

**REDEEMING SHAKESPEARE'S SINS:
MEASURE FOR MEASURE AND WILSON BARRETT'S *THE
SIGN OF THE CROSS***

ANJNA CHOUHAN

Measure for Measure, which was first published in 1623, though certainly not the most popular of Shakespeare's plays in the nineteenth century, underwent several forms of 'translation' in the very act of being performed on the Victorian stage. Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously termed the play 'painful' (1: 125), which was an attitude shared by many critics, readers and theatrical audiences throughout the century. In order to be made presentable to Victorian audiences, the text had to be expurgated and purged of its 'painful' improprieties, then transformed into a performative context on a nineteenth-century, rather than Elizabethan, stage. In England, in the mid century, the play was revived by Samuel Phelps then largely ignored until it was taken up by the national touring companies of well-known actresses such as Adelaide Neilson, Miss Alleyn, and Ellen Wallis. At the turn of the century, in his campaign to revive the 'real' Elizabethan stage, William Poel produced the play, using it to challenge the spectacular and ostentatious stage techniques encouraged by actor-managers, and subsequently expected by audiences, from the mid century onwards in Shakespearean performances.

Nevertheless, if the Victorian acting versions of *Measure* are to be perceived as 'translations' of Shakespeare's work, it does not follow that 'translation' itself must invariably be an attempt to produce a final, 'perfect' re-creation or copy of a text. This paper proposes instead that the teleological process of beginning with a source and continually moulding it into something more suited to its environment seems to be a far more pertinent way of assessing appropriations of Shakespeare's drama. The term 'translation', by this logic, encompasses the concept of adaptation. As Julie Sanders has argued, 'adapting' a work is not 'robbing' so much as 'enriching' a source text (41), which suggests that there is a dialogue between what is an 'original' and its 'adaptation'. Though this discourse on translation is a product of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it seems to apply to Victorian appropriations of and engagements with Shakespeare's plays.

In order to examine this claim, it is necessary to direct attention to Wilson Barrett's *fin de siècle* play *The Sign of the Cross*, which — I

propose — can be read as a late nineteenth-century reinterpretation or ‘translation’ of Shakespeare’s *Measure*. In 1895, the actor–manager Wilson Barrett opened his play to London audiences with immediate success. Not only was the play eventually published in the form of a novel in 1897, but as James Thomas has observed, *Sign* was performed over 10,000 times in just under ten years (143). Though *Sign* is not a conventional ‘translation’ or even a deliberate adaptation of *Measure*, the plays can operate in relation to one another by the fact that their treatments of a theme offer to ‘translate’ the ways in which readers and audiences respond to characters undergoing similar experiences across both works. Barrett’s representation of religion on stage, though not explicitly evoking Shakespeare’s play, confronted aspects of *Measure* that confounded and often offended many Victorian readers and audiences. To perceive *Sign* as an unconscious ‘translation’ or adaptation of *Measure*, therefore, it is necessary to begin with Victorian responses to the two plays.

Throughout the Victorian period, attitudes towards *Measure* were conflicting and indicative of the dissatisfaction felt by readers and critics about the characters, their actions, religion, and, ultimately, the quintessential ‘moral’ of the play. Being both read and performed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, *Measure* elicited comments from scholars such as Joseph Hunter that characterised the play as ‘improbable and disgusting’ (1: 221). Together with critical remarks, like those of Hunter, performances prompted theatrical reviewers to engage with the text. To quote *The Belfast News Letter* in 1883, ‘not merely the pruning hook, but the scythe must be brought to bear upon some of the scenes before they can be presented to a modern audience’ (18 September 1883). The scenes referred to here contain sexual references. Not only does the play include an unrepentant brothel owner Mistress Overdone, but the character Lucio, for instance, makes no secret of his sexual exploits, admits to having impregnated a prostitute, and has a store of witty euphemisms for intercourse; all of which were unacceptable to what are considered to be conventional Victorian sensibilities. More importantly, however, the play is riddled with theological discrepancies. Every character, whether bawd, nun, priest, murderer or Duke, has a legitimate moral standpoint that is potentially justified by religious rhetoric. As a result, there are debates between characters about supposedly objective concepts within the parameters of Christianity, such as goodness, charity and, ultimately, salvation.

