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Kin(g)ship and Power

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ANGELO RIGHETTI*

Measure for Measure Shakespeare Festival, Roman Theatre, Verona, 19-21 July 2018

Abstract

The review discusses the assets and liabilities of the production of *Measure for Measure* directed by Paolo Valerio for the 2018 Shakespeare Festival at the Roman theatre in Verona. After giving a fair write-up of performance (acting, scene-setting and costumes), the reviewer foregrounds the central, aporetic issues of the 'dark' comedy/tragicomedy – love, sex, law and religion. Reservations are expressed about the fast tempo imposed on the tragic part of the play by privileging intrigue and allowing Duke Vincentio to dominate the stage as a puppet master – thereby overshadowing the mirroring effect of the comic one that is almost downgraded to a farce instead of working as a realistic counterbalance.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *Measure for Measure*; tragicomedy; performance; aporia; justice; mercy

Measure for Measure featured for the third time on the bill of the Shakespeare Festival held at the Roman theatre in Verona on its seventieth anniversary. It was first staged there in 1967, directed by the then avant-garde director Luca Ronconi, starring celebrities like Massimo Girotti as Duke Vincentio, Sergio Fantoni as Angelo, and Valentina Fortunato as Isabella. Exactly twenty years later, a new production followed by the well-known English director Jonathan Miller, with Giulio Brogi playing Vincentio, Aldo Reggiani in the role of Angelo, and Elisabetta Pozzi in that of Isabella. Both mises-en-scène were moderately successful in spite of the high professionalism of actors and directors.

Over fifty years after the first open air performance 'on the banks of the Adige river' – despite its many, prestigious revivals in Britain starting in the 1960s and '70s and continued into the new millennium – the premiere wasn't convincing enough – still, it deserves suspending judgment especially because of the limited time devoted to rehearsals.

For the time being the audience response must be taken into account as they followed in nearly absolute silence the intrigues "unfolding" the multi-plot, 'dark' comedy, and were so overwhelmed that they tepidly applauded the actors "strutting" in their "two hours' traffic" on the stage.

One may wonder whether the audience appreciated the effort of the director, Paolo Valerio – chairman of Fondazione Atlantide Teatro Stabile di Verona – en-

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trusted with the only production of the Shakespeare Festival for the current season (“thrift, thrift”... alas!). The joint venture, sponsored by the Town Council of Verona, involved the Fondazione Teatro della Toscana with a view to the revival of *Measure for Measure* at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence for the next winter season, with Massimo Venturiello in the play’s leading role, ‘on loan’, as it were, for the Veronese summer theatrical event.

The performance of individual actors and the company’s labours on the whole were dignified, but unfortunately the director’s approach to the twofold nature of the play did not sufficiently highlight the entwining of tragedy and comedy (a tragicomedy in fact) – that sets the pace at different stages of its development. Namely, with the ‘slow motion’ of the former mirroring the racing rhythm of the latter, with high station characters and action confronted by everyday people and goings-on of the dregs of society in Vienna. Vienna is a tag name suggesting an exotic place like Verona or Venice to identify a city where a friar is far more of a busybody than friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* – but meaning London, owing to clear references on the scene to Southwark with its taverns and brothels, and frequent allusions to VD and pox recently and allegedly ‘imported’ from the newly discovered Americas.

In his famous essay “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919) T.S. Eliot calls *Measure for Measure* “a profoundly interesting play of ‘intractable’ material”: after Freud it is not so hard to realize that the intractability of Hamlet’s problems (the character’s) refers to an unsolved Oedipus complex shaping a tragedy Eliot labels as a “play dealing with the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son”.

One wonders what is intractable in *Measure for Measure*. By and large I would say a pre-modern, pre-Reformation issue, that is, the still unseparated semantic and ethical spheres of sin (vice) and crime, and a still unachieved freedom of conscience. Both are combined with, and dependent on traditional patriarchal structures of power – the disguised Duke’s final mandatory imposition of ‘judicious’ matches hardly concealed by an age-old recourse to the comedic, outworn “bed trick”.

Besides, intractability deeply influences the tragic plot that veers back and forth on aporias of justice and mercy, and a debate on the law and its enforcement, preeminent in *The Merchant of Venice*, though not carrying the extremely dramatic consequences of *Measure for Measure*.

Yet another question pertaining to the tragic part of the play, although its possible disastrous results are overshadowed here, is the Duke’s transfer of absolute power to Angelo, his Deputy and alter ego, whose mission is to set things right in his absence and have the law strictly observed. The move is not explained or is vaguely explained away, but foreruns King Lear’s abdication, something sacrilegious for an Elizabethan audience, and here, despite the ‘happy’ ending the risk of a moral, social and political, disruption is ever present, however much the Duke’s ruse and scheming fight it back and have the upper hand.

