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**A Problem of Substitution and “Seeming”:
Angelo as Representative, Upholder, and Breaker of Law in *Measure for Measure***

In her 1998 article “Infinite Space: Representation and Reformation in *Measure for Measure*,” Huston Diehl asserts that the play exemplifies the Protestant concern with mistaking the signifier for the thing signified. This distinction between signifier and signified functions largely as a distinction between external and internal (in other words, between flesh and spirit), hearkening back to the Augustinian definition of a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Concern over this distinction is visible in many aspects of Protestantism, belying a great skepticism with the power of the external to reliably signify the internal: cutting the seven sacraments down to two, devaluing the clerical offices, rejecting elaborate religious ceremonies, fervent iconoclasm, etc. Following Calvin’s teachings, they acknowledge that the human world is no substitution for God’s world, that it is disastrous to privilege appearances and “seeming” over trust in God’s grace and power of salvation. As such, despite *Measure for Measure*’s lack of explicit religious affiliation, the play certainly seems to corroborate a Protestant understanding of the world, particularly with the character of Angelo. Angelo’s character arc provides an especially elucidating commentary on the dangers of falling for false signification or substitution. While various aspects of Angelo’s character have been discussed by numerous scholars, this essay will focus specifically on plotting the trajectory of his downfall, using evidence both from Angelo’s own speech and from remarks made by other characters.

As both Diehl and Alexander Leggatt have noted, Angelo's fall can largely be attributed to the substitutional errors he makes throughout the play. This essay will show how Angelo's initial status as a "seemer"¹ and his pride in his personal holiness become the catalyst for his fall from grace. The essay will first examine Angelo's appointment by Duke Vincentio, offering some background on issues of law and rulership that inform this exchange of power. This appointment paves the way for Angelo's rule, which is where we see most clearly his errors of substitution and their severe consequences (especially for Claudio). It is when Angelo encounters Isabella that his façade begins to crumble as his Puritanical resolve is challenged by the "virtuous maid" (2.2.222). This turning point reveals Angelo not as the "saint" he believes himself to be (2.2.217), but as a hypocritical man of flesh and blood who is condemning another for the same crime that he himself is prepared to commit. The trial scene in Act 5 lays Angelo truly low, revealing his treachery to the public and forcing him to acknowledge his many errors of substitution, his inability to distinguish appearance from truth. The essay will conclude with some commentary on the possible outcomes of Angelo's trial and royal pardon, following Darryl J. Gless to suggest that such forgiveness might just be the second chance Angelo needs to set himself on a more righteous and holy path, one that does not run with God, but amongst men.

Angelo's appointment to his post by Duke Vincentio introduces issues of leadership and law very early on in the play. Just as Bolingbroke and Richard III must be deemed fit to inherit the crowns that have been plucked from their former (and sacredly anointed) owners, the Duke

¹ "Seemer" was a "common Elizabethan pejorative [term] for the social type we now label 'Puritan'" (Hayne 18). The adjective "precise" or "prezic," as it appears in *Measure for Measure*, was also often used to describe such individuals. The term "seemer" very clearly highlights the distinction between the outward displays of holiness that Puritans were scorned for and the internal faith in God prescribed by the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*. In the traditional Protestant view, the works professed and publicly enacted by the Puritans were useless because they could not help attain salvation, which could only be given by God.

must affirm his selection of Angelo as his deputy and “heir.”² He must also specify the scope of this substitution, which is total:

...we have with special soul
 Elected him our absence to supply,
 Lent him our terror, dressed him with our love,
 And given his deputation all the organs
 Of our own power. (1.1.16-22)

Although Angelo at first seems unwilling, or at least apprehensive (“Let there be some more test made of my mettle / Before so noble and so great a figure / Be stamped upon it” (1.1.52-4)) he accepts the power “to enforce or qualify the laws” (1.1.71). It is important to note the conditions and expectations set up in this transfer of power: Angelo knows he is being rewarded for his Puritan morality and restraint, that his appointment is due to his stalwart, unwavering precision. This makes him, if anything, even more eager to uphold his “otherworldly” adherence to the law (Watson 428) and reputation as a man in whose “tongue and heart” live “[m]orality and mercy in Vienna” (1.1.47-8).

