

**“Yet though he should kill us, we will speak the truth to him”:
Freedom of Conscience in
Thomas Helwys’s *A Short Declaration of The Mystery of Iniquity* and Shakespeare’s
*Measure for Measure***

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The year 1612 was a terrifying time to be a vocal religious dissenter in London. Within a matter of months, both Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman were burned at the stake for heresy by order of King James I.¹ When his burning began, Wightman apparently lost heart and recanted his views. Weeks after being released, however, he denied his recantation, and so he faced public execution for a second time. This time, there was no escape:

[Wightman] was carried again to the stake, where feeling the heat of the fire again would have recanted, but for all his crying, the sheriff . . . commanded faggots to be set to him, where roaring he was burned to ashes.²

Wightman’s death followed Legate’s which took place in a similar fashion only three weeks earlier. King James took a personal interest in both men’s cases, in keeping with his emphatic

I wish to thank my husband, Alan Nelson, and my father, Dr. Paul Stripling, for their numerous insights on this project.

¹ Edward Wightman has been labeled by some as a madman for his unconventional views of the Trinity while others have characterized him as a precursor to Baptists because of his opposition to infant baptism. See Joseph Iviney, *A History of English Baptists*, 4 vols. (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1811). Bartholomew Legate was deemed a heretic “for Arianism, preaching that Jesus was a ‘meere man’” (Richard Groves, introduction to *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, by Thomas Helwys, ed. Richard Groves (New York: Mercer University Press, 1998), xviii).

² *Newsletters from the Archpresbyterate of George Birkhead*, ed. Michael C. Questier, Camden Fifth Series, vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153. (I have modernized the spelling and punctuation of this quotation).

belief that he was responsible for his subjects' "souls and bodies."³ James viewed his roles as a religious and governmental leader as being inextricably bound. Therefore, before Legate was burned at Smithfield, James personally questioned him, attempting to sway him from his heretical beliefs. Such an interrogation was a significant part of what James believed was his "personal role in the work of conversion."⁴ Legate, however, would not be persuaded by the king, and shortly thereafter suffered a horrific death by burning.

Despite such visceral examples of the dangers of religious dissent, in the same year that Wightman and Legate experienced torturous deaths for their religious convictions, one particularly brave English subject contradicted the king's right to assume dominion over the immortal souls of his subjects. In 1612, Thomas Helwys penned *The Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, in which he dared to provide "the first exposition in English of the notion of liberty of conscience."⁵ While Helwys would agree that a king was indeed entitled to bear a "sword" of justice in civil matters, as James mentions in his work *Basilicon Doron*,⁶ Helwys insists in *Mystery* that the king should not attempt to bear a "sword of justice power over his

³Debra Kuller Shuger, *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England: The Sacred and the State in "Measure for Measure"* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 110.

⁴James Doleman, *King James I and the Religious Culture of England*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, vol. 4 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 107.

⁵Richard Groves, introduction to *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, by Thomas Helwys, ed. Richard Groves (New York: Mercer University Press, 1998), xx. Most scholars, including Groves, believe that Helwys wrote *Mystery* in 1611 or 1612.

⁶ King James, *Basilicon Doron*, in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 52.

subjects' consciences.”⁷ Yes, the King has control over the “civil estate,” but Helwys reminds his monarch “our lord the king is but dust and ashes as well as we.”⁸

To underscore the intended effect of *Mystery*, Helwys addressed a copy of the text directly to the king with a note on the flyleaf that boldly proclaims, “The king is a mortal man and not God, [and] therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.”⁹ Tragically, in writing this impressive missive to the king, Helwys had penned his own death warrant. Shortly after the publication of the document, Helwys was imprisoned. By 1616, he was dead.¹⁰ While today many people primarily associate King James with the treasured translation of the Bible that bears his name, as James Dunn bluntly notes, “The same King James whose name is in the front of your Bible is the one who ordered the death of Thomas Helwys, the first Baptist pastor in England.”¹¹

While Helwys was spending his final days in a London prison, the greatest playwright of the English speaking world was concluding his tenure on the London stage. Among his prodigious talents, William Shakespeare possessed an uncanny ability to subtly comment on, and even criticize, the prevailing policies of the monarchs of England, without suffering censure or worse. As this paper will suggest, Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*, first produced in England only a few years before Helwys wrote his bold letter to the king, manifests the very

⁷Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves (New York: Mercer University Press, 1998), 35.

⁸*Ibid.*, 34.

⁹*Ibid.*, xxiv.

