The Problem Ending of *Measure for Measure*
Isabella’s Celibate Power Conquered by the Tyrant Duke

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As a modern reader of Shakespeare, the ending of *Measure for Measure* perplexed and troubled me more than any of the other problem comedies. The speech at the end of *Taming of the Shrew* at least offers some comfort in knowing that an actor will be given the opportunity to define how one will interpret Katherine’s “defeat.” The silence at the end of *Measure* leaves the interpretation completely free; there is no language to aid in the embodiment of Isabella’s emotional state. The problem, then, is how does one read this ending? There have been many attempts to place the exact issues that make this ending so controversial. There is the obvious perspective of the heroine and her religious intentions both contained within the world of the play and in the audience’s perception. There is the less investigated side, however, of the Duke and his true role as ruler of Vienna as well as shaper of the genre of the play. By looking at these two characters together it may be possible to come up with some conception of how their marriage may have been perceived by Shakespeare’s audiences. By combining a close reading of the text with every angle from which this play has been judged, religion, feminism, history, politics, and Shakespeare’s other texts we may be able to reach a
reading that is not distorted by partial focus. My goal is to present an argument that supports the idea that the ending is more tragic than comic and would have been perceived as tragic despite Shakespeare’s Protestant audience.

As the author of the play, Shakespeare chose to label his play as a comedy, and in his defense it is in accordance with the classic, comic form: the evil character is subdued, there is reconciliation, and finally marriage (four of them!). In terms of Measure for Measure being strictly comedic in the same sense that Shakespeare’s romantic comedies are would be a difficult and shallow argument. I believe everyone agrees that the play is making some form of a social commentary. “It is because Measure for Measure is structured as an intellectual counterpoise of moral concepts and ideas that the normal, tragic results of the actions and decisions of the chief characters are suspended in favor of coldly comic irony and paradox” (Stevenson 12). The play can be said to use essentially simplified, moral caricatures that serve to highlight and critique a value system, which is essentially being tested and ‘experimented’ with by the Duke (Stevenson 14). Therefore, the outcome serves to highlight and engage with abstract, intellectual concepts like power, justice, and morality. Furthermore, because they are stereotypes, the characters are less like people and more like social devices that we can gain societal knowledge from. While this argument sounds attractive, this play deals with incredibly complex and gray conventions that unfortunately are contradicted and manipulated between opposing and allied forces in the play. To strictly consider the play as a ‘moral experiment’ denies the problems it creates.

1 This view is echoed in Rachel DuPlessis’s “Endings and Contradictions” where the play is looked at again in terms of theoretical social conventions and “scripts” rather than definitively within the world of the play (DuPlessis 283).
The play, then moves more accurately into the category of ‘problem comedy.’ A problem play can be defined as one where, “the situation faced by the protagonist is put forward by the author as a representative instance of a contemporary social problem; often the dramatist manages…to propose a solution to the problem which is at odds with prevailing opinion” (Abrams 246). Essentially it serves the purpose of giving an alternative solution to a problem. Shakespeare, however, does something different. His play are those that, “Explore ignoble aspects of human nature, and in which the resolution of the plot seems to many readers to be problematic, in that it does not settle or solve, except superficially, the moral problems raised in the lay” (Abrams 246). Therefore, not only are we given a problem, but also the solutions themselves are problematic: there is no real solution, only more problems and questions. Although looking at the play as a social critique is not a wrong, it only provides one insight into what the play is doing. By not fully answering the problem, it leaves the play open to many, almost too many, possible interpretations.

While the play as a whole presents a variety of moral critiques, it is the ending that is most problematic in determining how the resolution should be viewed.

Shakespeare builds Measure around the attitudes and emotions of the characters as much as around the action. Yet when the Duke proposes to Isabella, in the same sentence in which he pardons Claudio his violation of the law, she is silent, speaking not at all after pleading for Angelo. Shakespeare has led the audience to an emotional response but has avoided stating a moral conclusion. He has left the contradiction without even the appearance of resolution…, which is more disturbing and probably more subversive than a definitive ending. (Margolies 80)

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2 This is not completely rigid, as there are also elements of Northrop Frye’s definition of New Comedy (Frye 103).
Arguably, if Shakespeare had just left the ending with the other three marriages, we would be faced with fewer questions in answering the problem. We would be able to read a clear social commentary on corrupt rulers and tyranny, as well as injustice laws and social practices. Angelo is not punished for sex; he is punished for wronging his wife and supposedly killing an innocent man. Therefore compassionate justice solves the problem of unjust rule. Furthermore, because he is not punished for sexual transgression, then it can be argued that the play is pro-Protestant. The play does not end there though; it doubles back on itself, creating a paradox in its original message. Furthermore, the ironic outcome is not only contradictory, but also conspicuously negative and socially dissident. What, then are we supposed to gain from this play; what moral question has it answered? At the end, we are left with this open-ended question, which is begging for an answer.

*Measure for Measure* is arguably one of the most debated of ‘problem’ comedies not only because the play contradicts itself, but also because the problems it deals with lie in a pretty gray areas historically. The play engages with, on the surface, a moral issue of justice, which one could say is resolved rather definitively at the end. Under that, however, are questions of religion, tyranny, rape, enforced marriage, and a seemingly disturbing narrative contradiction in which the main character loses the one thing that drives her throughout the course of the play all to resolve the ending in the comic convention. Therefore, the goal becomes figuring out just what is going on at the resolution of the play, and come up with some satisfying answer to such a blatant, moral contradiction. Admittedly, some of the areas that need to be examined are impossible to fully answer, but by acknowledging both sides of the argument, as well as examining
those ambiguities against definitive claims, I believe that there is a conclusive argument to be made: unfortunately, the play does follow the genre of comedy, and therefore it must not be labeled as anything but. Morally, however, while the religious argument will be split, the Duke’s character demonstrates a trope perverse enough in Renaissance society that it can be claimed that even if the audience does not agree with Isabella’s religion, there would be sympathy for her on the grounds that she is taken advantage of by a tyrant.