However, Rebecca Lemon notes that the notion of “law” is much more complicated than it appears at first: “Aristotle’s formulation (law v. legislator, letter v. spirit) might suggest that the ‘law’ is coherent and material, a ‘letter’ to be followed. Against the letter of the law stands equity, the power to pardon. But such an opposition is misleading. The law is not singular” (555). In Shakespeare’s England, there were many types of law, which often overlapped and conflicted. There were common law courts, equity courts, and civil law (which grew out of ecclesiastical canon law), as well as “sovereign proclamations and statutes” (557). While

² As Robert Watson notes, “*Measure for Measure* starts with the Duke fashioning Angelo into a son and an heir to the throne” (418). The Duke’s intention to make Angelo “at full ourself” (1.1.46) expresses an “implicit fantasy of parthenogenesis,” a common struggle amongst Shakespeare’s tragic male leaders to overcome “their own mortality” through a transferring-over of power and identity.

common law tended to be unwritten and based on customs, civil law was “written and international. It relied not on judicial precedent but on code for its legal authority. Probate, marriage, and sexual behaviour all fell under the civil law of the ecclesiastical courts” (557). *Measure for Measure* takes place in Vienna rather than England, which means that the city is not necessarily governed by the same mishmash of courts – however, it is certainly still “a place in which ideas encounter each other,” wherein “issues raised by Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, among others,” are in constant tension (Berman 143).³ The way in which these different frameworks and doctrines are forced to coexist within the city of Vienna reflects the issues Lemon highlights in Shakespeare’s time with determining “the law” and how it should be upheld. The law that Angelo is tasked with enforcing, civil law, might appear stable and concrete, but it is not as unyielding as he interprets (or desires) it to be. Indeed, Lemon observes that “the problem with this ‘problem play’ lies in the instability of the law, a force offered as at once the source of and solution to Vienna’s problems” (559).

Looking at the law from a Calvinist-Protestant perspective further complicates the role of judge or law-enforcer. As Diehl notes, “in such a construction of the world a magistrate is in a sense always a representation of the divine judge – God’s substitute, if you will – and always to be viewed in terms of both his likeness to the divine (his authority, power, and punish) and the limitations of that comparison” (398). Calvin calls civil magistrates “deputies of God” who must be exemplars of God, but who are certainly not expected to be perfect or all-knowing. To view “the magistrate as an image of the all-judging God was to understand not only how he derives his authority from God but also how inadequate he is in relation to God” (398). Considered in this light, Angelo’s equation of his role as magistrate to divine rulership is only partially complete.

³ This paradigm, Ronald Berman asserts, is centered on “the revelation in the sensual life of the unresolvable conflict between actuality and ideal,” echoing the divide that Diehl and others have described (143).

He sees himself as being put in a position of absolute power – which is true in the sense that the Duke has endowed him with his “absolute power and place here in Vienna” (1.3.14) – but does not acknowledge that even the Duke’s power is limited by his humanity. Angelo’s hasty and hopeful mental substitution places him, as the surrogate Duke, directly in line with divine rulership, but without recognizing that he is still, as a human, far below God.

