the heels of self-appointed Tudor experts on Italian
government such as William Thomas and Charles Merbury, there was a
proliferation of translations and studies of Italy by those eager for preferment
under the Stuarts. The case of Sir Robert Dallington, who was one of the few
courtiers to serve in the households of both Prince Henry and Prince Charles,
marks the tangible benefits of being an expert on Italian politics in Jacobean
England. Dallington wrote two texts on judicious government, each of which
used Italian precedents as examples of how not to rule. At the opening of his
Aphorismes Civill and Militarie, he cites Francesco Guicciardini’s history of
Florence as a warning for his royal readers:

About the year 1490, Italy the most glorious and goodliest countrie of Europe,
stood in fairer termes of happiness and prosperite, then ever it had done since
the first declination of the Romane Empire: she was not subject to any command,
but of naturall Italians ... All of which faire flowers of peace were soddainly
blasted: most of the governments changed: the people wasted: the wealth
exhausted: the cities demolished: Arts and Armes decayed: and all by the heart
burning and jealousie of her own Princes, which set that noble countrie in
combustion: and being once on fire, ministred so much fuel of herselfe, as in
fortie years space it could not be quenched.17

Here, with its contempt for the factionalism and blind self-interest of the
rulers, Dallington's citation draws on the nostalgia for the past and the disgust
for the shame of Italy that characterizes the works of Guicciardini, Machiavelli,
and even Castiglione. In his Survey of the Great Dukes State of Tuscany, Dallin-
gton casts the state's loss of its tributary cities and, finally, its very independence
as an instructive lesson in political incompetence:

I could not finde where that great wit of theirs lay, whatsoever either by Maccia-
vel his report in his historie, or in his person may to the contrary be alleaged ... I
dare say that if Macciavel were again living, and should see them, that were wont
to rule a state, now not [fit] to bring a few Lettice from their Villa ... he would
unsay that which hee had formerly said, and sweare that they had no witte.18

As he disclaims that he acquired any useful 'matter of pollicy, or history or Art'
during his time in Florence, Dallington refuses to derive any positive know-
ledge from Italian culture.19

The morbid curiosity with which such early modern English treatises of
government survey the disorder of Italian states comes to the fore in the
disguised duke plays of Marston, Middleton, and Sharpham, where concealed
observers learn how to renew their hold on power by studying the errors of
other leaders. Disguise becomes a process of political education, demonstra-
ting how to overcome instability. Even as these plays register discontent with
corruption on a wider level, reflecting domestic unease about the court, they
are rooted in conventional representations of precarious Italian states. Despite
the attention paid to individual abuses, the motives for concealment have little
to do with mere voyeurism or capriciousness. The disguised dukes, faced with
internal treason and the territorial ambitions of neighbouring states, have no
choice but to abandon their public roles. The protagonist of The Malcontent, a
deposed Duke of Genoa, 'lie[s] in ambush for conveniency', spying on con-
spiracies in the usurper's court as a means of regaining his title (3.3.22). The
erstwhile ruler bitterly laments being compelled to take on the guise of
Malevole: 'O God, how loathesme this toying is to me!' (5.3.41). In The
Phoenix, the inability of the ageing Duke to see beyond the flattery of the court
obliges his son to act in secret against treasonous conspirators. The cynical ex-
Duke of Florence in Sharpham's The Fleire profits from the sexual abuses
permitted by the weak government of his new abode. For although Ivo Kamps
has argued that the disguised monarch figure is 'a wishful image of the Chris-
tian God', unaffected by temporal events, the rulers in these plays are subject to
political tumults beyond their control. It is telling that the unseen Duke of Florence, deposing and reinstating rulers of Genoa at will, is the most powerful leader in *The Malcontent*. The historical context of Italian crisis, where the status of the ruler and the state are always under threat, demands a new understanding of the realities of power.