The play is set in Vienna, Austria, and both within the setting and historically it is a Catholic state. While this is important for understanding and contextualizing the character of Isabella, as well as the Duke’s Friar disguise, Shakespeare’s England and audience was not nominally Catholic. The Catholic ideal of celibacy is one that drives the plot of the play forward, but the Protestant audience would generally detested the idea of celibacy as it goes against their own ideal of chaste, companionate marriage. Therefore, a purely Protestant audience would arguably have viewed Isabella’s marriage at the end of the play as the Duke saving her from her life as a nun, and bringing her into a healthy, chaste marriage. While this side of the argument, the religious lens, seems to be clear-cut, unfortunately history presents us with a large hole. Although England itself was Protestant, it was only so after years of going back and forth between the two religions and forced conversions after each new monarchy; the country’s religion coincides with the monarch’s religion. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to assume that every Catholic in the country just disappeared. Furthermore, the argument is complicated by Shakespeare’s own background, as well as how he works Catholicism
into the play in a largely positive manner. In this section I will examine the role that religion plays in terms of figuring out the ending of this play.

Unfortunately the question surrounding the audience’s position is one that cannot have a definitive answer: although it can be claimed that the country is Protestant, there could also be a silent, Catholic population among the spectators. While this can be asserted by speculation and common sense, Shakespeare himself, both in his own history as well as his other plays, can reinforce this. There is very little that can be undeniably claimed about William Shakespeare the person, but that should make the facts that we do know all the more salient. When Shakespeare’s parents were children, England was a “highly conservative Roman [Catholic]” state, and there is evidence that his grandfather was an incredibly devout Catholic (Greenblatt 93). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to conclude that his household at least had some Catholic sympathies, if not secretly a full-blown, Catholic family. Furthermore, the town he grew up in, Stratford, historically remained secretly and subversively Catholic, and his father is documented to have been involved with many of the subversive groups (Greenblatt 102). Even though any definitive conclusion about Shakespeare himself can only be speculative, the evidence surrounding him does show that Catholics still practiced in England after it went Protestant. Furthermore, they just so happened to be located around where he grew up, so it would not be unreasonable to assume that he was at least aware of Catholic sympathy. Not only does this suggest that his audience could very well have been mixed, but it calls into question his own motivation and sympathies as well.

To say, however, that an audience was not predominantly Protestant would be neglect a conspicuous truth. In his works, his nods to Catholic sympathy are subtle;
nothing is a blatant defense of the religion. His inclusion of sex in some of his plays automatically implies that he does not believe in celibacy. I would even argue that his works more explicitly show Protestant ideals. For example, in his Sonnets, the first part of them is all about procreation and trying to convince a man to have sex. Falling directly under Protestant beliefs, he is urging a man into a chaste marriage for the purpose of having children, thus propagating a Protestant religious ideal. This then stresses Shakespeare’s ambiguity as an author. Many of his other plays, however do display at least hints of Catholic sympathy, or what can be interpreted as such.

In his play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare forces one of his heroines to decide between an enforced marriage, death, and a nunnery. When explaining the life of a nun, he has Theseus say, “Thrice bless’d they that master so their blood / To undergo such maiden pilgrimage; / But earthlier happy is the rose distilled / Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn, / Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 1.1.76-80). All he says about the life a nun is that although they are more holy and further blessed when they go to heaven, married women are much happier during their time on Earth. He does not mock the concept at all, he even, arguably praises the way of life by noting its significance in relation to the afterlife, a concept that is central to early modern culture. He simply says that it would be easier for her to listen to her father and marry the man he chose for her. Furthermore, Shakespeare actually has Hermia decide that being a nun is the better choice saying, “ere I will yield my virgin patent up / Unto his lordship, whose unwishéed yoke / My soul consents not to

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3 This and all future references to the play are to William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, New York: Washington Square Press; hereafter cited in the body of my text by page number in parenthesis.
give sovereignty” (1.1.82-4). He even suggests that being a nun and remaining celibate grants her happiness in her own right because she remains in control of her virginity, thus giving her agency through the Catholic conception. In addition to what Shakespeare explicitly writes, by exclusion we can see that besides *Romeo and Juliet’s* Friar that makes one too many mistakes⁴, Shakespeare never writes a single evil or stereotypical Catholic character.⁵

The idea of celibacy as power is a medieval concept. As the lesser sex, a woman’s worth was really centered in her virginity:

> The highest praise was earned by those models of female virginity who had “successfully repudiated their own sexuality; they had negated their unfortunate female nature; and only in this way were they able to transcend the weakness and limitations of their sex.” (Leslie 182).

The only way for women to gain power over men in this structured society was to maintain their virginity; it was an un-gendering that allowed them to not be ‘sexualized objects,’ but rather neutral figures that did not have to submit to men. While conceptually this should be an empowering step for women of this time, unfortunately there was a line a woman can cross, a concept that becomes prevalent in the events of *Measure for Measure*. There is a fine line a woman has to walk between ‘virtuous virgin’ and, “overly ambitious virgin…seeking ‘freedom from all subjection to men’” (Leslie 183). Therefore, women are caught in a trap between being expected to be the

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⁴ One can make the argument that Romeo and Juliet’s deaths were largely due to the Friar’s mistakes, but even so, his actions were well intentioned, and the mistakes are subtle to the point where one can choose to read them as human error.

⁵ In comparison to Shakespeare’s bumbling friar, other playwrights of the time were writing far more severe and hateful depictions of Catholic figures. For example, if you look at Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, also set in a Catholic state (Italy), the Catholic, religious figures are unarguably the corrupt, villains of the play. Catholics are even more the center of evil in Marlowe’s *Massacre of Paris*, and they are portrayed as corrupt buffoons in his *The Jew of Malta*. 
ideal, asexual virgin, and having too much agency. We can see how Isabella finds herself unfortunately caught in this trap by both Angelo and later the Duke.

