

The Journal of Religion and Theatre

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

The Journal of Religion and Theatre is a peer-reviewed journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

ISSN 1544-8762

Each author retains the copyright of his or her article. Users may read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, cite, or link to the full texts of these articles for personal, research, academic or other non commercial purposes. Republication and all other commercial use of these articles must receive written consent from the author.

Submission Guidelines

- Submit your article in Microsoft Word format via the internet
- Include a separate title page with the title of the article, your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number, with a 70 to 100 word abstract and a 25 to 50 word biography
- Do not type your name on any page of the article
- MLA style endnotes -- Appendix A.1. (Do not use parenthetical references in the body of the paper/ list of works cited.)
- E-Mail the article and title page via an attachment in Microsoft Word to Heather Beasley: protobeasley -at- gmail.com. (Please replace the -at- with @.)

DEADLINE: May 1st of each year

"Darkness as a Bride:" Heloise, Isabella, and the Dialectic of Transcendence and Deception in Early-Modern Theatre

by

Douglas FitzHenry Jones

Dissatisfaction may lead to nostalgia – regret that modernity no longer allows human beings to experience their world as a cosmos that assigns the individual his or her place on firm ground, regret that with what Nietzsche called the death of God our spiritual world apparently lost both founder and foundation and now is developing all sorts of cracks and fissures, falling into ruin as supposedly stable supports have begun to shift.¹

The study of the history of Christianity has, in the past century, confronted its own boundary problems. Was there a proto-Christianity predating the life of Jesus? How distinct was early Christianity from its Jewish antecedents? Was Luther far more entrenched in medieval suppositions than our hindsight would have us believe?² Was Elizabethan England decidedly Protestant or was 'Protestant' a synecdoche for a myriad differing allegiances?³ By way of response, twentieth-century scholarship has exhibited a fascination with the manner in which we assert ourselves – as scholars and as human beings – over and against the ineffable richness of cultural history. In particular, figures like Hans Blumenberg and his student, Karsten Harries, have opened up a view of early modernity as a period in which, for the first time, 'place' could no longer be assumed or naturally granted to the individual. It fell, rather, upon that individual to construct a 'place' – a role – for her or him self.⁴ As one might suspect, the

¹ Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 3.

² For more on subject of Luther's medieval characteristics, see Hieko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1989).

³ See Ethan Shagan's *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴ According to Blumenberg, history is not a matter of the simple transference of Christian 'contents' to dishonest, secular 'contents,' but, rather, the "reoccupation" of 'functional' frameworks [*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT press, 1983), p. 64]. This distinction, and the notion of 'function' it engenders, is essential for Blumenberg as well as for the subsequent scholarship concerning itself with early modernity. The most fundamental ontological questions (such as those regarding the truth or falsehood of humanity's assertion of itself over lived experience and historical process) and their respective responses have always served a 'functional' purpose. At the threshold of the modern epoch, these questions were not transformed but, rather, passed down. Moreover, because human self-assertion constitutes the basis of

liminal potential of Shakespeare's theatre has since become a ready metaphor for the process of "self-fashioning" from within (and as a consequence of) a boundless environment.⁵ We see Hamlet, at times, collapsing in indecision, overwhelmed by the 'shifting' court around him; or the dark Iago, reveling in epistemological uncertainty, having his hand at role after role.⁶ Hugh Grady has referred to Falstaff's revelry in *Henry IV* as an exemplar of "the potential of selves unfixed from traditional roles and world views to imagine and act out new roles and potentialities as an alternative to now outmoded ones."⁷ In thinking of the sixteenth-century as a period 'now' unmoored from 'outmoded' or clearly synthetic boundaries, a dialectic between transcendence and deception emerges. That is to say, by recognizing the artificiality of previously-fixed assumptions, do we then transcend these assumptions or do we, like Iago, garner the ability to manipulate already 'shifting' boundaries to our own less-than-admirable designs?⁸

modernity, the enactment of proper 'function' unavoidably falls on the human agent. The answers are hence one's own, while the questions are deeply rooted in the past epoch.

⁵ For more on the process of self-fashioning as a theatrical endeavor see Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Alisdair Macintyre's "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" in *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science*, ed. Gary Gutting (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

⁶ Susan Schreiner has developed this characteristic of Iago in "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare" in *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 83, No. 3 (July 2003), pp. 345-380.

⁷ Hugh Grady, "Falstaff: Subjectivity between the Carnival and the Aesthetic" in *Modern Language Review* Vol. 96, No. 3 (2001), p. 610.

⁸ There was also a similar dynamic to be found within the work of the Italian mystic Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa's *Docta Ignorantia* (1440) sought to recognize the artificiality of boundaries (characterized primarily by the limits imposed upon human perspective and noetic capacity) so that such boundaries might be transcended. The infinite nature of God, Cusa writes, "transcends all our understanding, which is unable by the path of reason to combine contradictories in their source, for we proceed by means of the things made evident to us by nature, but reason, falling far short of this infinite power, cannot join together contradictories, which are infinitely distant. Therefore, we see incomprehensibly [...]" And elsewhere: "It is very clearly established from what has been said that the absolute maximum is both incomprehensibly understandable and ineffably nameable [Selected Spiritual Writings, Trans. Hugh Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 92 Emphasis mine]." In other words, noetic deconstruction can be constructive – the recognition of limitation, freeing. As Blumenberg suggests, "it is a constitutive element of the modern age that it expands through restriction [The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, p. 500 Emphasis mine]." However, Harries (as we see in the above quote) points to the dark shadow of 'learned ignorance' to be found primarily in the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche. See also Giordano Bruno's treatment of epistemological themes in the *Ash Wednesday Supper* (1584) for more on the dark side of boundary dissolution.

Such dialectic finds its corollary in the Puritan distrust of theatre. While Protestants in England had long denounced the 'popish' ceremony of the Corpus Christi plays, they also came to condemn the deception stemming from the proneness of secular drama to a more inward, more epistemologically subversive, form of idolatry.⁹ Not surprisingly, the raw power of the stage became, for the London populace, an object of both fascination and fear. However, within the study of the history of Christianity, there is, I think, a comparable context which may help articulate the dialectic in question: that of medieval feminine mysticism. In what is to follow, I will argue that the explosive interiority of such mysticism relies upon an imposed role which holds within its popular expression the seed of its own undoing. The role in question is characterized by the pervasive 'bridegroom' analogy from the *Song of Solomon*, and posits the 'bride of Christ' as one who is closest to truth and, consequently, removed both from a male-dominated rationality and, more generally, from the fixed boundaries of the social order. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that this truth – what the thirteenth-century mystic Beatrice of Nazareth called the "limitless abyss of Divinity" – proved, in the end, too powerful to be contained within the narrow bounds of feminine limpidness or 'weakness' as proscribed by the prevailing medieval theories of womanhood.¹⁰ Thus, in much the same way as Shakespeare's theater was considered a *liminal space* – holding within it the potential for either transcendence or manipulation of boundaries – so, too, the woman of medieval mysticism was

⁹ For more on opposition to the Corpus Christi cycle, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Alters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 579-581. On interior idolatry, Huston Diehl writes, "because the reformers fear that any act of the imagination is potentially idolatrous, seducing people from God, the theatre cannot escape Protestant suspicions that it is dangerous even though it is a secular art form [*Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 69]."