The lack of an Italian setting in *Measure for Measure* marks a departure from the handling of disguised duke plots by period dramatists. What stands out immediately in Shakespeare’s approach is the security of the ruler’s own position. It is significant that, although the Duke’s public absence creates the potential for state violence and sexual exploitation, the consequences of misrule threaten only the subjects of Vienna. For although the Italianate plays deal with the fragility of political power, the fate of the Duke of Vienna is never at stake. Confident in his ability to return, Shakespeare’s Duke chooses of his own accord to avoid the popular view for a brief period. In spite of Angelo’s eagerness to abuse his temporary position, once given ‘Mortality and mercy in Vienna’, he does not show any ambition to seize permanent authority (1.1.44). The combination of a disguised duke plot with the traditional ransom story has much to do with the limited focus on the correction of a subordinate’s abuses. As Vincentio adopts the costume of a friar, allowing him to spy unobserved, he admits a desire to test his followers: ‘Hence shall we see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be’ (1.3.53–4). The ruler’s curiosity reflects what Foucault has called the changing economy of power with the decline of absolutism, moving from the production of royal spectacle to an invisible strategy of surveillance that ‘imposes on those whom it subjects a compulsory visibility’. For all its reputation as a problem play, as Franco Moretti has argued, *Measure for Measure* might be better seen as the “de-problematizing” play par excellence ... a comedy written by the Duke! Denied any private space, the populace of Vienna becomes the spectacle. Isabella’s principled rejection of Angelo, ‘Dressed in a little brief authority’, does not offer a precedent for resistance to legitimate power (2.2.120). Apart from Barnadine’s refusal to die, an exception that proves the rule, Vincentio disposes of the bodies of his subjects as he sees fit.

While *Measure for Measure* draws on the portrayal of surveillance in early Jacobean political drama, it leaves the ruler’s place at the head of the established social hierarchy in Vienna unquestioned. The intertextual density of Shakespeare’s plot construction, merging sources from diverse ideological positions and circumstances, complicates the transmission of individual genres. The more than legitimate paranoia of Italian dukes on the Jacobean stage, constantly menaced by treason, has little to do with Vincentio’s blithe manipulation of his subjects. When Shakespeare came to depict the trials of an usurped duke in *The Tempest*, a later work with remarkable similarities to disguised ruler narratives, he was careful to site the action amidst a context of
Italian state intrigue. For although Gary Taylor has recently contended that *Measure for Measure*’s references to Vienna are the product of posthumous adaptation, envisioning a more typical Italianate version based in Ferrara, the anomalous setting highlights the distance separating the providential vision of the ransom story from the staging of crisis in other political disguise plays. The active surveillance of officials is a logical expansion of the Duke’s role in the ransom plot as the ultimate guarantor of justice, permitting the prevention of abuses before they occur. At the end of the play, a chastened Angelo makes manifest the outcome’s association with theories of the ruler as a proxy for God:

O my dread lord,
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness
To think I can be undiscernable,
When I perceive your grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes.

(5.1.367–71)

Given the importance of the ransom plot, the textual history of the location has potential ramifications for our understanding of the play’s assimilation of material from outside the disguised duke tradition. The most immediate English source for the sexual blackmail story, George Whetstone’s *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), takes place ‘In the Cyttie of Julio (sometimes under the dominion of Corvinus Kinge of Hungarie, and Boemia)’. It is noticeable that Lucio’s gossip at the beginning of the play, in a passage whose provenience Taylor has disputed, emphasizes the central European setting: ‘If the Duke with the other dukes come not to composition with the King of Hungary, why then all the dukes fall upon the King’ (1.2.1–3).

With the recognition in the Jacobean theatre community of the disguised duke play as a distinct genre, the continuities and discontinuities of Shakespeare’s approach emerge from within the context of a wider repertory. Though critics often tend to idealize the ability of Shakespeare to interrogate existing forms, rather than merely reproducing them, generic parody became part of the satiric strategies of many playwrights. The ideological implications of rewriting disguise plots come to the fore in Edward Sharpham’s *The Fleire*, where the great innovation is to bring a super-sophisticated deposed Duke of Florence to a clearly defined Jacobean London. Composed after the works of Marston, Middleton, and Shakespeare, as underlined by the wealth of allusions to entrenched conventions and plot structures, the satire exploits audience recognition of the disguised ruler figure. In Sharpham’s version, performed in 1606 by the Children of the Queen’s Revels, Duke Antifront explicitly observes the court of James himself, rather than a distant Italian state or a city in central Europe. The novelty of a domestic setting emphasizes the rhetorical function of location in previous plays. When asked why he came ‘out of Italy into
England, the Florentine provides a self-reflexive gloss on the early modern drama’s treatment of political issues within an Italian context: ‘Because England would not come into Italy to me.’ The emphasis on Italy underlines how anomalous the Viennese setting of Measure for Measure really is, falling outside conventional strategies of political commentary.