Another issue with this substitution and assumed positionality is that it places Angelo above, not among, the common people he is responsible for judging. The Protestant “insistence that self-knowledge can be achieved only by recognizing one's utter inability to fulfill the law” also involves “a recognition that necessarily precludes passing judgment on others” (Diehl 403) – something that Angelo lacks as he comes to the metaphorical throne. If the law is, as Calvin asserts, a “loking glasse” that “representeth unto us the spottes of our face” (qtd. in Diehl 403), Angelo refuses to peer into this mirror and see his true reflection. He instead sees himself as a coin stamped in the image of the Duke, a piece of metal once malleable, perhaps, but now firmly set. His inability to see himself in his people makes him forget his own humanity – a humanity he has already been denying for many years after spurning Marianna, his betrothed. As Kenneth Graham notes, “it is the coldness and hardness of heart that prevent him first from experiencing and then from enacting charity and compassion” (45), from even so much as acknowledging “That his blood flows or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone” (1.4.56).

If the situation surrounding Angelo’s appointment paints an ominous picture, his rule confirms and exacerbates these grim portents. It is clear from his swift arrest of Claudio that he intends to firmly uphold the old laws that the Duke had allowed to fall by the wayside:

We must not make a scarecrow of the law,
 Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,
 And let it keep one shape till custom make it

Their perch and not their terror. (2.1.2)

And yet, the punishment meted out to Claudio is, as Gless notes, even more severe than the Old Law, which “punished fornication with enforced marriage and a fine,” proving that “Angelo is more exacting than the Lord himself” (222). Angelo’s desire to make an example out of Claudio once again demonstrates an issue of substitution: he wishes to punish Claudio in order to prevent fornication from taking place in the future, and perhaps to atone for the fornication that had taken place before he was instituted as deputy. It seems as if he is painting Claudio as a surrogate Christ-like figure, in the sense that the unlucky convict will receive the punishment of all the sinners before him. This substitution of the singular for the universal demonstrates Angelo’s desire for total objectivity in law, of meting out justice without regard for situational or circumstantial details. Holding himself as the “gold standard” to which all other men seem to fall short, Angelo feels justified in delivering his harsh sentence. After reminding Escalus that being tempted and falling to temptation are two separate matters (2.1.18-9), he assures the wary deputy that “When I that censure him do so offend, / Let mine own judgment pattern out my death, / And nothing come in partial” (2.1. 31-3).

Despite Angelo’s attempts to embody and enact the law with perfect precision (he even forces Escalus to “tell him / he is indeed Justice” (3.2.254-5)), several of the other characters are quick to see through his façade. Claudio bitterly bemoans that the new deputy “Who, newly in the seat, that it may know / He can command, lets it straight feel the spur” (1.2.158), lamenting Angelo’s harshness as a tyrannical “demigod Authority” (1.2.116). Lucio, while perhaps not challenging Angelo’s authority directly, is certainly quick to mock the man’s parentage and claim that “when he makes water, his urine is / congealed ice; that I know to be true” (3.2.12-3). The most vocal opponent of Angelo’s power though is Isabella, particularly in her appeal to

Angelo in Act 2 Scene 2 to spare Claudio's life. It is noteworthy that when Isabella challenges Angelo on his absolute rulership, pointing out that if he were truly "the law" then he would be able to make exceptions, Angelo changes tack and begins to portray himself not as the law itself, but rather as subordinate to the law: "Be you content, fair maid. / It is the law, not I, condemn your brother" (2.2.104). He removes his own agency in the case, making the law into something immoveable and unchangeable by human beings, something that must be followed "to the letter." He becomes, essentially, the scribe who fulfills the letter of the law rather than the divine dictator, "the voice of the recorded law" rather than the law itself (2.4.65)). As such, he is able to deflect Isabella's pleas and arguments without taking the brunt of the blame for enforcing a law that is needlessly harsh.

