"Let Me Have Claudio's Head"
The Beheading of John the Baptist as a Remote Source in *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract   In an attempt to produce a reconstruction of the genealogy of the sources, this essay investigates the relationship between *Measure for Measure* and the *Gospel* of Matthew, examining in particular the possibility that the episode related to Claudio's supposed beheading is somehow associated with the death of John the Baptist, as recorded in Matthew 14:1-12. In Shakespeare as well as in the Evangelist's text, the request for the head is charged with a highly symbolic value: it is a visualization of the triumph, the gift that the instigator makes to his own superiority, a narcissistic gratification. It is an expression of personal affirmation; an acknowledgment of one's own power and of the capacity to make it operative. Doing violence becomes an investigation of one's own political force. It represents the violation of the corpse, the desecration of the *relic*. But it is also an appalling solution to put to rest any possible accusation related to immoral or illicit relationships condemned by the law. Moreover, it is a violent act, secretly perpetrated, with neither moral purposes nor royal warning.

Summary   1 Crime and Punishment; Sentence and Clemency. – 2 Matthew and Shakespeare: the Death of John the Baptist as a *remote source*. – 3 The Differences with Respect to the Sources: *contaminatio* and *complicatio*. – 4 The Substitution: the Head of Ragozine. – 5 "For My Better Satisfaction". – 6 Private Executions. Heads not Belonging to the City. – 7 To Desire to Destroy. Negative Fetishism.

Keywords   Measure for Measure. John the Baptist. Matthew's Gospel. Shakespeare.

1   Crime and Punishment; Sentence and Clemency

Among the most political of Shakespearean plays, *Measure for Measure* was represented at court in the presence of James I on December 26, 1604, the likely year of its composition. The play investigates complex issues ranging from the proper administration of justice to the ethical problems of corruption and the temptations of the flesh, to inadequacy and human inconsistency in matters that bring into play abstract ideals, generically understood, and selfish and pressing personal interests. Conviction and forgiveness, severity and tolerance, sexuality and rationality are therefore interwoven in the play.

The occasion for Shakespeare's exploration comes from the reiteration of a story that had already been narrated by other authors of the sixteenth century. It finds its first written version in a letter in Latin penned in 1547 by the Hungarian student Joseph Macarius and addressed to his patron Georgius Perzenith. 24 years later, the story is revived, and partially modified, by Martin Luther in his *Von Weltlicher Oberkeit* (*On Secular Authority*). Afterwards, the episode will be presented to the public by Giraldi Cinthio and George Whetstone, who will bring several modifications with regard to the original plot.

In the version put on stage by Shakespeare, against the background of a Vienna inclined to vice, Duke Vincentio, pretending to have to leave the city for urgent reasons, delegates control and the administration of justice to Angelo:[1]

> In our remove be thou at full ourself.
> Mortality and mercy in Vienna
> Live in thy tongue and heart.
> (*Measure for Measure* I, i, 43-5)[2]

Appointed to the new role, but trapped in the mazes of a rigid and uncompromising Puritanical moral code, Angelo sentences to death the young Claudio for having slept with Juliet before marrying her.[3]

From a critical point of view, the dramatic articulation presents a comparison between the *Old Testament* statutory scheme – embodied by Angelo, who recovers the biblical teaching of "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (*Exodus* 21:24)[4] and thus the precepts of the rigid and merciless application of the law – and the principle of the *New Testament* that can be summed up in the formula "Let him that is among you without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7), epitomized by the Duke and Escalus who, to quote Marrapodi, embody "the Renaissance, Counter-Reformation view based on mercy and humane understanding of the faults of others, a principle which extols, not weakens, the very nature of authority and kingly power" (2004a, 77). Thus the play investigates the debate between the stance of an unyielding and severe God (the God of fear),

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1   In actual fact Vincentio does not leave the city and, disguised as a monk, oversees the executive and judicial administration of the Deputy, secretly organizing the events that follow.

2   All quotations are taken from Jowett et al. 2005.

3   By so doing, the Deputy recovers, and brings into force, in the Viennese community, an ancient law which had remained for years without an effective application.

4   All quotations of the *Old* and *New Testament* are from the *Geneva Bible*, 1599 edition.

recorded in several passages of the *Old Testament*[5] and brought to the stage by Angelo, and the position of a God that is loving and merciful, but not weak (the God of forgiveness), revealed by the *New Testament* and embodied by the Duke (and Isabella). Retributive justice, an *Old Testament* archetypal concept, according to which to every sin there corresponds a punishment that is equal to the crime committed, is opposed to the *New Testament* approach of merciful justice, grounded on indulgence and on the pardoning of sins.

Consequently, Angelo's strict administration of the law and his extreme severity in Claudio's sentence – inflicted for a deed which, although extramarital, was carried out with mutual love and as a full consensual act – highlight, and condemn, the aberrations of political ideologies based on the precepts of blind intransigence and merciless strictness. Furthermore, the lecherousness of the 'ransom plot' – which the Deputy presents to Isabella, offering to grant amnesty and free her brother provided that she submits to his sexual advances – gives full account of human weakness, remodelling the *Gospel* warning which thoroughly expresses the pitfalls of *sarx*, the allurements of desire: *Spiritus promptus est, caro autem infirma* (Matthew 26:41).[6] The Deputy's sinful fall conveys the hypocrisy and fragility that inform extremist and intolerant attitudes. And the fall is all the more serious because it affects men of high degree and of supposed moral blamelessness who administer the common good.[7]

2   Matthew and Shakespeare: the Death of John the Baptist as a *remote source*

However, the aim of this study is not to anatomize in depth either the symbolic framework or the ethical-moral meanings of the play. In an attempt to produce a reconstruction of the genealogy of the sources, this essay intends to seek the relationship between *Measure for Measure* and the *Gospel* of Matthew, examining in particular the possibility that the episode

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5   The excerpts are numerous: from the *Expulsion from Eden: Genesis* 4-9; to *Genesis* 6:7; to the violence against women and men: *Deuteronomy* 22:20-4; to the death penalty for the blasphemer: *Leviticus* 24:16; to the punishment inflicted on the people of Egypt: *Exodus* 12:29-30; but one also thinks of *Exodus* 21:12-7, or of *Ezekiel* 28:23. It is true, at the same time, that in other passages of the *Old Testament*, God is "slow to anger, and abundant in goodness and truth, Reserving mercy for thousands" (*Exodus* 34:6-7).

6   "The spirit indeed is ready, but the flesh is weak".