¹⁰ The exact date and cause of Helwys’ death is unknown, but a document from 1616 refers to Helwys’ wife, Joan, as a “widow” (Groves, xxvi).

¹¹James Dunn, “Church, State, and Soul Competency,” *Review and Expositor* 96 (1999): 71.

dangers of which Helwys warns in *Iniquity*.¹² In the play, Duke Vincentio, a figure that scholars have long suggested might in fact represent King James, dons the guise of a friar and presents himself as a spiritual authority to the citizens of Vienna. In so doing, the character embodies the duality that King James represented: a political ruler who insisted on intervening in his subjects' spiritual lives. The play, through Vincentio's repeated attempts to intrude upon the personal consciences of those he governs, presents a microcosm of the inherent dangers of governmental interference in an individual's relationship with God.

James's Religious Policies: "Harry them out of the land"

Both Helwys's *Iniquity* and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, overtly in Helwys's work and more covertly in Shakespeare's, speak to the cultural ramifications of King James's coronation as the new English monarch as well as James's determination to be the king of "men's souls."¹³ James declared his duty to each subject saying that God demanded that he "upon the peril of his soul . . . procure the weal of both souls and bodies."¹⁴ Though the belief that a monarch served as the head of the church was commonplace, James's intense interest in the personal spiritual lives of his subjects differed from his predecessor. Unlike Queen Elizabeth, who ruled England for forty-five years, James was "vitaly interested in a wide range of religious

¹²In David Bevington's introduction to the play he notes, "the play was performed for court, for the new King James I . . . on December 26, 1604. Probably it had been composed that same year or in late 1603" (Introduction to *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington. 4th ed. [New York: Longman, 1997], 404).

¹³Shuger, 59. It is important to remember that though James was new to the English throne, he had been king of Scotland for thirty-six years prior to his coronation as the English monarch.

¹⁴King James, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 65.

matters,” and his “influence reached beyond the boundaries of the church proper—to . . . personal religious commitment.”¹⁵

Because of James’s passionate interest in spiritual matters, some religious groups practicing outside the government-sanctioned Church of England who had suffered oppression during Elizabeth I’s reign looked hopefully upon James’s tenure as king. Prior to his accession, James made overtures to Catholics that suggested he would afford them greater tolerance than they had experienced in the Elizabethan era. As James Ellison notes, “James . . . led the English Catholics to expect a considerable degree of toleration if he were to become king, and the first year of his reign saw the introduction of a greatly relaxed regime toward Roman Catholics.”¹⁶ Puritans too who had “become increasingly unhappy . . . during the last years of Elizabeth’s reign” hoped that James might understand their desire to “purify” the Church of England.¹⁷ Puritans were encouraged by James’s initial reaction to the “Millenary Petition” presented to him as he traversed England to be crowned. In receiving the petition, which outlined specific flaws in the Church of England, he was “noncommittal but gracious.”¹⁸

Despite these hopes, both Catholics and Puritans soon found James eager to embrace the hegemonic church. As Alan Stewart notes, “James found plenty to please him in the top ranks of the Anglican Church. He felt the Anglican hierarchy to be properly deferential . . . James was in his element. He had his bishops, who accepted the divine right of kings while keeping watch

¹⁵Doleman, 2.

¹⁶James Ellison, “*Measure for Measure* and the Executions of Catholics in 1604,” *English Literary Renaissance* 33, no. 1 (2003): 44.

¹⁷Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 186.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 189.

over the church.”¹⁹ The Catholics soon discovered that the anti-Catholic laws that had been initially relaxed were abruptly enforced. In 1604, just one year following his accession to the throne, “James unexpectedly allowed Parliament to renew and even tighten the old [anti-Catholic] laws of the 1580’s.”²⁰

Puritans were similarly dismayed by James’s actions. While he called the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 ostensibly to hear from both Anglican and Puritan representatives, many scholars believe that the conference was little more than a farce.²¹ Stewart concludes that “the net effect of the Hampton Court Conference was precisely the opposite of what the Puritans wished: the imposition of a stricter orthodoxy within the Church. The . . . Convocation passed new canons to enforce conformity.”²² Roy Battenhouse concurs that it was becoming evident that James “lacked the patience and charity of a reconciler.” The Hampton Court Conference ended with a threat to the Puritans that James would “harry them out of the land” if they did not conform.²³ This promise by James would extend not only to Puritans and Catholics, but also to any subject deemed “nonconforming,” a designation that definitely applied to early Baptist leaders.²⁴

The origin of the Baptist faith has been the subject of voluminous attention. Time does not allow a thorough treatment of the subject here, but the early years of James’s reign are

¹⁹Ibid., 186.

