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“What We Do Minister to Our Gross Selves”: Afflicted Bodies, Illicit Sex, and the Agency of
Disease in *Romeo & Juliet* and *Measure for Measure*

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

May 5, 2021

Acknowledgements

The work done here would be impossible without a number of relationships made and collaborative efforts undertaken during my time at Bates and beyond. First, thank you to my family, who have done well to help me arrive to this point in time. Thank you to Erin Lyons '21, for not working on one, but two massive Shakespearean undertakings with me; May 5th is a date I don't think I'll ever be able to forget. Your intelligence knows no bounds, and I will be forever grateful for this professional relationship, it is unique to any I have developed before or since. A very warm thank you to the Bates College department of English for four years of stretching myself and my peers towards our true intellectual potential: whether it is Prof. Salter who taught the first course I attended at Bates – Asian-American Women Writers – and joined my honors panel years later; or Prof. Freedman who made me take stock of how I read Shakespeare's politicized messaging, the foundation is laid over the sequencing here, and I am grateful for it. Liv Guion '21, thank you for being in AAWW that first day, and for every day since reminding me that long-winded projects such as this one better make a point. Additionally, thank you to every friend who read any draft of this strange, sometimes dark paper; I'm thankful that each and every one of you could be bothered to read about illness when there is a real-life plague ravaging the land. Finally, I want to extend a massive thanks to Dr. Myra E. Wright for advising this project through all of its ups and downs. Your support through every major accomplishment of the past two years has not gone unnoticed, and I am greatly appreciative of the faith you have placed in me

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Abstract

This project examines how the social and cultural effects brought about by disease are reflected in William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* and *Measure for Measure*. The focus of my research concerns the conditions under which virginal and bawdy illnesses form and proceed to spread from person to person in Shakespeare. In no case does sickness ever affect only the individual; instead, systems as a whole can fall ill. Throughout both plays, there is an observed inability to understand disease – let alone cure it – on the part of those who are framed as leaders or healers. Analysis of sexual illness in either play further opens both texts to be critiqued for their depictions of violence against women, particularly sexualized violence and figurations of marriage as a carceral state. These fictional versions of Verona and Vienna are devastated by various physical plagues that give way to moral ones. Despite the present turmoil at the outset of either play, worlds in the midst of radical change are being depicted; this is due to how the proliferation of deadly disease exposes shortcomings in inequitable systems. Through close readings of the language and action in the plays, renegotiating issues of genre, and engagement with scholarly discourse on disease as a biological, but also a moral and social issue, I uncover a pattern of behaviors in these plays that exhibit how oppressive, misogynistic systems provide the perfect breeding ground for disease to fester.

Introduction

Through readings of two of Shakespeare's plays, this project seeks to attend to questions that arise at the intersection of infectious disease, sexuality, and the reformation of cultural norms. In response to the bold early modern figurations of how cultural issues are situated in people's daily lives, a number of Shakespeare's plays keep illness in the background. Whether this is through literal representation, curses and swearing, or metaphorical allusion, pervasive attitudes about the danger of disease exist at every level of early modern English society and are thus represented in drama from the time.

Shakespeare uses the stage to reflect existing anxieties, and to administer his own sort of medicine: imagined possibilities in response to real issues people face. In *Romeo and Juliet* there are the real-world questions of first love and its pitfalls; in *Measure for Measure*, the playwright is asking fewer intensive questions about building marriages and other domestic relationships. Instead, the later play zooms out to consider the role that disease plays in societies in freefall. This is not to suggest that the political situation in the imagined Verona is any better than the fictional Vienna – it is not. The political temperatures of both cities as portrayed have reached a fever pitch, and as will be observed heat itself is connected to illness and sexuality.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, and elsewhere in early modern drama, greensickness is a disease that is figured as a product of unruly womanliness as diagnosed by men. I am indebted to Ursula Potter's explanation of the virginal disease that places the burden of how this disease has been manufactured via pseudoscience and misogyny. In her conclusion Potter indicates three ways that greensickness has the potential to influence further scholarship around *Romeo and Juliet*; I find myself influenced by the last of the three. She explains that reading through this lens "Further focuses attention on male perceptions of female sexuality. This latter effect is important

for the play as a whole; *Romeo and Juliet* is a highly sexed play that opens on a scene of crass male sexual bravado” (289). As will be the case in *Measure for Measure* as well, male perceptions of how their cultures function in this play rests just adjacent to discussions of infectious disease.

Opening with coarse references to sexuality from the very beginning makes sex foundational to the world of the play, and some of the scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* that this project is concerned with are loaded with potentially erotic staging possibilities as a result of what I would like to imagine as a gathering of greensick young men. They are working through Romeo’s affliction, communally, and it is a familiar state for the group who offer their various, perhaps ill-advised, advice for the titular male character.

The Verona that Shakespeare imagines is one missing foundational nurturing aspects; that is how misguided adolescent ideas around sex are allowed to proliferate. Potter describes the emergent sexuality of young people in an “adult world which fails to value sex as love, seeing it only as a genital drive to be satisfied or joked over” (289). Benvolio urges Romeo to seek out sex, and Mercutio cannot help but belittle his friend’s situation. Both of these dynamics and their administration as (bad) medicine is explored in the context of Romeo’s afflicted mind and body.

Greensickness becomes a threat because of the youthful nature of leading characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, but the dangers posed by sexual attitudes associated with the disease do not necessarily change with age. Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Measure for Measure*, is a sex-obsessed play, but instead of exploration the later play is primarily concerned with sexual control that – again – disproportionately affects women. Yes, Claudio’s life is on the line for his sexual “crime”, but he is an outlier as most men of his seeming status have sexual improprieties that are allowed to go unchecked. Having found new relevance in a world affected by the change

triggered by the #MeToo movement, this is a play that wants to suggest some reclamation of female sexual agency. If the conversation were to be written, the women portrayed in this play would be able to provide much-needed advice to a young Juliet. The men in *Measure for Measure*, on the other hand, continue to reflect the immature sexual attitudes that the young Veronese boys flaunt in the name of their own bravado.

Considering the sexual practices being represented in these plays, those portrayed as bawds, and indeed criminals, in *Measure for Measure* occupy an interesting position when read comparatively with characters from *Romeo and Juliet*. Where characters in the earlier tragedy have removed any love from sex, in the problem play a newly liberative practice of divorcing sex from marriage moves through society. This carries with it, its own problem set that is explored in this essay, also through the lens of infectious disease. Close readings of physical symptoms become more important here, and understanding the grotesque imagery that the poetry of this play works to conjure helps guide the audience with Duke Vincentio towards an understanding of the actual dangers of disease.

Though it is listed as a comedy in the First Folio, and the ugliness that the grotesque imagery throughout suggests the same, the question remains as to whether or not this play is funny. I will not attend to conjecture about how moments had the potential to play for Shakespeare's audiences here, but in 2021 we cannot merely rely on the logic of marriage as a means of defining genre. The play is not without moments that have genuine potential to be funny for a contemporary audience, but there is a true cognitive dissonance that cannot go unacknowledged when escapist laughter must live alongside representations of the most vile human ugliness and violence.

Transcending genre altogether, the use of illness as a tool does not just exist in Shakespeare's darker work. In one of his brightest festival comedies, *Twelfth Night*, antitheatrical attitudes of the time are reflected as the *raison d'être* for the movement, in spite of its members. That play's brazen sexuality, particularly its moments of reference to real locations in London. According to Keir Elam's notes in a recent Arden editions Antonio's reference to the Elephant would have been a reference for Shakespeare's audience to a well-known brothel (*Twelfth Night*, 3.3.39; 272).

Shakespeare uses this moment to signal the dangers that he understands society around him to view as associated with certain peoples and behaviors. At the same time (and perhaps this is empathetic conjecture), I can only imagine that the jokes that flew in the face of the antitheatricalists were meant to get the biggest laughs from the audience for the sake of celebrating the art form. To understand exactly how characters in both of the plays discussed here come into "sick health", and attempt to paradoxically cure their ills, I am indebted to the work of literary theorists and social historians concerned with how sickness proliferates in Shakespeare's London *and* his imagined Verona (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.178). These plays present stories and teach lessons themselves but become all the more textured and human when it is fully realized that Shakespeare was drawing on his own lived experiences, not merely creating fantastic worlds from scratch.

During his discussion of infection in early modern literature Darryl Chalk writes that "Lovesickness, or love melancholia, thought to be a potentially fatal illness in medieval and early modern culture, is often figured as a communicable disease, one caused by pathogenic rays transmitted between eyes" (13). Throughout Shakespeare, conversations about sickness and love should also be considered in relation to locations and proximity. As is true of real-world

illnesses, infection becomes more likely within a certain distance. While that space is not defined as six feet for Olivia when she first sees Cesario or when Romeo and Juliet meet at the Capulet ball, but being close enough to look someone in the eye, to touch them, or to have sex are all close enough to pass along infection. Rereading these plays with COVID-19 ravaging the world in the background heightens an awareness of closeness in either text. Stagings do not need to feel claustrophobic for their audiences, but intimate productions of these plays have a potential to do well, especially if production teams to service to the language of illness throughout either story.