7   Dismay, mixed with terror, for the disproportion of the punishment inflicted on Claudio by the seemingly incorruptible Angelo, is highlighted by rough Pompey, servant to Miss Overdone and spokesperson for the common sentiment: "If you head and hang all that offend that way but for ten year together, you'll be glad to give out a commission for more heads" (*Measure for Measure*, II, i, 227-9).

related to Claudio's beheading is somehow associated with the death of John the Baptist, as recorded in Matthew (14:1-12).[8]

In an essay on intertextuality, Robert Miola defines three possible categories of sources subdividing them into 'coincident', 'proximate' and 'remote' (2004, 19 ff.). To the remote sources, in particular, belong those sources and influences which are hard to trace because, being the result of previous readings or suggestions and impressions, they often participate in the author's creative process in an unconscious way:

> The field of possibility here widens to include all that an author previously knew or read: grammar-school texts, classical stories and authors, the Bible, evident in allusions, turns of phrase, or reappropriated motif. The dynamic still consists of reading and remembering, even if the process of recollection and rearticulation occurs in the subconscious mind of the author. (20)

Miola's study, intended as an attempt 'to map out' Shakespeare's intertextual transactions, takes into account notions such as approximations, adumbrations, appropriations or even mediations operated by the author (13). In this regard, the correspondences between Matthew and Shakespeare have already been abundantly enucleated. Wilson Knight in his "'Measure for Measure' and the Gospels" (1930)[9] stressed several Shakespearean allusions to the *New Testament*, with particular reference to the text of Matthew, analyzing in particular, with great accuracy, the "moral nature of man in relation to the crudity of man's justice" in the light of

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8   The episode is also found in Mark (6:17-29): "17 For Herod himself had sent forth, and had taken John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, which was his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 18 For John said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. 19 Therefore Herodias laid wait against him, and would have killed him, but she could not; 20 For Herod feared John, knowing that he *was* a just man, and a holy, and reverenced him, and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. 21 But the time being convenient, when Herod on his birthday made a banquet to his princes and captains, and chief estates of Galilee; 22 And the daughter of the same Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod, and them that sat at table together, the King said unto the maid, Ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it thee. 23 And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, *even* unto the half of my kingdom. 24 So she went forth, and said to her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, John Baptist's head. 25 Then she came in straightway with haste unto the King, and asked, saying, I would that thou shouldest give me even now in a charger the head of John Baptist. 26 Then the King was very sorry, *yet* for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat at table with him, he would not refuse her. 27 And immediately the King sent the hangman, and gave charge that his head should be brought in. So he went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the maid, and the maid gave it to her mother. 29 And when his disciples heard it, they came and took up his body, and put it in a tomb".

9   But the sources of *Measure for Measure* were also investigated, among others, by Lascelles (1953) and by Prouty (1964, 131-45).

the holy postulations (73).[10] It has also been highlighted that the title of the play is directly connected to a passage from Matthew's *Gospel* (73 ff.):

> 1 Judge not, that ye be not judged. 2 For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged, and *with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again*. (Matthew 7:1-2; emphasis added)

But the passages of the Holy Scripture in which it is possible to find similarities with Shakespeare's verses are numerous. Similarities that can be acknowledged, if more proof were needed, as further evidence of Shakespeare's familiarity with the texts recognised as the basis of Christian doctrine.[11] The very theological precept on which the ethical teachings of Christianity is based is echoed several times in Shakespeare's lines. The famous formula that provides the principles and measures of selfless love, uttered by Jesus and reported by all four evangelists: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39),[12] can be identified, for example, with a very similar expression, now reshaped in a deductive, ironic way, in the play of the English dramatist:

> DUKE   Love you the man that wronged you?
> JULIET   Yes, as I love the woman that wronged him.
> (*Measure for Measure,* II, iii, 26-7)[13]

Isabella too, showing a refined rhetoric, relies on a series of biblical references – as well as on a strong ability to argue on theological issues – to change Angelo's mind. Her words are deeply infused with the concept of Christian redemption (Knight 1930, 29):

> ISABELLA   All the souls that were were forfeit once;
> And He that might the vantage best have took

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10   But see also, for example, Marx 2000, 79 ff.

11   Studies on the relationship between the Holy Scripture and Shakespeare are of course innumerable; among the most recent: Shell (2015), Kastan (2014), Cummings (2013), Hamlin (2013), Woods (2013), Boitani (2009), Beauregard (2008), Groves (2007), Marx (2000), but Knight (1967) must necessarily be taken into account, as well as the above-mentioned Knight (1930).

12   One reads the whole passage: "37 Jesus said to him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and the great commandment. 39 And the second is like unto this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hangeth the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). The passage can also be found in: Mark (12:29-31), Luke (10:25-28), and again in Matthew (19:19).

13   The excerpt is used similarly in *Measure for Measure* (V, i, 338).

Found out the remedy. How would you be
If He which is the top of judgment should
But judge you as you are? O, think on that;
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
Like man new made. (II, ii, 75-81)

Later on in the text, the young woman again calls upon the Deputy asking him to wonder about his own sins, and to acknowledge them, thus finding the reasons for granting clemency to Claudio:

Go to your bosom;
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That's like my brother's fault: if it confess
A natural guiltiness such as is his,
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
Against my brother's life. (II, ii, 140-5)

The woman's lines seem to refer directly to the already quoted words of Christ which were recorded by John: "Let him that is among you without sin cast the first stone at her" (John 8:7). The parable, as is known, tells of Jesus' forgiveness for a woman caught in adultery. Yet Isabella's words also strongly refer to Matthew's lines dealing with the propensity to forgive the sins of others: "O evil servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou prayedst me. Oughtest not thou also to have had pity on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?" (Matthew 18:32-3).

Other excerpts from *Measure for Measure* could be assimilated, from a catechetical-Christian point of view, to episodes recorded in the Holy Scripture: references to Matthew (5:14-6)[14] could be found in the well-known passage of the torches lit to give light to others, and not to enlighten themselves (*Measure for Measure*, I, i, 32-5). Moreover, in the play there are also references to man originated from dust, with clear reference to *Genesis* (II, 7): "Thou art not thyself; | For thou exist'st on many a thousand grains | That issue out of dust" (*Measure for Measure*, III, i, 19-21); or even to the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*), "An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!" (*Measure for Measure*, V, i, 405-7), which is in *Genesis* (9:6), *Exodus* (21:23) and in *Leviticus* (14:19).[15]

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14   But the reference is also to Luke (8:16).