In so far as The Fleire is a product of a series of citations and revisions of other dramatists, the pleasure of the audience, especially for the cognoscenti, must have come from the possibility it offers for intertextual interpretation. By repatriating the Italian stereotypes of political error, forcing the Jacobean audience to watch a Florentine mock the domestic scene, Sharpam challenges the manner in which previous plays rehearse English anxieties within a foreign setting. Explicit allusions to the genre, as in The Woman Hater, underline its association with political transition under James I. The play devotes much of the second act to the Florentine’s response, as an expert on statecraft, to the Jacobean court:

I saw a Farmers Son sit newly made a courtier, that sat in the presence at cardes, as
if the chaire of state had bin made of a peace of his fathers Barne-doore:
O tis a shame:
I would have state be state in earnest and in game.

(2.1.223–8)

Here, as in The Fawn, a foreign expert contemptuously reviews the practices of a fellow ruler. The reference to ‘the presence’, denoting that the events described took place before the English monarch, ensures that the disguised duke’s criticisms of the court appear to be directed at King James himself. The association of ‘the chaire of state’ with a country squire’s ‘Barne-doore’ targets his failure to maintain appropriate standards of royal decorum. The specific criticism of the behaviour of a ‘newly made’ courtier picks up, of course, on the widespread unease about James’s prodigality with honours.

While Measure for Measure does not hazard such obvious topical allusions to the English scene, Sharpam’s demystification of the genre shows that disguised duke plots had already acquired specific political connotations. Given the potential associations with the domestic monarch, Shakespeare’s depiction of the Duke of Vienna deserves particular attention. Without the threat of Italian crisis, the absence of any sense of personal danger discourages Vincentio from undergoing the same process of education as the rulers in contemporary plays. Despite regular denials of any yearning for the approval of his subjects, where he notes that ‘the man of safe discretion’ will not affect it, the Duke’s actions are continually motivated by the fear of libel (1.1.72). Even before Angelo demonstrates his lack of integrity, as part of the ransom plot, the Duke has already cast him as the front man for his new campaign against vice: ‘Sith ’twas my fault to give the people scope, / ’Twould be my tyranny to
strike and gall them’ (1.3.35–6). In explaining his decision to adopt the disguise of a friar, as Vincentio seeks to persuade a doubting Friar Thomas, he points to the advantages of disassociating himself from the implementation of unpopular measures:

I have on Angelo imposed the office,
Who may in the ambush of my name strike home,
And yet my nature never in the fight
To do in slander.

(1.3.40–3)

The importance that libel acquires for the ruler is such that the enforced marriages imposed by Vincentio at the end of the play equate the conduct of Lucio, guilty of trading in malicious gossip, with the human cost of the moral abuses of Angelo. In staging the normalizing happy ending, the Duke pointedly excludes Lucio from the general amnesty: ‘And yet here’s one in place I cannot pardon’ (5.1.502). He makes it clear that the courtier’s unpardonable offence consists in the description of him as ‘a fool, a coward, / One all of luxury, an ass, a madman’ (5.1.502–3).

The anxiety about slander in Measure for Measure, where the ruler seeks public acquiescence, has nothing to do with the didactic concerns of Marston and Middleton. As a professional satirist, incurring official wrath under both Elizabeth and James, it was unlikely that Marston would encourage fears about libel. Indeed, as Brian Gibbons has noted, the disguised duke of The Malcontent ‘is a dramatic metaphor for the imaginative art of the satiric poet, encouraging vice and folly in order to exhibit their true nature and contrive their exposure and correction’.32 Marston depicts surveillance in terms of education, where the study of error brings the ruler to correct his own weaknesses. In The Fawn, after participating in the sycophancy at the court in Urbino, the disguised Duke of Ferrara emphasizes that the experience has forced him to confront his own susceptibility to flattery:

By Him by Whom we are, I think a prince
Whose tender suffrance never felt a gust
Of bolder breathings, but still liv’d gently fanned
With the soft gales of his own flatterers’ lips,
Shall never know his own complexion ...
Mortal till now, I scarce had known myself.