Quite apart from these negative responses to the plot, the play’s protagonist — the nun Isabella — received the praise and reverence that

was awarded to most of Shakespeare's heroines in the nineteenth century. She had, for instance, a chapter dedicated to her by Anna Jameson in 1832, in her collection of essays entitled *Shakespeare's Heroines: Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical and Historical*. She was also the subject of a short story by Mary Cowden-Clarke in her fictional work of 1850, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. Much later, in 1888, as part of a project celebrating moral and physical female beauty in Shakespeare's plays, the Dickens illustrator Francis William Topham produced a painting of Isabella robed in a demure and virginal blue. A good example of the general Victorian image of Isabella can be found in Edward Dowden's claim of 1875: 'out of this Vienna in which "corruption boils and bubbles"... emerges this pure zeal, this rectitude of will, this virgin sanctity' (82–83). Isabella, it seems, was considered the salvation of both the plot and the play itself in her role as the representative of virtuous womanhood within a corrupt, immoral world.

Much like *Measure*, Barrett's *Sign* focuses on a virginal, Christian woman called Mercia, and is complete with the 'disgusting', licentious characters with which Hunter argued Shakespeare's drama was riddled. Unlike *Measure*, however, *Sign* was held to be an implicitly Christian and spiritually enlightening play. While *Measure* was filled with passages 'which appear to be mere grossness' (Knight 316), *Sign* was described by the *Western Mail* as a 'stage-sermon' and 'a profound dramatic exposition of the power of Christianity' (5 November 1895). But Barrett's fusion of melodrama and religion also met with criticism, eliciting the disconcerting description 'holy-mouth diarrhoea' from the playwright Henry Arthur Jones (71). Whatever Jones' reason for dismissing Barrett's drama with such a seemingly vulgar term, his reference to the 'holy mouth' at least acknowledges the didactic aspirations of the piece that were so praised by the *Western Mail* during the play's opening months.

In spite of these seemingly polarised Victorian responses to the dramas, there are striking similarities in plot, character and theme. There are what I shall call 'proposition' scenes in each play, in which a virginal, beautiful, Christian girl is sexually threatened by an ideological outsider. In *Measure*, the Roman Catholic Isabella is offered a choice between her brother's life and her own chastity by a vehemently rigid judge, Angelo. Angelo's conception of 'judgment', though not entirely independent of Christianity, allows no possibility of leniency, meaning that he and Isabella fail to agree on the issue of 'mercy' as a moral obligation. Similarly, in *Sign*, Mercia is forced to choose between death and the advances of the Roman pagan Marcus Superbus, who not being a Christian, perceives her pious existence as deviant and futile. Not only,

then, do the plays focus on Christian heroines, but they involve direct threats to the source of their virtue: chastity.

It is necessary now to turn to the ‘proposition’ episodes in the plays. This is the moment in *Measure* when Angelo makes his offer to Isabella:

ANGELO: Plainly conceive, I love you.
 ISABELLA: My brother did love Juliet,
 And you tell me that he shall die for it.
 ANGELO: He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love.
 ISABELLA: I know your virtue hath a licence in it,
 Which seems a little fouler than it is,
 To pluck on others.
 ANGELO: Believe me, on mine honour,
 My words express my purpose.
 ISABELLA: Ha! little honour to be much believed,
 And most pernicious purpose! Seeming, seeming!
 I will proclaim thee, Angelo; look for it:
 Sign me a present pardon for my brother,
 Or with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world aloud
 What man thou art.
 ANGELO: Who will believe thee, Isabel?...
 You shall stifle in your own report
 And smell of calumny. (2.4.141–54)

The encounter here is distinctly rational, with each party engaging in discussion and allowing for Isabella to adopt a clear rhetorical and moral position. Isabella even offers to excuse Angelo, to a degree, by referring to the ‘license’ implicit in his authority, and concludes by threatening her tyrant with exposure.

While this episode centers on the dialogue, the ‘proposition’ scene in *Sign* relies more on action:

MARCUS: I am your master —
 MERCIA: No —
 MARCUS: You are my slave
 MERCIA: No — no —
She runs to the window and attempts to throw herself from it.
 MARCUS: There is no escape. You are mine body and soul —
He falls to the floor and clutches at her robes.
 Your master is your slave — love me.
Seizes her and covers her with kisses.
 MERCIA: Ah, mercy — mercy — have mercy —

MARCUS: Have thou mercy — yield to me — yield — I love
thee — love thou me — love me.