¹⁰ Beatrice of Nazareth, "There are Seven Manners of Loving" in *Medieval Netherlands Religious Literature*, trans. Eric Colledge (New York: London House & Maxwell, 1965), p. 204. In the twelfth century, Peter Abelard wrote to his beloved Heloise – a woman with whom a large portion of this essay will concern itself – that "the virtue of women is the more pleasing ... because their nature is weaker [The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Classics, 1974), p. 121 Emphasis mine]." Andrea Nye has described these 'prevailing themes of womanhood' in Abelard and Heloise as those in which woman are at a remove from the logic and dialectic which comes to characterize the male scholastic. As long as these themes survive, she continues, the future of philosophy appears bleak. "If rationality, logic, and correct methodology are structured according to universal categories that are sexist, racist, and body phobic, women may not be logical or rational. If logical thought requires that categories stay rigidly fixed, not coming into contact with lived experience and changing as a result, then women may again fail to succeed. If philosophy persists in being a professional discipline divorced from passionate experience and aspiration, women may not be interested ["A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise" in *Hypatia* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1992), p. 16]."

thought to be in close proximity to the 'limitless abyss' and, as such, a *liminal figure*. As Augustine cautioned in the fourth century, "if ... a man were to take in a literal and carnal sense much that is written in the Song of Solomon, he would minister not to the fruit of a luminous *charity*, but to the feeling of libidinous *desire*."¹¹

The present study concerns itself with the oscillation between 'charity' and 'desire' – between transcendence of self and the deceptive substitution of earthly flesh for the ethereal bridegroom. In the process of my analysis, I will have recourse to two primary texts: the correspondence of Peter Abelard with his student, Heloise, and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Where the former is embedded in the contexts of medieval scholasticism and mysticism, the latter recalls these contexts in the characters of Angelo and Isabella. In the letters of Abelard and Heloise we witness the creation of a veritable 'fortress' where men are said to guard the castle walls while women reside within the keep (or central 'bridal chamber,' as the *Song of Solomon* would have it). Men are bound to the "outward works:" to the precision logic and reliability which allows the castle walls (composed of dogma and scholastic theology) to remain intact.¹² Where men are the 'keepers,' women are the 'kept.' They are said to engage "the very truth itself" – a function which is marked in the letters by an almost uncontrollable interiority.¹³ We will see that Heloise fully exploits this feminine trope to effectively tear down the castle walls, thereby achieving a unique agency which had been denied her by Abelard's controlling logic. Turning to Shakespeare's Angelo, we have just such a 'man' as Augustine describes: one bound to the precision logic of the 'literal sense,' and bound, ultimately, to replace another's 'virtue' with his own 'desire.'¹⁴ What is more, *Measure for Measure* as a whole provides us with the framework of substitution ('a measure for a measure') which sheds light upon this dialectic oscillation in a world of unfixed boundaries. In the subsequent investigation,

¹¹ Augustine, "Of the Spirit and the Letter (*De Spiritu et Littera*)" in *Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine: The Retractions*, ed. Philip Schaff (Washington: Catholic University of American Press, 1968), p. 201 Emphasis mine.

¹² "Letter 6, Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁴ As Angelo asks himself: "Dost thou desire her foully for those things | That make her good? [William Shakespeare, "Measure for Measure" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 178-179 (Hereafter '2.3.178-179')]"

I am not then arguing an influence but, rather, describing a worldview which will hopefully reveal the contours of human assertion in the early-modern period and perhaps, by extension, our modern age.¹⁵

I. HELOISE & ABELARD

While Abelard has often been considered the greatest scholastic thinker of the twelfth century, we know comparatively less about his partner in correspondence, Heloise. Though Peter the Venerable had praised Heloise for her uncommon "pursuit of secular learning," she was, in her own time, best remembered for her station as abbess in Abelard's Paraclete convent (named for the 'Holy Spirit' or 'comforter').¹⁶ Her role, in Abelard's account of the two lovers, seems to have amounted to little more than that of a diversion along Abelard's path to academic renown.¹⁷ Accordingly, part of my aim in this section is to flesh out the character of Heloise with reference both to her rhetoric in the *Letters* and to her place within the larger medieval mystical tradition. Even a cursory glance at Heloise reveals her rhetorical skill in appealing to Abelard's interests while, all the time furthering her own agenda. What are, on the surface, letters of adoration and devotion thus reveal themselves to be segments of a sophisticated discourse on the importance of Pauline interiority over and above the "outward show" of Aristotelian rationalism.¹⁸ We will see that the inwardness of love, on this account, is both a

¹⁵ Worldviews, as the scholar Charles Elliot Vernoff has explained, "[arise] in fulfillment of the constitutive need of self-conscious beings for some comprehensive and integral orientation to the conditions of their existence ["The Contemporary Study of Religion" in *Methodology in the Academic Teaching of Judaism*, ed. Zev Garber (New York: University Press of America, 1986), p. 17]." They represent, Vernoff continues, "a view of 'the world' as total system, by and large internally logical and coherent, which satisfies the elemental human need to *make sense of things* as the means of establishing basic sanity and maintaining a foundation for practical action [Ibid., p. 18]." The role of women as 'brides' of Christ is, for instance, characteristic of a medieval or early-modern worldview – that is, characteristic of an attempt to render what I have earlier called the 'explosive interiority' of Heloise 'internally logical and coherent.'

¹⁶ "Peter the Venerable: Letter (115) to Heloise" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 217.

¹⁷ As Leif Grane has written, "we shall follow Abelard's career up to the time when, through his meeting with Heloise, he was diverted from his course [*Peter Abelard: Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Derek Baker (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc, 1964), p. 35]."

¹⁸ "Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard," p. 69.

true 'fulfillment of the law' and the greatest obstacle to that fulfillment.¹⁹ From here, we may look deeper and ask ourselves how and why such interiority is portrayed in the *Letters* as being intrinsically feminine. At this juncture, I will have recourse to the mysticism of Beatrice of Nazareth in an effort to contextualize and give voice to the aforementioned dialectic between transcendence and deception.²⁰

In his confession, *Historia Calamitatum* (1132), Abelard draws our attention to two evils which marked his early life as a scholastic: his lechery and his pride. Throughout the *Historia*, he speaks of these sins, not as all-consuming addictions (much as Heloise will in her response to Abelard²¹), but as necessary rungs on the path to spiritual wisdom. "God's grace provided a remedy for both these evils, though not one of my choosing: first for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practiced it, and then for the pride which had grown in me through my learning."²² It is important to understand that Abelard views his lechery and prideful nature from the objective standpoint of one who has already found asylum by God's providential hand. "I know well," he tells us (quoting Jerome), "that it is *through* good and evil report that we make our way to the kingdom of heaven."²³ Anguish, for Abelard, is cathartic – it

¹⁹ In Romans 13:8 Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." In a similar passage from Galatians 6:2 he repeats, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ [*The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) Emphasis mine]."