When Claudio is arrested, his first instinct, against the advice of his friend who suggests an appeal directly to the Duke, is to have his sister plead his case. He says:

This day my sister should the cloister enter,  
And there receive her approbation.  
Acquaint her with the danger of my state,  
Implore her, in my voice, that she make friends  
To the strict deputy; bid herself assay him.  
I have great hope in that, for in her youth  
There is a prone and speechless dialect  
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art  
When she will play with reason and discourse,  
And well she can persuade. (1.2.175-84)6

This is the first mention of Isabella in the play, and our very first introduction to her character is that today is the day she is supposed to become a nun. Therefore, we know this to be arguably the most important attribute to her character. In an initial reading of the phrase “speechless dialect such as move men,” I think that the line suggests her ability to persuade Angelo is one that is based on her looks, body language. If we, however, consider Isabella’s body, then one will remember that she is a virgin, an ideal maiden so to speak. Therefore, I believe the argument can be made that when considering how her character is introduced that it is not only her ‘womanness’ that will persuade him, but the fact that she is a virtuous woman. Furthermore, Claudio lets us know that she is well versed in argument. He seems to be placing full trust in Isabella almost as his lawyer even though she is a woman.

6 This and all future references to the play are to William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, edited by N.W. Bawcutt, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; hereafter cited in the body of my text by act, scene, and line number in parenthesis.
It is her virtue that allows her access to the court in such a role, a position that should be held by a man. Before she enters the scene, another description of her virtue is given. The provost says, “My good lord, a very virtuous maid, / And to be shortly of a sisterhood, / If not already” (2.2.20-2). Again, the text continually stresses that she is a nun, as if it is the most important quality about her. As a woman, she should not be so willingly accepted into a judicial space, yet Angelo openly “welcome[s]” her into the court (2.2.26). Furthermore, he asks the provost to stay and listen to the argument, which could be interpreted that Angelo might be willing to accept that this woman may persuade him against his original judgment.

This is complicated, however by the fact that her argument does not work. Instead, Shakespeare has the male, Catholic figure she appeals to, Angelo, try to rape her because he is attracted to her virtue (he asks himself: “Dost thou desire her fouly for those things / That make her good” (2.2.177-8)). Angelo is a Catholic tyrant who is desperately trying to enforce Catholic values upon the citizens by making sin punishable by death. Shakespeare then gives us two contrasting, Catholic figures: the religious tyrant and the virtuous, well-spoken nun. While Isabella’s argument does not work to persuade Angelo, Shakespeare does not allow Angelo to win. Shakespeare, instead, saves Isabella from rape with the intervention of a meddling Friar (the Duke), thus

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7 In *The Merchant of Venice*, a very similar appeal is made by a female character, but Portia is disguised a man, which is what allows her into the court. Portia, however, is a married woman, so she would not have the same problem of ‘virtuous agency’ so to speak.
8 This argument is complicated by the fact that the Duke ultimately takes her virginity away from her in the end. I believe my analysis of the Duke will flesh out why this does not undermine my argument for Shakespeare’s Catholic sympathy so as to completely thwart it, and I believe that there is some significance in choosing to disguise him as a Friar, which is an icon, Catholic figure who is also sworn to celibacy.
allowing her and her ideal triumph. I do not think it is impossible to overlook that
Angelo as a corrupt, Catholic character is written into the play, but the fact that he does
not win only against another Catholic ideal shows at least some Catholic sympathy.
Furthermore, it is the protection of celibacy against an overtly corrupt tyrant that the play
emphasizes.

Directly in relation to *Measure for Measure*, while we as modern readers can
place our own interpretation on the text, it is highly likely that the audience would have
viewed the Duke’s proposal as not necessarily consensual, but *best* for her well-being,
and that “a Protestant audience would see the offer of chaste marriage to the Duke as
preferable to the celibacy of the convent” (Baines 297). In her article, Baines does
acknowledge the argument that the ending is complex and that the move away towards
chastity may be a gift of sorts to the recusant Catholics in his audience, but argues that
Shakespeare is most likely writing for his Protestant audience. 9 Furthermore, the fact that
Isabella ultimately fails her designated task, and the Duke is the one who actually solves
the problems (that he arguably created by leaving), complicates a pro-Catholic argument
because her celibacy ultimately does not giver her agency, and instead leads to further
and further manipulation. As I stated at the beginning, I do not believe there can be a
definitive claim to be made for either side of the religious argument; the problem extends
past Shakespeare’s own ambiguity into historical ambiguity. While having a concrete
answer would definitively make this problem play less of a problem in terms of figuring

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9 Baines’ argument is based on the reading that Isabella’s silence is simply “a woman’s silence” in “the ‘natural,’ patriarchal ordering of things,” but as I will flesh out later in this essay, this argument takes a very narrow approach at looking at what occurs only within the context of the scene rather than at the whole play (Baines 298). My argument will use the same quotes, but reach a different conclusion.
it out, I believe that Shakespeare gives us more clues than just our heroine’s religious dilemma.

When trying to discern how to look at the ending of this play, while the focus is on how the ending treats our female protagonist, looking at the Duke’s character is in the final analysis the most telling evidence. Not only is it his actions that open up this debate, but also there is the largest amount of textual evidence when looking at the ending through this position. The figure of the ‘rapist tyrant’ is a prominent archetype in literature past the renaissance and through reformation literature, and has origins as far back as ancient Greece. The figure typically involves a Duke or King who preys on a beautiful, young virgin or married woman, and is often tragic in genre. Similarly to Measure for Measure, it is also common that they are set in a Catholic, or non-English state. I argue that Isabella’s marriage to the Duke is definitively enforced, but there is much debate as to whether or not this is definitively rape or just another implementation of patriarchal power in Renaissance society. In this section, I plan to argue that the actions the Duke takes are those that result in labeling him as a rapist tyrant through close reading of the Duke’s stated intentions throughout the play against Isabella’s intention, as well as critical works supporting both sides of the argument and other works by William Shakespeare.