Interestingly, these pleas for Angelo to soften his heart do work, but not in the way Isabella had in mind: Angelo's resolve is weakened, but towards Isabella rather than her brother as she had hoped. He realizes he is human after all (telling Isabella in Act 2 Scene 4 that "We are all frail" (130)), but instead of embracing this realization, Angelo resists it in an almost schizophrenic manner:

When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects. Heaven hath my empty words,
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel. (2.4.1-4)

He seems to fear that these emerging feelings will compromise his ability to carry out his duties (which is true, but only because his methods for judging depend on his hardheartedness and precision). As Anthony Gash asserts, "Angelo's attempts to unify the secular and sacred fields by spiritualizing society, while, like a surgeon, sealing himself off from contagion, leads paradoxically to an internal splitting of the psyche, revealed in soliloquies which alternate

between self-exaltation and self-disgust” (202). These soliloquies of self-examination, uttered for the entire audience to hear, create a public forum where Angelo “privately” works through his conflicting selves. Eventually, “[u]nable to accept that sexual desire can be anything but evil, he sees no choice but to be either the elect self or the reprobate other, finally opting for the latter: ‘Let’s write ‘good angel’ on the devil’s horn’ (2.4.16)” (202). The sexual love that has the potential to “regenerate him, and in the Platonic tradition is seen as the foundation of sacred love, is experienced as a catastrophe” (202). In his own sexual frigidity, Angelo has framed all forms of sexual engagement as inherently evil and corrupt⁴; he has made the substitution between sexual love and fornication, cutting himself off from the practices of “ordinary people” who fall in love, get married, and have sex (although not necessarily in that order).

After Angelo commits what he believes to be fornication with whom he believes to be Isabella, he is overcome with anxiety and inner conflict, to the point where it seems he no longer knows who he is: “This deed unshapes me quite, makes me unpregnant / And dull to all proceedings” (4.5.22). He has allowed himself to be caught in a web that the former, fully resolute Angelo would never have fallen prey to. Although it is not explicitly stated in the play, perhaps this self-loathing and confusion is why Angelo chooses to go ahead with the execution order despite having assured Isabella that her acquiescence would save Claudio’s life. Indeed, upon further consideration, it is possible to see how Angelo believes that executing Claudio will assuage his guilt: killing Claudio removes the cause of the whole unhappy situation (“cause” in the sense that his arrest is the reason for Isabella’s pleading, and that her pleading was what moved Angelo to fall for her), making it such that Angelo can put the whole debacle “out of sight, out of mind” once Claudio is buried and Isabella is dedicated to the convent where he will

⁴ A case similar to that of Leontes from *The Winter’s Tale*, as discussed by Richard Strier in “Mind, Nature, Heterodoxy and Iconoclasm in *The Winter’s Tale*.”

never have to set eyes on her again.⁵ It is a cruel and immature means of dealing with the situation he has created, but one that nonetheless must seem reasonable to Angelo at the moment he gives his orders. Afterwards though he appears to change his mind, lamenting that Claudio “should have lived,” even though he might have eventually come to claim revenge for having received “a dishonored life / With ransom of such shame” (4.5.33-4). This moment in the play is foreshadowed by his proclamation in Act 2: “We are all frail” (2.4.130). Having lost his moral compass and “touchstone of his virtue” (Gless 216), Angelo falls deeper and deeper into the hole he has made.

Despite his internal tumult though, Angelo still does his best to uphold his façade of “unmoveable deliverer of justice” to the last, dismissing Isabella and Marianna’s testimony against him as the ramblings of “poor informal women” (5.1.268). It is not until he knows he has been cornered by the “all-seeing” Duke that he fully admits to his crimes. Realizing that he has been under surveillance the whole time shatters his fantasy of playing God because the “infinite space” (as Diehl calls it) between him and the position he sought to hold is revealed. Defeated, he must defer to his “dread lord” the Duke, the true authority in Vienna who has thwarted his attempts to “be undiscernible” (5.1.413, 415). Angelo concedes thus: “your Grace, like power divine, / Hath looked upon my passes” (5.1.416-7). It is in this interaction that Angelo fully comes to terms with “the reality the Duke has dramatized for him – no deed, good or ill, escapes the supreme witness” (227).⁶ This revelation also “cures Angelo of the faithlessness apparent in

⁵ As Leggatt notes, Angelo “has evidently made no attempt to meet Isabella again; once was enough” (347). Besides, he is certain that Isabella’s testimony will not damage him; as he tells her, “My unsoiled name, th’ austereness of my life, / My vouch against you, and my place i’ th’ state / Will so your accusation outweigh” (2.4.169-71).