²⁰ As mentioned previously, I am not arguing for an influence between these historically disparate figures. I have selected Heloise (d. 1164) and Beatrice (d. 1268) rather, because they embody a strand in mysticism which runs through two very different contexts – France of the 12th century and Belgium of the 13th century. Part of my hope is to suggest the pervasiveness of this strand of mysticism before attending to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

²¹ As Heloise responds to Abelard, "My heart was not in me but with you, and now, even more, if it is not with you it is nowhere; truly, without you it cannot exist ["Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 54]."

²² "Letter 1, *Historia Calamitatum*," p. 9. On the latter 'evil,' the mere tone of the *Historia* is enough to suggest to the reader that Abelard may have had a problem with what he himself and others perceived to be conceit. He notes repeatedly "the loss to the Church and the grief of philosophers" that would result from his abdication of all things 'scholastic' [*Ibid.*, p. 13]. The jealousy of lesser intellects is likewise a constant refrain. The above 'remedy,' for example, refers to a fateful altercation with the French mystic, Bernard of Clairvaux, which ultimately resulted in the condemnation of Abelard's treatise on the Trinity (*Theologia*) in 1121. From Bernard's perspective, Abelard's conceit had incited the foolhardy endeavor of applying dialectical reasoning to matters of faith. In Abelard's *Historia*, Bernard of Clairvaux is portrayed as less a living, breathing individual than a central protagonist in the author's spiritual drama.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 36 Emphasis mine. "Through persecution," he repeats, "my fame increased [*Ibid.*, p. 8 Emphasis mine]."

comprises a role in his own spiritual drama of salvation. Both the 'remedy' of his sudden castration and the concomitant predilection for Heloise are, in this way, inserted into a worldview. What is more, Heloise herself becomes both antagonist and protagonist in an exhaustive system based upon biblically-appropriated notions of femininity. As the antagonist in Abelard's story, she is first compared to the 'temptress Eve.' "I had done nothing unusual in the eyes of anyone who had known the power of love," Abelard tells us of his 'lecherous' relationship, "[that] *since the beginning of the human race* women had brought the noblest men to ruin."²⁴ As 'Mary Magdalene,' Heloise is placed on the pathway of redemption – a path which concludes in the acceptance of the nun's veil as the 'Virgin Mary' (the protagonist of Abelard's story). "It was a fortunate trading of your married state," he consoles Heloise in a subsequent letter: "as you were previously the wife of a poor mortal and now you are raised to the bed of the high king."²⁵ From the brothel to the Paraclete, Heloise is now Abelard's spiritual 'comforter,' resplendent in her special relationship with the bridegroom.²⁶

There is no escape from this system. If the *Historia* was our only extant source, we would have before us a drama in which 'Heloise' is merely a compendium of paradigmatic roles bonded together in a coherent and highly derivative narrative by the able hands of her "barren angel."²⁷ Far from this, Heloise's letters animate, problematize, and ultimately transcend Abelard's imposed worldview. After reiterating her identity as 'temptress Eve,' the abbess

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13 Emphasis mine.

²⁵ "Letter 5, Abelard to Heloise" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 73.

²⁶ It is not inconsequential to note that Heloise entered the Paraclete at Abelard's behest. "It was not my own sense of vocation which brought me as a young girl to accept the austerities of the cloister," Heloise recalls, "but your bidding alone, and if I deserve gratitude from you, you may judge for yourself how my labors are in vain ["Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard," p. 54]." Abelard has complete control over Heloise in this 'bidding' just as, I argue, he has control over her identity through the exhaustive system of the 'temptress Eve,' 'Mary Magdalene,' and the 'Virgin Mary.'

²⁷ In the late sixteenth century, the then-Catholic John Donne would satirize the poet's art in his elegy on "Love's Progress:" "Whoever loves, if he do not propose | The right true end of love, he's one that goes | To sea for nothing but to make him sick. | And love's a bear-whelp born, if we o'er-lick | Our love, and force it new strange shapes to take, | We err, and of a lump a monster make. [...] Makes virtue woman? Must I cool my blood | Till I both be, and find one, wise and good? | May barren angels love so. But if we | Make love to woman, virtue is not she, | As beauty's not, nor wealth ["Elegy 13: Love's Progress" in *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 59-61]." Donne as a young man was thoroughly opposed to the Elizabethan regime. While studying at the Inns of Court he was an ardent Catholic. His poetry during this period made a mockery of the Queen's Protestantism, the role of a woman in general, and the Petrarchan sonnet sequence in particular – the last being, for him, a form of absurd flattery.

confesses to Abelard that she is most certainly a "hypocrite" for loving him more than God and that the Lord, no doubt, "sees in [her] darkness."²⁸

God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore.²⁹

The language here is nothing short of incendiary. Heloise is, in effect, breathing life into Abelard's paradigms – setting fire to what would otherwise be a rather dry depiction of Mary the harlot. Most importantly, she here reestablishes in a profane form the framework of ascetic denial which had rendered Abelard's anguish meaningful in the *Historia*. "Consequently," Abelard had written, "the great philosophers of the past have despised the world." Such, he went on, "is the practice today through love of God of those among us who truly deserve the name of monks."³⁰ In Heloise, we have a denial of both spatial and temporal gifts – the 'whole world,' 'all the earth,' 'for ever' – not for 'love of God' but of Abelard *himself*. "I can expect no reward for this from God," she laments, "for it is certain that I have done nothing as yet for love of him."³¹ Using the building blocks of Abelard's own worldview, Heloise substitutes 'desire' for 'charity' – Abelard for the bridegroom – concluding that she is indeed a temptress.³²

However, if we were to stop here, Heloise's words would amount to little more than an affirmation of Abelard's warnings in the *Historia*. To make sense of this substitution, we must instead go on to examine the notion of femininity which is set forth by the *Letters*. We will discover that the proposed 'weakness' of women to which both Abelard and Heloise ascribe is, in fact, a form of Pauline interiority, being, at one and the same time, transcendent and

²⁸ "Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard," p. 69. "It was the first woman in the beginning," in Heloise's words, "who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall [Ibid., p. 67]."

²⁹ "Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard," p. 51.

³⁰ "Letter 1, *Historia Calamitatum*" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, pp. 14, 15.

³¹ "Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard," p. 54.

³² Heloise writes: "I beg you, be fearful for me always, instead of feeling confidence in me ["Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard," p. 70]."

perilously liminal.³³ To begin, such interiority is characterized throughout by an intimacy with the marrow of human experience. To use the popular imagery of the twelfth century, women (as 'brides' of Christ) are thought to be closer to the central chamber where the bridegroom dwells. "What," Abelard asks us, "is this privilege of the weaker sex"? Where "men imprint the sacraments by figures ... the woman ... worked on the *very truth itself*, as the Truth actually attests."³⁴ Christ, the 'Truth,' is said to favor the "humble woman, with no special clothing or ceremonial."³⁵ Liberated from the 'figures' of worldly authority, the woman is said thus to turn inward to the center of her soul where the 'truth itself' resides.