15   Another similarity between the Shakespearean text and a passage from the *Gospel* of Luke can be found: according to the Evangelist, Jesus, in an episode related to the death of the Baptist and referring to Herod, used the term "that fox"; one reads in Luke (13:32): "Then said he unto them, 'Go ye and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and will heal still today, and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected'". Likewise, in a scene from *Measure for Measure* when all the characters are gathered at the gates of the city, the Duke

Neither the parallels between Angelo's lascivious desire for the beautiful Isabella, "O, fie, fie, fie! | What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo? | Dost thou desire her foully for those things | That make her good?" (*Measure for Measure* II, ii, 176-9),[16] and the reference to adultery recorded in the famous *Sermon on the Mount,* "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:28),[17] can be forgotten. In this regard, Geoffrey Bullough (1975, 393-5) recognised *De sermone Domini in Monte* – a text written by St. Augustine with clear pedagogical-pastoral aims to comment with meticulousness on the evangelist's words – as a certain Shakespearean source. But, as we have seen, the references to the *Gospel* of Matthew are not limited to what is reported in the teaching given by Christ to his disciples on the mountain near Capernaum.

In sum, previous criticism has unquestionably stated that the scripture of Matthew reached Shakespeare, directly or via St. Augustine. The degree of similarity between the two authors' texts shifts from direct appropriation (one thinks of the title), to evocation, to simple, unconscious, references, highlighting in any case – and this is what matters here – an undeniable legacy. This is not to say that Shakespeare deliberately used Matthew's references to manifest his own opinion about religion or to underpin his theological perspective. The complex question of Shakespeare's faith has already been explored, the investigation revealing its insolvability, the impenetrability of the topic; "the ambiguity of Shakespeare's engagement with religion self-evidently cannot tell us anything certain about his faith" (Wood 2013, 8). We could say, with Kastan, that "religion provides Shakespeare with the fundamental language of value and understanding in the plays, from the beginning of the career through its end. It supplies the vocabulary in which characters understand themselves and are presented to us to be understood" (2014, 6), yet we cannot infer with certainty Shakespeare's own convictions through the holy excerpts which he decided to use and reshape, in light of the fact that "Shakespeare declines to tell us what to believe, or to tell us what he believed" (7).

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asks: "O, poor souls, Come you to seek the lamb here of the fox?" (V, i, 295). The evangelical derivation of the whole play is accurately observed by Alessandro Serpieri, in "Introduzione" (Serpieri 2003): "the reference frame of the play is undoubtedly biblical, and in particular Christian" (27). The translation is mine.

16   And precisely lust, initially opposed by the Deputy of Vienna, is the cause of the depraved request that determines the 'ransom plot': "ANGELO He [Claudio] shall not [die], Isabel, if you give me love" (*Measure for Measure*, II, iv, 144).

17   But in the Shakespearean text (*Measure for Measure*, IV, ii, 2-4) references to the *Letter to the Ephesians* (5:23) can also be found; it is also possible to find parallels between the *Letter of Paul to the Romans* (9:15-18) and *Measure for Measure* (I, ii, 116-7).

3   The Differences with Respect to the Sources: *contaminatio* and *complicatio*

Furthermore, as stated above, the sole aim of this essay is to analyze a different, new, aspect, i.e. the possibility that the Holy Scripture was in some way revived by Shakespeare in particular to elaborate the events related to the beheading of Juliet's betrothed (in reality it never occurred). In other words, the purpose of the essay is to investigate and determine whether the story of John and Salome somehow influenced the drafting of the episode of the decapitation of Claudio.

We have seen that the text of Matthew, among various other works, has been recovered and presented through a reshaping process of themes and motifs integrated, more or less consciously, in *Measure for Measure*'s dramatic magma. Subsequently, this process of *contaminatio* was juxtaposed to that of *complicatio*, i.e. by an elaboration of the original source which is transformed and made new through a skilled use of dramatic variations and thematic adaptations: that is to say by the insertion of situations and events derived from further texts or perhaps directly invented by the author (Marrapodi 2004b, 2).

On this basis, it is useful, for the purposes of this essay, to scrutinize the Shakespearean episode which is the object of this analysis, highlighting any deviations from the primary sources, and identifying the elements that could indicate a possible debt to the Evangelist's text. It must be said, from the outset, that the decapitation episode is listed both in Cinthio's novella V, deca VIII, inserted in *Hecatommiti*, 1565 (then refashioned in the posthumous drama *Epitia*, 1583), and in George Whetstone's play "Promos and Cassandra" (1975), i.e. in the main sources of *Measure for Measure*.[18] As a consequence, Claudio's beheading cannot be considered a Shakespearean invention.

Nevertheless, a number of dissimilarities, of not secondary relevance, should be underlined. In particular, Shakespeare's play differs more from Cinthio's text than from Whetstone's. Also, in the tale of the Italian author, Epitia, the female protagonist, is coarsely and starkly mocked by the Governor, but in this case, after lying with the woman, Iuriste, the

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18   Similarly, the story is also outlined in *Von Weltlicher Oberkeit* (*On Secular Authority*), the text by Martin Luther, published in 1523, which I referred to at the start of this article. In this case too, after the noble had lain with the woman, he orders the beheaded body of her husband to be delivered to her. It must be remembered that the 'ransom plot' also appears in *Philaria*, a Latin text composed in 1556 by Claude Rouillet. Again, the ruler, Severus, having consummated the relationship with Philaria, disregards the deal and puts Hyppolitus, Philaria's husband, to death. Moreover, in 1547, an account of the story was transcribed in a 'Letter' penned by a Hungarian student. On this subject see, among others, Marrapodi 2004. It should be added that Whetstone himself revived the story told in "Promos e Cassandra" in a short tale entitled "An Heptameron of Civil Discourses" (1582).

Governor, sends her her brother's corpse (thereby reneging on their prior agreement). Thus, at least in the novella, it is the whole body (and not only the head) that is consigned to Epitia, with a black cloth to cover the horror. The head of the deceased will be mournfully placed at the foot of the mutilated body:[19]

> Ed egli le rispose […] che a casa il fratello le manderebbe. […] fe' chiamare il prigioniere, e gli disse: vanne alla prigione, e tranne fuori il fratello di questa donna e conduciglielo a casa. Epitia ciò udito piena di molta allegrezza a casa se n'andò, aspettando libero il fratello. Il prigioniere, fatto porre il corpo di Vico sopra la bara, gli mise il capo a' piedi, e copertolo di panno negro andando egli avanti il fe' portare ad Epitia. […] Questo è, disse, il fratel vostro che vi manda il signor governatore, libero dalla prigione. (*Hecatommiti*, deca VIII, novella V)

In the novella, the gruesome mockery is not limited to the amputated part: the pitiful recognition of the brother can also be made through the limbs or the torso, and not only through the face. In this a first difference between the episode of the beheading in Shakespeare and in Cinthio is found.