²⁰Ellison, 44.

²¹“F. Shriver has observed that there was an element of ‘rehearsed drama’ about the conference, ‘which makes one suspect that it was a kind of enacted proclamation’”(Qtd. in Kenneth Finch and Peter Lake, “The Ecclesiastical Policy of King James I,” *The Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 2 [April 1985]: 173).

²²Stewart, 204.

²³Battenhouse, 197.

²⁴As William Estep notes, “Baptists’ denial of the state’s jurisdiction in religious affairs automatically made them nonconformists” (“Respect for Nonconformity Permeates the Baptist Conscience,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions*, ed. Charles W. Deweese [Franklin,TN: Providence House, 1996], 84).

commonly seen as the first years of the Baptist denomination.²⁵ While scholars debate the impact that groups such as the Puritans and Anabaptists had on the establishment of the Baptist faith, most concur that the first General Baptists emerged from a movement of English “Separatists,” who, unlike the Puritans, believed that “true believers should separate entirely from the Church of England.”²⁶ John Smyth pastored a congregation of Separatists in England of which Helwys became a member.

Because congregations like Smyth’s denied the king’s authority in spiritual matters, they were deemed nonconformists, and nonconformists of any ilk made James very uneasy. He was suspicious that such “seditious schismatics” would greatly undermine his authority.²⁷ Smyth and Helwys would soon learn, as William Estep notes, “that the death of Elizabeth had brought no friend of the Puritans or Separatists to the English throne.”²⁸

Thomas Helwys: *The “First Modern Baptist”*

Helwys’s eventual death in the squalor of Newgate Prison was a far cry from the scene of his privileged birth in 1550. As the son of a wealthy landowner, Helwys enjoyed a life of

²⁵There are many excellent resources that provide a thorough examination of the early years of the Baptist faith. One seminal text in this field is Leon McBeth’s *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987). A recent collection that provides a thorough overview of Baptist history is *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

²⁶Michael Williams, “The Context of Baptist Beginnings, 1517-1609,” in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 11.

²⁷Qtd. in Finchman and Lake, 178.

²⁸Estep, “Thomas Helwys: Bold Architect of Baptist Policy on Church-State Relations,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 20, no. 3 (1985), 25. It should be noted that recently several scholars have made claims for James’s rehabilitation in relation to his religious policies. W. B. Patterson (*King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]) praises James’s efforts at “genuine religious unity among his subjects” and feels scholars have not fairly evaluated his authentic efforts at the Hampton Court Conference to find a “compromise which the two parties would find acceptable” (49).

comfort, and he completed studies at Gray's Inn in England before assuming the role of a country gentleman. Helwys possessed, however, an insatiable curiosity regarding spiritual matters, and Helwys's home with his wife, Joan, and their seven children "became a hospitable center of the Puritan community."²⁹ Befriending Smyth, of course, changed his spiritual course forever, and by 1607, Helwys had joined Smyth's congregation. Because of the increasing number of rulings against nonconformists, Smyth, Helwys and other members of Smyth's congregation fled to Holland, a refuge for many religious dissenters of their day. In Amsterdam in 1609, they established what is commonly known as the first Baptist church in history.

Ultimately, Helwys and Smyth parted ways in Amsterdam due to various doctrinal disputes, and Helwys became the "leading thinker of his party."³⁰ Meanwhile, back in England, a climate of increasing religious intolerance for nonconformists was brewing. In addition to the executions of Legate and Wightman, dozens of clergy were denied their positions, and still other nonconformists were jailed. Certainly word of this persecution reached Helwys and may have convinced him that he should return to his homeland and make a stand for his faith. Estep speculates, "Helwys's sense of guilt might have increased with every fresh account of example of King James's barbarism."³¹ Despite the hostile environment awaiting them, Helwys and a small number of followers elected to return to England.

Though guilt for his fellow Separatists' sufferings might have motivated Helwys's sojourn home, certainly his decision was also evangelical in nature. He claimed that "thousands

²⁹Qtd. in Groves, xxi.

³⁰Groves, 32.