Abelard's encomium, perhaps unwittingly, opens the door for Heloise to subvert both monastic and scholastic rationality – a task which she zealously takes up in her third letter. Drawing extensively from Paul and Augustine, she here formulates a distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law with a critical eye to those men "who rashly profess monastic observance:"

They all hurry almost equally indiscriminately to enter monastic life: they are received without proper discipline and live with even less, they profess a Rule they do not know and are equally ready to despise it and set up as law the customs they prefer. We must therefore be careful not to impose on a woman a burden under which we see nearly all men stagger and even fall.³⁶

There is a suggestive irony behind this passage when we consider that the purpose of Heloise's third letter is to exhort Abelard to amend the Benedictine Rule to better fit a woman's 'weaker'

³³ On weakness, Abelard writes that "the virtue of women is the more pleasing to him because their nature is weaker ["Letter 7, Abelard to Heloise," p. 121]." Similarly, Heloise informs us that, for her, "youth and passion and experience of pleasure which were so delightful intensify the torments of the flesh and longings of desire, and the assault is the more overwhelming as *the nature they attack is weaker* ["Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard," p. 69 Emphasis mine]."

³⁴ "Letter 7, Abelard to Heloise," p. 113 Emphasis mine.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³⁶ "Letter 6. Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 101.

nature.³⁷ Why ask for a rule at all? Based upon the above passage, it would seem that a rule *itself* is irrelevant; for the rule is a 'custom' which is 'set up' and 'professed' without understanding. What matters most is rather the spirit behind the rule. "For nothing so divides Jew from Christian as the distinction between outward and inner works, especially since between the children of God and those of the devil love alone distinguishes."³⁸ While maintaining the posture of a 'humble or weak woman,' Heloise unleashes an understanding of inner works which seems to explode the trappings of this same posture. To pose the question: why must a woman seek approval and direction from a man who, by the very nature of his gender, is further from the interior truth which she enjoys?³⁹

Andrea Nye, in her discussion of the *Letters*, suggests that the transcendence of 'outward show' which marks medieval feminine interiority places women in the position of being dangerously liminal. Women, so understood, are 'weak' because they are closer to a truth which renders them irrational. Heloise's "thought," according to Nye, "has no rigid institutional scaffolding."⁴⁰ There is no dominant Aristotelian paradigm, no monastic law, and – in the face of the bridegroom – no boundaries. In short, Heloise's interior life is uncontrollable.⁴¹ In a

³⁷ As she addresses Abelard toward the conclusion of her letter: "Do you then also, I beg you, who seek to imitate not only Christ but also this apostle, in discrimination as in name, modify your instructions for works to suit our weaker nature, so that we can be free to devote ourselves to the offices of praising God [Ibid., p. 109]."

³⁸ Ibid., p. 104. Heloise words here echo Paul's first letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 5-7, Paul writes: "but the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions [*The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*]."

³⁹ Elizabeth Zimmerman's affirmation of this question is helpful: "It seems that her intentions were trumped by Abelard's will, under which she placed herself [...]. In both matters – marriage and religious vows – Heloise consents, but only under Abelard's direction; he stands as the primary agent of the hypocrisy which she is forced to live ["It is not the Deed but the Intention of the Doer": The Ethic of Intention and Consent in the First Two Letters of Heloise" in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 257.

⁴⁰ Andrea Nye, "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise" in *Hypatia* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 1992), p. 13.

⁴¹ "For nothing," Heloise prefaces her third letter, "is less under control than the heart – having no power to command it we are forced to obey. And so when its impulses move us, none of us can stop their sudden promptings from easily breaking out, and even more easily overflowing into words which are the ever-ready indications of the heart's emotions ["Letter 6, Heloise to Abelard," p. 93]." And elsewhere: "How can it be called repentance for sins, however great the mortification of the flesh, if the mind still retains the will to sin and is on fire with its old desires? It is easy enough for anyone to confess his sins, to accuse himself, or even to

striking display of poetic imagery, Beatrice of Nazareth (writing a little less than a century after Heloise) details the soul's progress from the outer-ramparts of reason and reliability to the innermost depths of religious experience.

[The soul] is drawn, above humanity, into love, and above human sense and reason and above all works of the heart, and it is drawn along with love alone into eternity and incomprehensibility, into the vastness and the unattainable exaltation and into the limitless abyss of Divinity, which is in all things, remaining incomprehensible in all things.⁴²

While Beatrice and Heloise differ on the proposed object of their devotion, both women express their love with imagery that is at one and the same time, esoteric and visceral. Love is utterly 'incomprehensible' *and* deeply felt. "Love," Beatrice continues, "seems to be working violently in the soul, relentless, uncontrollable, drawing everything into it and devouring it."⁴³ In like fashion, Heloise writes to Abelard that her love *for him* "rose to such heights of madness" and that his words "pierce our hearts with swords of death, so that what comes before us is more painful than death itself."⁴⁴ 'Death' and 'devouring,' 'unattainable exaltation' and 'madness'

mortify his body in outward show of penance, but it is very difficult to tear the heart away from the hankering after its dearest pleasures ["Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard," p. 68]." Notice here the gendered language: Heloise associates the 'outward show' of 'repentance' with masculinity and the 'fire of the mind's desire' with femininity. Women are understood to be 'weak' because they are attached so closely to the heart and thus, as Nye explains, irrational.

⁴² Beatrice of Nazareth, "There are Seven Manners of Loving" in *Medieval Netherlands Religious Literature*, trans. Eric Colledge (New York: London House & Maxwell, 1965), p. 204. As a side note, Bernard of Clairvaux, who would come to condemn Abelard's rationalism, uses similar language: "When will flesh and blood (Mt 16:17), this vessel of clay (2 Cor 4:7), this earthly dwelling (Wis 9:15), grasp this? When will it experience this kind of love, so that the mind, drunk with divine love and forgetting itself, making itself like a broken vessel (Ps 30:13), throw itself wholly on God and, clinging to God (1 Cor 6:17), become one with him in spirit and say, 'My body and my heart have fainted, O God of my heart; God, my part in eternity?' ["On Loving God" in *The Selected Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), p. 195]"

⁴³ Beatrice of Nazareth, "There are Seven Manners of Loving," p. 203.