In addition, determining a further, profound difference with Shakespeare's text, in Cinthio, the body sent to the woman is not that of a substitute, but the brother's real body. Thus Epitia is fully deceived; she will not manage to rescue her brother. Neither pity will be shown to Vico, nor any stratagem will save his life. Later on, having gone through moments of grief and pain, the woman will first organize the burial of the remains and then set about wreaking her revenge.[20]

Dissimilarly, in Whetstone the episode of (just) the head handed to Cassandra, the sister of the young Andrugio sentenced to death, is present. At least as regards this aspect, "Promos and Cassandra" could be considered the 'proximate' source of Shakespeare's play. But even in this case some profound differences with respect to *Measure for Measure* could be detected. Let's proceed in order.

Unlike what happens in Cinthio's novella, in "Promos and Cassandra" the head delivered to Cassandra is not that of her brother, imprisoned for lust, but the 'mangled' and unrecognizable head of a recluse who had recently died: "a dead mans head, that suffered th'other day" (IV, v). In the long soliloquy that ends the second scene of act IV, Promos, having enjoyed Cassandra, reveals his nefarious plan to order the beheading of Andrugio

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[19] Walter Moretti underlines that "In the staged version of Epitia's story, proposed by Giraldi himself […], the 'happy ending' of the novel was assured by the expedient of replacing Vico's head with that of a convict (as, indeed, in Shakespeare's play)" (1992, 23).

[20] In actual fact, once the death penalty is inflicted on Iuriste, Epitia herself will plead for mercy with the Emperor, thus obtaining clemency for the Deputy.

and the will to have the man's head conveyed to the woman:

> I will to the Gayler sende | That secretelie Andrugio he behead, | Whose head he shall, with these same | wordes commend "To Cassandra, as Promos promist thee, | From prison loe, he sendes thy Brother free". (IV, ii)

Yet the jailer, noble in spirit, filled with compassion, will save Andrugio by making a pitiful replacement and hiding the young convict in the woods. The same Andrugio, in the fifth act of the second part of the story, will relate the facts to the king, thus leading the text towards the conclusion:

> When I should dye, the Gayler mov'd to ruth, | Declared to mee, what Promos pleasure was; | Amazde whereat, I tolde him all the tru-eth, | What betwene Cassandra and him dyd passe. | He much agriev'd Lord Promos guylt to heare, | Was verie lothe, mee (wofull man) to harme; | At length, just God, to set me (wretched) cleare, | With this defence, his wylling minde did arme. | Two dayes afore, to death, were divers done, | For severall faultes, by them committed; | So that of them, he tooke the heade from one, | And so to Cassandra, the same presented, | Affirming it, to be her brothers head. | Which done, by night, he sent me post away (V, v)

Ergo, the replacement of the head is present both in Whetstone's text and in Shakespeare's. Notwithstanding this, it is still possible to find some differences between the events narrated in the two plays. In *Measure for Measure*, the severed head sent to Angelo presents traits that are unaltered and merely similar to those of Claudio;[21] in the text by Whetstone, instead, the severed head has lost its original features and looks like a tumefied and disfigured mass (cf. Lever 1967, xli).

If Shakespeare, as we shall see, finds an expedient to hand over to Angelo a head similar to that of Isabella's brother, Whetstone will hastily solve the issue of resemblance deforming the somatic traits of the head delivered to Cassandra.[22] Proof of this is the fact that the woman, imposing on herself an imperturbable demeanour, first asks the jailer to thank Promos for the macabre delivery "I thank him yet, he would vouchsafe on me, my brothers head"; then, when she is left alone, she will mourn her brother's fate without becoming aware of the substitution: "Andrugio, let mee kis

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21   The same thing happens in Cinthio's novella, but in this case the deformation of facial features is not necessary: the head delivered to Epitia is precisely that of her brother.

22   Cassandra will be deceived by the jailer who will send her the head of a man who has features similar to those of Andrugio; the face will therefore be deformed before being delivered.

thy lippes" (IV, iv). The woman will accept the devastation of the face as a result of torture or offenses against the person and will never doubt the authenticity of the head, now unrecognizable. Thus, in Whetstone, the swelling and deformation of the features are a subterfuge necessary to the replacement and therefore to the success of the stratagem conceived for the happy ending. Conversely, in Shakespeare the head delivered to Angelo will not present signs of violence or bruising but will simply look like Claudio's. In this it is possible to find a first departure from Whetstone's work.

In sum, Shakespeare seems to have intentionally avoided the slavish repetition of the story as it was proposed by the two predecessors. And the issue of identifying the major sources is important just to have cognizance of the changes made with respect to them, to assess the extent and quality of the changes and, where possible, to try to trace the reasons for them.

What has been said so far highlights the differences between the episode in Shakespeare and the main sources of *Measure for Measure*, with the observation that it is unlikely that Shakespeare, writing of the story of the beheading of Claudio, was inspired exclusively by Cinthio and Whetstone; yet this does not demonstrate proximity to Matthew's text. For this, further considerations are required.

4   The Substitution: the Head of Ragozine

It must be immediately observed that, in Shakespeare's text, before Angelo's death sentence is carried out, there comes the unexpected, and appropriate, expedient of the 'double exchange' of Claudio's substitute whose head is to be cut off. It has already been remarked that the episode of the substitution is completely absent in Cinthio's novella, while in Whetstone's play the replacement is made only once. Conversely, in *Measure for Measure,* with an unforeseen change with respect to the plan devised by the Duke to save the young convict – "Let this Barnardine | be this morning executed and his head born to Angelo" (IV, ii, 172-3) – in addition to Claudio's head, Shakespeare also decides to save Barnardine's head, replacing it with that of a pirate who died in prison:

> PROVOST   Here in the prison, father,
> There died this morning of a cruel fever
> One Ragozine, a most notorious pirate. (IV, iii, 66-8)

The angle that suggests a voluntary Shakespearean deviation, a clear example of *complicatio* of the source, is that following the example of "Promos and Cassandra" the story would likewise have found a happy ending: it would have indeed been enough to deliver to Angelo the 'mangled' head of a detainee who had just died that the young woman could

not have recognized (or disowned) precisely because of the swelling of the face.**23** In *Measure for Measure*, as in Whetstone's text, the features of the first substitute were different from those of the convict. The diversity of appearance and colours could possibly have compromised the success of the plan hatched by the Duke, also putting the Provost's life in danger:

> PROVOST   Angelo hath seen them both, and will discover the favour. (IV, ii, 174)

Yet shaving and dyeing Barnardine's head before handing over the battered head to Angelo, trusting also in the ability of violent death to alter the features, could have obviated (perhaps with some risk) the slight resemblance with Isabella's brother. As the Duke properly declares:

> DUKE VINCENTIO   O, death's a great disguiser; and you may add to it.
> Shave the head, and tie the beard; and say it was
> the desire of the penitent to be so bared before his
> death: you know the course is common. (IV, ii, 175-8)

Actually, in the play, suddenly "an accident that heaven provides" (IV, iii, 74) intervenes. Through a superior will, through chance, which finds its origin in a Shakespearean specific purpose, a pirate with features similar to those of Claudio dies in prison "of a cruel fever":