When looking at whether or not this is an enforced marriage and the position contemporaries would take on this subject, there is evidence in Shakespeare’s other

\[\text{\textsuperscript{10}}\] More specifically, Hesiod.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\] Within Shakespeare’s own works, one can refer to his poem Lucrece. Other works with this figure include The Revenger’s Tragedy and Women Beware Women by Thomas Middleton. All three works are tragedies that end in the death of the victim and the death or usurpation of the victim and the attacker.
works. When the Duke proposes to Isabella he says, “for your lovely sake, / Give me your hand and say you will be mine” (5.1.494-5). While the line reads as if there is choice, I argue that there is no choice. One could make the argument that the Duke’s proposal to Isabella is not forced and that she has a choice because in comparison to the other marriages dictated by the Duke, especially in his rephrasing of the proposal (Ross 148). “I have a motion much imports your good, / whereto if you’ll a willing ear incline…” (5.1.538-9). He switches his offer by saying that he his proposal will be of great benefit to Isabella if she is willing to listen to it, which does, as some may argue, open up the possibility of choice; especially in comparison to the clearly forced marriages of the other characters. This argument, however, is undermined by the continuation of the line with “so bring us to our palace, where we’ll show/ what’s yet behind, that’s meet you all should know” (5.1.541-2). While it initially is open to choice, he closes the line with certainty that she will accept the proposal. Furthermore, this is the last line in the play; Isabella is not actually given a choice because she is not even given the opportunity to respond.

This proposal resonates well with a proposal in another one of Shakespeare’s plays, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, where another Duke proposes to another silent maiden. Duke Orsino says, “…Here is my hand, you shall from this time be/Your master’s mistress” (*Twelfth Night* 5.1.316-7). One can immediately notice that while the idea is similar, the action of giving one’s hand and becoming some ‘thing’ for the Duke, this proposal is definitively not a request: it is a closed statement of what *will*

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12 This and all future references to the play are to William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, edited by Roger Warren and Stanley Wells, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; hereafter cited in the body of my text by act, scene, and line number in parenthesis.
happen. Similarly to Isabella, Viola also is not given the opportunity to respond to this declaration. Without knowing the plot of *Twelfth Night*, one would assume that this would show *Measure for Measure*’s Duke as more compassionate. In context, however, this scene demonstrates the opposite. Here, Viola does not have to speak because the impending marriage is a fulfillment of an already determined desire of hers. In her iconic speech at the end of Act Two, Scene Two, she reveals to the audience early on, “My master loves her dearly, / And I, poor monster, fond as much on him… As I am man, / my state is desperate for my master’s love” (2.2.33-7). Only after a short period of being in service to the Duke, we learn that she has fallen for him, and that she is anxious that he will never love her because he believes she is a man. So for him to definitely fill her “desperate” desire for his affection is demonstrates that it is consensual and not enforced.

This marriage proposal serves my argument to reveal that Isabella is definitively placed into an enforced marriage. By setting up a similar case, Shakespeare shows us one proposal that is warranted and one that is problematic. *Measure for Measure*’s proposal does not fill Isabella’s desire in her silent gratitude. There is no declaration of secret love or admiration before this abrupt proposal as there is in *Twelfth Night*. In fact, she repeatedly denounces all desire for physical love and marriage because of her devote relationship to God. This marriage is clearly against Isabella’s wishes, and does not fit in with Shakespeare’s similar proposal style of this nature. Isabella is twice told (or asked) to marry the Duke, and is both times never given an opportunity to defend her desire for celibacy.

The contemporary position of whether or not an enforced marriage would be well accepted by the audience is also evident through the examination of Shakespeare’s other
works, both comedy and tragedy. In another comedy, *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, there is another meaning to be gained from Hermia’s line: “So will I grow, so live so die, my lord, / ere I will yield my virgin patent up, /unto his lordship, whose unwished yoke / my soul consents not to give sovereignty” that I pointed to earlier (1.1.79-82). In addition to the reading in the earlier passage, she says that she would rather live and die as a nun, the very thing that Isabella wants to be, than marry a man she does not want to marry. Shakespeare, in an early comedy, sets up a precedent that an enforced marriage is worse than celibacy. Therefore, while the play’s position on chastity and celibacy may be indeterminable, Shakespeare clearly expresses in a play of a similar genre that Isabella’s fate is worse than the religiously controversial life she wishes for. Therefore, regardless of whether or not Isabella is being saved from her Catholic vocation, the audience would most likely view the enforced marriage as something worse than living as a nun.

Furthermore, it is the Duke himself that forces her into the marriage, thus opening one of the points as to whether or not he is a ‘tyrannical Duke,’ literary figure.

In determining whether or not this Duke is in fact a tyrant, there appears to be two main, scholarly opinions. The first is that while he does exert his power, he does so within the confines of his power as leader/patriarch. As the ruling figure in Vienna, he rules as a King should rule. The second, however, demonstrates that he maliciously oversteps the boundary of ‘just ruler,’ and discriminatorily passes judgments and arrangements

13 In a less direct relationship, Shakespeare also plays with this idea in *Romeo and Juliet* in Act 3, Scene 5 where Juliet is told that she has to marry Paris against her own wishes; she has already consummated her marriage with Romeo. This enforced arrangement between Paris and Juliet arguably is what causes her to go to the Friar and put her life on the line in order to escape marrying him: potential death (and in the end actual death) is a better option than being forced to marry someone against one’s will.

