

Spring Lectures, 2016, for the Angel Foundation, by Peter Milward

No.2. Saturday May 28, on *Measure for Measure*

coming after *The Merchant of Venice*, on the theme of Mercy
appropriate to the present Year of Marcy as proclaimed by Pope Francis
both plays centring on a trial scene with the heroine's plea for Mercy
reflecting the contemporary opposition of Papist v. Puritan

Setting of this play, first in new reign of James I with *Othello*, 1604

in Catholic Vienna – "the most Catholic of Shakespeare's plays" (Devlin)
yet disguised by bawdy scenes, illustrating the main theme
but rejected as a whole by Jesuit censor in Valladolid, from 2nd Folio

Plot, old laws in Vienna including punishment for fornication by death
lapsed during rule of Duke Vincentio, when "liberty plucks justice by nose"
appointing Puritanical (precise) judge Angelo to reinstate them
First victims, Claudio with girl-friend Juliet, though on pre-contract
Claudio's friend Lucio seeks help from his sister Isabella, as novice
name not from source but prioress of Wroxhall Priory before Reformation.

Then Isabella comes before Lord Angelo, pleading for Mercy on Claudio

With three impressive speeches, recalling Portia's "Quality of Mercy"

"No ceremony that to great ones 'longs/
Not the king's crown, nor the
deputed sword/ The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe/
Become them with one half so good a grace/
As Mercy does."

"Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once/
And he that might the
vantage best have took/ Found out the remedy. How would you be,
if he that is the top of judgment should/ But judge you as you are? O
think on that,/ And Mercy then will breathe within your lips/ Like
man new made."

"Merciful heaven!... Man, proud man,/ Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured/
His glassy essence, plays such
fantastic tricks before high heaven/
As make the angels weep, who with
our spleens/ Would all themselves laugh mortal."

But she fails to move "the precise Angelo" (= Puritanical, as insisting on
the Old Law of Moses, decreeing punishment for adultery, though not
himself a Puritan in the strict religious sense, as judge in Vienna)

Instead she moves him by stirring his sexual impulse towards her,

"O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint/
With saints dost bait thy hook!"

He promises to release Claudio in return for sexual relation with her

Now we turn to Duke Vincentio, who returns to Vienna to spy on Angelo
in habit of Franciscan friar, as Friar Lodowick, with consent of friars
but also to bring comfort to Claudio and Juliet in prison
though only Claudio condemned to death, advising him in sermon,
"Be absolute for death!" cf. theme of all friars, from R Southwell
Note syllogism of lovers, advised by triplicity of friars, in RJ, MA, MM
Romeo and Juliet, Claudio and Hero, Claudio and Juliet
Note, too, hero as Friar Lodowick, heroine as Isabella – both Catholic
contrasted with Puritan villain, Lord Angelo
as in contrast in MV between Portia for Antonio and Shylock
Then Isabella goes to brother in prison, informing him of Angelo's proposal
but Claudio no longer resigned to death, "Sweet sister, let me live!"
making another impressive speech, reminiscent of Hamlet
"Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,/ To lie in cold obstruction and
to rot./ This sensible warm motion to become/ A kneaded clod, and the
delighted spirit/ To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside/ In thrilling region
of thick-ribbed ice,/ To be imprisoned in the viewless winds/ And blown
with restless violence round about/ The pendant world... 'Tis too horrible."
But she only gets angry with him for such a plea – not for mercy.
Anyhow, Friar Lodowick finds a solution with one Mariana
formerly contracted with Angelo, but rejected without her dowry
but now to take Isabella's place at night in bed with Angelo
and so it happens – a so-called "bed-trick" (as in AW)
whereas Angelo still goes ahead with the sentence on Claudio
Now Isabella changes her tune, pleading with the returning Duke
"Justice, justice, justice, justice!" (repeated four times)
but not Angelo's legal justice, rather personal justice
as in Jesus' sermon, "Blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice"
considering that Angelo's injustice is concealed
Cf. Lear's similar anger against the injustices of this world
Only in the end, when Angelo's crimes are revealed before the Duke
once again Isabella bends her knees with Mariana
and pleads for Mercy on Angelo, though still unaware of brother's life
Thus all is solved, and Isabella appears as incarnation of Mercy
as Our Lady is invoked as *Salve Regina, Mater Misericordiae*