⁴⁴ "Letter 4, Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 64. In the "lost love letters" (based upon and anonymous fifteenth-century manuscript thought to be part of the earliest correspondence between Abelard and Heloise) the female speaker uses even more powerful language: "since my mind is turning with many concerns, it fails me, pierced by the sharp hook of love...Just as fire cannot be extinguished or suppressed by any material, unless water, by nature its powerful remedy, is applied, so my love cannot be cured by any means – only by you can it be healed ["Appendix: The 'Lost Love Letters,'" p. 238].

mark this extreme form of a devotion which has transcended or, rather, forgone social and epistemological boundaries. As the soul approaches the sun, the vestiges of human ingenuity and contrivance fall away, revealing a 'weakness' which is at once virtuous and wholly 'other.'⁴⁵

As we have seen, Heloise's explosive interiority allowed her to substitute 'desire' for 'virtue' and Abelard for Christ. Such interiority, in turn, was rendered possible by a common trope from the *Song of Solomon* taken to its furthest extent in the 'incomprehensible abyss of divinity.' What is so striking about Heloise's account is that the rhetoric of her desire for Abelard is so similar to the rhetoric of devotion to God. Of course, in Heloise's mind, the interiority of her love for Abelard was the most important and, ultimately unavoidable, virtue; for "one who loves another has *fulfilled the law*."⁴⁶ This is not to say, however, that this interiority was altogether praised or even accepted in medieval society. In my understanding, the rubric of 'weakness' was a paltry structure superimposed upon a religious force (the mysticism of Beatrice, for example) which was perceived to be epistemologically and thus socially subversive. As Alisdair Macintyre has written of *Hamlet*, "to be unable to render oneself intelligible is to risk being taken to be mad, is, if carried far enough, to be mad."⁴⁷ This 'madness' moreover is best understood as a possible consequence of a state of liminality – a state of existing *between* boundaries. "Liminal entities," one anthropologist writes, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom,

⁴⁵ Of course, this dynamic of 'virtue' and 'otherness' reemerges in the Petrarchan trope of the sixteenth-century sonneteer. In eulogizing the premature death of his patron's daughter in 1611, John Donne, for instance, unites two themes which had, for some time, figured prominently in the renaissance imagination: (A) the search for redemption through idealized love, as manifested in Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* and (B) the concern with human perception of, and interaction with, absolute or objective truth. Both themes pervade the full length of Donne's *An Anatomy of the World*, intermixing to such an extent as to become indivisible. Echoing *Astrophil's* dependence on his unattainable muse, Donne writes, "Her name defined thee, gave thee form and frame [John Donne: the Major Works, p. 214]." The mistress, in this case the young Elizabeth Drury, is the epitome of Petrarchan virtue: her cheeks are 'blushing red,' her face composed of "beauty's ingredients [Ibid., p. 215]." Donne, however, is not the poet to dwell overlong on such popular conceits, and the poem soon becomes a vehicle for his sentiments of profound displacement. "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone; / All just supply, and all relation [Ibid., p. 212]." Where the muse had once granted 'definition,' the collective conscious is now 'in pieces:' undefined and frighteningly ambiguous. The death (or, in Beatrice of Nazareth's case, the rebirth) of the beloved, then, heralds the ruin of the intelligible sphere. In her wake, humankind is left scurrying about a barren landscape in which there is no center, no accord, and no sanctuary.

⁴⁶ Romans 13:8 Emphasis Mine.

⁴⁷ Alisdair Macintyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" in *Paradigms & Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science*, ed. Gary Gutting (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), p. 56.

convention, and ceremonial."⁴⁸ Because logic and its 'customs' of interpretation have ceased to apply, the spiritual neophyte resists interpretation as a necessary condition of her or his ontology. As suggested above, both Abelard and Heloise struggle with the interpretation of the latter figure's identity and, in so doing, reach for a rule which might provide some stable sanctuary amidst the vertiginous environs of the heart.

II. MEASURE FOR MEASURE

By the late sixteenth century, questions of human perspective and intelligence – the way we interpret our world – had taken center stage in religious and secular culture. John Calvin's insistence that the mind is indeed "a perpetual forge of idols," that Eve's temptation and Adam's fall had a decidedly noetic effect on every succeeding individual, coupled with the 'new philosophy's' awareness of perspectival relativity had, in Shakespeare's England, succeeded in generating a veritable hotbed of epistemological uncertainty.⁴⁹ Thus, the celebration of boundary dissolution in the face of Beatrice's 'limitless abyss of divinity' had given way to an abyss of doubt brought on by the mind's idolatry – "a labyrinth," Calvin warns us, "of many woes."⁵⁰ In *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*, Huston Diehl argues for a connection between the idol or graven image and the beloved feminine figure as objects of Protestant

⁴⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), p. 95. Note that Turner also suggests of the liminal person that "it is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life [Ibid., p. 95]."

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), I.XI.8. On Calvin and the 'labyrinth' of the sinful mind, see William Bouwsma's "Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact" in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) and *John Calvin: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). On the epistemological anxieties attending the 'New Philosophy' see, first and foremost, Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Karsten Harries' *Infinity and Perspective*, and Louise Dupré's *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). On Shakespeare's England, see Patrick Collinson's "William Shakespeare's Religious Inheritance" in *Elizabethans* (London: Hambledon, 2003). By the time Calvin was writing, Nicholas of Cusa had unleashed the concept of 'learned ignorance' (which, in turn, was to be taken up by Giordano Bruno in the sixteenth century); Copernicus had, perhaps unwittingly, dismantled the neatly-arrayed boundaries of the Aristotelian cosmos; and years of reform had left the intelligible and (most importantly) accessible Catholic ritual system in shambles.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.VIII.1.

"ambivalence."⁵¹ The fervency of the iconoclastic act, according to Diehl, belies a strange attraction to the icon. The feminine icon, whether virtuous or otherwise, is herself, in the eyes of the poet, a sublime mistress who is both attractive in her idealized virtue and something to be destroyed. Liminality thus becomes a 'labyrinth of many woes.' To use the language of Shakespeare's sonnets, "love is not love:" love is, at one and the same time, "made of truth" and a "false plague."⁵² While we can see in Shakespeare's words an oscillation between truth and deception which is similar to that of Heloise; the emphasis, now looking at the early-modern period, falls to a greater degree, not on the woman's self-representation, but rather on the subject's perspective of the sublime woman.⁵³

Given this climate of anxiety, one is not surprised to find the character of Elbow in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* a little "out of joint:" "Marry, sir, by my wife, who, if she had been a woman cardinally given, might have been accused in fornication, adultery, and all uncleanliness there."⁵⁴ Elbow's confusion of 'carnal' desire with 'cardinal' virtues not only echoes the dialectic we have just now seen with regard to Heloise's interiority but also keys us in to the process of "misplacement" which replays itself throughout the more serious proceedings in *Measure for Measure*.⁵⁵ At the heart of these proceedings lie Angelo and Isabella,

⁵¹ Huston Diehl, "Iconophobia and Gynophobia" in *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage*, pp. 158-159. And for this same subject with explicit reference to *Measure for Measure*, see Katharine Eisaman Maus' chapter on "Prosecution and Sexual Secrecy" in *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁵² William Shakespeare, "Sonnets 116, 137, 138" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), pp. 100-119. Sonnet 138 is particularly instructive on the 'love is not love' paradox: "Therefore, I lie with her, and she with me, | And in our faults by lies we flattered be." 'I lie with her' as a mirror image of 'she lies with me' communicates the sole affinity between the two characters: they both 'lie.' The poet is limited by his belief that his lover 'is made of truth,' and the muse is constrained by her vain desire to make the poet the picture of 'youth.' The disjointed reasoning of the sonnet then leads to an absurd conclusion: namely, that which is communal in a relationship—that which brings the lovers together—is not unifying. What is shared, rather, is a tendency to stray from reality—that is, to 'lie.'