Romeo and Juliet and *Measure for Measure* are both plays that on some level are concerned with sexual exploration and imagining new ways forward towards liberative views on desire on a societal level. Reading these plays with a concern for how illness operates provides a direct pathway towards examining sex as social and political tool. In both of these imagined cities, Shakespeare provides a look at how social decay begins to play itself out in sexually charged interpersonal relationships. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience is meant to be shocked into realizations by the death of such young people, and in *Measure for Measure*, the assumption that Vienna returns to normalcy (for better or worse) should be comforting. In either case, Shakespeare uses these plays to provide the opportunity for the holistic check-in of intimate human relationships that may not be accessible in repressive societies such as the Verona or Vienna in which these plays are set. None of the characters in these plays are responsible for the existence of the faulty systems they find themselves a part of, but the action of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Measure for Measure* demands revolutionary change for the better from individuals, otherwise entire societies may have to reckon with a sort of cultural backsliding.

Chapter 1: "Sick Health": *Romeo and Juliet's* Shaky Foundations & Paradoxical Curatives

There are a number of different types of mental and physical afflictions depicted throughout Shakespeare's canon, across a broad spectrum of characters. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the characters who fall victim to disease are mostly young people: adolescents who are coming into themselves and attempting to navigate the rigid structures in place as best they can while laying claim to their own identities are tasked with curing disease. This, naturally, leads to the administration of bad medicine and ignorance of good advice presented as childish raving.

Bonnie Lander Johnson's work on the early modern illness provides a lens through which greensickness is able to be reimagined as a product of corrupted desires. Johnson lays out her argument such that characters are not at fault for the violence that befalls them – or even their inexplicable needs to seek out harm. Rather, her essay provides something closer to a new way of thinking about generational trauma and the burden that youth assailed by love and manifestations of disease are charged with carrying.

Douglas Trevor's non-esoteric approach to psychoanalysis acts as a primer on humoral theory, its shortcomings, and the potential that the responsible use of psychoanalytic themes have in reëvaluating Shakespeare. These new interrogations provide a perspective beyond the metaphorical and further open up discussion of the play to "questions regarding agency, subjectivity, self-awareness, and of course self-delusion" (Trevor, 88). For reading *Romeo and Juliet* this is important in reference both to character's described and displayed moods, but perhaps more importantly this thinking helps bolster Schwarz's point that both love and sickness lack directionality. This leaves any and every character depicted in *Romeo and Juliet* equally susceptible to falling in love, but that often won't be far removed from illness or death.

Kathryn Schwarz's discussion of communion between people and social gatherings as breeding ground for both sexuality and plague clarifies presentist readings, while also remaining

central to how this early modern work was produced. In the context of this project, there are recent lived experiences that give the argument that Schwarz puts forward about love and infectivity in *Romeo and Juliet* real-world import. Sweaty basements, fleeting glances, and bodies pressed up against each other have become illicit on a coronavirus-ravaged campus, but in Shakespeare this very same space is figured as curative.

Romeo and Juliet produces an understanding of love/sickness that in Rebecca Totaro's words becomes "increasingly personal," with the ability to "[appear] like one's best friend *and* one's worst enemy, like the lover *and* the tyrant" (3). There is an inexplicable attraction between humans and the love of love, as well as a connected affinity that infection shares for the human corpus and psyche. The siren song of love/sickness is "like the thing devoutly to be wished *and* that which must give us pause (Totaro, 3-4). There is always cause in Shakespeare's written word, in the work of the scholars I rely on, and indeed in our culture to reëvaluate how we structure the intricate webs of human connection every person finds themselves entangled in, lest we spiral towards devastation.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, lovesickness and greensickness are two diseases that may not share identical symptomatic expressions, but their common ground is in the sorts of people they seek to infect: young lovers. Also of note is who is able to cure these diseases. Part of this chapter will explore how age and experience are not synonymous, in this play, with the efficacy of a person's abilities. Remedies for disease are difficult to come by, and those whose jobs it is to provide cures in Verona either make fatal miscalculations, as demonstrated by Friar Laurence, or administer ill-advised advice, as will be seen in study of Juliet's Nurse. Like those who are ill in this play, many of the figures who provide comic relief in the tragedy and offer cures to the sick

are themselves youthful. While they give this work their best efforts, they themselves also direction on avoiding and curing the same illnesses that have affected their peers.

To understand the remedies provided, readers must first trace the path by which infection with lovesickness takes place. In *Twelfth Night*, the countess Olivia attempts to stop herself (“Not too fast, soft, soft”) from falling for a new servant to the duke Orsino (1.5.285). In doing this she ponders whether

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
methinks I feel this youth’s perfections
with an invisible and subtle stealth
to creep in at mine eyes (*TN* 1.5.287-290)

As is the case elsewhere in early modern drama, Shakespeare figures lovesickness as being taken via the eye before being embedded in the heart and mind of its host. In his essay on early modern antitheatricity Darryl Chalk figures this view of love as “redolent of an emerging contemporary understanding of contagion” (1). With this in mind and considering *Romeo and Juliet*, love and sickness come to be understood individually – but also bound to each other – as active events in which transmission happens person-to-person via contact or proximity. The love/sickness grappled with in the play’s early scenes is connected to Romeo’s current crush.

When Benvolio presses Romeo on his general melancholy the exchange is as follows:

BENVOLIO. In love?

ROMEO. Out.

BENVOLIO. Of love?

ROMEO. Out of her favour where I am in love (*Rom*, 1.1.163-168).

Romeo goes on to rail against the internal imbalance that his unchecked feelings have led him to through a series of paradoxes, the penultimate of which is “sick health” (1.1.178). It is love – or what Romeo has conceived of as love – that has made the protagonist unwell. He is sick, and his emotionally raw early tirade is natural convalescence, his body trying to come to terms with newfound infection. Romeo describes love as “a smoke made with the fume of sighs; / Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes” (1.1.188–189). Romeo’s words have medical implications and are directly connected to framing the symptoms of his lovesickness. Sujata Iyengar defines “fumes” as the “vapors of corrupted humors rising in the body to provoke an intemperate or confused emotional response, often anger” (Iyengar, 142). As a product of the playwright’s understanding of bodily function, Romeo is presented as stricken with a humoral imbalance. That would be useful for early modern audiences to more easily create empathy for the character, but in the 21st century, such a reading of the character (and the play on the whole) should be considered with a grain of salt.

In this reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, I would like to use Douglas Trevor’s essay “Love, Humoralism, and ‘Soft’ Psychoanalysis” to interpret potential understandings of illness in the play after the early moderns. Trevor’s framing of humoral theory as being “safely relegated by science to the category of metaphor or associative—rather than diagnostic—understanding” is perfect for helping to imagine sickness in *Romeo and Juliet* (87-88). This tragedy is a play where people are sick, but boils, pus, and other grotesque images are replaced by characters wrought with emotional turmoil – various social ills are playing themselves out differently than in other depictions of disease, but with equal destructive potential.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, illness plays out mostly internally before exploding outward from host bodies into the real world as violence or death. This reading of the play rests comfortably at

an intersection between interpreting the emotional manifestations of humoral imbalance and simply seeing Romeo's mood as a branch of the larger Capulet-Montague feud – that is: unexplainable bad behavior. Of the play itself Trevor writes that it

offers its own resistance to a full-on, "humoral" interpretation. That is, while every medical authority that one may cite from this period or earlier ones views the condition of love melancholy with the utmost gravity, Romeo's friends and relatives do not. Rather, they see Romeo's mood as at least partly affected. (90)

Romeo's mopey behavior should not be articulated by modern readers as a neurological symptom attributed to brain damage from injury or illness, but his interactions with Benvolio and his family frame a portrait of affected, melancholy youth. While still staying safely removed from being a humoral reading of the play, it must be said that Romeo's feelings as he presents them seem to be genuine sadness. Lovesickness has taken hold of Romeo and is making him irrational. This symptom is minor and does not reach its violent potential, but this paradoxical outburst is an expression of "fumes" that make him misunderstand reality by pairing opposing concepts, allowing them to exist in impossible synthesis.