14 Tyrant figures that enforce marriage on beautiful women would include, among others, Cambyses and Tamburlaine.
manipulates the tragic events of the play in his favor. In this section, I will demonstrate how the second opinion undermines the first, and then support this through close reading of relevant sections in the text.

One side of this argument is that the Duke does not act out of tyranny in marrying Isabella, but as the patriarchal, father figure that knows what is best for her. This is supported by the rephrasing of the marriages proposal, which can be read as him saving her (Baines 298). This argument also condones the ending by emphasizing that it is not punishment for a sexual transgression, but rather “legitimizes sexuality” to ultimately reach the desired “comic conclusion of marriage” (Adelman 171). The ending then should not be viewed as forced, but legitimate and reasonable because it is not born of the same transgressions of adultery that the ‘punished’ marriages are. There is also the argument that the Duke’s role serves as the tragi-comic character of a “trickster and priest…associated with…transformation and healing” (Gibbons 49). He then serves to fix the sinners’ relationships as well as perhaps save Isabella from her Catholic path.

Each of these arguments, however, can be argued against. The first argument is the antithesis of what was demonstrated in the previous section: the rephrasing of the marriage proposal does not soften it as an act of fatherly compassion, it is forces her into a position against her wishes. The second argument is undermined when one realizes that

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15 In the introduction to the version of the main text used in this paper, the editor goes so far as to call the Duke Shakespeare’s “overlord,” expanding on the idea that in Shakespeare’s version of this story, based on source materials, the Duke is given more agency than anyone other version; especially in shaping the outcome and ending of the play with “less happy consequences” (Bawcutt 24).

16 A similar argument is also made in Penny Gay’s article “Problematic Plots and Endings: Clowning and Comedy Post-Hamlet.” She also claims that the other marriages are all tainted with some form of sexual transgression from before the play begun, but the Duke and Isabella’s marriage has none (Gay 109).
although their marriage is not born out of sin, it is still overstepping the law.\textsuperscript{17}

Furthermore, by overstepping the law, it may not be born out of sin, but it will be consummated through sin, making the marriage just as immoral as the rest of them; arguably, even more so because he is tearing a bride of Christ away from her faith. Lastly, while I do believe it is not unfair to say that the Duke’s actions should be read as an agent to define the genre, I do not believe that he is a “healer” figure. Furthermore, although Gibbons presents the argument, he acknowledges that Shakespeare’s characters in the problem comedies “resist healing” (Gibbons 49). The Duke does not heal, but rather punishes people by making them marry individuals they do not wish to be with, as well as making Isabella break her marriage to Christ. Furthermore, as an agent of change, the Duke \textit{forces} her to change in the very way he went to lengths to protect her from when Angelo tried to do the same thing. Having punished Angelo for this and other actions, he is no better, yet sits above the law.\textsuperscript{18}

Most of the scholarly work that investigates the Duke as a tyrant presents it as an inherently sexualized ideal, automatically coupling ‘tyrant’ and ‘rapist tyrant.’ The play

\textsuperscript{17} Anthony Miller in his “Matters of State” describes something similar of Angelo as “the self-controlled and dispassionate man of justice proves to have passions after all, and privately flouts the law that he publicly enforces” (Miller 205). As I will argue later, the Duke, to paraphrase, also refers to himself as a ‘dispassionate man,’ yet makes passes at Isabella, and then places himself above the law he enforces only a few moments before and decides Isabella will marry him.

\textsuperscript{18} The character of the Duke is also argued to be a mirror of the reigning monarch of the time the play was produced, James I. This concept resonates with King James I’s own view on divine kingship. But the argument can be made, then, that Shakespeare’s intentions were to subtly mirror “the discontent that many of James’s subjects felt with him administration of justice” that he used “under the façade of touting the virtue of divine kingship” (Brown 2). Although the play is produced very early in James’ reign, his political views were made very public through his writing before his reign, and therefore this is not a problem to this argument. James argues that all Kings are above the law in his \textit{Rue Law of Free Monarchy}. 
itself, however presents evidence other than sexual advance and manipulation to support
the idea that he is a tyrant. In terms of self reference, the greatest evidence for this
comes in Act One, Scene Four, where the Duke twice reveals information about how he
views the nature of his power and position. The most explicit reference is in discussing
Angelo’s role as his “absolute power and place here in Vienna” (1.3.13). I think that
‘absolute’ can be read two ways. First is that it signifies that Angelo simply holds the
same amount of power as the Duke in his absence and is not merely a figurehead. The
line, however, can be read that way without the ‘absolute.’ By adding it, it evokes the
possibility of absolutism, and the sense that the Duke, in fact, does view his power and
“place” in Vienna as an absolute source. This terminology is obviously in the rhetoric of
tyrranny. It is then not outlandish to assume that there is at least some indication that the
Duke is, in his own mind, some form of absolute ruler (a tyrant).

The scene ironically moves to definitively discuss the anxieties of tyranny itself.
The Duke describes the current state of the judicial power in Vienna:

    We have strict statutes and most biting laws...
    Which for this fourteen years we have let slip....
    Terror, not to use, in time the rod
    Becomes more mocked than feared; so our decrees,
    Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
    And liberty plucks justice by the nose... (1.3.19-29)