⁶ While in the play it is the disguised Duke that represents “supreme witness,” it is important to note that he is not all powerful either, but rather another substitution for both divine power and for Shakespeare as playwright (as Leggatt notes on 358). He can manipulate the people around him in order to set up certain situations, but he cannot fully control either the actions of the other characters (Barnadine refusing to be executed, Angelo demanding Claudio’s head despite Isabella’s “concession”) or the circumstances that arise as a result of these unpredictable actions.

his earlier concern primarily for the eyes of men” rather than the eyes of the Lord (Gless 227). The public setting in which Angelo’s epiphany and subsequent “trial” take place succeeds in making him aware of his personal sinfulness, forcibly externalizing the remorse that he had previously had to combat only in his heart and mind.

When he is forced to realize the magnitude and multitude of his errors of substitution in a public forum, Angelo is also forced to acknowledge that outward piety is not an acceptable or genuine substitute for inner holiness as he had previously believed. The world of seeming he had constructed to uphold his own self image cannot subdue or supersede the reality witnessed, experienced, and shared by others. Unable to bear the shame of this realization, he begs for “sequent death” (5.1.420).⁷ The Duke however, being a ruler more inclined to charity and compassion, does not end up fulfilling Angelo’s wish (although he is prepared to give the execution order) because he is moved by Marianna and Isabella’s pleas to spare Angelo. In begging forgiveness for Angelo, the two women show him the charity and openheartedness that he had denied them both in their own circumstances, miraculously earning him a second chance at life.

The power of forgiveness, Beckwith says, is unique to humans and God: “in the grammar of forgiveness a king pardons, a priest absolves, but only humans and God forgive” (116). This forgiveness comes from an acknowledgement that all human beings are sinners, that there is no one who has not, at some point, needed to be forgiven. Freely given forgiveness levels people just as strongly as judicial law stratifies them because anyone can forgive or be forgiven. As

⁷ Watson points out Angelo’s further error of substitution here: in “[e]quating earthly judges with divine ones, he expects a sentence of death – mortality as annihilation – and reaffirms the association by imagining that oblivion is the best to be hoped for from this visitation of grace” (429).

opposed to the forms of church discipline Philip Gorski defines,⁸ forgiveness is a communal activity that does not punish but rather opens up the opportunity for self-improvement in a more organic and productive way. This “radical forgiveness against all odds” is a key element of Christian doctrine: just as Jesus forgave his killers (“Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:24)), Christians must be prepared to forgive even the most odious of crimes if they are to be able to confess and be forgiven themselves.⁹ Indeed, the end of the play features many acts of forgiveness and confession that are only made possible through an open forum of “communal confession.” As Diehl notes, these various admissions of guilt and requests for forgiveness highlight the inability of any single person, whether within the play or within the audience, to “judge, lest [they] too be judged” (Matthew 7:2).¹⁰

The forgiveness shown by Marianna and Isabella and the mercy shown by the Duke not only save Angelo’s life, but endow him with the opportunity for self-improvement and re-evaluation. While many scholars resolutely condemn Angelo, the play does implicitly hint at some more positive possibilities for the disgraced deputy after the conclusion of the play. Gless suggests that, although the Duke’s decree that Angelo should marry Marianna might seem like a

⁸As Graham explains: “Discipline can be individual, working from the inside, or social, operating from the outside, and it can be normative (from below) or coercive (from above). Four combinations result: (1) self-discipline (individual and normative); (2) corrective discipline (individual and coercive); (3) communal discipline (social and normative); and (4) judicial or institutional discipline (social and coercive). Generally, Gorski argues, self-discipline is the most intensive form, corrective discipline the least effective, communal discipline the most long-lasting in its effects, and institutional discipline the most stable. Among his conclusions is that, across Europe, Protestant forms of church discipline were generally more effective than post-Tridentine Catholic forms because they were less hierarchical and so more normative. But he notes that elements of all four combinations could be found in the discipline of both churches” (47).