(1.2.306–14)

Instead of legitimating authority, these plays argue, public shows of deference beguile the ruler. Middleton represents the Duke of Ferrara’s political weakness in The Phoenix as a failure to interpret the body politic. After seeing the political education disguise has offered his son, the aged ruler acknowledges the epistemic value of surveillance:
To thee let reverence all her powers engage,
That art in youth a miracle to age!
State is but blindness; thou hast piercing art:
We saw only the knee, but thou the heart.

Here, with the physical opposition of the knee and the heart, the abdicating Duke employs synecdoche to privilege the covert vision of the prince, able to determine the disposition of the individual subject. The political illegibility of the ‘knee’, representing an obligatory performance of reverence, demands that the ruler discount the external gestures of his subjects.

The importance of corporeal synecdoche in plays like Measure for Measure, as Elizabeth Hanson has noted, is that it ‘seems to promise access to unseen essences – things whose nature is to elude mediation.’ The surveillance of Middleton’s Phoenix, rhetorically depicted as seeing the heart, overcomes the divide between the public and private spaces of the subject. Yet, when disguise permits Shakespeare’s Duke to hear himself ridiculed by Lucio, he resists the unmediated version of his reputation:

No might nor greatness in mortality
Can censure scape; back-wounding calumny
The whitest virtue strikes. What king so strong
Can tie up the gall in the slanderous tongue?

The corporeal synecdoche used by Vincentio, asserting that the tongue of the subject menaces the ducal back, point to the desire of the ruler to protect himself by silencing the opinion of the individual subject.

For although the Duke of Vienna uses surveillance to consolidate his hold on power, exploiting the information he acquires, he resists placing himself in discussion. Indeed, contrary to the disguised ruler plays of Marston and Middleton, what Measure for Measure makes clear is the extent to which the Duke demands outward praise and deference. Unsettled by Lucio’s disrespect, Vincentio actually laments the absence of ‘dearer love’ (3.1.411). The fake friar’s defensive portrayal of the Duke as an archetypal Renaissance man has the air of self-flattery about it:

Either this is envy in you, folly, or mistaking. The very stream of his life, and the business he hath helmed, must upon a warranted need give him a better proclamation. Let him be but testimonied in his bringings- forth, and he shall appear to the envious a scholar, a statesman, and a soldier. (3.1.401–7)

Here, Vincentio’s complaint recalls the narcissism of Gonzago, the Duke of Urbino in The Fawn who continually trumpets his own sagacity and learning. In searching for topical allusions in Marston’s play, critics have argued that Gonzago’s appetite for flattery forms part of a satirical depiction of King
James. The emphasis that the ruler of Urbino places upon his qualifications as 'a philosopher' and a prince 'of discerning wit' certainly corresponds with period accounts of the Stuart king's proud evaluation of his voluminous writing and scholarship (1.2.171, 147). The appeal by Shakespeare's Duke to the value of his public statements, with the reference to 'his bringings-forth', may also allude to the royal authorship of works such as The True Law of Free Monarchies and Basilikon Doron. The English publication of Basilikon Doron in 1603, permitting James's new subjects to anticipate his agenda, reflected the same cultural interest in the issue of royal authority that fostered the popularity of disguised duke plots. However, as the similarity to the inept ruler in The Fawn suggests, the ideological posturing of Shakespeare's Duke does not go unchallenged.

In his clueless way, incurring the wrath of the disguised ruler with his playful malice, Lucio crushes the Duke's delusions of popular consent. It is significant that there is no equivalent figure to Lucio in the other relevant plays, except perhaps for Malevole. What condemns the gallant is his failure to offer a consistent performance of loyalty, anticipating the possibility that he might be watched. In looking at the 'culture of suspicion' implicit in early modern Italian theories of courtiership, Harry Berger Jr has persuasively outlined the importance that 'self-surveillance' has in Castiglione's and Della Casa's precepts for social advancement. The Duke's final punishment of the character, forcing him to marry the 'punk' who bore his child, does not come from the desire for moral reform. Rather, he intones that 'Slanderizing a Prince deserves it' (5.1.527). After all his efforts for the good of Vienna, at least as he sees it, Shakespeare's Duke is unable to accept the lack of public affection for him:

O place and greatness, millions of false eyes
Are stuck upon thee; volumes of report
Run with their false and most contrarious quests
Upon thy doings; thousand escapes of wit
Make thee the father of their idle dream,
And rack thee in their fancies.