³¹Estep, "Bold Architect," 31.

of ignorant souls in their own country were perishing for lack of instruction.”³² Helwys’s concern extended even to the very king who continued to allow the persecution of dissenters. As he remarks in *Mystery*, Helwys wishes that “the king should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth . . . and therefore we the king’s servants . . . seek the salvation of the king, although it were with the danger of our lives.”³³ Helwys was clearly aware that his concern for the salvation of his fellow English subjects, as well as for James himself, could lead to his death. Despite this, fueled by a missionary zeal to return to his homeland, Helwys returned to England and founded the first Baptist church on English soil at a time when, as Charles Deweese describes it, “for early Baptists, the stakes were high.”³⁴

Mystery of Iniquity: “For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves”

Establishing this historic congregation at such a crucial time certainly cemented Helwys’s place in Baptist history—Dunn among others has declared him the “first, modern Baptist.”³⁵ But it was penning the text *The Mystery of Iniquity* that left an even more indelible legacy on the Baptist faith. The text’s unusual title, as Walter Shurden notes, comes from 2 Thessalonians 2:7 which addresses the “mystery of lawlessness.” Shurden explains the connection between this scripture and Helwys’s work:

Helwys saw the evil especially in the pomp, power, and polity of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches who conspired with governments to deny freedom of conscience to

³²Groves, xxiv.

³³Helwys, 1.

³⁴Charles Deweese, “Baptist Beginnings and the Turn toward a Believers’ Church: 1609/1612/1633/1639,” in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 20.

³⁵Dunn, 68.

dissenters . . . Helwys identified the ‘mystery of iniquity’ as the satanic spirit of domination and oppression.³⁶

Helwys’s remarks regarding “freedom of conscience” have led Baptist historians and scholars to credit him as the first person to articulate that Baptist distinctive, “soul freedom.” As Shurden defines it, soul freedom is

the historic Baptist affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.³⁷

Leon McBeth says that “competency of the soul before God” means that “God has endowed every person with the ability to decide—and not only the power to decide, but also the necessity to decide. Spiritual decisions cannot be delegated to others, or passed on for others to make for us.”³⁸ E.Y. Mullins considers such a doctrine to be the “distinctive historical significance of Baptists.”³⁹

While rightly revered among Baptists, Helwys’s bold claims in *Mystery of Iniquity* guaranteed his significance for an even broader population. Helwys declares that religious freedom should be afforded not only to Separatists, but to each and every one of King James’s subjects. He insists, “For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the early

³⁶Walter B. Shurden, “Baptist Freedom and the Turn toward a Free Conscience: 1612/1652,” in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael Williams and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 23.

³⁷Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993), 23.

³⁸Leon McBeth, “God Gives Soul Competency and Priesthood to All Believers,” in *Defining Baptist Convictions*, ed. Charles W. Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 1996), 63.

³⁹E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 57.

power to punish them in the least measure.”⁴⁰ For James, such an idea was nothing short of heretical, for the “idea of religious freedom horrified him.”⁴¹ James viewed the ecclesiastical and secular realms as so intertwined that he foresaw religious freedom as inevitably leading to treasonable behavior. James believed that if all subjects were free to worship as they wish, “Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meete, and at their pleasure censure me and my Councill and all our proceedings.”⁴² Helwys was fully aware of the king’s position and knew how his defiance might be received. Despite this, in part two of *Mystery* he plainly states, “Yet though he [James] should kill us, we will speak the truth to him.”⁴³

Shakespeare and the “King’s Men”

While Helwys’s work explicitly addressed James in both his text and inscribed flyleaf, scholars have debated whether Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* may, or may not, have implicitly criticized England’s new king. At first glance, Shakespeare and Helwys could not seem more different.⁴⁴ If Helwys’s priority was provoking James into action with his incendiary document, Shakespeare’s priority seems to have been economic success. Shakespeare, most scholars agree, was a savvy businessman, profiting as both a shareholder in the Globe Theatre and as a playwright, and eventually retiring to his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon after

⁴⁰Helwys, xxviii.

⁴¹McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 100.

⁴²Qtd. in McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 100.

⁴³Helwys, 34.

⁴⁴Time does not allow a discussion of the ongoing debate regarding Shakespeare’s own religious convictions. Impassioned claims for Shakespeare as both an Anglican and Catholic have been offered by scholars from both perspectives. Some scholars insist that his beliefs did indeed motivate his creative output on the stage. This paper will argue that regardless of Shakespeare’s own religious convictions, *Measure for Measure*, in particular, reveals the dangers of governmental interference in an individual’s personal beliefs.

amassing a substantial fortune. While scholars will invariably debate which, if any, of his plays deliberately question the reigning monarch, Shakespeare apparently was capable of crafting provocative plays that, for the most part,⁴⁵ never crossed the carefully monitored line of the Master of the Revels who had to approve each play before it was allowed on stage. Shakespeare certainly had pragmatic reasons for keeping James happy with his plays--upon James's accession to the throne, Shakespeare's troupe was renamed the "King's Men," as James assumed the role of patron.⁴⁶