> PROVOST   One Ragozine, [...]
> A man of Claudio's years; his beard and head
> Just of his colour. What if we do omit
> This reprobate till he were well inclined;
> And satisfy the deputy with the visage
> Of Ragozine, more like to Claudio? (IV, iii, 67-72)

A new replacement is coming into view in the so far undefined path of the play. The substitution of the man to be beheaded becomes twofold: 1. Claudio → Barnardine; 2. Barnardine → Ragozine, so defining a further difference from "Promos and Cassandra". It goes without saying, that the

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23   It is hardly necessary to observe that this replacement makes *Measure for Measure* a perfect comedy, or rather a perfect 'dark comedy', in line with the precepts of the *tragedia di fin lieto* developed, not by chance, by Cinthio: the Shakespearean double substitution permits, indeed, every tragic killing (including that of the sinner Barnardine) to be avoided. As is known, the head sent to Angelo belongs to Ragozine: a pirate who dies in his cell.

trick is perfectly suited to the dramatic project.[24] Ragozine's substitution completes the path of clemency that informs the whole play: the action of sparing Barnardine's life *de facto* permits the remission of the Bohemian dissolute prisoner's earthly faults operated by the Duke in the last scene. Moreover, before the play ends, Barnardine himself is entrusted to Friar Peter "for better times to come" (*Measure for Measure*, V, i, 483), thus enforcing the lenient religious-political tone that characterizes the play. Hence, the double Shakespearean exchange, on the one hand, fully provides the similarity between the man whose head will be severed and Claudio,[25] while, on the other, it allows the drama to achieve a conclusion in which justice is combined with forgiveness. This ascertained, the investigation proceeds.

5   "For My Better Satisfaction"

To find significant traces of contiguity between *Measure for Measure* and the story of the saint another difference with respect to the two main sources must be noticed. The variation is simple to state: in neither works used by Shakespeare to draw inspiration for his play is the head of the convict 'solicited' by the Governor (or by the Deputy), nor is he ever given it. Iuriste, the alter ego of Angelo in the version of Cinthio, does not order

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24   It would also have been possible that the Duke confided to Isabella the deception of the exchange of heads plotted against Angelo to resolve the issue. Yet, as a matter of fact, Shakespeare preferred to deceive even the young virgin in order to reach a greater effect in the final scene. The misleading words of the Duke, perhaps tinged with cynical sadism, are surely intended for the perfect *coup de théâtre* of the last act: "DUKE He [Angelo] hath released him, Isabel, from the world: | His head is off and sent to Angelo" (IV, iii, 112-3).

25   But what are Ragozine's features? The text communicates only that the pirate has hair and a beard of the same colour as those of Claudio and that he is of the same age. The characteristics of Ragozine's face (and therefore Claudio's) seem to recall those of John the Baptist: a beard and a young age. Claudio's green age (and therefore Ragozine's) can be inferred from the list of the *dramatis personae* which says "a young Gentleman" referring to Isabella's brother. And, according to the *Gospels*, young age is an attribute also of the Baptist: John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (then Jesus' cousin), was born just six months before the birth of Christ. Consequently, at the time of the decapitation, the preacher could not have been more than thirty-three years old. But, obviously, this is not enough to determine a real proximity between the holy text and the beheading enacted by Shakespeare: one could argue that the similarities cannot be ascertained, or that the colour of Claudio-Ragozine's and John's beard and hair could be, at least in theory, different. In sum, the question of whether Ragozine's face recalls that of the Baptist cannot be resolved, nor is the confirmation of a physical resemblance really needed to prove the thesis of this paper. Yet the comparison in not completely fruitless: if it does not reveal a certain likeness, it demonstrates the 'possibility' of a resemblance, or at least it reveals that the features are not totally dissimilar. Moreover, the question of the severed head's features could be of some interest to point out the expedients and the precautions that should be put on stage to make the action coherent.

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the severed head of the detainee to be brought to him as proof of death; rather he gives the order "to bring the brother to his sister".[26] The same thing happens in "Promos and Cassandra": the head is not sent to Promos (the governor in Whetstone's text) as proof that the decapitation has taken place, but is sent to Cassandra as a violent expression of the breaking of the previous agreement. Both Epitia and Cassandra, who gave themselves to the Governors in their respective plays to obtain the grace of the brother, are taken by surprise (and, probably, by disenchantment and repugnance) by the arrival of the grisly remains. Yet neither in Cinthio nor in Whetstone is the horrible residue requested by the instigators of the execution. For their part, not the slightest interest is shown in the disengaged head.

In Shakespeare, instead, the head of Claudio is expressly required by Angelo (*Measure for Measure*, IV, ii, 124-5). The dramatic expedient of the severed head to be given to prove that the decapitation has happened is therefore an autonomous invention with respect to the main sources: it is an exclusively Shakespearean variation.[27] Let us analyze how events unfold.

When everything seems to be going according to the plan of Vincentio, instead of the grace for Claudio which the disguised Duke was expecting, the intimation arrives to put the young man to death, with the simultaneous request of the head to be received. One reads in Act IV:

> PROVOST   [*Reading the letter*] Whatsoever you may hear to the
>   contrary,
> let Claudio be executed by four of the clock; and in the
> afternoon Barnardine. *For my better satisfaction*, let me
> have Claudio's head sent me by five. Let this be duly performed […].
> (IV, ii, 122-5; emphasis added)

The order is peremptory: Angelo wants the young man's head as evidence of the beheading. Nor should we disregard the scrupulousness with which Angelo wants to verify that his commands are executed. The jailer receives an untypical solicitation: the death order is presented by the Deputy with unusual, worried pertinacity, as the recipient of the message will remind us:

> PROVOST   Lord Angelo, belike thinking me
> remiss in mine office, awakens me with this unwonted
> putting-on; methinks strangely, for he hath not used
> it before. (IV, ii, 117-20)

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26   Of great interest are the considerations presented by Walter Moretti (1992) in "La novella di Epitia e *Measure for Measure*".

27   Among the other differences with respect to the main sources it is worth mentioning the inclusion of the character of Mariana and the 'bed-trick' innovation, which allows Isabella to remain chaste and to receive the marriage proposal from the Duke.