*She breaks from him and runs to the door, beating on its brazen
panels. (3.3.73)*

Although the rhetoric of action is to be expected within stage directions, a collection of verbs such as ‘runs’, ‘throws’, ‘clutches’, ‘seizes’, ‘breaks’ and ‘beating’ is calculated to depict a very physical on-stage encounter, which offers to transform the ‘proposition’ into a rape scene. Mercia makes no logical objections to Marcus besides expostulations such as ‘no’ and ‘mercy’, and because Barrett denies her the rational and verbal power offered to Isabella, he yokes the innocence of his character, setting her helplessness against the tyranny of the immoral Pagan.

Both proposition scenes, though depicted in different styles, create a moral distance between the virtuous Christian woman and the dangerous, sexually menacing man. It is the very act of reading both scenes as encounters between innocence and tyranny that provides an indication of how Victorian readers and audiences interpreted, or wanted to interpret, Shakespeare’s play.

To return to *Measure*, not only does Angelo profess to be an ascetically religious man, but he is attracted to an equally pious woman dressed, no less, as a nun. That such a man can be tempted into lust raises questions about the sanctity of Isabella and the extent to which she acts as a temptress. Isabella’s combination of female piety, chastity, and her affinity to the Roman Catholic convent all fed into Victorian anti-Catholic rhetoric about deviant sexuality and, most significantly, godliness. Because of the emphasis placed on marriage and domesticity in the nineteenth century, chastity in a deliberately unmarried life was, by implication, deviant.

Although praise was directed at Isabella, the strength of her religious preferences, and her conscious choice to enter the Roman Catholic convent verged on the distasteful to both Victorian audiences and readers. Unsurprisingly, therefore, her actions did not always meet with praise. Despite leaving her conventual sanctuary to plead for her brother, Isabella is quick to condemn him to an early death. She exclaims:

Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Relieve thee from thy fate it should proceed:
I’ll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee. (3.1.14–58)

William John Birch, in 1848, suggested that this was ‘an exhibition of prudery and ferocity of virtue’ in Isabella, in conflict with her supposedly Christian ethos of charity (357). At the end of the century, Frederick Boas concluded that Isabella’s ‘wrath is stern’ and ‘wellnigh savage’ (368). Similarly, after Lily Brayton’s performance of Isabella in 1906, it was argued that the character ‘exaggerates the importance of chastity’ and invites ‘antipathy along with admiration’ (*The Times*, 21 March 1906). That Isabella’s asceticism occupied troubling territory for Victorian critics might be attributed, then, to her Catholicism and conventual aspirations. Although care was taken to eliminate any suggestion of wilful corporeal allure in readings and performances of Isabella, her attractiveness to both Angelo and the Duke, within the play, coupled with her deviant piety, were implicitly problematic.

That religious virtue can be translated into something corporeally attractive and potentially sexual was far from acceptable to Victorian audiences, particularly given the rise in female preachers within nonconformist groups such as the Salvation Army. Conspicuous, practical, active women preaching in public became an issue of moral debate and, in Liverpool in 1879, one Rev. P. Williams complained that ‘the heroes of the (local) army are two young ladies of “sweet seventeen”’ and, inevitably, ‘it is not their preaching but their “smiling winning way” that rouses feelings of religious revival’ (*Western Mail*, 4 December 1879). Whether or not these didactic, preaching girls deliberately employed their feminine wiles to attract congregations is open to debate. But that onlookers *noticed* the physical allure of such women is beyond doubt, and it was precisely this propensity towards distorted, immoral conceptions of openly religious females that may have prompted readers and audiences to seek a redefinition of Shakespeare’s Isabella.

Despite her chastity and religious asceticism, Isabella’s combination of beauty, youth and virginity put her on a par with characters like Portia, Rosalind, and Juliet, all of whom were considered marriageable and, by implication, ‘normal’ women. Because — both in criticism and performance — Isabella tended to be depicted as Dowden’s image of ‘virgin sanctity’ rather than as embodying chaste sternness, she was being consciously redeemed of her ‘savage’ Catholic affinities. The character’s potential marriage to Duke Vincentio, therefore, came as a welcome relief. Nuptials, as well as disengaging her from the convent, gave Isabella an opportunity to shed her past. Critical emphasis, especially from Anglican scholars like Dowden, was placed on her ‘work in the world’ through ‘wifhood’ and the adoption of ‘noble station’ (63). Although not quite as morally shocking, Isabella’s religiously

induced chastity and ability to attract men like Angelo placed her into a similar dramatic category to the infamous ‘woman with a past’. Like late-century women with dubious reputations, such as Arthur Wing Pinero’s Paula Tanqueray from *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893) and Wilde’s Mrs Erlynne from *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), marriage offers Isabella a new beginning and opportunity for redemption.