Vienna used to be a run tyrannically; the plot of play is based around these strict laws that
hold severe punishments (execution). The Duke, however, expresses anxiety that the
laws have not been enforced, and people do not fear this judicial system, his power
anymore. In fact, they find it a joke. This apparent anxiety should be considered
troubling. In this quote, we find dissatisfaction with the way things are now by using a
word like “mocked.” The rest of quote, similar to this word, uses rhetoric that refers to
his subjects as “children” (1.3.25). As readers, it is natural to fear that as a parent that is being mocked by his children, the Duke longs to reassert his power over his subjects, his kingdom, as the ruling patriarchal father over all.\(^\text{19}\) With this desire, however, he expresses another concern:

\[
\text{Sith ‘twas my fault to give the people scope,}
\text{‘Twould be my tyranny to strike and fall them}
\text{For what I bid them do; for we bid this be done,}
\text{When evil deeds have their permissive pass}
\text{And not the punishment. Therefore, indeed, my father,}
\text{I have on Angelo imposed the office,}
\text{Who may in the ambush of my name strike home,}
\text{And yet my nature never in the fight}
\text{To do in slander… (1.3.35-43)}
\]

Although he wants to assert his absolute authority over his subjects again, he fears that too much time has passed, and that he will openly be accused of being a tyrant. Therefore, the Duke expressly announces that his greater plan is to covertly re-establish his strict power, his tyrannical reign, without actually being on the throne. This disguise plot further opens up his tyrant-like behavior through the fact that he is using someone else to assert his dominance; he is an incredibly manipulative figure who controls the movements of his people, later Isabella, and, most importantly, his own council. He truly is a singular ruler.

I believe it is safe to generalize that no tyrant invites the opportunity for someone to explicitly call him a tyrant. Historically, freedom of speech is something that is stereotypically denied, and perhaps this desire to manipulate public opinion to reflect

\(^\text{19}\) This in reminiscent of Richard’s line in Richard II, when he says, “As a long-parted mother with her child / Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting, / So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth…” (3.2.8-11). Part of the reason that Richard was overthrown was because of the conflicts he created towards his restructuring of the court into an absolutist rule.
positively on him is in a way a suppression of speech. The play, however, gives a
concrete example of the denial of free speech, thus adding to the argument that the Duke
is a tyrant. When the Duke asks Lucio about what he knows of himself while in disguise,
Lucio honestly says, “It was a mad fantastical trick of him to steal from/the state, and
usurp the beggary he was never born to” (3.1.356-7). He paints for us a pretty negative
image of the Duke as a money launder and neglectful to the masses. He continues with
his opinion by calling him, “a very superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow” (3.1.400).
The Duke, in disguise, seems to be searching for Lucio to say one positive thing about
him, yet can only get these distasteful claims. Yet, Lucio, in his mind, is innocently
telling a religious figure his opinion of a man that obviously has a negative reputation, to
some degree, within the city. This is important because while the Duke earlier claims to
be merciful, that is his own opinion of himself. If we take Lucio, a common man, at his
word, then we can infer that the Duke has a false vision of himself, and that it is already
explicit to some people\(^{20}\) that he is a tyrant.\(^{21}\)

If Lucio had any lingering hope that the Duke was a good man, the Duke destroys
any possibility of redeeming his character at the end of the play. After the Duke reveals
his identity, one of the people he punishes is Lucio. In his initial reason for punishment
he says, “Thy slanders I forgive, and therewithal/Remit thy other forfeits” (5.1.522-3). If
the Duke only said this, then one can infer the he really is trying to act in a just manner
by punishing yet another sexual transgressor. He, however, rephrases his reason for
punishment by saying, “Slandering a prince deserves it” (5.1.527). He drops the sexual

\(^{20}\) Lucio does say that the many people think the Duke is a good, fair person (leader), but
he also suggests that the masses are not as observant as he is to the Duke’s misdeeds.
\(^{21}\) Again, like Richard, in Richard II who also had a false vision of himself.
transgression, and solely makes his punishment about a personal attack. In this switch, the Duke enacts a form a censorship\textsuperscript{22}, setting a precedent of punishment for anyone who speaks poorly about him. So not only do members of the public believe he is bad in speculation, his actions demonstrate that he does in fact act in a tyrannical way. Furthermore, apart from his own court, no one ever actually says anything positive about him as a ruler. There is a general dissatisfaction with his reign. As a tyrant, supported by this series of textual evidence, it is unlikely that any contemporary audience would agree with his actions. Therefore, if it can be argued that Isabella’s marriage to him was not only enforced, but also rape, then we can conclusively pinpoint what exactly makes this play so problematic.

In conjunction with the existence of the virgin maiden one can expect or imagine the existence of a tyrant. I have already showed Isabella’s (mixed) agency in the play as defined by her chastity. Depending on whether or not the Duke is a tyrant he would arguably act in two ways: he would either only focus on punishing those who broke the law, and absolutely stand by his judgments and apply them to himself, or he would feel threatened by her agency and try to destroy it:

If the Duke were simply concerned about achieving power, then his attention would probably be directed word the grotesque bodies. However, the Duke has power. His objective is attain absolute power, and his manipulations focus most pointedly on destroying all classical bodies except his own (Little 118)

\textsuperscript{22} It is here where critics most forcefully make the argument that the Duke is meant to echo King James I, who actually saw this play performed. Briefly mentioned in Anthony Miller’s “Matters of State,” it is further expanded upon in C.E. Brown’s “Duke Vincentio of Measure for Measure and King James I of England: “The poorest Princes in Christendom.” The critic describes the Dukes’s “pleasing a favorite,” Antonio, versus his punishment of Lucio to be reminiscent of King James’ unfair use of justice. (Brown 2).
The Duke, then acts as a tyrant: rather than focusing on the sexual miscreants, he directs his attention towards the destruction of other, powerful, religions “bodies.” Literally speaking, the only character in this play that is the embodiment of any sort of real religious ideal and ‘body’ is Isabella. Therefore, the enforced marriage and defilement of her chastity is his chosen course for the assertion of his absolute power, his tyranny. This manipulation is similar to his work within his own court, but this can also be interpreted as an incredibly calculated, sexualized advance. It is here where the argument turns towards the possibility of sexual perversion and rape.