While this understanding of illness in the play is mostly internal, moving forward into Romeo's "sick health" speech, the language of clearing the body of toxins is implemented. Romeo describes his love "Being purged" to Benvolio as a means to explain his behavior (1.1.189). Physical purgation is "the body's first line of therapy in any disease"; the body is "known to purge itself naturally," whether that be through menstruation, the production of phlegm, or vomiting for example (Iyengar, 281). In this moment, the only way that a panicked Romeo knows how to cope with what he is feeling is through an incredible, nonsensical purgation of emotion, and Benvolio just happens to be on the receiving end. Again – in form true

to his cautious character – Romeo’s outburst does not look like the fighting in the street at the top of the show. Nor does it resemble his eventual suicide at the end of the play. Instead, Shakespeare uses language that is solidly associated with sickness to stage the pitfalls and tantrums that come with the failures of romantic love. This replicates the variability that disease has from person to person and its ability to truly be an equalizer. Early moderns are familiar with the fact that no one is naturally immune to disease – or love, for that matter.

Love in *Romeo and Juliet* is an infectious disease with the ability to cause true distress, and through Romeo’s paradoxical sentiments and affected behavior Shakespeare is able to demonstrate the veracity behind thinking of love as an ailment. But, it is not framed as an illness that one just stumbles upon, and it does not just well up inside of an individual randomly. Benvolio recognizes the minor pains that the new infection causes his companion and steps in to offer a cure. After Romeo admits to being unwell and declares that, “A sick man in sadness makes his will; / A word ill urged to one that is so ill. / In sadness cousin, I do love a woman (1.1.200-202). Romeo is upset because he has seen Rosaline and is attracted to her, but he cannot achieve any sort of sexual gratification because of her currently standing promise to “live chaste” (1.1.215). This being the case, and Benvolio being the loyal friend that he is, he attempts to alleviate his friend’s distress. Benvolio suggests that the cure here is for Romeo to give “liberty unto [his] eyes. / Examine other beauties” (1.1.225-226). Peculiarly enough, the remedy to Romeo’s paradoxical thinking and lovesick heart is indeed itself a paradox. Benvolio suggests that for Romeo to cure his love for Rosaline he must commit himself to finding female companionship (the implication is that this should be a temporary sexual relationship) to cure what has made him unwell in the first place.

In the face of reason from Benvolio, Romeo runs and thus leaves himself open to the further ravages of his lovesickness. To support the thinking that Romeo's broken heart and the descriptions of the symptoms he gives are directly related to each other I will turn to Kathryn Schwarz's figurations of the spaces in which disease is spread. In her essay, "Held in Common: *Romeo and Juliet* and the Promiscuous Seductions of Plague", Schwarz describes the

relationship between communion and contagion that is intimate and correlative but not unidirectional or casual. While it only echoes the play to say that love is a plague, it introduces a different dimension to say that plague, through the sheer ruthlessness of perilous association, has a great deal to do with love (Schwarz, 250).

Working from Schwarz's definition of the interconnected relationship between plague and love as maintaining similar behavioral attributes, I will posit that there are no passive actors in experiencing love or illness in Shakespeare's writing – everyone can catch love or the plague, and everyone can spread either. The ubiquitous presence of love, sickness, and lovesickness is how love/sickness moves throughout a population, even between friends and strangers. It can just happen. This unpredictability is what makes love/sickness so formidable in the lives of early moderns and present-day audiences. The sheer lack of human control over either is what entangles them so in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Characters' lack of control over how they experience love and its symptoms comes about since this is a force without "unidirectional[ity]" (Schwarz, 250). There does not necessarily have to be a logic to how love/sickness spreads; it is probably more accurate to say that there is no true logic to this proliferation. I'd like to freshly consider this relationship from the audience's perception of the action. There is nothing to stage between Rosaline and Romeo; it is all

imaginary conjecture left up to teams of people tasked with producing this play. Beyond what his family and friends dismiss as his own irrationality and brain fogginess, there is no reason to believe that Romeo harbors any real feelings for Rosaline; that is why the remedies for Romeo's love malady suggested by the young men in Romeo's life tend towards revelry, sex, and nonchalance. It is also why – despite seemingly irrational reasoning – the device takes, and Romeo is cured of his sickness for Rosaline.

Like Romeo's affliction, the cure that Benvolio offers lacks logic. Insistent that he and Romeo attend the Capulet feast, Benvolio takes the chance to open up the proverbial medicine cabinet and open his friend's eyes to clear any lingering feelings for Rosaline. When the duo first enter on the street in act one, scene two Benvolio bluntly tells Romeo to, "Take thou some new infection to thy eye, / And the rank poison of the old will die (1.2.48-49). Here "rank" operates as a modifier to the noun "poison". Without it, the sentence functions practically unchanged, but there must be some need for the specificity of the poison's state of being, besides the structural needs presented by iambic pentameter. In its adjectival form, as it is used here, rank is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as, "Affected by or resulting from putrefaction; festering, rotten; contaminated" ("rank, adj. and adv."). What is fascinating here is the continued framing of love as sickening, poisonous, or corrosive, even when it is something that everyone is always actively seeking out, not just for fun, but as a cure to existing lovesickness. When the process is laid out on paper, there seems to be little logic to it. Compounding afflictions is no way to eradicate corrupting influences.

While this may appear to be madness, there is a method applied to it, and understanding the relationship between "communion and contagion" are of particular interest to how illness is constructed in this play (Schwarz, 250). In 2020, the sense of normalcy around communing with

others shifted towards a way of life that for early moderns would not have been normal, but isolation and quarantine periods would not have been unfamiliar. Suddenly, the play's imagery of both large, public gatherings and private, intimate meetings became akin to the present-day reality of contagious super-spreader events. In these same spaces, large and small, where COVID-19 can be spread, love also creeps into the eyes of the unknowing. While love is not spread through respiratory droplets, in the world Shakespeare has created and that is being defined after him, being close enough to someone that you can exchange the same air as them creates an opportunity for one to fall in love.

Romeo has spent the immediate action before the beginning of the play lovesick over Rosaline, and enough time has passed since his initial sighting that Benvolio recognizes that time is up on waiting for any gratification (romantic or sexual) from Rosaline. The goal here is to purge the old, ineffective poison – attraction to Rosaline – with a new infection. Benvolio has diagnosed his friend's illness and continues to grow more impatient with Romeo's brooding. After receiving the invitation from Lord Capulet's servingman, Benvolio notes to Romeo that at the party

Sups the fair Rosaline whom thou so loves,
 With all the admired beauties of Verona.
 Go tither, and with unattainted eye
 Compare her face with some that I shall show
 And I will make thee think thy swan a crow (1.2.84-88).

Benvolio wants his friend to enter this space with an unprejudiced view of the young women around them. And what does an event such as this have the potential to look like? People elbow-to-elbow, exchanging droplets and glances. Spaces like the one at the feast are fleeting, as are the

interactions therein, and the relationships you form in them. Shakespeare has created a nascent view of what finding love looks like. Romeo is attempting for the first time to define his feelings in a world that is telling him that sex is only worth laughing at or achieving short term pleasure. Like the violence at the top of the play, Romeo's longing for any bad advice his friends may have is not his fault, but it highlights the shared failures young people experience in early searches for romantic and sexual belonging in a world that has not encouraged such behavior.

Schwarz calls on the French theologian and Calvinist successor Théodore de Bèze to help define why Benvolio's cure for Romeo's paradoxical symptoms is indeed itself a paradox.

Schwarz explains that

Bèze calls on 'that general band' [bond] to argue that citizens should risk infection to preserve communion. *Romeo and Juliet*, like early modern plague writing, flatly asserts that anyone might die, and neither obscures nor evades the consequent proposition that everyone might die (256).

Schwarz uses Stockwood's 1580 translation and the early modern word "band" should be interpreted as standing in for bond or bound, as in forming "into a band or company" (Schwarz 256; "band v.1"). The ethereal, spiritual connection that keeps all people tethered to this world and to each other. *Romeo and Juliet* foregrounds communion, infection, and the risk of death over any logical approach to combating lovesickness. Schwarz is correct: when it comes to lovesickness, *Romeo and Juliet* is unflinching in its commitment to the thinking that "anyone might die". The Verona that Shakespeare has created is one in which seeking out successful romantic and sexual partnerships is mired in the potential for failure, violence, and even death, but all the characters encourage the play's protagonists to seek it out anyway. Like many of Shakespeare's imagined versions of real cities, Verona is inherently violent. The tragedy that

comes about at the end of the play is one that most participants in the action have been trying to actively avoid. The loss of innocence and the death of innocents at the play's end are indicative of widespread infectivity that "neither obscures nor evades the consequent proposition that everyone might die" (Schwarz, 256). No one is safe from love/sickness in the Verona of *Romeo and Juliet*, and tragic forces prove this when the star-crossed lovers who should have remained untouched wind up dead.¹

The casualties in *Romeo and Juliet* are as follows: Mercutio, Tybalt, Lady Montague, Paris, and the titular lovers, Romeo and Juliet. These are just deaths and do not account for the fighting in the streets between common people or the local government's inability to put violence associated with an ongoing family feud issues to rest. The dangers of love seem to be well-understood by Verona's citizenry. Why then, do the Veronese approach amorous connection in such a cavalier fashion? As Romeo tries to heal from his latest heartache, why risk the possibilities that negative outcomes are compounded? As the play continues, characters are only better-and-better poised to bring about more self-inflicted anguish instead of any tenderness or genuine connection.

