

Sources and Adaptations



Sources

Shakespeare might have used G.B. Giraldi Cinthio's story of Epitia¹ (perhaps its two versions, prose and drama) for the plot of *Measure for Measure*, but he changed a major plot element: Epitia is just a maiden, while Shakespeare's heroine, Isabella, is a novice. Epitia is reluctant to surrender her virginity because she cares about earthly honor. However, when her brother says that Juriste, the man who proposes "the monstrous ransom," might marry her, Epitia agrees because her honor might be saved. Isabella, however, does not surrender her virginity to Angelo because of religious concerns. For a novice or even a Christian, it would be a sin to break God's commandments by committing an act of fornication, and Isabella sees this sin as a damning one. However, instead of viewing Isabella's refusal as arising from moral conviction, one could see her refusal as self-righteous and theologically faulty. Does God damn all who commit fornication, regardless of circumstances? By making Isabella a novice and by raising such questions, Shakespeare adds theological complexity to his characters and to his play.

In addition, Shakespeare probably also read George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*.² In *Promos and Cassandra*, the protagonist, Cassandra, sleeps with Promos, the parallel to Angelo. Shakespeare, however, invents Mariana and the bedtrick. Cassandra eventually marries Promos, and she pleads for his life because she suddenly has a greater concern for her husband than she does for her brother. By creating Mariana, a girl who loves but is scorned by Angelo, and by having her sleep with

¹ Geoffrey Bullough, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-75), 2: 420-442.

² *Ibid.*, 442-513.

Angelo in Isabella's stead, Shakespeare preserves Isabella's virginity and rids the central female character of a problematic change of heart. He also makes Isabella's pleading for Angelo all the more important and climatic: instead of pleading out of a duty as a wife, she pleads out of the Christian mercy that she begged Angelo for in the first place. The change, however, raises some issues. Is it ethical for Isabella to allow Mariana to take her place and commit an act of fornication? Not only is the bedtrick problematic in respect to Mariana, but it raises issues concerning Angelo. Is the bedtrick a form of raping Angelo? In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare solves problems, but he also creates some ethical dilemmas of his own.

Many critics believe that Shakespeare was influenced by the morality plays that he grew up seeing, such as John Skeleton's *Magnyfycence*.³ Skeleton's play features a prince, Magnyfycence, who goes astray because of various personified vices. When Magnyfycence realizes the error of his ways, Redresse restores order. The character Redresse has no personal characteristics or emotions; the character exists only to solve the problems created by the vices. Some argue that Shakespeare created the Duke as an allegorical Justice figure similar to Redresse⁴. By perceiving him as a Justice figure instead of as a fully formed character, these critics have attempted to explain away his problematic disguise, deception, and bedtrick. The Duke, however, is more than a one-dimensional figure; unlike the allegorical characters in morality plays, he has complex human emotions. He gets angry at Lucio's slanderous jokes; he is surprised by the order for Claudio's execution; and he falls in love with Isabella. Shakespeare's fully human Duke denies the critics their neat allegorical reading, thereby forcing spectators to confront the character's dubious actions, and, by extension, to raise questions about the nature of power: Do the means ever justify the ends? Should the individual be sacrificed for the greater good? Shakespeare's human Duke creates a richer and more complex play.

³ John Skeleton, *Magnyfycence*, ed. Robert Lee Ramsay (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co., 1906).

⁴ Mathew Winston, "'Craft Against Vice': Morality Play Elements in *Measure for Measure*," *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981), 229-48.

Adaptations

Sir William D'Avenant's *The Law Against Lovers* (1673)⁵ combines *Beauty is the Best Advocate* with *Much Ado About Nothing*. As a result, the drama is incoherent. D'Avenant jumbles the action of the play by making Benedick related to Angelo and by having Lucio fall in love with Beatrice. The play doesn't have a Mariana character or Isabella's poignant plea; Angelo appears even more sadistic by stating that his indecent proposal is merely a test to find a suitable wife. In an effort to rid the play of its underworld, D'Avenant removes the prostitutes and has Barnardine executed; he thus deprives the play of comedy and charisma. Instead of improving two Shakespeare plays, D'Avenant effectively destroys both by combining them in *The Law Against Lovers*.