However, it was precisely this late Victorian penchant for morally troubling women that Barrett sought to address with *Sign*. In a press interview given in Cardiff during a tour of *Sign* in November 1895, Barrett claimed that the play was a direct response to the ‘woman with a past’ who, he argued:

Had had too much prominence given her in the society dramas...and that the tendency of treating women with a want of deference and courtesy was growing rapidly...and that if it were possible for me to devise a play in which should see positive purity in womankind and picture what influence that would have upon her surroundings, it might do some small amount of good.
(*Western Mail*, 4 November 1895)

Barrett’s focus on ‘positive purity’ disassociates his play not only from the Victorian dramatic paradigm of the ‘woman with a past’, but also from contemporary complaints about sexually enticing didactic women. In *Sign*, far from inviting rhetoric such as ‘ferocious’ and ‘savage’, Mercia is depicted as irrefutably good with — unlike Isabella — no excessive or ambiguous religious preferences. In this way, Barrett’s play can be read as a form of ‘redemption’ for the spiritual, religiously inclined woman.

As well as challenging the ‘woman with a past’, Barrett’s play exhumes the soteriological theme that seems to disappear from Shakespeare’s play beneath the subjective doctrine and religious hypocrisy of the characters. While the characters in *Measure* have inter-Christian theological debates, those in Barrett’s drama are presented as *either* Christian or Pagan. The religious groups are distinct in dress, mannerisms, and language, creating a visual as well as moral polarity. Like the licentious Lucio and brothel mistress of *Measure*, *Sign*’s pagans are heavily sexualised. Barrett’s instructions about dress focus on the sartorial decadence of the women. The character Berenis, for instance, is:

In creamy white silk, her bust is outlined by a massive band of many-coloured gems. A belt of the same rich

character draws her robe together at the waist. The drapery...seems to display rather than hide her figure. (3.1.153)

The calculated elegance of the pagan women contrasts with the simplicity of Mercia who wears only 'white robes and drapery' (2.3.150). Together with their provocative dress, the pagan women boast about their lovers and sexual conquests, while the men are depicted as either drunk and effeminate, or brutish and barbarous. Incidentally, before the play was licensed, Barrett set much of the pagan action around a brothel, evoking *Measure's* Mistress Overdone and her 'hot house' (2.1.63). In the final version, however, the brothel's mistress was changed to a wealthy society woman, and the brothel itself into a domestic home (see Mayer 28).

Not only does the implied sexual laxity of the pagans in the play affirm their moral inferiority to the Christians, but their majority and authority in Rome create a tyrant-versus-victim paradigm. Because *Sign* is set in a Roman world in which Christians are tortured and executed by decadent, immoral pagans, Barrett gave the position of victim to what was, in the nineteenth century at least, an imperially expanding, dominant faith. This retention of moral supremacy in a state of physical victimisation was not an uncommon image in Victorian evocations of early Christianity. Maureen Moran has recently observed the popularity of what she terms 'Victorian martyrdom narratives' which 'usually portrayed the sanctity of a small, attractive community of Christians withstanding the onslaught of the official and dissolute Pagan state' (131). If, as Moran suggests, such 'martyrdom narratives' were a recurring theme in the second half of the nineteenth century, it would seem that the image of the persecuted Christian offered a degree of escapism for Victorian audiences.

Given the rise of non-conformism in the middle of the nineteenth century with Methodism, Evangelism and eventually the more liberal Christian Socialism, there was no sense or even pretence of unity under one Church. Turning characters united only by a faith in Christ into an endangered, persecuted group allowed for a temporary negation of these schisms by creating a fantasy about victimisation at the hands of an indisputable evil. Barrett, through this tyrant/ victim paradigm, immediately 'redeemed' or translated the undesirable scenes lamented by critics such as Coleridge and Hunter in *Measure*, not by removing the sexually explicit characters, but by turning them into Pagans and, therefore, avoiding theological and inter-religious controversies.