Though he is often portrayed as flighty and foolish, Mercutio is another source for sound advice, once the poetic fashion is unpacked. He offers Romeo an exit plan on the question of love that is ultimately ignored but that could have potentially saved the title character's life. Shakespeare introduces a healthy amount of cynicism into the world through Mercutio, who

¹ This same risk returned to human consciousness in the 21st century with the unmitigated spread of a global pandemic opening up new potential to reshape contemporary human conceptualizations of disease.

approaches love with a sustained fervor that Benvolio does not offer to Romeo earlier in the play. After deciding to attend the banquet that they have not been (officially) invited to with Mercutio (who has been), Prince Escalus' kinsman is framed as a foil to Benvolio, at least on how one should approach sex, if attempts at desire should be made at all. Mercutio's cynical attitude is revealed in his long-winded, vivid "Queen Mab" monologue. Full of imagery that is meant to counter Romeo's reliance on dreams as prophetic, Mercutio's speech is both a cutting rebuke of love and also a ready commiseration with Benvolio's sentiment that Romeo takes this teenage crush much less seriously. Mab, the fairy queen, is introduced and her nightly activities described. Mercutio describes a figure who

gallops night by night

Through lovers' brains, and then they dream of love;
 On courtiers' knees, that dream of curtsies straight;
 O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees;
 O'er ladies lips, who straight on kisses dream,
 Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
 Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are. (1.4.70-76)

The conversation that he is having is predicated on mistrust of dreams ("That dreamers often lie") as a source for reliable information (1.4.51). Mercutio frames for Romeo why his adherence to dreams as prophetic should be taken with a grain of salt. Mercutio knows that love is on Romeo's mind. This is a first, light-hearted warning from Mercutio to Romeo against giving too much credence to what dreams are made on, so he chides Romeo for it.

Such an infection has become laughable among his friends, young men who endeavor to tease each other about convalescent crushes. What Mercutio does in the opening description of

Mab's activities frames her as benevolent, but one must consider what it is that people love.

Enter: the equivocation between love and violence. During his speech on love, Mercutio offers a description of the battlefield that it often becomes. This is not to suggest that the early moderns in particular view love this way, but that Shakespeare is one of many in a long line of artists who portray love as the war everyone must fight in at some point or another. Mercutio describes Mab on the battlefield, saying that

Sometimes she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
 And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
 Of breaches, ambuscados, Spanish blades,
 Of healths five fathom deep; and then anon
 Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
 And being thus frightened, swears a prayer or two
 And sleeps again (1.4.82-88).

What is notable about Mercutio's monologue in this instance is how suddenly and how strongly it takes a turn away from those things which people are perceived as loving and towards unbridled violence. The discussion on love does not turn towards a violent domestic sphere, with friction between husbands and wives. Instead Shakespeare turns immediately towards otherization and warfare.²

In the section of the monologue focused on weapons and combat, Mercutio forecasts Romeo's eventual demise. The "cutting foreign throats" telegraphs Juliet's eventual stab wound.

² Though outside of this paper's scope, the connection between *Romeo and Juliet*, self-love, nationalism, and political violence are worth further exploration.

Vividly, Mercutio paints a picture of love as a violent endeavor that is not worth Romeo's time. Here, Shakespeare delivers poetry full of imagery that lends itself to potentially violent staging potentials. This is Mercutio's second warning to Romeo, and it much more directly describes the real violence that could befall the latter youth.

What Mercutio offers Romeo is ultimately a two-fold warning against being driven towards love. On one hand Mercutio's argument is a part of Benvolio's: it is one that guides Romeo towards male friendship, partying, and empty hookups (to put it all in contemporary terms). But on the other hand, the Queen Mab monologue has an overwhelming potential to enter as an extension of Bonnie Lander Johnson's reconceptualization of greensickness in *Romeo and Juliet*. Johnson introduces a reading of greensickness, her "green vision," which "relies on the conceptual association between womb/blood and breast/milk: both are bound up in the play's concern with corrupted appetites and unnatural 'foods'" (139). The essay in which Johnson introduces this new conceptual lens through which to view desire, "Blood, Milk, Poison: *Romeo and Juliet*'s Tragedy of 'Green' Desire and Corrupted Blood," does well to explore the foundational pitfalls that exist throughout the child-rearing process that Shakespeare has conceptualized of in this fictional Verona. This is important in helping to explain why in this play people seek out bad medicine, cures with properties they know will ultimately lead to further pain.

In act one, scene three of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has the Nurse recount for the audience a moment in which Juliet's nurturing foundation was corrupted. The Nurse character represents the cultural function of children being breastfed by a third party. But, what is peculiar here is the Nurse's reminiscence on actions that actively reject nourishment and leave Juliet vulnerable to illness as she ages. Eleven years later, with Juliet's marriage on the horizon, the

Nurse reminisces about “that day...[she] had laid wormwood to [her] dug” (1.3.24-27).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this use of wormwood directly refers to the plant *artemisia absinthium*, which is known for its medicinal possibilities and bitter taste. The *OED* notes that “The leaves and tops are used in medicine as a tonic and vermifuge, and for making vermouth and absinthe; formerly also to protect clothes and bedding from moths and fleas, and in brewing ale. It yields a dark green oil” (wormwood, *n*). The leaves and tops used to make curatives were not used here, nor was vermouth or absinthe for the purposes of cocktail mixing. While this examination of Johnson’s “green vision” requires the reader to briefly zoom out from Romeo and his friends to revisit this central depiction of breastfeeding in the play, this poetic “flashback” from the Nurse acts as a cultural looking glass through which Shakespeare’s audiences are able to clearly see the connection between tenderness and corruption. Though the physical act that the Nurse engages in with Juliet is nourishing, carrying it out with the use of an unnecessary bitter medicinal is a further demonstration of the stain on interpersonal relationships in Shakespeare’s Verona.

Characters in this play seek out bad medicine for their physical, psychological, and sexual illnesses because from the moment they are born, their caretakers feed them corrupted sustenance, and thus to survive (but paradoxically, ultimately die). Breastfeeding, like sex, is framed as behavior that is supposed to be an act of love and nourishment between people; despite this, *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates to its audience that the latter activity is permanently tainted by the former. The inability for characters in *Romeo and Juliet* to form meaningful, healthy romantic and sexual relationships is a byproduct of bad medicine going to work on individuals.

In the Queen Mab speech Mercutio recognizes this very stain on relationship building, and alongside Benvolio is attempting to offer Romeo a means of side-stepping the potential

dangers of lovesickness. With his advice ultimately gone unheeded, Mercutio is signaling that Romeo's love/sickness is a product of green vision, to borrow from Johnson's language, and his death is just the first in the ensuing associated violence (139). Similarly to how love is figured as "plague" that ventures to "creep" into the eyes and minds of unwitting victims in *Twelfth Night*, Mercutio's imagined Mab works to plant mistruths in people's minds – making them think that love is a worthy pursuit (*TN* 1.5.287-290).

One of Mercutio's last lines, "a plague a' both your houses", has been a site for scholarly conversation in *Romeo and Juliet*, and this corrupted speech act is the moment in the play that sends the action into a violent tailspin (3.1.92). Schwarz's insistence not to read Mercutio's final curse as "necromantic nor even as performative, but rather as indicative of a bridge between the contagion of bodies and the contagion of ideas, across which words migrate into bodies and bodies into words" operates similarly to what Chalk discusses is happening in *Twelfth Night* (251). What is different here is that instead of love being taken in through the eye, new malevolence exits Mercutio's mouth. In his final moments, violent corrupted language is what Mercutio spews towards his friend, and immediately after that same friend commits a murder himself. The connection between corrupted speech and how it infects others is on full display in act three, scene one when Mercutio's speech act is followed directly by physical violence, a flesh act.

All corrupted interactions are indicative of bodies into words and words into bodies: flesh acts to impact others. What may be confusing in the grander context of social gatherings is the expectation of speech, but that is not necessarily a requirement in the spread of love or illness. Rather, expect gazes, moans, and a general sickly presence. Plague becomes personified in this

text and is never passive. Schwarz points to a specific moment in Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus* that states:

The cadavers in a mass grave aren't the dead, they aren't our dead: they are wounds heaped up, stuck in, flowing into one another ... Through another concentration, bodies are only signs annulled. This is a trenchant critique of how we discard persons whose classification has shifted from worth to waste (77).