⁹ This explains how pious Isabella is able to forgive the man who would have ruined her purity and thus, in her eyes, her chances of getting into Heaven. This implicit acknowledgement that she herself is not perfect (an acknowledgement that Angelo fails to make for himself until the last act of the play) enables Isabella to find it in her heart to forgive the man whom she believes has killed her brother.

¹⁰ Gless similarly notes that: “Critics given to shrill assertions that there is nothing amiable in Angelo fail to recognize that his frailties are as likely to be their own. Only the self-ignorant can say with assurance that, given the power, he would not fall to an offered temptation and the subsequent desire to hide his fall” (233). Although “Angelo may be tainted with pride, lust, and treachery,” this makes him all the more human and therefore all the more in need of the forgiveness that everyone will eventually need.

dubious solution, Angelo's "traumatic humiliation and new self-knowledge may produce a humane and loving husband, especially for a woman who once had proved attractive even after completing, under Angelo's exacting eye, the customary tests of courtship" (233). Perhaps once Angelo accepts physical love in the chaste context of a marital relationship, he will find a more viable outlet for his repressed sexuality than whatever he sought in Isabella.¹¹ The substitution of Marianna for Isabella as overseen by the Duke may be the exact form of stabilization Angelo needs, now that he has accepted that he has human needs and desires, that his flesh is as weak as any man's given the right provocation.

Although it is unlikely that Angelo will ever again be put in a position of power in Vienna, there is a high probability that if he was endowed with any sort of power, he would wield it much more fairly and justly. Having been publicly humbled and humiliated, he no longer counts himself a "man of stricture and firm abstinence" (1.3.13), but a sinner like everyone else. His earlier Puritanical and pharisaical ideas about the law, love, and general conduct have been utterly destroyed, and it is unlikely that he will revert to his old hardhearted ways. If Angelo starts out as the exemplar of the clerics Erasmus railed against – men who "disowned the common nature which they share with mankind, particularly their sexuality," demonstrated "concern with the letter rather than the spirit," behaving more like Pharisees than Christ with "their outward displays of piety and their lack of charity," and forgot "the temporary nature" of their office of power (Gash 200) – these delusions are stripped away throughout the course of the play in the most dramatic manner.

¹¹ Diehl asserts that the reason Angelo is so infatuated with Isabella is that he is "aroused by the novice's saintliness – that is, for the way she images the divine." His lust can therefore be interpreted as a "misplaced desire to know God directly and carnally" (400). Once this fantasy is dispelled and Angelo can see his idolatrous infatuation for what it is – a substituted desire for heavenly knowledge – it is quite possible he will embrace Marianna as a fellow human rather than striving for a falsely "divine" love.

By tracking the trajectory of Angelo's character development throughout the play, it is possible to develop a more multifaceted depiction of someone who at first appears to be among Shakespeare's most callous and corrupt villains. While this essay does not attempt to excuse or justify Angelo's faults, it does strive to portray him in a holistic and humanizing light rather than using him as a foil to analyze the more upstanding characters of the Duke or Isabella (as is often the case in *Measure for Measure* literature). All the characters in the play, not just Angelo, fall prey to errors of substitution and misplaced faith, as indeed all member of the audience do as well. As human beings (or depictions of human beings, as in Shakespeare's plays), we must acknowledge our inherent penchant for interpreting the world through signs, symbols, and substitutions – no matter what religion, if any, we follow – and try to grant others the love and forgiveness we wish to receive in kind.

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