(4.1.58–63)

Here, as N. W. Bawcutt notes in his edition of the play, the repetition of 'false' does not refer to the artifice of the flatterer, but to the treachery of unlove. Confronted with the epistemic distance between private contempt and public deference, the heart and the knee that the aged ruler in The Phoenix identifies, Vincentio's response is to compel displays of affection. The early modern idea of power, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, is about more than social position and wealth: '[its] quintessential sign is the ability to impose one's fictions upon the world'. Yet what makes the encounters with Lucio so traumatic for the Duke is that he had not fully recognized that the apparent love of his subjects
was only an act. In returning to his outward role, after his disguise is removed, Vienna’s ruler regains the authority to suppress dissent and exact affection. The marriage he demands for himself at the end, set alongside the enforced unions, comes as his ultimate revindication of authentic love.

The vanity of the Duke of Vienna lies behind another significant departure from the conventions established in the Italianate plays: the choice of disguise. While other disguised rulers depart from their usual position of respect, casting themselves as disreputable figures on the fringes of the court engaged in flattery or conspiracy, Vincentio maintains his dignity ‘Like a true friar’, claiming the honour due to a religious elder (1.3.48). The irony about the choice of a disguise granting moral authority is that Shakespeare’s Duke requires his subjects to engage in disquieting physical actions such as the bed-trick, a sexual bait and switch involving a would-be religious novice, and the desperate attempt to find a ‘convenient’ corpse to substitute for Claudio (4.3.100). In accepting to perform in the Duke’s deception of Angelo, hazard- ing their bodies and personal reputations in the scheme, both Isabella and Mariana make it clear that they are relying upon the assurances of the supposed friar that ‘tis no sin’ (4.2.71). What is at stake in such covert manoeuv- ring is that enforcing the rule of an absolute monarch can be a messy business even in the best of disguised duke plays.

When we look beyond Shakespeare things get even messier. One of the most striking aspects of the later parodies of the genre, alongside the topical satire, is the squalid means by which power is obtained and preserved. Instead of merely observing folly and vice, the deposed Duke of Florence in The Fleire exploits the activity of his two daughters as prostitutes, installing himself unbeknownst to them as their enterprising pimp. Aware that the son of the usurping ruler of Florence is one of their most enthusiastic clients, Antifront uses the sexual labour of his daughters to gain access to the Jacobean court and search for the information he needs to regain his dukedom. Needless to say, many critics have found that the play lacks ‘serious moral pressure’. In noting that the entrance of the daughters into the stews, ‘varied by attempts to poison some of their clientele, proves no impediment to a concluding journey to the altar’, Alfred Harbage has declared that it would be difficult ‘to imagine Shakespeare dealing in such ware’. However, as Mary Bly’s recent study of the repertory of the Whitefriars theatre has argued, the popularity of plays with bawdy language and situations proves that sexual material did have a commercial appeal in the London theatre marketplace. Critical approaches based on subjective values such as morality and dramatic quality distract from the manner in which Sharpham’s bawdy satire, designed to satisfy the partic- ular tastes of his fellow students at the Inns of Court, offers an insightful reading of the political strategies of the disguised duke plays written by his predecessors. At the very least, The Fleire is important because it documents
what one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought were the weak points in the theatre’s treatment of disguise and sovereignty. The blatant moral lapses of Antifront’s cynical will to power suggest that, for Sharpham, control over the body politic was not divorced from the fate of individual bodies.