Still, the play's numerous connections to contemporary England have garnered attention. While the play's setting may appear to be ostensibly foreign, many scholars have observed that Catholic Vienna may be little more than a fictionalized version of Jacobean England. Leah Marcus suggests, "Vienna is not actually Vienna; it is London, or at least a place which can easily be taken for London."⁴⁷ Even the problems that characters complain of in the play, including war, plague, and unchecked sexual immorality were contemporary concerns of Shakespeare's London. Yet the unmistakable parallels that exist between Duke Vincentio and King James create the most convincing case for the play as a commentary on the newly crowned king and his policies.

⁴⁵Bevington notes that one scene from Shakespeare's *Richard II* was "disallowed for acting during Elizabeth's lifetime" because of the queen's concern that subjects might see parallels between herself and the deposed king.

⁴⁶Jonathan Goldberg insightfully notes, "Many critics...have supposed that royal patronage circumscribed the subject matter and attitudes expressed in plays, or involved commissioning plays for court performance. This does not seem to have been the case... [some of the] plays performed by the King's Men... could be suspected of sedition and atheism" ("Social Texts, Royal Measures," in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure"*, ed. Richard Wheeler [New York: G.K. Hall, 1999], 31).

⁴⁷Leah Marcus, "London," *Critical Essays on "Measure for Measure"*, ed. Richard Wheeler (New York: G.K. Hall, 1999), 58.

The “Outward-Sainted Deputy”

For centuries scholars have debated whether Duke Vincentio is actually a figure for King James. In the first scene of the play, Duke Vincentio reveals his supposed plan to leave Vienna.

He remarks:

I love the people,
But do not like to stage me to their eyes:
Though it do well, I do not relish well
Their loud applause and *Aves* vehement;
Nor do I think the man of safe discretion
That does affect it.⁴⁸

As historians have often noted, James perceived himself as a philosopher and scholar, and preferred private reflection and intellectual debate to the walkabouts or progresses in which his predecessor thrived. Vincentio’s instinct to move away from sight, as he says in the third scene of act one, “I have ever lov’d the life remov’d” (1.3.8), and study others’ behaviors while being unobserved himself, is very much in keeping with the preferences of the “scholar” king.

There are also distinct parallels between the duke’s and James’s use of surrogates, or deputies, to act on their behalves. Duke Vincentio admits in the first act that he has failed in enforcing the prevailing laws against immorality, and he therefore elects a surrogate, Angelo, in his place, as one who will be responsible for imposing the laws that the duke has neglected. The duke announces: “We have with special soul/ Elected him our absence to supply; / Lent him our terror . . . and given him deputation all the organs / Of our own power” (1.1.17-21). He later alerts Angelo to the extraordinary power he now possesses: “In our remove, be thou at full ourself. / Mortality and mercy in Vienna / Live in thy tongue, and heart” (1.1.43-44), and grants

⁴⁸William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Arden Edition, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.1.67-72. All subsequent citations to the play are from this edition and will appear parenthetically within the text by act, scene and line number.

Angelo, the deputized sovereign in Vienna,⁵¹ presumes to vouch for her eternal salvation and to insist that Isabella's soul will be spared. Such behavior not only indicts Angelo but the duke as well since the duke has entrusted Angelo to serve as his representative, saying "be thou at full ourself" (1.1.43). The actions of a deputy invariably implicate the figure in power who deemed him worthy of power.

James's behavior is mirrored by this scenario in a number of ways. In *Basilicon Doron*, reprinted a year before *Measure for Measure* was produced,⁵² the king admitted that he (like Vincentio) "had ruled too laxly at the beginning of his reign."⁵³ James also, as Jonathan Goldberg notes, seemed uninterested in the act of governing: "Like James, the duke could be accused of having little interest in running the government, delegating all responsibility to others."⁵⁴ Carolyn Brown observes that James "chose favorites not based on their knowledge of government nor on their character but on his fondness for them . . . he inevitably attracted men, like Shakespeare's Angelo, who lacked good character and governing skills, and, consequently, abused their positions of power."⁵⁵ James relied too, of course, on members of the Anglican hierarchy to enforce his policies governing nonconformists. As he states in his *Meditation on*

⁵¹Though the duke (and therefore his deputy) is not referred to as a monarch, I agree with Shuger who notes that "Shakespeare's duke . . . is for all intents and purposes, a monarch or sovereign; he is certainly not a duke in the English sense" (155).