⁵³ On the damaging effects of this perspective, Sir Philip Sidney has acknowledged in this period that, "true, [...] on earth we are but pilgrims made, | And should in soule up to our country move: | True, and yet true that I must *Stella* love ["Sonnet 5" in *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella, and Other Writings*, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson (London: Everyman Paperbacks, 1997), p. 25]." In Sidney, Love of women easily substitutes love of God (our proper course as 'pilgrims').

⁵⁴ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. Brian Gibbons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.1.71-73. The phrase 'out of joint' is from Bouwsma's *John Calvin: An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 52-54.

⁵⁵ The lord Escalus says of Elbow: "Do you hear how he *misplaces*? [*Measure for Measure*, 2.1.80 Emphasis mine]"

the outwardly "precise" villain and the internally pious virgin.⁵⁶ Each seeks to manipulate the other and, in so doing, to exchange the benefits of one another's ethical systems.⁵⁷ "Most dangerous," Angelo exclaims upon meeting Isabella, "is that temptation that doth goad us on | To sin in loving virtue."⁵⁸ "Might there not be a charity in sin," he later poses to his muse, assuring her, after her staunch resistance to his lecherous designs, that "my false o'erweighs your true."⁵⁹ Surely, Angelo is unrepentant in his pursuit of Isabella. His logic, in equating virtue with desire, is perhaps more horrifying than that of any Viennese libertine precisely because it is logic. He knows well what he does. He effectively ordains a world between himself and Isabella wherein he is subject to an uncontrollable interior urge (to the poet's 'false plague'). Yet, all the while, he retains an objective standpoint from which to view his own moral downfall. Isabella, to the contrary, tries her hand at outward show for the express purpose of maintaining both her brother's life and her own moral integrity. In a cunning bed-trick, Isabella substitutes herself with the once-jilted Mariana who, we are told, suffers from a "violent and unruly" love, thereby satisfying the rational (legal) terms of Angelo's self-imposed irrationality (illegality).⁶⁰ In the end, Isabella's machinations provide the deputy with the femininity he is wont to perceive. Her transcendence of 'precise' boundaries is, ultimately, brought about by an intricate campaign of deception.

The relationship between Angelo and Isabella, as it is initially presented to us in the play, holds much in common with that which we have already seen between Abelard and Heloise. Angelo, as mentioned before, sees himself as bound to a 'precision' accuracy in legal

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2.61.

⁵⁷ Maus refers to Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke as "the three morally ambitious characters in *Measure for Measure* [*Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance*, p. 159]." In other words, both Angelo and Isabella have an ethic to which they subscribe. Angelo's ethic of exteriority and Isabella's interiority will be discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

⁵⁸ *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.187.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.4.63, 2.4.171.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.1.229. To quote the Duke's words in full: "This fore-named maid [Mariana] hath yet in her the continuance of her first affection. His [Angelo's] unjust unkindness, that in all reason should have quenched her love, hath like an impediment in the current made it more violent and unruly." In Mariana's case, as with most of the events in the play surrounding Angelo, 'all reason' has ceased to dictate action.

administration. "It is the law, not I, condemn your bother," he tells a grieving Isabella.⁶¹ In the magistrate's ethics, a gulf exists between the interior self and the law. Abelard's scholastic prudence here reemerges as a reified system – the legal arm of the state as professed by Angelo in its undisputed authority.⁶² In an attempt to save her brother from the clutches of such authority, Isabella criticizes Angelo's heartless moralism, the limits of his "ceremony," and, finally, his foolish pride:⁶³

...But man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape
Play such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angles weep...⁶⁴

It is helpful here to recall Heloise's forceful words to Abelard: men, she says, 'hurry almost equally indiscriminately to enter monastic life...they profess a Rule they do not know and are equally ready to despise it and set up as law the customs they prefer.' Heloise's sentiments express the danger of 'outward show' if it is to be considered the sole indicator of virtue.⁶⁵ The law, she implies, does not find its legitimacy *ex opere operato* but, rather, from the charitable

⁶¹ *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.83.

⁶² Angelo, Maus writes, "everts his inwardness, holding his self-mortification up for display: even when his struggles, his agonies, his triumphs are undertaken in rigorous isolation, *they acquire meaning insofar as they are narrated to or witnessed by others*, rendered into patters for others to emulate. Nonetheless, Angelo's legalistic identification of the true with the publicly available turns out not to be merely impossible, but morally dangerous. It allows him to muddle the relationship between the realm of intention – acts merely contemplated but not executed – and the realm of the secret, which might include deeds as well as intentions [*Inwardness and the Theatre in the English Renaissance*, p. 162 Emphasis mine]." That is to say: Angelo's interior life is judged by his peers. There is no concept of an omniscient God. 'Deeds' that fall under the public radar are not, in his understanding, deeds at all. Everything happens within the realm of *observable* agency. Ironically, as the magistrate, Angelo is the representative of public opinion. His fall from grace into lechery must, therefore, be bracketed off from his own position as public defender.

⁶³ *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.60.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.2.121-126.

⁶⁵ Note that Isabella refers to Angelo as an "outward-sainted deputy [*Ibid.*, 3.1.88]."

intention of the individual who is, in turn, wise enough to be 'assured' of his 'ignorance.'⁶⁶ Both Heloise and Isabella's words here amount to a critique against any attempt to systematize the ineffable complexity and richness of human experience. The 'proud man' is said to be 'most ignorant' of what he 'professes.' He 'plays fantastic tricks' with logic and accepted 'custom' thereby bending the law to fit the designs of his own 'brief' perception.⁶⁷

We first encounter Isabella, much like we do Heloise, as a soon-to-be "votarist" in a Vienna nunnery.⁶⁸ Also like Heloise, Isabella is here engaged in asking her superior for a rule – "a more strict restraint | Upon the sisterhood."⁶⁹ Thus, from the outset, Shakespeare establishes Isabella as woman on the threshold of her marriage to the world and her marriage to Christ; one who feels the need for a curb to control the 'weakness' of her nature. As one scholar has argued, Isabella binds herself to a contemplative life by which she maintains her chastity from the safety

⁶⁶ We may again have recourse to Nicholas of Cusa's mystical tract, *De Docta Ignorantia*: "the quiddity of things, which is the truth of beings, is unattainable in its purity, and although it is pursued by all philosophers, none has found it as it is. The more profoundly *learned* we are in this *ignorance*, the more closely we draw near truth itself [p. 91 Emphasis mine]." Thus to 'set' the intellect 'up as law' is a form of idolatry in which human contrivance ('philosophy') eclipses the omniscient God.