The desire for possession is rooted in Angelo, to the point of urging the gaoler and reminding him of his duty of obedience. If the expedient of saving the brother through the exchange of heads may, then, have been taken from Whetstone, the episode of the request for the severed head seems to be one of Shakespeare's innovations, and it cannot be excluded that the scene is to be considered as a *variatio* derived from the story of John the Baptist. As is known, during the banquet held for the King's birthday, in which "princes and captains, and chief estates of Galilee" were invited (Mark 6:21), Salome danced for the sovereign, fascinating him. To reward her, Herod, the king of Judea, made public promise to fulfil one of her wishes. After consulting with her mother, Herodias, Salome formulates her request to Herod: she wanted the head of the saint, kept for some time in prison,[28] to be delivered on a silver plate. Immediately afterwards, the girl gives the head to her mother. One reads in Matthew:

> 6 when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. 7 Wherefore he promised with an oath, that he would give her whatsoever she would ask. 8 And she being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a platter. 9 And the King was sorry. Nevertheless, because of the oath, and them that sat with him at the table, he commanded it to be given *her*, 10 And sent, and beheaded John in the prison. 11 And his head was brought in a platter, and given to the maid, and she brought it unto her mother. (Matthew 14:6-11)

The element that must be taken into critical account is how, both in the holy text and in Shakespeare, the severed head is explicitly requested: now by Salome (on behalf of Herodias): "Give me here John Baptist's head in a platter"; now by Angelo: "let me have Claudio's head sent me by five". As we shall see, in both cases, the head severed from the body, going beyond the quality of testimonial evidence, becomes an element of private satisfaction.

Even the reasons for the request could be assimilated. Herodias will have her personal desire for revenge against John, harboured for a long time because of the Baptist's allegations, finally satisfied. The woman, it should be noted, had called for the death of John to silence his criticisms about her illegitimate relationship with the king: Herodias was in fact already married to Herod's brother (Herod Philip I), and marriage with a sister-in-law was expressly forbidden by the Mosaic Law. Besides, Herod too was already married. Hence the attacks of the saint:

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28   In all probability, John was imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, on the southern edge of Perea, a territory in which John had professed and preached throughout most of his life.

3 For Herod had taken John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. 4 For John said unto him, It is not lawful for thee to have her. (Matthew 14:3-4)[29]

Similarly, Angelo will demand the head of Claudio to be sure that no one is aware of his illicit relationship with Isabella and of his wicked proposal. Moreover, in the near future, the young brother might even take revenge for being forced to live in infamy, saved thanks to an act of lust obtained by fraud:

ANGELO   He should have lived,
Save that riotous youth, with dangerous sense,
Might in the times to come have ta'en revenge,
By so receiving a dishonour'd life
With ransom of such shame. (IV, iv, 27-31)

Debauchery is as widespread in Angelo's 'palace' as it is deep-rooted in the royal court of Galilee, and the same men deputed to amend licentiousness, enforcing the law by ensuring obedience to it, are trapped in the depravity they were supposed to eliminate. Both rulers are, or will be, forced to face shameful attacks regarding their moral conduct. As this implies, Herodias' desire to see his enemy deceased is analogous to Angelo's and is now dramatically addressed to him. Both are nourishing a similar entrenched resentment towards the two convicts. The deaths of Claudio and the Baptist are necessary, appalling solutions to put to rest any possible accusation related to immoral or illicit relationships condemned by the law.

But there is more. Like Herodias, Angelo asks for the head of the prisoner "for my better satisfaction". In addition to the pleasure received from the possession of Isabella (or at least from what he considered such), the Deputy demands further satisfaction, thus failing to fulfil the contract stipulated with the woman.[30] Precisely in the emotional perversion that accompanies the delivery of the outraged remains – experienced as a moment of complacency, as well as a form of personal release – it is possible to trace a fundamental affinity between the holy text and Shakespeare's play. It is worth noticing that this kind of intimate satisfaction, at the same time perverse and disdainful, is absent in the other texts that inspired the Shakespearean play. Both Promos and Iuriste fully satisfy their cynicism in the consummation of the sexual act with the deceived young woman.

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29   The passage is also presented in Mark (6:17-18).

30   It should be noted, then, that Angelo had already failed to keep his promise breaking the wedding promise to Mariana (III, i, 202-22). Therefore, though well orchestrated, the Duke's plan to trust the Deputy again might be considered imprudent.

Neither of them manifests the intention of receiving additional smugness from the vision of the executed man's mutilated body. Their complacency does not go beyond the outrage exerted on the woman. Among the texts that most influenced the drafting of *Measure for Measure*, the *Gospel* of Matthew, in which the story of John the Baptist is obviously present, is the only one in which the explicit request for the severed head of a protagonist sentenced to death is shown.

As in Matthew, in Shakespeare too, following the directions of juridically and socially superior authorities, the head will be prepared and sent to the person who had commissioned the merciless act. And it is of no importance that the head delivered in *Measure for Measure* is not the one required, and that a scam hatched against Angelo to save Claudio is underway. What should be noted is that the similarities between the two events are evident, at least in this point. In a way, the dramatic role of the Duke itself can be considered, obviously *mutatis mutandis*, comparable to that of Herod. Like the king of Judea, the Governor of Vienna, still in disguise, asks the jailer to send the mortal remains to the person who requested them, i.e. Angelo:

> DUKE   Quick, dispatch, and send the head to Angelo. (IV, iii, 89)

Similarly, Herod will deliver the Saint's head on a silver platter to the young Salome who demanded it as a token to give to her mother (cf. Matthew 14:9-11). In both cases, the order will be executed promptly:

> PROVOST   Here is the head; I'll carry it myself. (IV, iii, 98)

Like Herodias, Angelo will wait for the remnants in his rooms, enjoying the macabre sight.

6   Private Executions. Heads not Belonging to the City

A further consideration should be added. In neither of the cases is there a public execution, performed in an open area of the city. The beheadings are organized and put into practice in the hidden space of a dungeon: in a secret zone out of sight. It is worth saying that beheading as a form of capital punishment was very common in both Elizabethan and Jacobean times.[31] And it was commonly charged with a high paradigmatic-didactic

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31   Even though the plot is set in Vienna, the play is conceived and written to be performed in England, thus Shakespeare, who surely was aware of the institutional practice of exhibiting the severed heads to the community, may have used this traditional custom in his play confident that the audience would recognize it as a well-established procedure. Indeed, in

value: it was offered to the city as admonition and reprimand:[32] a kind of political propaganda deliberately exhibited as evidence of the king's surveillance and control over the municipal life. There is a wealth of testimony to displacement, in central places, of heads stuck on pikes and tarred to preserve them from the action of the weather:

> The heads of executed criminals were exhibited in centralized places – London Bridge, Westminster Hall, the Tower of London […] or at the boundaries of cities, on gates, bridges and walls. Dead body parts announced the crime, as well as humiliating the criminal. […] Heads were preserved so that they could be displayed for as long as possible. […] traitors' heads were coated in tar or parboiled to slow the rot […]. For more than three hundred years, from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, there was a Keeper of the Heads who lived in the gatehouse on London Bridge, and whose job it was to arrange traitors' heads […] to their best effect. (Larson 2014, 90-1)