Referring back to the ‘proposition’ episode, it is important to note that the threat to Mercia’s religion is manifested in a *corporeal* encounter between a Pagan and a Christian. This seems to turn the scene into a sexual as well as a religious delusion about the subordination of incorruptible virtue. However, to eliminate the tension and injustice that lingers at the conclusion of the meeting between Isabella and Angelo, rather than moving from the ‘soul’ to the ‘body’, *Sign*’s ‘proposition’ scene appears to shift from the ‘body’ to the ‘soul’.

In order to illustrate this thematic movement, it is vital to observe that before the ‘proposition’ episodes, each pair of characters is engaged in a discussion about Christian salvation. In *Measure*, Isabella launches into the discourse of soteriology:

All the souls that were were forfeit once
And he that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy. (2.2.75–77)

By referring to the Atonement, Isabella seeks to impress upon Angelo the spiritual necessity of earthly mercy in an attempt to secure her brother’s pardon. It is after these observations that Angelo asks himself, ‘dost thou desire her foully for those things/ that make her good?’ (2.2.179–80). When he makes his proposal to Isabella, he adopts the discourse of corporeality, referring to her ‘external warrants’, the ‘treasures of [her] body’ (2.4.137, 96), the possibility of ‘feasting on her eyes’ (2.3.184), and finally commands her to ‘yield up thy body to my will’ (2.4.164). Even Isabella echoes this bodily rhetoric with her images of ‘wearing...the impression of keen whips’ and ‘stripping to death’ (2.4.101–2). Putting aside the Roman Catholic associations of self mortification where the body and spirit are one, there is a clear shift from spiritual to corporeal matters here, and it is precisely this bodily, earthly focus of the play that Barrett rejects in his more palatable ‘stage sermon’.

Like *Measure*, in Barrett’s *Sign*, Marcus’ sexual advances are preceded by a discussion on Christian salvation. The characters probe the issue of ‘virtue’ and Mercia introduces the doctrine of Christianity with claims such as ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven’, ‘the kingdom of man is tottering — the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand’, and ‘He who gave me that soul will keep it pure’ (2.3.168, 170, 172). The most poignant indication of Barrett’s spiritual agenda is the climax of the ‘proposition’ scene. When Marcus attempts to throw himself upon Mercia after the exchange quoted above, she struggles free and holds out a cross. At this moment, a hymn sung by the other Christian prisoners in

Marcus' dungeon is heard in the background, while a shaft of light is thrown upon Mercia and her cross. It is worth noting that publicity images for *Sign* in the forms of posters, souvenir postcards and, as David Mayer notes, photographs, often depicted this moment (173). Choosing to promote and honour *Sign* through this image of a Christian girl with a cross, offers up this scene as the climax of the play.

When Mercia holds out her cross, Barrett's stage directions read, 'the darkened room is illuminated by a soft white light', and 'Marcus falls to his knees, burying his face in his hands' (2.3.173). Given that Marcus goes on to declare his conversion to Christianity, and chooses to be executed along with the other Christians at the close of the play, the climax of the 'proposition' scene draws both characters out of the carnal and into the spiritual. Mercia silences and subordinates her attacker not with doctrinal argument, but with a moment of divine inspiration that hinges around the mystery and symbolic redemption embodied in the cross. That Marcus is able to connect with the spirituality of the moment redefines this encounter as a form of religious enlightenment. The tyrant is here subdued into a state of immediate repentance through a consciousness of divinity.

Whereas Isabella's verbal piety fails to prevent Angelo from considering his proposition unconscionable, it is the implicit, unconscious virtue of Mercia that awakens Marcus to a new form of religion. Because Barrett presents Marcus's desire for Mercia as a spiritual longing, his initial sexual advances can be read as a misinterpretation or a disproportionate channelling of religious awakening. In other words, Barrett makes Marcus's attraction to Mercia a form of religious devotion.