A group of characters impersonated by experienced actors links the tragic plot(s) and the comic subplots, in particular Escalus (Roberto Petruzzelli) and the provost (Marco Morellini) who stand for mercy on grounds of compassion and common sense, and above all Lucio (Alessandro Baldinotti), who dares a critique,

both direct and oblique, of power abuse (Angelo's), or contests and unmaskings (metaphorically and literally) power in disguise (Vincentio's).

The Duke – played by Massimo Venturiello at top speed even when matters of power, law, and religion demand a slowdown to give the audience time to 'digest' and think – is the "unmoved mover" that leads to the final recognition by treating all the other characters like puppets on a string. His presence on the stage, disguised as a friar, is made pervasive by having his gigantic photograph projected on backdrop banners, making him an eavesdropper all the time – and in his own authoritative persona he ends up becoming the substitute director engaged in metatheatrical operations.

Simone Toni (Angelo) and Camilla Diana (Isabella), male and female deuteragonists, still young actors but with a significant curriculum to their credit – are only in part up to the difficulties and double binds of their respective roles. Angelo's inner debate on his decision to enforce the law by abiding to the letter that imposes a death sentence on "fornicating" Claudio and prison for his lover Juliet, is suddenly confronted with his overriding passion for Isabella who defensively clings to principle (chastity). Angelo's blackmail follows: she ought to yield to him in exchange for saving her brother's life – and Claudio (played by Francesco Grossi, one of the new voices of the Teatro della Toscana and Verona), out of the anxiety of *timor mortis* emotionally blackmails her too.

In the text the crucially dramatic situation, central to the play, is explored in tense dialogue first between Isabella and Angelo and then between Claudio and Isabella, whereas the director cuts it down to size and simplifies it to suit a speedier action – hurry seems to be his obsession – and the subtle, long-drawn-out temptation of the mind verging on the temptation of the flesh is made to end up indulging voyeuristically in the realistic physical assault of Angelo on Isabella, and in the suggestion of incest between brother and sister.

The open air resources of the Roman theatre are put to good use by adopting the minimalism of the Elizabethan stage and its scanty properties. On a bare scene all the characters move and interact, but unfortunately shout and at times almost rant, and the noise effect is deafeningly amplified by the microphone on the mouth of each actor. This is somehow inexplicable because both old stagers and young actors have sensitively pitched voices trained in prestigious schools of theatre art (Piccolo Teatro and Filodrammatici in Milan, Orazio Costa and National theatre in Florence, Teatro Stabile in Verona).

A set of moving, variously coloured banners as a backcloth have already been pointed out in connection with the Duke's projected image on them as if they were screens, but they are also meant to underscore the basic opposition of appearance and 'reality' in the play, marking characters caught in critical situations, as when Isabella cries out: "seeming, seeming!" – to counter Angelo's blackmail and "proclaim"/shame his conduct that appears divided between repression/self-repression and unbridled lust.

The colour of the characters' costumes is overall grey-black including the hooded habit of the friar/Duke. Perhaps the costume designer intends to create a Brechtian alienation effect by suggesting the fashion of the 1920s. I'm afraid that as regards Escalus, Provost, Lucio, their apparel recalls the uniform of first-class

funeral pallbearers, while Angelo wears a whitish overbuttoned coat that may suggest a monk's 'innocence' up to the blackmail scene, but is returned to a grey-black suit when he is under trial and up to the 'happy' ending.

As for the women characters: Juliet (Federica Pizzutilo) is grossly identified by her "sin" – as, being heavily pregnant, she enters the stage exhibiting her swollen breasts and baby bump, but (comically) insists on necking Claudio (in pants), "arrested and carried to prison"; Isabella, as a novice is supposed to conceal all signs of femininity and is overdressed like a Red Cross nurse on duty, while Mariana (Federica Castellini, a very good actress playing in a minor key here), resurrected from Angelo's past as a pawn in the Duke's game, appears as a nondescript back-combed blonde preparing to resume her position as Angelo's betrothed and finally his wife after profiting by the "bed trick".

To sum up, it is the opinion of the writer of these notes on the assets and liabilities of the Roman theatre performance of *Measure for Measure* that Paolo Valerio's production will greatly improve from a tauter cohesion between the different phases of the play, more rehearsals, and above all a theatre where voice modulations do not need microphones.