The exposed head, as Regina Janes states, "models the sovereign's power over the living, warned, terrorized […]. That head fulfils the sovereign's responsibility for order and peace to the people, and belongs to them as much as to him. The claim on the symbolic preserves behaviours that would otherwise be condemned" (2005, 18).[33] It is self-evident that if heads-on-the-bridge are symbolic proof of injustice persecuted, conversely, heads-privately-cut-off have a deeply cruel, malicious meaning, standing for a violent act, secretly perpetrated, with neither moral purposes nor royal warning. Claudio and John are put to death[34] on the boundary of merciless justice, carried out for the realization of private, unrevealed objectives. Hence, the remnants of the beheadings have no need to be shown off. The expositions would not have been welcomed by the community which could have judged them as pitiless and against popular sentiment. On

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2 Henry VI, the heads of Lord Say and Sir James Cromer are brought on stage stuck on two poles and then exhibited in the streets (cf. *2 Henry VI*, IV, viii, 92-154).

32   Most of the beheadings took place at the Tower of London or on Tower Hill, as public executions; obviously there were exceptions (usually for women): see, for example, the decapitation of Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, on May 28th 1541; of Anne Boleyn, on May 19th 1536; of Catherine Howard, on February 13th 1542; of Lady Jane Grey, on February 15th 1554, privately carried out, or at least in front of a small group of people. But for these private beheadings there was a reason: "The sight of a woman having her head hacked off, with all the goriness which this entailed, was thought likely to provoke sympathy for the victim, no matter what she had done" (Webb 2011, 18). On February 25th 1601 also Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, was beheaded privately (on his own request).

33   Also of great interest is Stahl 1986.

34   In reality, as is known, Claudio's death is only supposed.

the contrary, they need to be covered with silent watchfulness, and tacit approval.[35] The reason is that while heads exposed in local places glorify the King's power, stressing his strength and his mastery in administering justice, mortifying the victims,[36] in the case of Angelo and of Herod, the heads secretly cut off and never given to the public gaze shame them. Both private beheadings are indeed a strong testimony to Angelo and Herod's awareness of the wicked, unpopular value of their death sentences.

Moreover, if the severed heads of the executed belonged to the people as well as to the sovereign, in the case of John and Ragozine, the heads could not be considered a 'property' of the city, neither in a physical nor in a metaphorical sense. They are not exhibited as a civic, open reprimand,[37] as part of a teaching, moralizing process. Both heads will just be part of a personal, macabre memory, conveying the idea of a monopoly of violence, of a sole control over the victims. No longer is the punishment addressed to the public; it is now an end in itself. In so doing, the very function of the ruler, as a disinterested and loyal governor of the country, is lost.

7 To Desire to Destroy. Negative Fetishism

Hence the possession of the head is given as a dynamic of control and as an enemy's submission. The need to receive the severed head is an expression of personal affirmation; an acknowledgment of one's own power and of the capacity to make it operative. The need to directly verify the execution of the order refers to both the sense of pleasure that comes from receiving effective feedback to one's own will, and to the sadistic enjoyment arising from the subjection of the antagonist. Doing violence becomes an investigation of one's own political force.

Set in this context, the request for the head is charged with a highly symbolic value: it is a visualization of the triumph, the gift that the instigator makes to his own superiority, a narcissistic gratification. But at the

35   Neither Herod's guests nor Shakespeare's Provost would dare to overtly condemn the order given by the instigator. The jailer himself, in *Measure for Measure*, asks for evidence and guarantees to secretly disregard Angelo's will – he himself trembling for his own life – and so the Friar (the disguised Duke) will show him a letter with the seal of the Duke (IV, ii, 155-95).

36   In this case, the use of the verb 'mortify' is not a chance one, the verb deriving from late Latin *mortificāre*: 'to cause death', 'to put to death', or 'to subdue (the flesh)'; from Latin *mors* (death) and *facĕre* (to make). For further information, see also Hoad 2003.

37   According to the *Gospels*, the Baptist's body was buried by Jesus' apostles: "And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus" (Matthew, 14:12). Thus, neither John's head was exposed as a warning nor was it given to the public for adoration (how could it be possible, Christian religion not being officially spread and recognized yet?).

same time it represents the violation of the corpse, the desecration of the 'relic', the outrage on the individual that others have loved more than their own person.[38] It is a negative fetishism, a negation of idolatry. The request for possession is activated not out of fanatical adoration but out of revenge. The delivery of the head does not assume either a consecratory or worshipping value, it does not coincide with the beginning of a cult for an object considered charged with mystical meanings, but it is given as a mortification of the rival. The reception of the severed head is the final step in the path of socio-political annulment of the other considered as a menace to the preservation of personal supposed moral integrity, and to the maintenance of power.[39]

The act of delivery consecrates a phenomenology of horror. It reveals an insane tendency towards an ethical subjectivism, and therefore towards a process that lets behavioural rules correspond to individual purposes. The satisfaction that comes from the observation of the macabre remains complies with the aberrations of a diverted justice. It is the expression of a perversion related to the exercise of power; an affirmation of greatness.[40] The vision of the horror coincides with a moment of unspoken pleasure: the motionless, sacrificed, mutilated body awakens an intimate, never uttered, excitement.

The deaths of John and Claudio (the latter only supposed) represent the primacy of a passionate and violent impetus aimed at an egotistical self-realization. But those deaths also represent a suppression of the truth, or rather the elimination of any aspect that could give voice to the truth. For this reason, at the same time, they represent the wrong which needs repair, injustice waiting to be punished. And, while the redemption for the story of John the Baptist will be consigned to the judgment of God, the redemption of the wrong suffered by Claudio (and Isabella) is consigned to the fully earthly reality of the city of Vienna:

ISABELLA   Justice, O royal Duke! (V, i, 20)[41]

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38   In Angelo's eyes, Isabella is prepared to sacrifice her body to save her brother.

39   The process of annulment being commenced with the imprisonments of the two men.

40   In *Discipline and Punish* – originally published in France as *Surveiller et punir* (1975) – Michel Foucault points out how in some cases crime "reveals the monstrousness of the strong and powerful", becoming "the exclusive privilege of those who are really great" (1977, 68-9).

41   With these words Isabella will plead for justice: "ISABELLA Justice, O royal Duke! Vail your regard | Upon a wronged, – I would fain have said, a maid. | O worthy prince, dishonour not your eye | By throwing it on any other object | Till you have heard me in my true complaint | And given me justice, justice, justice, justice!" (V, i, 20-5).