In this final section, I plan to trace the Duke’s sexual manipulation of Isabella throughout the play, ultimately leading to his sexual conquest and subsequent forced submission and rape. This idea is best supported by David McCandless’ article “I’ll Pray to increase Your Bondage” where he writes:

[The Duke] seems determined to make Isabella feel as helpless as possible. He resolves to keep her ignorant of Claudio’s survival…He will hurt her in order to please her, play God in order to secure her devotion, manipulate her into an indebtedness favorable to his proposal…. The Duke increases Isabella’s helplessness, orchestrating the public besmirching of her honor…. Having reduced her to absolute powerlessness, the Duke proposes marriage, seemingly consummating a careful plot to bind Isabella to him, to place her in the chains of a possibly unwanted wedlock (McCandless 103-4).

This is an argument of a sadistic manipulation of Isabella by a patriarchal tyrant asserting his will over her. This assertion of dominance is a confirmation of his power as he reclaims his position at the end as ruler. The Duke himself claims not to be a sexual person as he says, “Believe not that the dribbling dart of love/Can pierce a complete

23 There are a few other sources that touch on this idea as a small piece of their larger argument. Janet Adelman suggests that the Duke “coerces” her into participating in her sexuality (Adelman 171). Alexander Leggatt interprets the Duke’s proposal as asking for a reward for everything he’s done for her (Leggatt 146).
bosom” as an answer to a question as to whether or not he is part of a love scandal (1.3.2-3). He is suggesting himself to be pure, and sexually inexperienced. However, before the end of the play, the Duke neither has control over his kingdom’s sexuality, nor his own.24 The end, then, functions both as a claim of his legitimacy as a ruler, as argued above, as well as his mastering of his sexuality. He is able to break the purest of women, a nun, therefore, he asserts his control over a sexuality that is subversive to his patriarchy, thus asserting himself to be someone who can control even the most out of reach types of sexuality. The key word, however, in this claim by McCandless is “unwanted.” Not only does the Duke, in my analysis, present himself as a tyrant, but a rapist tyrant. While there is no physical rape in the play, there is textual evidence that the Duke’s claims about himself are not truthful, as well as the sexual manipulation of Isabella throughout the play.

The first point I would like to explore is the Duke’s own claim about his sexuality. As previously stated, he claims that he is sexually innocent. While this is only speculative evidence, I believe that it is worth noting that the line is an answer to a question that is asked before the scene begins: “No, holy father, throw away that thought” (1.3.1). He is denying something and that thing, which was quoted in the previous paragraph, is whether he was disguising himself as a friar because of some problem with love. My question, then, is why would a friar ask the Duke such a question when sexual relationships are legally forbidden in the city? One inference could be that the people of

24 A desexualized or feminized ruler or court would be considered unbalanced in terms of societal “hierarchical power” that essentially keeps society together in old, Catholic states (Aers 150). Therefore, if citizens noticed or “feared” a rulers “sliding femininity” it could cause civil unrest (Aers 150). In relation to the Duke, this could be another motivator for his reestablishment of sexual dominance.
the city know him to be a sexually transgressive individual. This idea is supported by something Lucio says to the Duke while he is disguised:

> Why, what a ruthless thing is this in him, for the Rebellion of a codpiece to take away the life of a man! Would the Duke that is absent have done this? Ere he Would have hanged a man for the getting a hundred Bastards, he would have paid for the nursing a Thousand. He had some feeling of the sport; he knew the Service, and that instructed him to mercy (3.1.76-81).

In short, while Lucio is saying that Angelo is being incredibly strict, the Duke would act hypocritically for the same offense: he is calling the Duke a lecher, and an experienced one too. This is obviously in contradiction with what he says about himself. Therefore, if there is evidence that the Duke is a transgressor, then we may not be able to trust what he says about himself.

I suggest sexual triumph as the qualifier for rape in this case because it is arguably black and white that Isabella does not want to have sex, and any sexual obligation would be considered rape. She is explicitly adamant on the subject as she says, “Better it were a brother died at once/Than that a sister by redeeming him/Should die for ever” (2.4.107-9). When asked to choose between sex and her brother’s life, essentially whether she would consent to being raped, Isabella says that she would rather just let him die. Therefore, if Isabella sees all sexual advances towards her as unwanted, then any sort of

25 Earlier, Lucio also makes an argument that this action of false justice is similar is against the natural, procreative process (1.4.40-4). This is explored in Robert Watson’s argument that the Duke is a figure of “biological morality” and need to reproduce (Watson 149). This calls into question, again, what role the marriage serves, and how moral or immoral the original laws were in terms of human procreativity.

26 This sentiment is the driving force of the action of the play. It is echoed throughout the play, but most notably in Act 3, Scene 1 when she tells her brother that she had the chance to save him and chose not to, comparing what she would have had to do to “incest” (3.1.142).
action could be deemed as rape. Furthermore, the marriage could hypothetically be a sexless one and only for her personal benefit as he suggests. I, however, believe that textually there is enough evidence to suggest that the marriage was entirely a sexual manipulation, implying that it will result in rape.

His manipulation begins in Act Three, Scene One, when he initially involves himself with her dilemma. In her moment of sexual crisis, he steps in and offers assistance. “The maid will I frame/and make fit for his attempt; if you think well to carry/this as you may, the doubleness of the benefit defend/the deceit from reproof” (3.1.256-9). He offers her a solution to her current problem: he will save her from Angelo’s rape, which she readily accepts. She, however, is innocently placing her sexual fate in his hands, giving him control over her present situation. Her future is now entirely at his will. He appears to keep his word, and remain faithful to his promise to help her, but in a critical moment for her emotional stability, he withholds important information for her with lack of a good reason:

The tongue of Isabel—she’s come to know
If yet her brother’s pardon he be come hither.
But I will keep her ignorant of her good,
To make her heavenly comforts of despair
When it is least expected. (4.3.104-8).

He knows that Claudio is safe, and she is safe, but makes the decision not to tell her.