Given the interest in recent studies of Measure for Measure in what Stephen Cohen has described as ‘the ideological schizophrenia of the play’s conclusion’, where romantic comedy seems to clash with the disguised duke plot, Sharpham’s self-reflexive handling of comic closure in The Fleire offers a valuable Jacobean critical precedent.43 In the twelve lines of rhyming couplets which conclude the play, by this time a sign of parody, Duke Antifront quickly marries his unwilling daughters to their most pathetic clients, loudly claiming that the marriages fulfil all the requirements of New Comedy: ‘And now since everie thing so well doth sort, / Let all be pleas’d in this our comic sport’ (5.5.112–13). The only confirmation that there is a happy ending comes from the Duke, since his chatter about genre drowns out any potential opposition from the couples. For all his blustering at the end, however, Antifront makes no effort throughout the course of the action to hide the fact that the need to ‘regaine our right in Florence’ outweighs anything else (2.1.430). Sharpham treats the Duke’s efforts to match his daughter Florida with Piso, the son of the dead usurper of power in Florence, as part of a perverse inversion of a standard romantic comedy plot, where the heavy father succeeds in imposing his wishes in spite of the resistance of his daughters and the disgust of the grooms. As in Measure for Measure, the transition from the very real threat of execution to a series of enforced marriages serves a clear political function. Brought to desperation by his condemnation to death, after a trial engineered by Antifront, a distraught Piso unwittingly renounces his new title:

Let them call back the banisht Signior Antifront, whose they and we, and all have wrong’d: O could I live but to enquire him out, in satisfaction of his wronges, ide marry his eldest Daughter and whilst a liv’d a should be restored to his estate, but O hee’s – (5.5.100–4)

The spontaneous disavowal of a dukedom, overheard by the disguised ruler, closely follows a similar scene in The Malcontent.44 At this point, taking up the offer, Antifront reveals his true identity and marries Piso to his daughter, a prostitute who has already shown her contempt for him. For both Antifront and Piso, the marriage with Florida is a function of political expediency. While Piso has limited information about the identity of the actual bride, his long-term intention is to ensure his legitimate succession to power in Florence after Antifront. The conclusion’s reminder of the role of dynastic marriages in consolidating the fortunes of a royal house would not have scandalized the Jacobean audience, since English political life for the final half of the sixteenth century was conditioned by the interminable discussion of Elizabeth’s wedding
prospects. The absurdity arises from the ruler’s unconvincing effort to repre-
sent a sleazy political alliance as romantic comedy, a genre promoting ideals of
love and personal autonomy.

Such generic tension is at the heart of what modern audiences and critics
have come to see as the disturbing outcome of the final scene in Measure for
Measure, where Shakespeare seeks to resolve the three different plotlines he
derived from his array of sources. The uncomfortable silence of Isabella at the
conclusion, after receiving the abrupt proposal of marriage from the Duke of
Vienna, feels like ‘a rent in the play’s coherence, a site of unspeakable confusion
in its discourse.’ It is important to note that the silence of a female character,
eliding the absence of a coherent dramatic motivation, is not unique in
Shakespearean comedy. At the end of Twelfth Night, as Alan Sinfield has
cogently noted, Shakespeare distracts from the inadequacies of his plot by
leaving Olivia ‘improbably silent at just the moment when anything she might
possibly say would disrupt the normalizing patriarchal closure.’ The lack of
any response by Isabella, as with Olivia, naturalizes her impromptu betrothal
to an unexpected suitor. The difference between the silences of the two women,
however, comes from the generic context in which they are set. While Olivia’s
seeming acceptance of marriage to the male twin of the disguised woman that
she had been courting serves to complete the reassuring final tableau of happy
couples, leaving only the comic victim Malvolio excluded, the power relations
involved in the Duke of Vienna’s desire evoke the broader pattern of enforced
marriages at the conclusion of Measure for Measure. After continuing to
renounce Mariana when she appears before him, Angelo himself offers no
response when ordered to ‘marry her instantly’ (5.1.378). While Mariana and
Isabella come to plead for the remission of his execution, his only further
comment is that he ‘crave[s] death more willingly than mercy’ (5.1.479).
Angelo’s own silence about his new wife smooths over the fact that, to para-
phrase Mariana, the Duke is mocking her with a husband. Among the none
too happy couples in this tableau of unconvincing reconciliation, only Lucio
enunciates his disgust at the Duke’s match making: ‘Marrying a punk, my lord,
is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging’ (5.1.524–5). Placed at the climax
of this sequence of unwanted unions, as Lucio is forcibly taken away to wed in
prison, the proposition to Isabella threatens to betray the ideological antagon-
isms dividing the romantic ideal of personal choice, the ruler’s incarnation of
state power, and his role in the sexual blackmail plot as the defender of female
chastity. It is telling that, despite Vincentio’s frequent denials of sexual motives,
Friar Thomas suspected right from the beginning that the ruler was led by the
‘ends / Of burning youth’ (1.3.5–6). Isabella remains voiceless because she is
the bond holding together Shakespeare’s unstable amalgam of the traditional
ransom story, the disguised duke plot, and romantic comedy. Anything she
says could upstage the ostensible closure, exposing the conflicts of interest
between the different roles that Vincentio is attempting to perform simultaneously. The intertextual background of Measure for Measure, mediating sources with diverse ideological visions of the individual subject, precludes a harmonious comic resolution to the political discourses it attempts to manage.