Given the similarity of situation, since Victorian audiences seemed to praise this scene where corporeal lust is overruled by faith, the incident between Angelo and Isabella was simultaneously, consciously or not, being 'translated' or re-interpreted as a positive encounter. When judging Angelo through the medium of Marcus, it is possible to read the former's encounter with the nun as a religious awakening that is misinterpreted as lust. Although not as dramatic or visually conspicuous as Marcus' 'conversion', Angelo undergoes a process of change. Before propositioning Isabella, Angelo exclaims, 'what dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?', and asks:

What, do I love her
That I desire to hear speak again,
And feast upon her eyes? (2.2.178, 182–84)

Angelo's self-doubt here contrasts with his confidence in the necessity of rigidity within the law earlier in the play:

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 (2.1.1–4)

Having met Isabella, he seems to undergo a transformation into doubt and insecurity. But, given that Isabella only ever speaks to him in theological terms of liberal Christianity and the importance of mercy as a form of salvation, his attraction to her and subsequent experience of doubt might very well have ideological undertones.

Interestingly, after the encounters with the pious women, there are similarities between the experiences of Angelo and Marcus. Like Angelo's confusion of desire and 'love', Marcus asks, 'what is it possesses me? is this love or what?' (2.3.165). When Mercia demands to know why she has been summoned by Marcus he replies, 'to feast upon thy beauty — to hear the music of thy voice — to watch the light that beams from those bright eyes' (2.3.167). Marcus here recalls attention to Angelo's response to Isabella through his images of fleshly hunger implied by 'feasting', together with a desire for the 'eyes' and 'voice' of the woman. Just as Angelo wishes to 'hear' and 'feast' upon Isabella, so too does Marcus seek to visually devour Mercia. It is the desire implicit in the evocation of hunger that suggests that the women possess qualities capable of satiating the male appetite.

Far from being an expression of corporeal lust, however, Barrett seems to suggest that when faced with a virginal, Christian woman, all desire or hunger for her is simply a manifestation of an implicit spiritual longing for a 'right' or correct paradigm within which to worship the monotheistic Divine. And it is here that Barrett's play seems to truly translate *Measure* into an acceptable Victorian experience, because while Angelo subscribes to the belief that Isabella is a sexual rather than a spiritual object, Marcus embraces Mercia's doctrine and learns to overcome his transitory corporeality. By converting to Christianity before the mass execution of all Christians, not only does Marcus become a suitable partner for Mercia but, more conveniently, they have no opportunity to consummate their marriage. Having Mercia's flesh destroyed by lions, instead of by her husband, creates a fantasy of *domesticity* and simultaneous *virginity* without the need for Isabella's Roman Catholic nunnery. Attraction and desire, then, are fused in a

sensational manner with the Victorian reverence for marriage and family life, and with conceptions about female virtue.

It seems, therefore, that a sexually problematic situation has been ‘redeemed’ by being re-written as a spiritual encounter between a Pagan and a Christian. More interestingly, the entire foundation of Shakespeare’s theologically troubling play seems to be reconstructed into Barrett’s fantasy of religious righteousness threatened by a tangible evil. Turning the ‘proposition’ into a melodramatic romance that culminates in spiritual enlightenment, whether deliberate or not, offers to relieve Shakespeare’s characters of their hypocrisy and ambiguity and, most importantly, it transforms the play into a morally permissible onstage form of didacticism, making explicit the very lessons that respectable conscience-ridden Victorian audiences appear to have wanted from Shakespeare’s drama in a less challenging and ambiguous fashion.

But Barrett’s drama, I think, by the fact that it does not announce itself as a ‘translation’ of *Measure*, together with the lack of explicit reference to Shakespeare’s play either in or outside of *Sign*, suggests that adaptation and ‘translation’ do not necessarily constitute the abandoning or even copying of a ‘source’ text to arrive in a linear fashion at a perfect version. Rather, works such as *Sign* are testament to the malleability in the acts of reading and observing drama. Mercia and Marcus, consciously or otherwise, evoke Isabella and Angelo and in so doing, offer a new medium through which to negotiate their encounter without necessarily making any claims to ‘translate’ or ‘redeem’ either of Shakespeare’s characters.

It may be helpful, therefore, to perceive an original work such as *Measure* as a beginning or source which becomes an ongoing, flexible entity. If a text like *Measure* can be treated as an inherently meaningless piece that is manipulated and ‘translated’ into something meaningful by its readers and performers, then whenever it is ‘translated’ into different forms of drama, it is not so much ‘lost’, as added to and re-interpreted so as to lend it an air of ‘redemption’ even in the eyes of a religiously unstable, moral-seeking, late-Victorian audience.

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