This also is how *Romeo and Juliet* is working by the end. Sick, wounded, and dying bodies are not treated with respect, they are – again – allowed to pile atop each other in the streets or in a tomb. Like to Juliet's weaning, the groundwork for the compounding violence in the second half of the play is laid in the scenes leading up to act three, scene one when violence seems to explode out of nowhere. The reasons are two-fold. The first being because those in charge could not actually enact any sort of order. The second: those who are the central perpetrators of violence (the untitled upper middle class, in this case) are unwilling to compromise. Plague steps in as a great equalizer, and we must all now accept that people may begin to die indiscriminately because of the emotionally intemperate. While the symptoms of the illness ravaging Shakespeare's Verona do not present themselves with boils and pus, street violence and the resulting deaths are enough to make societal waves.

Schwarz is correct to note throughout her essay on the seductions of contagion that our relationships to each other are constantly in flux in the face of public health crises. She writes how "In pandemic time, when the social world seems as fragile as the bodies that inhabit it, narrow protocols of coalition open outward to more volatile terms and forms" (Schwarz, 250). The reevaluation of societal values based around whose work is considered "essential" is a conversation being had in the 2020s and in *Romeo and Juliet*--not just through the interrogation

of bad medicine by adolescents, but through the political pressure put on the Capulets and Montagues to lay their feud to rest. Veronese society can function if these people are left to let these emotions play out internally and domestically, but once there is open fighting in the street, as there is at the top of the play, these characters become representative of class-based societal ills.

Chapter 2: "A Very Ill House": Venereal Disease and Threats to Domesticity in *Measure for Measure*

Like a festering wound, the imagined Vienna in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* has been exposed to infection. A representation of Shakespeare's London (or any major metropolitan area in distress, as has been seen in 20th & 21st century performance practices), the play represents both literal illnesses associated with the bawdy bodies of a city's social "underworld" and also metaphoric social ills that are the cause of literal societal decay. Through grotesque imagery and the ludicrous nature of its representatives, the bawdy is a comic tool, even if it isn't always laugh-out-loud funny. In his disguise as a friar, Vincentio is exposed to a collection of the ugliest that Vienna has to offer. This happens alongside the moral abatement that Isabella watches happen as Angelo attempts to wield the power of his position over her, stripping away any sexual agency.

Vincentio's behavior during the ongoing public health crisis is all too familiar to contemporary leaders who lack the foresight to contain outbreaks of disease, even on a pandemic scale; this is because the problems that plague the masses tend to remain far away from those in power. In order to truly understand what the reality of the situation is, Vincentio must go live among the Viennese people and experience their concerns. What Vincentio sees, particularly during his time in the prison, is what moves him towards actual government effectiveness. The problems presented go beyond just physical illness, but the language of sickness and disease is employed throughout *Measure for Measure* to highlight the often grotesque, violent nature that follows being afflicted with (and indeed, healing from) disease.

Unfortunately for Vincentio, but more to the detriment of his subjects – and yet another real-world problem – is that often leaders do not completely understand what sort of policies will benefit the public good until trauma is experienced. This reactive approach to governance

contributes to Vincentio's inability to act as a leader until the pressures of looming societal issues have compounded. While visiting Claudio in prison during the third act, Vincentio witnesses the worst that being alive has to offer, and all of it ends in death: brothers and sisters debating their virtues and livelihoods, people ravaged by disease, and new state-sanctioned violence introduced as the panacea to all of Vienna's issues.

Through his generally removed social position in society, perceived absence when he is disguised amongst his subjects, and overall impractical tactics for surveying the health of his populace, Shakespeare has framed Vincentio's ineffective leadership as creating exactly the conditions that disease – and with it, social decay – need to proliferate. In her character study of the duke, Catherine Cox presents a duke who does not behave much differently in the face of crisis than leaders from Shakespeare's lifetime. She draws comparisons to London government officials who, “in the spring of 1603 delayed warnings and restrictions until the disease had become uncontrollable” (Cox, 439). In 2020, modern governments again displayed how disease is a threat that manages to elude officials in terms of effective response. That is because you cannot see disease until it has already taken root and is presenting bodies made grotesque by its very presence back to the viewer.

The duke has been avoiding the responsibility of actually solving the problems in Vienna, and Cox draws attention to a parallel between Duke Vincentio and a scene from Thomas Dekker's, *The Wonderful Yeaere* – the playwright's first plague pamphlet that acted as a financial alternative when theaters were closed – which demonstrates the new problems avoidance brings. Cox briefly explains, “Dekker's description of a father's flight with his son uses the same motifs as those employed by Vincentio—the ass laden with goods, the fool who flees death, and death's ironic entrapment” (447). First, considering the parallel imagery between Vincentio and the

figure in Dekker's writing: a patriarch attempts to guide a person (all of Vienna, in the duke's case) towards safety, but through ill-considered action leads his party to their doom, regardless. Like in *Oedipus Rex*, the foolish avoidance of one's fate only causes it to draw closer. By not moving towards widespread justice until directly facing gross injustice, the duke is driving himself and all those he is responsible for towards the grave. But, perhaps Vincentio's dukedom is not doomed to absolute social collapse. I want to introduce a different excerpt from *The Wonderful Yeaere* that helps to reposition Vincentio's time in the prison as a pilgrimage, from which a lesson is actually learned, but only because of the eschatological imagery that the prison itself presents.

Dekker's plague pamphlets present apocalyptic visions of plague-ravaged populations, and Shakespeare uses similar tactics to shock Vincentio towards leadership. Death personified, vermin, and an inescapable gloomy atmosphere permeate Dekker's plague writings, and *Measure for Measure* takes on much of the same tone. When Dekker describes the surroundings that a "Chaplesse hollow scull" would inhabit in its post-plague eternity, he writes that

He should heare no noise but of Toads croaking, Screech-Owles howling,
Mandrakes shriking: were not this an infernall prison? would not the strongest-
harted man (best with such a ghastly horror) looke wilde and runne madde? and
die? (13).

Perhaps most significantly is the metaphorical location that Dekker uses to refer to this space. Casting this decimated world as a "prison", the same sort of space in which Vincentio most closely observes Vienna, speaks to some fears forming in the early modern imagination. What draws this moment in Dekker's first plague pamphlet even more closely to *Measure for Measure* is the figure that Dekker introduces after establishing the environment. Dekker introduces a

figure “that durst (in the dead houre of gloomy midnight) haue bene so valiant, as to haue walkt through the [still] and melancholy streets” (13). Like Vincentio, this wanderer exists outside of, and is seemingly protected from the situation at hand. Remaining so removed, they pass through the world, observe the sheer reality of what is presented, and have the ability to choose when they interact with the material world. For Vincentio: his visit to the prison is the space where he experiences an apocalyptic vision of what all Vienna can become.

The prison is figured as the location and the tool for state violence in *Measure for Measure*, and in this space Vincentio both experiences and is told about how the carceral state is central to allowing pain and death in Vienna to thrive. Particularly notable is the sheer replaceability of prisoners amongst each other. When there is the need for a dummied version of Claudio’s severed head Bernadine, the inmate from whom the replacement head was meant to come from, is too hungover to be executed, but a new possibility arises. The Provost announces that

There died this morning of a cruel fever
 One Ragozine, a most notorious pirate,
 A man of Claudio’s years, his beard and head
 Just of his colour. (*Measure for Measure*, 4.3.68-71)

Illness followed by death is so commonplace that all the duke and company needed to do for a head was wait – someone was going to die anyway. The casual, two-fold nature to the severed-head rouse speaks to the prison’s inability to act as rehabilitative space. Many of the prison’s current inhabitants were pulled from the streets of Vienna for sexual crimes that would eventually spread disease. Instead of treating or stopping the circulation of various fevers, poxes, and venereal disease in this now marginalized portion of the population, the illnesses that are

temporarily removed from a wider community are now allowed to infect and, as has been displayed, kill a group of people who have been stripped of their agency, freedom, and access to healthcare. This particular scene happens after the plan to resolve the action of the play is set in motion, but it is that essence of the prison that jolts Vincentio to restore justice to his dukedom.

Widespread outbreaks of disease are a problem that must eventually be dealt with, less the illness destroy all available hosts, but that is not to suggest that there are any preventative measures in place. The duke was only moved to action when the issues at hand were so critical that they could not be ignored. The outbreak of venereal disease and Angelo's blatant sexual power brokerage, exploiting his position for physical gain, happened to line up in this fictionalized Vienna; and the two become representative of each other. Just as Vincentio finally feels compelled to literally heal the nation, Isabella rebuffs Angelo's advances, upsetting that existing power (im)balance. The action of the play offers itself as metaphor and mirror, and the language used throughout works to make it clear that abuses of power are indeed a form of social sickness – markers of poorly functioning or decaying societies that are closely related to, but ultimately separate from, the actual infectious disease that makes its way through Vienna.