⁶⁷ As Isabella states in her soliloquy at the end of Act 2: "oh, perilous mouths | That bear in them one and the self-same tongue, | Either of condemnation or approval, | Bidding the law make curtsey to their will, | Hooking both right and wrong to th'appetite | To follow as it draws [*Measure for Measure*, 2.4.173-178]. Heloise does not believe for a second that the law exists apart from the self – as Angelo would have her believe. It is also important to recognize that the basis for the tolerance Isabella seeks on her brother's behalf finds its corollary in the humanist tradition which preceded Shakespeare. In his *Praise of Folly*, Desiderius Erasmus writes that the arbitrary nature of intolerance, is due to those Priests who "battle for (their rights to) a tithe with swords, spears, stones, and every force of arms in fine soldier style, while the sharp-eyes amongst them look to see if they can extract anything from the writings of the ancients with which to intimidate the wretched people into agreeing that more than a tithe is their due [trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p.111]." Here we see a connection between the maintenance of the law by force (Angelo's persecution of Claudio) and the maintenance of ideologies (Abelard's scholasticism). Along similar lines, Sebastian Castellio, in the wake of the execution of Michael Servetus at the hands of John Calvin's Geneva, emphasizes the relativity of individual perception and, consequently, interpretation. In so doing, he brings learned ignorance under the rubric of social tolerance. "An impure and petulant tongue," he wrote, "is not to be ascribed to anyone who differs from Calvin on the Lord's Supper, infant baptism, predestination, and persecution, provided one believe in the truth ..." [*Contra Libellum Calvini*] in *Concerning Heretics*, ed. Roland H. Bainton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), p. 272]."

⁶⁸ Isabella, we are told, is one of the "votarists of Saint Clare" [*Measure for Measure*, 1.4.5] – that is, one who has taken (or will soon take) vows in the Franciscan subset known as the 'Poor Clares.'

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.4-5. Heloise implores Abelard "that you will prescribe some Rule for us and write it down, a Rule which shall be suitable for women, and also describe fully the manner and habit of our way of life ["Letter 6, Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 95]."

of the cloister to the treachery of the court.⁷⁰ She is defined, in other words, by the ethic of her interiority – a trait which becomes most apparent as she stands before the lecherous eyes of Angelo. "Go to your bosom," she insists of Angelo, "knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know."⁷¹ As a 'bride of Christ,' Isabella recognizes that 'God sees in her darkness,' that her *own* 'heart' lies open to the panoptic vision of the deity. Where Angelo is said to be 'most ignorant of what he's most assured,' Isabella humbly prays: "let me be ignorant and in nothing good | But graciously to know I am no better."⁷² Wisdom, then, comes from the painful recognition of inward pollution. In this respect, Isabella is not unlike the pietist divine of Shakespeare's England who, as Peter Kaufman has written, saw "the therapeutic value [...] ascribed to self-scourging and to ostensible, provisional self-cancellation."⁷³ As Shakespeare's conniving Duke proposes to himself upon Isabella's inquiry regarding her brother's welfare, "I will keep her ignorant of her good | To make her heavenly comforts of despair."⁷⁴ With these words, I would suggest one last comparison with Heloise: the Duke's control over Isabella's religious identity is, here, reminiscent of Abelard's attempt in the *Historia* to fix Heloise as a character in his own religious drama.⁷⁵ We must remember that, while Isabella is the object of an uncontrollable lust, her virtue itself is, in the minds of the other characters, static throughout the play.

⁷⁰ David Beauregard, "Shakespeare on Monastic Life: Nuns and Friars in *Measure for Measure*" in *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*, ed. Dennis Taylor & David Beauregard (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), p. 316.

⁷¹ *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.140. See also 2.2.53-55: "But might you do't, and do the world no wrong, | If so you heart were touched with that remorse | As mine is to him?"

⁷² *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.76-77.

⁷³ Peter Iver Kaufman, *Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 112.

⁷⁴ *Measure for Measure*, 4.3.100-101. Kaufman likewise speaks of the pietist's tendency "to find comfort in their discomfort [*Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection*, p. 48]."

⁷⁵ Such a comparison becomes even more suggestive when we consider that the Duke is, in the eyes of many interpreters, a behind-the-scenes manipulator – that is, the creator of his own drama from start to finish. "I'll privily away," the Duke tells Angelo in Act 1. "I love the people, | But do not like to stage me to their eyes: | Though it do well I do not relish well | Their loud applause and aves vehement [*Measure for Measure*, 1.1.67-70]." It is also hard for the reader not to speculate a bit into Shakespeare's own sentiments on play acting and writing here.

As mentioned before, Angelo and Isabella eventually submit themselves to one another's ethical systems. Angelo, like the dotting sonneteer, willfully surrenders to the emotional anguish which, in his imagination, attends the experience of love, just as Isabella abuses appearances in an effort to ultimately transcend Angelo's authoritative grasp. In act two, just prior to propositioning Isabella to "yield her body up to shame," our precise villain reclines in his chambers and contemplates his livery.⁷⁶ For our purposes, the transformation which takes place in the following soliloquy is worth quoting in full:

...The state whereon I studied
Is like a good thing being often read
Grown sere and tedious. Yea, my gravity,
Wherein – let no man hear me – I take pride,
Could I with boot change for an idle plume
Which the air beats for vain. Oh place, oh form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
Wrench awe from fools and tie the wiser souls
To thy false seeming. Blood, thou art blood:
Let's write 'God Angel' on the devil's horn...⁷⁷

Katharine Maus has suggested that the character of Angelo mixes up intentionality with secrecy.⁷⁸ While I agree that treachery remains palatable to Angelo only insofar as it remains clandestine; the above soliloquy, I think, represents a form of interiority, borrowed from Isabella, which renders the partition between public and private irrelevant. We begin above with the 'study of the state' – a source, Angelo exclaims, of his own public 'gravity' and surreptitious 'pride.' However, the proposed tedium of the law is to be understood as more than a secret abdication of responsibility. In some ways, Angelo's words echo Hamlet's lament upon

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2.4.104. The term 'livery' comes from 2.4.139 where Angelo suggests to Isabella that *she* take up her "destined livery" as a woman "credulous to false prints [Ibid., 2.4.130]."

⁷⁷ *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.7-16.

⁷⁸ Katharine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, p. 162. See footnote #62 for Maus' own words on this subject.

the ascension of Claudius to his father's throne: "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable | Seem to me all the uses of the world!"⁷⁹ In explicating *Hamlet*, Schreiner has pointed us to the emergence in the play of a dark world which is marked by the "dissolving of boundaries."⁸⁰ "From this point forward," writes Schreiner, "[Hamlet] can only play a part in the midst of a world he knows to be fundamentally false. [...] He becomes the person with a different perspective."⁸¹ In a similar fashion, Angelo alerts us to the mere 'casing' or outward appearance of 'place' and 'form.' He has, in essence, now recognized what the Duke had already stated to be the case in act one: that, in Vienna, "quite athwart | Goes all decorum."⁸² In the felt absence of boundaries brought on by the recognition of the 'false seeming' of 'place' and 'form,' Angelo chooses, not to transcend, but to follow the passions of his 'blood.' "I have begun," he later tells Isabella, "and now I give my sensual race the rein."⁸³ Like Heloise, he chooses the path of temptation – a path which, according to the final line of the above soliloquy, is defined by a knowing self-deception.⁸⁴

Of course, the object of Angelo's self-imposed plague is not a 'Temptress Eve.' Isabella, as shown above, maintains her chastity by way of a rigorous self-examination. Her interiority is not therefore the unruly passion which marks the poet's anguish. Yet, the fascination with perspective which characterizes the early modern period moves Shakespeare to emphasize the dangerous liminality of femininity as it appears *only* to Angelo's fallen noetic capacity. With the aid of the Duke, the virtuous Isabella replaces herself with the character of Mariana whose

⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, "Hamlet" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 1.2.133-134. See also Hamlet's response to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 2: "This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours [Ibid., 2.2.290-293]."