Charles Gildon's *Beauty is the Best Advocate* (1700)⁶ has the ghost of Shakespeare comically appear in the epilogue to apologize for the adaptation. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to agree with Shakespeare's ghost. Gildon's play removes the low characters and action, and even portrays the slanderous Lucio as a respectable protagonist. All the couples have been married before the action of the play, and the Duke does not appear until the end. These changes do not offer a compelling solution to the play's problems, but, instead, evade them or cover them over. This adaptation, however, has some redeeming qualities. The masques of Dido and Aeneas provide interesting parallels to the action of the play, and sometimes, like Hamlet's *Mousetrap*, convict the characters. Overall, Gildon smoothes over the rough and problematic elements in Shakespeare's play to present an entertainment.

Mary Cowden Clarke's Victorian children's book, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*⁷, invents for the reader Isabella's background, which resolves many of the problems raised in the play. For example, we are told that Isabella hastily becomes a novice after her father's death. Knowing this, one need not worry about the ethical implications of the Duke's proposal to Isabella but, instead, rejoice that he has saved her from a rash decision. Clarke's neat solutions, however, come at a high cost. Before his death, Isabella's father exhorts her to take care of Mariana; this paternal

⁵ William D'Avenant, *The Dramatic Works of William D'Avenant*, 5 vols. (1872-4, rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 5: 117-211.

⁶ Charles Gildon, *Beauty is the Best Advocate* (London: D. Brown and R. Parker, 1700).

⁷ Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, ed. Ernest Rhys, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1906-14), 2:1-79.

command undercuts the power and magnanimity of Isabella's decision to plead with Mariana for Angelo's life. Overall, however, Clarke's story is inventive and illuminating and, moreover, gives insight into a Victorian woman's struggle with Shakespeare's problematic text.

Bertolt Brecht's modern adaptation, *The Roundheads and Peakheads*,⁸ is an anti-Nazi parable that transforms many of the problematic elements of Shakespeare's play. Both plays deal with political topics; Shakespeare's Vienna struggles with moral bankruptcy, while Brecht's Yahoo is literally bankrupt. Brecht's Isabella becomes a novice for purely economic reasons, and finances drive many of the play's characters. The play's Regent, like the Juriste of Shakespeare's sources, isn't really involved in the action, but only comes at the end as a figure of justice. Thus Brecht disposes with problems of the Duke. Furthermore, the bed trick is invented by a pimp, who replaces Isabella with a whore, thus removing other moral problems in the play. Unlike Mary Cowden Clarke, Brecht leaves the reader with questions and with some new problems. His ending, even more than Shakespeare's, leaves many unpardoned and the spectator with a sense of unease. The audience doesn't believe that Yahoo has reformed in any way. Brecht's piece changes many of the problematic elements of Shakespeare's play, only to raise political and moral issues of its own about racial prejudices and political power.

Charles Marowitz's *Measure for Measure* (1978)⁹ returns to Shakespeare's sources to create a disturbing vision of Shakespeare's play. In a bizarre scene, Claudio leads Isabella to Angelo's bed, where she sleeps with the magistrate to save her brother. Downstage, the bishop, an added character, gives Claudio the last rites. Claudio is killed, and the truly absent Duke returns. Isabella pleads with the Duke, but he claims to disbelieve her and sends her to prison. The last scene depicts the Duke drinking with Angelo. Their exchange is the same one Pompey and Abhorson share about execution being a respectable trade (4.2), leaving the reader in horror at the brutality and corruption. Marowitz inventively rearranges Shakespeare's dialogue throughout his play and returns to the sources in order to create a chilling commentary on politics and power.

⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Jungle of Cities and Other Plays*, ed. Eric Bentley, trans. N. Goold-Verschöyle (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1966), 167-280.

⁹ Charles Marowitz, *The Marowitz Shakespeare* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1978), 181-225.