In *Measure for Measure*, the language of sickness and infectious disease is allowed to rest right alongside rhetoric concerned with power dynamics. The audience follows Duke Vincentio through Vienna's underbelly as he attempts to tease out the issues in his kingdom, though without necessarily offering tangible, long-term solutions for the disenfranchised. Ineffective leadership from seemingly virtuous rulers, followed by the installation of impious despots are how the power dynamics in *Measure for Measure* open up Vienna for infection. Through a combination of abuses & neglect of authority, power brokerage in sexual agency, and open misogyny, it is the ruling class in Vienna that unleashes the spread of venereal disease on

the population and is then left all but powerless to stop it from ravaging the land. Through his inaction, followed by an up-close observance of the social decay he has ushered in, Duke Vincentio finally sees the world he has helped create: one where the scapegoating and marginalization of diseased bodies act as a veneer atop discussions about the larger violent systems that grip Vienna.

Sexual openness, especially that on the part of women is dangerous because of the potential exposure to physical illness that illicit sex brings, as well as the breakdown in preconceived domestic power structures. Mistress Overdone, Mistress Elbow, and Isabella are all women who have taken full control of their sexuality. Mistress Overdone, the brothel madam is a central bawdy figure to this play since many of the action's marginalized individuals frequent her establishment. Mistress Elbow – the pregnant wife of a constable – acts on her own desire when she engages in sexual conduct outside of her marriage. This leading to pregnancy, a physical manifestation of sex's consequences beyond infectious disease. Juliet is another example of this, and her unborn child is referred to colloquially as Claudio's "bowels"; with the comparison to feces revealing how illegitimate children are figured in the Viennese imagination (*MM*, 3.1.29). Perhaps the most dangerous of the female figures represented in the play is Isabella. The young woman's conviction to become a nun – stripping herself of all sexuality – is representative of fully-manifested sexual agency. In Shakespeare's Vienna, Isabella has figured herself such that no man can have access to her sexuality, not even the most powerful of them, including Angelo.

In the Duke's absence, a number of power dynamics and social needs shift in Vienna, and in what is considered the social underbelly this has worked favorably for Mistress Overdone; comparative readings of these stewards of Vienna's social and political wellbeing highlights how a brothel madam postures herself as a better example of leadership than the absentee duke.

Towards the beginning of the play, Mistress Overdone banters with business associates and patrons about the state of the city, inquiring: “Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat, / What with the gallows and what with poverty, I am / custom-shrunk (*MM*, 1.2.79–81). Overdone is concerned with areas of discussion that will have direct impact on her patrons. Effectively holding court to gauge how bad perceived troubles are, she provides a list of societal ills (war, plague, crime, and poverty) that have the potential – and have already begun – to impact her business. Being “custom-shrunk”, the madam has noticed fewer patrons that she would typically anticipate, so at this point in the play even a profession as reliable as prostitution is suffering (“custom, n and adj”). As a professional in a field that is so closely dependent on the well-being of those it serves, it is no surprise that the brothel madam is one of the first to raise direct questions about Vienna’s troubled state.

While there are several ways of reading the potential issues directly affecting Mistress Overdone’s customers, of the four societal troubles (disease, executions, poverty, and war) that the madam presents, two immediately rise above the others as the likely culprits for emptier pocketbooks: plague and crime (*MM*, 1.2.79-80). The “customers” that are referenced are not just the men looking for sex, but the sex workers themselves (*MM*, 168). This is a world in which it can be comfortably said that war will not postulate any shortage of women at home, and working in a brothel provides an escape from poverty. That means that the female bodies that bawdy men and women rely on are either sick with fever and trying to “sweat” their sickness out, or they are hanging for their profession at “the gallows”. The latter being an option suggests that any reforms implemented in response to various social conditions will be the cause for a certain reign of terror in some communities, but not others – for “the miserable have no other medicine” but for the powerful to take pity on them (*MM*, 3.1.2).

What is observed is the inequitable use of reform law to further police already marginalized people. Angelo's militant moralism taking the reins on civil leadership is a situation created by the absent duke, and the acts of brutality that results of the deputy's presence will always fall more harshly among the working class and bawdy figures. The clear hoarding of political power and then singularly handing said power to one person such that he can abuse his status both provide clear views into Vincentio's lack of leadership ability or political awareness at the outset of the play. But, seeing past the veneer of piety that his deputy displays and experiencing the humanity that bawdy figures share is the length of Duke Vincentio's character arc.

When considered alongside the pragmatic Mistress Overdone, the duke reads as even more poorly suited for his position due to a lack of an awareness of Viennese social conditions. While the duke is not blessed with an innate talent for governance, he is not without the ability to learn and demonstrates a level of empathy in his action that signals a potential to be a leader whose direction is allied with the needs of the public. When he is in the prison, disguised as the friar, Escalus asks the man for news, and he reports

None, but that there is so great a fever on goodness,
 that the dissolution of it must cure it. Novelty is only
 in request; and it is as dangerous to be aged in any
 kind of course, as it is virtuous to be constant in any
 undertaking. There is scarce truth enough alive to
 make societies secure, but security enough to make
 fellowships accursed. Much upon this riddle runs the
 wisdom of the world; this news is old enough, yet it is

every day's news (3.1.480–489).

What is noteworthy about Mistress Overdone and Duke Vincentio's speeches alongside each other is when and how similar information is presented, with each character providing a model for typified leadership. In the second scene of the play, at her first appearance, Mistress Overdone is framed as a proactive figure; she is concerned with those issues that may have an impact on her business proceedings that are also of broader social concern. Vincentio provides a contrasting figure, one for whom there is a disconnect between himself and those whom he is supposed to lead. This removal – purposeful or otherwise – is what makes the root cause of issues perfectly obvious to Overdone, while they remain unclear to the duke. More notably: in this moment, the duke acknowledges exactly where the issues lie in the city he is supposed to be in control of. Though he lacks news that Escalus requested, the Duke does present two paradoxes here: one concerned with the illness and death of virtue; the other questioning virtue's merits to begin with.

Though the short prose speech may present itself as deflection of the request for “news abroad i'th' world” – of which the duke has none – his speech is deeply revealing about what he has learned during his time masquerading as a friar (*MM*, 3.1.479). After the extended scene in the prison, Vincentio has been exposed to the abuse, disease, and violence that are ravaging Vienna — a Vienna from which he has been absent. In the prison Vincentio realizes that he is, and always has been, participating in and perpetuating the very system which he is supposed to protect his citizens from.

The empathy created during Vincentio's trip to the prison is on display when he offers Claudio advice at the beginning of act three, scene one and uses sickly language to frame the

jailed young man's misfortunes. In a speech where the duke is attempting to put Claudio at ease with death, the duke calls on the gentleman to consider whether life is worth living, asking

Friend hast thou none,
 For thine own bowels which do call thee sire,
 The mere effusion of thy proper loins,
 Do curse the gout, serpigo and the rheum
 For ending thee no sooner. (*MM*, 3.1.28-32)

As it is noted earlier, this speech reveals deeply rooted Viennese opinions on the sick and sexually otherized. Claudio's actions have left such a stain on his public image that death would be less shameful – this is manifested through Juliet's pregnancy. According to the marginal gloss in *Measure for Measure*, "serpigo" is a stand-in for herpes, "rheum" is a "runny discharge from the nose or throat", and "bowels" are children; in Claudio's case, the product of sexual misfortune that is essentially his punishment (255). As he talks about Claudio's condition, Vincentio's language tie the situation directly to disease and to sex. By placing the particularly ugly looking, painful symptoms associated with sexually transmissible illness in direct relation to Juliet's pregnancy works to further conjure up fear-inducing imagery for Shakespeare's audience about what happens in the shadow of unregulated sexuality. Where there is sex without control, concurrent to the decay of society at large, will be the devaluation of the family unit.

In *Measure for Measure* discussions of class dynamics are implicit, and Shakespeare demonstrates most explicitly in Angelo how the upper class mistreats and exploits the rest of a population as a means of hoarding power. This work is done largely through the language of illness and highlights how sickness can truly be a sensual and visceral assault on the body. Left in charge of Vienna and facing down the symptoms of social decay, the falsely pious Angelo

oversees state enacted violence against the lowest in society. Instead of holistic reforms in response to sex work, the implicit and explicit violence that follows the sex trade, and outbreaks of disease that come as a product of it, Angelo only compounds the damage being done to the public. Unfortunately, the duke's deputy is not behaving at all unlike the English government.