Not so much the act of beheading must be owed to Matthew, but the procedures of the decapitation and delivery of the severed head and, above all, the wicked satisfaction felt by the Deputy on receiving the cranium of the condemned man. Obviously, the personal events regarding Claudio and the Baptist's lives cannot be superimposed (how could they be?). Nor do I wish to say here, it is worth emphasizing, that Shakespeare intended to slavishly reproduce the *Gospel* passage. Instead, the fact is to be considered that, having to write about an act of beheading, and deciding to deviate from the sources, Shakespeare drew inspiration (also) from the episode narrated in Matthew's text, that critics have already recognized as a source of the play. Thus, it is in some way possible that Shakespeare operated a sort of 'mythic transformation', turning biblical conventional episodes into literal prototypes of a secularized society. As Debora Shuger has painstakingly highlighted, the renewal of biblical features, the renegotiation of the mythical element in terms of dramatic production, were not uncommon to Elizabethan writers:

> mythic transformations were possible because in Renaissance practice the biblical narratives retained a certain (if limited) flexibility: not necessarily a theological flexibility but a sort of extra-dogmatic surplus of undetermined meanings – or rather meaning capable of being determined in various ways. (1994, 5)[42]

Yet, encroachments in sacred territory, translations of New or *Old Testament* in the Elizabethan plots were not necessarily indicators of specific theological intentions or of doctrinal messages surreptitiously conveyed to the audience by the author. Most likely they were a secularized repositioning of epic-biblical material, that is to say of the numerous religious cultural features which the Elizabethan community was imbued with, also considering the massive circulation of holy texts in Shakespeare's England.[43]

The process of secularization that affected Elizabethan culture was long-lasting: necessarily, the texts produced in those years shared, in their interstices, either reconstructions (or reshapings) of religious episodes, or aspects of religious patterns, not to mention echoes of biblical speeches. In a way, the Shakespearean stage-world also remained linked to previous performances in which the dialogical context re-proposed scriptural, archetypical models. But, possibly, Shakespeare's use of biblical-allegorical patterns, as well as his reshaped use of biblical references, were functional

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42 But one reads also Greenblatt 1980, 1991.

43 As Kastan states: "what is everywhere evident is Shakespeare's awareness of the inescapability of religion in his England" (2014, 7).

to the didactic and moral purposes entrusted to the modern stage (for further information, cf. Leone 2016). They fitted more with the dramatic-educational project that underpinned Renaissance theatre than with a path of encoded Catholicism detectable through the parallels between the holy excerpts and the dramatist's lines. To this extent, it is in some way possible, as Alison Shell points out, that Shakespeare "treated all religions, including the Christian doctrine of his time, as subservient to artistic unity and closure" (2015, 235).**⁴⁴**

Measure for Measure is given to the public as a secular drama in which holy promptings and evangelical loans are certainly present, but set in a civic environment, in the ordinariness of a corrupt Vienna. The plot is undoubtedly infused with a religious atmosphere, the Bible's moral features, its ethical and principled purposes are unquestionably incorporated, yet the play delves into the analysis of a fully human society, depicting the decline of human nature when guided by obtuse and repressed lechery, also presenting the risks related to the inconsiderate use of an intransigent law. The ethical, religious insights, the symbolic references to the *Gospels*, the lenient atmosphere of the last scene are pigeonholed in Shakespeare's dramatic pattern in which the character is turned into a legal subject called to account for his conduct not only to God but especially to a civilized society governed by specific legal rules intended to protect the dignity and honour of every member (Leone 2016, 13). On stage there is presented the tragic, wholly earthly, struggle between aspirations to virtue and tangible mediocrity of those who are called to administer the common good (13). In this exemplar, theatrical scheme, Christian precepts, biblical parables are necessarily considered as prototypical models to refer to.

The Shakespearean differences with regard to the texts of Cinthio and Whetstone can be considered as a resolute intention to diverge from the works of the authors who had preceded him; to change the emotional landscape in which to place the *new* story of Claudio, proposing different dramatic details, introducing significant variations. The double substitution of the man whose head is to be cut off, the delay in the execution of Barnardine,**⁴⁵** but in particular the request for the severed head made by the instigator, the procedure of the *private* beheading, and the consequential complacency gained, suggest that Shakespeare can possibly have drawn from the episode of the Baptist the changes he intended to offer the Elizabethan audience, without attributing to those changes any definite conceptual value. They could be considered as simple loans, presumed to

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44 Also of great interest are Boitani's reflections on Shakespeare's immanent *Gospel*, considered, *mutatis mutandis*, a symmetrical, earthly remodeling of the transcendental one (cf. Boitani 2009).

45 Another significant parallel with the Holy Scripture can be found in the time that passes before the decapitation of the dissolute Barnardine, "a Bohemian born [...] that is a prisoner

be useful to the dramatic construction; expedients to obtain diversification from the source path; a further testimony to Shakespearean attention to a play that acutely investigates the complex fragility and vulnerability of the human being.

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nine years old" (IV, ii, 1, 131-2) is finally carried out. Strangely, the execution of Barnardine is continually postponed until it coincides with the execution of Claudio ("to-morrow morning are to die Claudio and Barnardine", IV, ii, 6). Hence, according to the original plan contrived to deceive the Deputy, Barnardine should have been beheaded instead of Claudio. And the postponement of the Bohemian detainee's execution is the result of persistent pressure exerted by the prisoner's friends, and of the deferment conceded by the Duke:

> DUKE VINCENTIO   How came it that the absent Duke had not either
> delivered him to his liberty or executed him? I
> have heard it was ever his manner to do so.
> PROVOST   His friends still wrought reprieves for him: and
> indeed, his fact, till now in the government of Lord
> Angelo, came not to an undoubtful proof. (IV, ii, 134-9)

Similarly, the Holy Scripture reports that the execution of John the Baptist is constantly postponed by Herod, who, on the one hand recognizes John's qualities, while on the other he greatly fears the people's reaction to the possible death of the prophet. One reads in Matthew: "And when he [Herod] would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a Prophet" (Matthew 14:5). The Baptist then remains in jail for a long time, in the fortress of Machaerus, just as the Bohemian remains in his Viennese prison for a long time. Thus, not only the waiting times for the execution of Barnardine's sentence seems to refer to that of the Baptist, but in a sense also the reasons for the deferral of the capital punishment: "His friends still wrought reprieves for him" (IV, ii,137) the Provost will answer the question formulated by the disguised Duke who enquires about the reason for the delay of Barnadine's execution. And if in case of the story narrated in the *Gospels* the continual postponement of the date of the Baptist's death finds its reasons in the historical and religious context in which the event happened, in Shakespeare this delay is the result of a deliberate choice: indeed the scene could have been expunged from the text without producing consequences. It would have been sufficient to proceed directly with the replacement of Claudio's head with that of Ragozine, the pirate who died in prison whose head will in the end be cut off and sent to Angelo.

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