⁵²*Basilicon Doron* was first published in 1599 and was reprinted in 1603. *Measure for Measure* is believed to have first been performed in 1604 for King James's court.

⁵³Quoted in Lever, xlix. Battenhouse's essay details the critical history of scholars who have identified the duke as James. While Lever presents compelling evidence for parallels between the duke and James too, he cautions, "to see the duke as an exact replica of King James would be to misunderstand Shakespeare's dramatic methods and the practice of the contemporary stage" (l). Lever's insightful comment serves as a reminder that Shakespeare would certainly not have dared to overtly depict James himself on stage, a practice clearly forbidden by the censorship rules of the day.

⁵⁴Goldberg, 35.

⁵⁵Carolyn Brown, "Duke Vincentio of *Measure for Measure* and King James I of England: 'The poorest princes in Christendom,'" *Clio* 26, no.1(Fall 1996): 5.

Matthew, “It is the King’s office to oversee and compel the church to do her office, to purge all abuses in her, and by his sword to procure her due reverence and obedience of all his temporall subjects.”⁵⁶

Helwys addresses the consequences of James endowing individuals with the power to act on his behalf in part two of *Mystery of Iniquity*. Specifically, Helwys repeatedly informs James of his culpability in allowing members of the Anglican hierarchy to act against nonconformists. He reminds James that when these representatives act with his authority, he is guilty of their actions: “Let our lord the king know that it concerns the king highly on to consider it . . . all the cruelty thereof executing by the king’s power, whereby *they make our lord the king guilty* of all the imprisonment, banishment and persecution which by the king’s power they impose on all the faithful subjects of the king who withstand their abominations.”⁵⁷ Refusing to mince words, Helwys reminds James that whether he personally takes actions himself against nonconformists, or his “representatives” act on his behalf, he is “guilty” of these acts, just the same.⁵⁸

While Angelo depicts the dangerous potential of empowered deputies in Jacobean England, it is Duke Vincentio himself who best embodies the pervasive threat of the government to the freedom of conscience. Shakespeare’s decision to have Vincentio disguised as a friar

⁵⁶King James, *A Meditation upon the 27th, 28th, and 29th Verses of the 27th Chapter of Saint Matthew* in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann Somerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 237.

⁵⁷Helwys, 51.

⁵⁸Helwys does seem to give James an “out,” as it were, implying that James could not possibly be aware of some of the heinous actions taken against nonconformists. He lists the various punishments nonconformists have endured: “They [church officials]. . . apprehend them by violence and force, imprison them, sometimes divers years, many times not suffering so much as their wives to come at them . . . The Lord give the king a heart to pity his people herin. *The king is ignorant of these dealings*, and none dare tell the king thereof, the prelacy have been so mighty and so cruel” (52). (emphasis mine)

seems a deliberate manifestation of the secular and ecclesiastical realms of which James claimed dominion. The figure of the duke/friar personifies the very issue for which Helwys would die.

The Duke as Friar: “*Mixtae Personae*”

Just as both men allowed deputies to act on their behalf, both James and Vincentio viewed themselves as divinely appointed deputies. James had a particularly mystical view of kingship. He believed that there was, as Alison O’Harae notes, a “peculiar, quasi-divine, quality that distinguished the physical body of a legitimate monarch.”⁵⁹ In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* James says outright “Kings are called Gods by the prophetic King David, because they sit upon God his Throne in the earth.” In his *Meditation* he says, “Kings therefore, as God’s deputy-judges upon earth, sit in thrones . . . as mixtae personae (mixed persons) . . . being bound to make a reckoning to God for their subjects’ souls as well as their bodies.”⁶⁰ Reflecting on the crucifixion, James describes how kings follow in the tradition of Christ himself: “The soldiers gave Jesus a purple robe ‘to declare him a king,’ just as kings ‘as God’s deputy-judges upon earth . . . [are] clad with long robes.” James goes on in the text to explore “what it means for a king to be like Christ.”⁶¹

The duke’s own attitude toward his divine appointment is similarly communicated in the play. In a soliloquy in act three he announces, “He who the sword of heaven will bear / Should be as holy as severe: / Pattern in himself to know, / Grace to stand, and virtue, go”; like James, he sees his role as one who judges on heaven’s behalf, bearing “heaven’s sword.” (3.2.254-57).