In the 17th century (and indeed in more modern examples) the kneejerk reaction to treat sex workers as criminals and not victims of a violent system leads to the further depression in quality of life for the people most affected by the institution of commodified sex. In Shakespeare's London, it was not uncommon to see people prosecuted for a variety of sexual crimes. In his essay, "Sex, Social Relations and the Law in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London", Faramerz Dabhoiwala establishes for the reader a London where the scales of justice tipped unfavorably for the disenfranchised. In his discussion of the prosecution of sexual crimes in and around early modern London, Dabhoiwala notes that

Between September 1600 and August 1601, for example, at least three hundred – and possibly up to a thousand – men and women were punished in the City's house of correction alone, for fornication, adultery or prostitution. Every year, many hundreds more were prosecuted in a variety of suburban jurisdictions. And the city's several church courts, too, were continually in action against such offenders. (86)

Sexual crime was pervasive in early modern London, and punishment was swiftly carried out. Across all levels of legal authority, the political control of already exploited bodies was on the agenda of those in secular and religious circles. Even though Angelo is responsible for a reactive execution of violent actions against the public to combat the social ills that authorities feared prostitutes and sexually transmitted disease represent, his attempts are a futile result of further negligence. Again, the Viennese ruling class mirrors the leadership of early modern England.

Despite attempts to remove and marginalize sex workers and their clients, they were an ever-present group in society. In his essay on early modern sexual practices, “Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox”, Kevin P. Siena describes the persistence of commodified sex, despite concerted attempts to close public stews and expel sex workers from the country. Siena writes that “Prostitution persisted despite these efforts [to eradicate it], and medical commentators responded by issuing warnings about the danger of brothels. They often lamented that even harsher measures were not taken to police prostitutes” (559). Like in Vienna, Shakespeare’s England is feeling pressure from religious and medical communities to curtail the sex trade. The combination of political pressure, a history of neglecting the issue, and the perception that the literal health of the nation hangs in the balance is what allows for state-sanctioned violence to find an acceptable place in society, fictional or otherwise.

In her characterizations of Angelo and Vincentio, Catherine Cox argues that by placing “a self-interested person, lacking divine sanction, one unused to the princely arts of equitable judgement, the duke appears to have broken faith with his people” (440). Similarly to how he allowed the conditions that breed disease and violence in tandem, Vincentio doubles down on being responsible for widespread national trauma by putting Angelo in charge. Appropriate responsibility should absolutely be leveled on Vincentio, but Cox does provide convincing reasoning for why the duke must “leave” Vienna in the way that he does. The duke, “Because of his prior negligence [...] must remove himself from the seat of power, look upon the diseased condition of his realm at close range, and accept responsibility for building a more involved, participatory government” (441). This performative *mea culpa* only creates and exacerbates a cycle of ineffectual governance and deep-rooted violence in the “underbelly”. Perhaps there is

some right, noble reason for the duke to temporarily step away, but the damage that is compounded during the interim period of Angelo's acting governance cannot be dismissed.

The language of illness in *Measure for Measure* becomes a tool to underscore the prosecution of marginalized bodies, the scapegoating of the victims of the sex trade, and the explicit otherization of those deemed unfit for civil society. In *Measure for Measure*, these sentiments were echoed at every level of society and are not just apparent to society's upper class. Sliding down the power spectrum and turning attention to characters that make up the middle class – those who have not necessarily escaped their social conditions but are tools of the state – is useful in understanding the relationship between sickness and public opinion from the lower class in *Measure for Measure*. Elbow, one of the play's fools, a lower status character who is given license to openly comment on the world around them as they see best fit is a representative of middle-class values in the play. These figures often provide the most cutting, specific insights on the world of the play. Elbow is not nearly as intelligent as characters who fulfill this role in other pieces of Shakespeare's writing, but like Mistress Overdone, he is closer to Vienna's "underbelly"; that is, the city's common people. Unlike Angelo or Vincentio, who spend little to no actual time in and amongst the bawdy class, Elbow has regular contact with sex workers, their employers, and the clientele.

In Elbow, Shakespeare mirrors yet another real-world analogue of characters who are trying to navigate sex and class, through the use of language that evokes illness to reinforce feelings of disgust and fear. Derisive language about bawdy figures "was echoed in that of the constables and watchmen who actually arrested adulterers, fornicators and prostitutes, at the request of aggrieved husbands and wives" (Dabhoiwala, 89). One step closer to the bawdy class, and the direct threats that the social ills that they represent become all the clearer. For Elbow and

those with whom he associates himself, the sex trade presents a threat not just to civil society as its understood, but to the family dynamic on a personal level. Adulterous relationships not only invite sickness into otherwise clean, unaffected households, but they put the dissolution of relationships in their entirety at risk as well. On one level, yes, Elbow is fulfilling his duty to the state as an appointed officer of the law, but the connection that prostitutes have to middle class communities presents a new class dynamic that adds to the texture of Viennese politics of neglect.

In act two, scene one, Angelo is holding court in a hall at his home and the low-level constable has arrested Froth and Pompey in a brothel. Upon their entrance, Elbow announces of the pair that “if these be good people in a commonweal, that do nothing but use their abuses in common houses, [he knows] no law” (2.1.41-43). “Common houses” are the ever-common brothels where disease is spread, and through a bit of light word play Shakespeare ties this abundance to the health of the “commonweal[th]”. When that phrasing lands on the ear what it does is place the plague on people not directly responsible for the conditions that currently define Vienna. During Froth and Pompey’s interrogation Elbow remarks how these two were arrested at “a hothouse, which [he thinks] is a very ill house too” (2.1.64).

The audience goes on to learn that Mistress Elbow is pregnant, likely under suspicious means, and read in the context of explicit class anxieties, Elbow’s expressed personal opinions on the brothels are a justified reaction to how bawdy behavior may come to infect the average household. Escalus asks the detained bawds, “What was done to Elbow’s wife that he has cause to / complain of? Come me to what was done to her” (*MM*, 2.1.111-112). Pompey’s response is a pun: “Sir, your honor cannot come to that yet” (2.1.113). The play on male ejaculation and Pompey’s suggestion that Escalus wants to hear how Mistress Elbow came to be pregnant for

lewd, self-satisfying reasons underscores the illicit nature of her pregnancy. If the baby were indeed Elbow's, there would be no question about *how* his wife came to be pregnant. The given information (or perhaps what isn't known for certain and must be imagined opens this scene up to a variance of staging possibilities that highlight the wide variety of anxieties that can be represented here. Other bawdy types, like Pompey and Froth who have been arrested, would be responsible for this pregnancy that has been cast onto Elbow.

In his essay, "Shakespeare's Bawdy", Mario DiGangi explores these sexualized figures' place and function in the playwright's work. Again: beyond the real physical threat that is presented by venereal disease, bawdy figures are the personification of social anxieties that are not always fully corporealized. DiGangi writes that the "bawdy can signal anxiety about sexual agencies that are not fully human"; and that, "bawdy in Shakespeare can reach beyond human sexuality to convey the disturbing erotic agency of things" (137, 138). Bawdy figures, as well as the diseases they are associated with, are incredibly active forces, there is no passive infection – like there may be with airborne viruses, for example. For infidelity to take place, for sexually transmitted disease to spread, and (in Mistress Elbow's case) for pregnancy to begin, there must be not only the encroachment of the bawdy upon an individual, but also active engagement on the part of non-bawdy figures. Not only is pregnancy able to be reduced to an affliction in this reading, the resulting illegitimate children are permanent reminders of the scourge of social ills, in the same way that physical disease can leave scars and disfigurement. Unlike scars or resulting disability from certain illnesses, illegitimate children do not signal to the world around them that they are the byproduct of behavior that is punishable by death. Here, the imperceptibility of disease and its outcomes become yet another cause for male fear.

This exchange between three disparate social classes works to demonstrate how the Viennese middle class has been deceived by their ruling class into thinking the poorest people among them are to blame for both the physical sickness circulating through the populace and the societal ills leading to outright social decline. While the poorest in this society, those who spend time with bawds and prostitutes in the city's "underbelly" are indeed exposed to the diseases found in brothels and spread it and are discarded by elites as immoral, it cannot be lost on those working with this play that the members of this subsection of society are just as much victims of an exploitative system as they are anything else. It is the absence of true leadership, the misapplications of power by unthinking political figures, and a willful neglect of pressing issues at hand that truly plagues Vienna, and this is not lost on its citizens.