Furthermore, he says that it is to make the reveal even more comforting for her later on. He, however, does not simply tell her that he was just executed. He graphically tells her, “He hath released him, Isabel, from the world. / His head is off, and sent to Angelo” (4.3.113-4). He essentially tells her that it is too late, and that she has failed. Arguably, because Isabella subsequently describes herself as “wretched,” she feels as though she
made the wrong choice: she should have given into the sexual advance in order to save her brother (4.3.119). This puts the Duke in further control over her, almost sadistically making her doubt everything she believes in. Furthermore, he has set up the situation so that she will be there when he reveals himself as the Duke, giving himself the opportunity not only to have her feel even more indebted to him, but weaker and powerless, ultimately giving him the opportunity to make her indebted to him.

In the reveal scene, he continuously drives her into a state of helplessness and submission. Before the reveal he is incredibly dismissive of her plea, and makes her feel as though she has completely lost: “Away with her. Poor soul, / She speaks this in the infirmity sense” (5.1.47-8). He publicly humiliates her, calling her crazy, which drives her into a corner with no where to escape; she’s lost her brother and her honor. She has lost to the point where when the Duke does reveal himself as the Friar, he has control over her entirely:

**Isabella:** O give me pardon
That I, your vassal, have employed and pained
Your unknown sovereignty….

**Duke:** Your brother’s death, I know, sits at your heart….
O most kind maid,
It was the swift celerity of his death,
Which I did think with slower foot came on,
That brained my purpose; but peace be with him. (5.1.388-97)

She is completely submissive to him while he, again, continues to lie to her about her brother’s death. Furthermore, this instance adds weight to her debt to him: he has told her that his actions against Angelo are for *her*. Therefore, she now *feels* that all of his actions are done for her, but we know from earlier that he already had a plan in motion to assert his authority over Angelo and his city; this is just another lie. Just before the proposal, in contradiction with his earlier declaration to reveal her brother’s pardon, he
plays dumb. “What’s he?.... I would thou hadst done so by Claudio. / Go fetch him hither, let me look upon him” (5.1.769-72). Although he orchestrates a reveal, he hides the fact that he knew, thus completing his manipulation. He has succeeded in everything he set out to do in his conquest: gain her sexual trust, break it, and make her feel indebted to him while completely maintaining his innocence. Therefore, when he says he will marry her she arguably does not have any choice at all, it is his reward for saving her brother, and she has no way to deny him it (Leggatt 146). She is put in the impossible position of denying a Duke, a tyrant Duke, his wish, and the Duke orchestrated this position. We know that she explicitly does not want this, and because she never says that she changed her mind on the subject, one can conclude that this is definitively rape.

In this section I have analyzed three major elements surrounding the actions of the Duke: enforced marriage, tyranny, and rape. Connected, they plot out a story of how one may view his character in relation to both his character archetype, as well as the genre of the play. As a tyrant the Duke manipulates Isabella into sexually submitting to him against her will through a marriage that she does not want. Therefore, it can be said that the Duke definitively partakes in these negative tropes. This, arguably, does not make him the hero he has set himself up to be, but rather the literary villain who tricks a young woman out of everything she wants. Furthermore, the Renaissance audience viewed these three tropes as negative, supported by their common literary themes of the time. Therefore, the audience would arguably disagree with the ending, perhaps even finding it displeasing and tragic. We cannot, however, ignore the religious half of this argument: the fact that the Duke is saving her from her Catholic ways. While I cannot argue that there is a definitive answer to how the audience will feel, I believe that Shakespeare’s
other works have provided enough contrasting evidence to support a claim that he may have not intended for this ending to be comedic in anything more than its structure: it ends in marriage.

While this essay primarily deals with contrasting arguments, there is a neutral argument that must be acknowledged. If we take a step back and look at this in the literal way it is labeled, it is a comedy as written on the first folio of the work. As is common in most comedies, there is a humor, and a common thread in Shakespeare’s humor is that someone is the butt of a joke: Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*, and Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* to name a few. If Isabella is to be categorized with them as the subversive social figure who ultimately is thwarted at the end of the play (her religion making her subversive, of course), then this play just presents a character we pity and feel sympathy for rather than corrupting an answer to a complex, moral issue; although I believe it still arouses the questions surrounding it. It is merely another joke that one or many may find distasteful. Furthermore, one can choose to “stand outside of the community that the joke is intended to amuse” or “sympathize with those on whom the joke is played” (Garner 117). Therefore, the issue becomes not about examining these large issues of religion and rape in order to find meaning, but recognizing that this is a common social trope that people disagreed with, and furthermore being aware that this person, who we feel sympathy for, is being placed in this situation. It does not matter whether or not it is funny or sad; it’s just about recognizing the issue.

This analysis of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is more or less an experiment to see how the ending of the play can be interpreted by looking at it from as many of the relevant perspectives as possible. The problem that most of the scholarly
work on the subject faces in their conclusions is that the approach taken seemingly ignores any argument that is too far away from the chosen approach. By combining the history, religion, politics, and Shakespearean studies with the text it creates an undiluted picture of the magnitude of problem in question. As I have consistently articulated, with most of Shakespeare’s meaning and work, some of the arguments are surrounded by too much ambiguity for anyone to make a definitive claim on those subjects; although, people have tried, and I believe that those arguments are rather too narrow. I believe the text, however, clearly lends itself to the idea that we are not supposed to be comfortable with Isabella and the Duke’s marriage. Regardless of whether or not it is a joke and regardless of whether or not an audience member is Catholic or Protestant, the Duke’s political role and the way he enacts his system of justice as ruler of his domain would be morally reprehensible in the eyes of a Renaissance individual. Even if her religious values do not match the majority, no one values tyranny, and the Duke’s blatant sexual advances and manipulation make him a sexually perverse tyrant at that.
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