⁵⁹Alison O’Harae, “Which Model? Whose Measure? Sexuality, Morality and Power in Measure for Measure and Basilicon Doron,” *Philament* (September 2003), 2.

⁶⁰King James, *The Trew Law*, 64; King James, *A Meditation*, 237.

⁶¹Shuger, 73.

Others also pay the duke respect as though he is divine. When, in the final scene of the play, Angelo finally confesses the guilt he feels over his actions, he credits the duke with godlike omnipotence: “O my dread lord, / I should be guiltier than my guiltiness / To think I can be undiscernible, / When I perceive your Grace, like power divine, / Hath looked upon my passes” (5.1.364-368). Scholars have often noted how the ubiquitous nature of the duke, always watching but never observed himself, befits a deity.

Yet despite the fact that the duke professes a divine nature, when he dons a clerical disguise and begins his charade as Friar Lodowick, his behavior is Machiavellian rather than Christ-like. Meeting with Friar Thomas, Vincentio instructs him, “Supply me with the habit, and instruct me / How I may formally in person bear / Like a true friar” (1.3.46-48). Vincentio’s verbiage reveals his superficial approach to life as a spiritual leader. While traditionally a spiritual calling leads friars to don clerical garments to signify an internal commitment, the duke exploits the guise of devotion to invade the spiritual lives of those who surround him. Yet the duke himself never undergoes any sort of internal transformation of his own; Shakespeare’s word choice in this passage reminds us of this fact. The duke says he wishes to be supplied with the friar’s “habit,” a word that naturally connotes more than surface materiality; it also signifies ingrained behavior. As the Oxford English Dictionary reveals, as early as the fourteenth century the word “habit” also referred to “the way in which a person is mentally or morally constituted; the sum of mental and moral qualities; mental constitution, disposition, character.”⁶² This type of “habit” cannot be “supplied” by another, as the duke’s failures as a friar will demonstrate.

⁶²Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “habit.”

James similarly demonstrated a preoccupation with external appearances. With his *Basilicon Doron*, he crafted a “how to” manual for his son and heir. In the text, he reminds his son of the daunting responsibilities of the monarchy and at the same time schools his son in the proper behavior of a divinely appointed king. In one passage, he provides his son with a specific strategy for dressing:

. . . in your garments be proper, cleanly, comely and honest . . . thereby to signifie, that by your calling yee are mixed of both the professions . . . as your office is likewise mixed, betwixt the Ecclesiasticall and civill estate: For a King is not *mere laicius* (layman), as both the Papists and Anabaptists would have him, to which error also the Puritanes incline over farre.⁶³

The passage reveals James’s preoccupation with the opinions of various nonconforming groups including “Papists,” “Anabaptists” and “Puritans,” who denied his sovereignty over the “Ecclesiasticall” estate. The passage also, however, suggests that James viewed the appropriate attire of a monarch as one that “signifie(s)” his various roles, including his position as “Ecclesiasticall” leader. James believed his role as “god’s deputy” should be reflected by his external garments.

Helwys, however, warns of the dangers of a preoccupation with external garments through his railing against the Church of England’s adoption of Roman rituals and practices:

.... you force and compel men to submit to your whole conformity, which is the perfect image of the beast. Not to speak of your *surplice, and cross*, and churchings, and burials . . . But whosoever shall look upon them with an eye of less than half uprightness shall easily see them to come out of the bowels of the beast, and to be the deformed image of his ugly shape.⁶⁴

⁶³King James, *Basilicon Doron*, 52.

⁶⁴Helwys, 17 (emphasis mine).

In this scathing indictment of the elaborate customs of the Church of England, Helwys identifies external trappings, such as the “surplice and cross,” as signifiers not of holy devotion, but as signs of “the beast.” Helwys resented the ways in which the Church of England, through its perpetuation of the accoutrements of “popery,” suppressed the individual’s freedom to arrive at an authentic faith.

Shakespeare demonstrates how external religious garb, while perhaps not signifying demonic qualities, is at the least often effective in masking the true intentions of an individual. It is, ironically, the duke himself who laments, “O, what man may within him hide, / Though angel on the outward side!” (3.2.264-5). Upon donning religious attire, however, it is the duke who immediately benefits from his citizens’ reverence for his alter-ego, Friar Lodowick, and the duke exploits their respect throughout the play. The audience witnesses this “friar” engage in the repeated manipulation of his subjects: he arranges a tawdry, infamous “bed trick,” in which he swaps one woman for another without the male participant being aware, he mentally torments persons awaiting execution, and he deceives others into believing their loved ones have died, knowing full well that they are alive.⁶⁵ As Brown insightfully notes, “Shakespeare disabuses us of the godliness of rightful rulers by portraying his duke as a prevaricator and schemer, not a Solomon or Christ, as the duke deludes other characters into believing. What we see is not a divine ruler but someone intent on creating a divine image.”⁶⁶ Shakespeare, through his depiction of the duke, is presenting the inherent dangers of political figures who claim “divinity” and fall short, becoming little more than actors themselves, donning costumes and playing roles.