⁸⁰ Susan Schreiner, "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare," p. 379.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 376.

⁸² *Measure for Measure*, 1.3.31-32.

⁸³ Ibid., 2.4.160-161.

⁸⁴ Compare Angelo's statement, 'let's write "Good Angel" on the devil's horn,' with Paul's oft-cited expression "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light [2 Corinthians 11:14]."

intense desire for Angelo subjects her to a "brawling discontent."⁸⁵ Toward the conclusion of the play, the Duke ironically suggests that Mariana is indeed "nothing then: neither maid, widow, nor wife."⁸⁶ She is a liminal woman: an "imagined person" whose passion is beyond identifiable boundaries.⁸⁷ We may also compare Mariana to the sublime muse of the Petrarchan trope. She is, for instance, the veiled figure of Shakespeare's sonnets: "Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot, | And all things turn to fair that eyes can see!"⁸⁸ Not only does Mariana come before Angelo with her face literally veiled in the final act, but her mysteriousness appears to satisfy the terms of Angelo's misplaced desire as early on as act two: "these black masks," he says to Isabella, "proclaim an enshield beauty ten times louder | Than beauty could, displayed."⁸⁹ While the 'outward show' has, from Angelo's point of view, remained the same, Isabella has skillfully manipulated appearances, substituting another's desire for her own virtue.

The borderless interiority which had before typified Heloise's femininity, has now, in *Measure for Measure*, infected the entire world of the theater. Elbow's own confusion is symptomatic of the atmosphere in Vienna, where 'all decorum has gone athwart.' The law itself, embodied in Angelo, has succumbed to a 'false plague;' and the paragon of virtue, embodied in Isabella, has taken part in deception to maintain the truth. Clearly, by Shakespeare's time, the dialectic oscillation between virtue and desire can no longer be inserted into a limpid framework of feminine 'weakness.' Human perspective itself has failed. The reason and

⁸⁵ *Measure for Measure*, 4.1.16. We may here compare Mariana's intensity with that of Heloise. "What king or philosopher could match your [Abelard's] fame? What district, town, or village did not long to see you? When you appeared in public, who – I ask – did not hurry to catch a glimpse of you, or crane her neck and strain her eyes to follow your departure? Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence; queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed ["Letter 2, Heloise to Abelard" in *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 53]." Just as Heloise laments the dearth of her 'philosopher,' so, too, Mariana laments the powerful presence of Angelo. Mariana is, Shakespeare tells us, 'on fire' for her lover – and fearfully 'unruly' in his absence.

⁸⁶ *Measure for Measure*, 5.1.177.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.1.209.

⁸⁸ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 95" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 83.

⁸⁹ *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.79-81.

reliability which are, in turn, granted by perspective have become, as Montaigne famously wrote, "nothing but ceremony."⁹⁰

The theater of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries provided a fitting space to play out the complexity of early-modern religious experience. In the absence of what Harries calls 'firm ground,' all action, from one point of view, becomes a 'ceremony' of manipulation. Worldviews, after all, function only inasmuch as they render the richness of experience intelligible. If religious truth, mystic wisdom, and interiority cause boundaries rather to appear meaningless, then a worldview must rise to the challenge of substituting new appearances. This epistemological 'give and take' between dissolution and creation – explosive truth and reconstructive agency – marks the religious lives of Heloise and Shakespeare's Isabella. The avowal of either virtue or desire rests, in both instances, on one's perspective.

⁹⁰ Michel de Montaigne, "Of Presumption" in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), p. 478.

Works Cited:

- Abelard and Heloise. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Trans. Betty Radice. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Augustine. "De Spiritu et Littera." *Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine: Retractions*. Ed. Philip Schaff. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1968.
- Beauregard, David. "Shakespeare on Monastic Life: Nuns and Friars in Measure for Measure." *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England*. Ed. Dennis Taylor and David N. Beauregard. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. 311-335.
- Blumenberg, Hans. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge: MIT press, 1983.
- Bouwsma, William J. "Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact." *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*. Ed. Timothy George. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.
- Bouwsma, William J. *John Calvin: An Intellectual Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Calvin, John. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.
- Castellio, Sebastian. "Contra Libellum Calvinii." *Concerning Heretics*. Ed. Roland H. Bainton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1935. 265-287.
- Clairvaux, Bernard of. "On Loving God." *The Selected Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*. Trans. G.R. Evans. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.
- Collinson, Patrick. *Elizabethans*. London: Hambledon & London, 2003.
- Cusa, Nicholas of. "De Docta Ignorantia." *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*. Ed. H. Lawrence Bond. New York: Paulist Press, 1997. 85-206.
- Diehl, Huston. *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Donne, John. *The Major Works*. Ed. John Carey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Dupré, Louis. *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

- Erasmus. *Praise of Folly*. Trans. Betty Radice. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Grady, Hugh. "Falstaff: Subjectivity between the Carnival and the Aesthetic." *Modern Language Review*. 96.3 (2001): 610.
- Grane, Leif. *Peter Abelard: Philosophy and Christianity in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Derek Baker. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc, 1964.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Harries, Karsten. *Infinity and Perspective*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Kaufman, Peter Iver. *Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.
- Macintyre, Alisdair. "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science." *Paradigms and Revolutions: Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science*. Ed. Gary Gutting. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980. 54-74.
- Maus, Katharine Eisaman. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Ed. Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976.
- Nazareth, Beatrice of. "There are Seven Manners of Loving." *Medieval Netherlands Religious Literature*. Trans. Eric Colledge. New York: London House & Maxwell, 1965. 200-206.
- New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version (Third Edition)*. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Nye, Andrea. "A Woman's Thought or a Man's Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise." *Hypatia*. 7.3 (1992): 16.
- Oberman, Hieko. *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. Trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart. New York: Image Books, 1990.
- Schreiner, Susan. "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare." *The Journal of Religion*. 83.3 (2003): 345-380.
- Shagan, Ethan. *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Shakespeare, William. "Hamlet." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. 1659-2090.

- Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. Ed. Brian Gibbons. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Ed. Stephen Booth. New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella, and Other Writings*. Ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson. London: Everyman Paperbacks, 1997.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969.
- Vernoff, Elliot. "The Contemporary Study of Religion." *Methodology in the Academic Teaching of Judaism*. Ed. Zev Garber. New York: University Press of America, 1986.15-40.
- Zimmerman, Elizabeth. "'It is not the Deed but the Intention of the Doer': The Ethic of Intention and Consent in the First Two Letters of Heloise." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. 42.3 (2006): 249-264.