After discussing Mistress Elbow's pregnancy Pompey launches into a list of nonsense that employs a metaphor about failure to cure disease. He says to the group that if they "be remembered, that such a one and such a one were past / cure of the thing you wot of, unless they kept very good diet" (*MM*, 2.1.105-106). The overarching tone of the short speech is one of annoyance. Pompey is repeating back what he has perceived as nonsensical direction on avoiding disease right back to the bureaucratic body responsible for these instructions, all the while implementing gibberish such as "such a one and such a one" and "you wot of". Pompey offers this "blah blah blah" treatment because he experiences first-hand how the powerful in Vienna have written off actually tending to the nation. In this moment, Shakespeare has framed Pompey as a reasonable character, with a keen awareness of the unfair nature of the world he inhabits and who wants to raise that issue when he shares space with those in power. Speaking for the people – bawds, prostitutes, and other common people – Pompey effectively calls out hypocrisy before Angelo, and the line acts as a sort of response to Elbow's declaration at their entrance. Alongside

Mistress Overdone, Pompey watches the Viennese population dwindle as the grips of different societal ills tighten.

For all the social, personal, public health crises that run through the fabric of this play, characters are slow to offer solution-oriented thinking, but one character who does is the dandyish Lucio and in doing so activates a vocabulary that is concerned with physical positioning that will help further define the link between illicit sexuality, punishment, and disease. When offering advice to Isabella about how to best deal with Angelo's advances, Lucio suggests that she

Give't not o'er so. To him again, entreat him,

Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown.

You are too cold; if you should need a pin,

You could not with more tame a tongue desire it (2.2.45-48).

Lucio's direction employs actions that make Isabella suppliant to Angelo, but I would like to introduce a reading of this sort aside as sexually charged. The operative word that describes Isabella's performance as lacking sexual flair is "cold". While this is a descriptor of demeanor or personal affect, we know that Shakespeare uses descriptors of temperature to, dampness, and texture to describe sexual viability through metaphor. Othello's "hot, hot, and moist" when describing Desdemona's hand is an example (*Othello*, 3.4.45). Like to the Venetian general's concern with his wife's hand, the tactile and its relationship eroticism and disease is what is equally significant in *Measure for Measure*. Lucio encourages physical contact between Isabella as a means to speedily resolve Claudio's legal troubles. Suggesting that she "Kneel" before Angelo and "hang upon his gown", Lucio creates the possibility for staging overt sexuality in this scene. This advice given to Isabella reveals how in Vienna it is easier to capitulate to the

sexual power brokerage being used by Angelo is an easier route to resolution than by typical means. Presented as preparing to take the veil, Isabella is a morally upright character, reluctant to weaponize her sexuality, but she is targeted by those in power as a sexual object. Lucio's suggested solution that she uses hand-to-body touch goes against the expectations of a nun but opens up the dynamic between Isabella and Angelo to the same set of issues that affect Elbow's household.

The idea that touch, particularly manual sexual contact can spread disease similarly to penetrative sex is not a new idea. In "Shakespeare's "Bawdy"", DiGangi discusses some of the foundational framework that exists in English literature for the sensual indicators of the spread of sexual disease. When comparing Robert Burton's quarto on pathologized melancholia, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Thomas Malory's 15th-century re-telling of the Arthurian legend, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, DiGangi suggests that just as "the cooks' bawdy hands in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* spread contaminating matter through touch, Beaumains' bawdy kitchen clothes spread contaminating matter through smell" (141). It should be noted that though the character of regard in *Le Morte D'Arthur* is an olfactory agent of disease, his name translates to "good hands" or "beautiful hands" further linking the movement of contaminants to the tactile. Similarly, in *Measure for Measure*, the sex that characters should not be engaged in becomes the contaminating matter in their relationships. This goes for Angelo using power for sex, the consistently bawdy figures who inhabit brothels, and characters like Lucio who are able to transverse various parts of Viennese society.

In the play, Lucio is figured as offering a middle ground between the average working-class characters represented by Isabella and Claudio and the consistently bawdy figures presented by Mistress Overdone and Pompey. While he may be able to walk freely and offer

advice as a third party to those in distress during the play's action, Lucio is not without his own sexual baggage. At the end of the play, it is demanded that he marry a sex worker whom he has gotten pregnant, Kate Keepdown, in order to make right his illicit actions. As with Mistress Elbow, Shakespeare uses pregnancy here to indicate the danger (and potential permanence) of extramarital sexual relationships. Lucio's status as an active bawd spheres gives him a new claim of credibility in realms of sexual politics. While what is being suggested strips Isabella of much of her agency, Lucio offers a real solution, while motioning for the female protagonist to expose herself to unwelcome sexual vulnerability.

Ultimately: pregnant bodies, betrothed bodies, and sickened bodies are all tied together by this play's concern with policing sexuality and allowing power dynamics to be influenced by sexual desire. *Measure for Measure* falls under the complicated classification as a "problem play". Rightfully so, for a play that juxtaposes sexualized violence, bawdy humor, and a seemingly happy ending. The dark subject matter can make the humor in this play moot; this is certainly one of the plays in Shakespeare's canon that is much more difficult to renegotiate and defend with 21st-century sensibilities. That said, this play still holds comic potential in its foolish characters, while being bound by theatrical conventions that help make this piece of theatre "comic", even when it is not necessarily funny.

Measure for Measure is not a comedy because of slapstick deliveries hidden behind the verse, but because it ends in a marriage and also through the revelation of Viennese ludicrousness to its audience. The play trends towards both Shakespeare's indicators of comic closure, while revealing the Aristotelian ugliness, to which the natural response is laughter. Structurally, the play is a comedy, but the dark content presents a challenge to how genre is defined here. Viewing this play as a comedy takes a bit of mental hoop-jumping, but I would

argue that to situate this play within Shakespeare's broader canon, it must be viewed (at least partially) as an exploration of the pitfalls of sexual relationships. Sex is implicitly related to love, even if this play's concern with sex is about control and nothing else. Comedy should be quite literally a labor of love, and the introduction to Braunmuller and Watson's most recent Arden edition of the play very directly asks whether or not there has ever been such a "sex-obsessed masterpiece that seems less interested in pleasure or romantic love", and in "Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*", Mario DiGangi reasons how "the logic of comedy" ultimately exerts one of the greatest influences on this play (*MM*, 25; DiGangi, 591). The logic being referenced here is the notion in Shakespeare's body of work that at the end of comedies there must be a wedding (or, more likely, multiple weddings). Marriage at the end of this play is simply used as a performative means to an end by Duke Vincentio and by Shakespeare to create the illusion of the restoration of power to Vienna after a journey through its sickened underbelly.

In total, the combination of pregnancy & marriage with the language of disgust and sickness is the embodiment of male anxieties concerning female sexuality in *Measure for Measure*. Pregnancy and marriage are ultimately tools of control and ownership over female bodies in this play. Policing sexuality in *Measure for Measure* becomes synonymous with policing the womanly form. Being married to a man, having to care for a child – this is, without a doubt, a woman's work in *Measure for Measure*'s Vienna – or both become forms of incarceration in this early modern text.

Conclusion

Though they are separated by phases in Shakespeare's career and by the sorts of people that either play wants to deal with, read together, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Measure for Measure*

reveal a need for societies to check their dominant sexual attitudes. Contextually, it must be understood that either of these plays the culture this play was being produced in was not one in which marriage was done for love. Political gain was the major reason for marital union. That point considered, producing these plays in 21st century, where views on sex have shifted, but not necessarily for the better. The same male anxieties and ineffective governance persist, even if the circumstances vary with new technologies and changes in ways of understanding.

Either of these plays exist at the end of a spectrum: in *Romeo and Juliet* there is unchecked sexuality that give rise to the spread of disease, and the overly prescriptive sexual control enacted in *Measure for Measure* leads to the same. Masterfully, Shakespeare has crafted worlds going to the absolute extremes on this scale, and in either case presents a warning about what are repressive attitudes in either case.

In 2021, as the truth of how the world operates continues to be laid bare as it has been this entire century, these plays that reveal truly frightening potentials will find new relevance. The more it is revealed how the structures we are supposed to trust fuel inequity and fear; when crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic are exploited by autocrats to tighten their grips on power and undermine democracy; and when we still live in a world such that violent attacks on women in the United States and the United Kingdom are ignored until they cannot be anymore. Only when violence becomes explosive, people briefly pay attention; as was the case with the recent mass shooting of massage parlors in Atlanta, the killing of Sarah Everard by a British police officer, and the disappearance of Vanessa Guillen from Fort Hood military base in Killeen, Texas.

All of these examples speak to the exploitative sexual systems that these plays force their audiences to reckon with; the last of which with horrific ease. Guillen was only 20 years old, and

while it makes sense, there is something unsettling about ending my undergraduate thesis that is partially concerned with the death of teenagers with the spotlight on the murder of someone whose teenage years just ended. Echoing Schwarz again, there is something completely inescapable about human sexuality, but that is not to say that it cannot be corrected and made to work better. Without violence, attending to pleasure, and framed as an act of love, there is true potential for (no pun intended) sexual healing in the worlds of these plays and in the minds of viewers, even up until this day.

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