Notes


2 William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, The Oxford Shakespeare, ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.1.58. All further references are placed within the text.


4 The popularity of The Malcontent in 1604, following upon its revival by the King's Men, does not preclude an earlier composition date. While James's accession raised hopes for reform, as shown by the emergence of similar plays, satire of the court had already become prominent in the waning years of Elizabeth's reign.


8 There has been extensive critical discussion of the relationship between Middleton's play and the new monarch: significant accounts include Tricomi, Anticourt Drama, pp. 15–16; N. W. Bawcutt, 'Middleton's The Phoenix as a Royal

9 After the death of Alfonso II in 1597, the Este were left without a legitimate heir and the Popacy took direct control of Ferrara. See Luciano Chiappini, Gli Esteensi: Mille anni di storia (Ferrara, Corbo, 2001), and Bonner Mitchell, 1598: A Year of Pageantry in Late Renaissance Ferrara (Binghamton, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1990).


12 John Marston, Certaine Satyres in The Poems of John Marston, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1961), l. 27 (see also, for example, the comments in The Malcontent (1.4.87) and the sycophantic character named ‘Castillo Balthazar’ in Antonio and Mellida), and The Fawn, ed. Gerald A. Smith (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 4.1.167.


14 See A briefe collection or epitomie of all the notable and material things contained in the hystorie of Gucciardine being verie necessarie for Parliament, councell, treatises, and negotiations (London, T. Purfoote, 1591).


19 The vehemence of Dallington’s attack was such that the Duke of Florence protested to the English authorities. See Anna Maria Crinò, Fatti e figure del seicento angiotoscano (Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 1957), pp. 41–8.


24 Taylor argues that the location must have been changed by Thomas Middleton, as
a response to English hostility in 1620 towards Ferdinand II’s persecution of Protestants on the continent. See Gary Taylor, 'Shakespeare’s Mediterranean Measure for Measure', in Tom Clayton and Susan Brock, eds, Shakespeare and the Mediterranean (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2004). (I thank Professor Taylor for sending me a copy of his paper before publication.)


28 Edward Sharpham, A Critical Old Spelling Edition of the Works of Edward Sharpham, ed. Christopher Gordon Petter (New York, Garland, 1986), 1.3.258, 259. All further citations will be placed within the text. Albert Tricomi has noted the relation of this passage to the disguised duke tradition. See Anticourt Drama, p. 23.

29 See Michael J. Redmond, “‘Tis common knowledge”: Italian Stereotypes and Audience Response in Much Ado About Nothing and The Novella, Shakespeare Yearbook, 13 (2002), 419–41.

30 Tricomi, Anticourt Drama, p. 23.

31 In just the first year of his reign, James tripled the number of knights. See Linda Levy Peck, Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England (Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 32.


33 Elizabeth Hanson, Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 80–1.

34 See Albert W. Upton, ‘Allusions to James I and his Court in Marston’s The Fawn and Beaumont’s The Woman Hater’, PMLA, 44 (1929), 1048–65, and Tricomi, Anticourt Drama, p. 22.


36 Dollimore notes that ‘perhaps the most subversive thing in the play is the most casual, namely Lucio’s slurring of the Duke’s reputation’. See ‘Transgression and Surveillance’, p. 83.


38 See Measure for Measure, note 58, p. 180.


44 The spontaneous renunciation, overheard by the disguised ruler, echoes that of Pietro in *The Malcontent* 4.4.119–30. For the possible dramatic and personal relations between the two authors, contemporaries at the Middle Temple, see Christopher Gordon Petter’s prefatory material to his edition of Sharpham, pp. 33, 185–8, and 201–3.


46 Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject*, p. 74.