⁶⁵Some scholars have a much more sympathetic view of the duke. For example, G. Wilson Knight sees the duke as a benevolent figure, saying “The duke’s ethical attitude is exactly correspondent with Jesus” (*The Wheel of Fire* [London: Methuen, 1930], 82). Perhaps the duke’s attitude is Christian, but his actions are clearly not Christlike.

⁶⁶Brown, 15.

Duke and Juliet: “*Arraign Your Conscience*”

Perhaps the clearest example of the duke’s interference in the private reflection of an individual conscience is in the duke’s meeting with Juliet. Despite Helwys’s protests to the contrary, the duke, as the leader of Vienna, feels entitled to exert “power over the immortal soul of his subjects.”⁶⁷ Juliet is Claudio’s young pregnant lover who has been jailed for the sin of fornication. Arriving at the jail in his clerical disguise, the duke insists on visiting the criminals, saying, “Make me know / the nature of their crimes, that I may minister / To them accordingly” (2.3.7-8). His ministerial guise is only a facade, but it allows him intimate access to his subjects’ most private sins or crimes.

Though the duke professes to “minister” to the “afflicted spirits” in the prison where Juliet is confined (2.3.4,7), he leaves Juliet in greater despair than he finds her. He questions her, “Repent you, fair one, of the sin you carry?” (2.3.19). Juliet immediately confesses her sin, and yet her confession is not sufficient for the duke; he insists that she acknowledge her sin as worse than Claudio’s (the man who impregnated her), telling her, “Your sin [is] of a heavier kind” (2.3.29). Juliet dutifully accedes to this judgment, and yet the duke declares himself the judge of the sincerity of her confession.

I’ll teach you how you shall arraign your conscience,
And try your penitence, if it be sound,
Or hollowly put on.

(2.3.21-3)

⁶⁷Helwys, xxiv.

Vincentio will teach her to “arraign” her conscience; Lever interprets “arraign” here to mean “interrogate, examine.”⁶⁸ Vincentio’s presumption that he can, as an external observer, “interrogate” Juliet’s conscience and then conclude whether her penitence is legitimate, or simply “hollowly” put on, parallels King James’s own beliefs about his role in his subjects’ spiritual lives.

James would at times personally interrogate subjects accused of heresy. He enjoyed intellectual debate, and found great pleasure in demonstrating his scholarly acumen. These interrogations, however, would often have fatal consequences for the accused. Bartholomew Legate was only one victim of James’s interrogations. As king of Scotland, James took a particular interest in the questioning of women suspected of witchcraft. He attended these interrogations, as William McElwee explains, “gripped in a sort of fascinated horror.”⁶⁹ As Otto Scott remarks “the king suggested new tortures to the examiners, who were surprised that was possible.”⁷⁰ James’s interest was not limited to physical torture; he seemed to enjoy inflicting mental pain as well. Brown remarks, “His gratuitous involvement in questioning the accused suggests that he enjoyed the interrogations, the inflicting of mental anguish.”⁷¹

James’s own involvement in inflicting not only mental but physical torture on his own subjects is another area in which Helwys boldly reprimands the king:

⁶⁸Lever, 52.

⁶⁹William McElwee, *The Wisest Fool in Christendom* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 71.

⁷⁰Otto Scott, *James I* (New York: Mason and Charter, 1976), 211

⁷¹Brown, 14.

The king must needs grant that as he is an earthly king he can have no power to rule in this spiritual kingdom of Christ, *nor can compel any to be subjects thereof*, as a king, while the king is but a subject himself.⁷²

As Richard Groves explains, “One of Helwys’s greatest concerns was the use of the sword of the state to insure conformity in the kingdom of heaven. Helwys notes, ‘If Christ’s sword will not prevail to bring men under obedience to his own laws, what can our lord the king’s sword do? . . . the king’s sword cannot smite the spirits of men.’”⁷³ Helwys repeatedly insists in *Mystery*, as Baptists have continued to stress for four hundred years, that a *compelled* faith is not an *authentic* faith.

Though Juliet avoids physical torture, she does endure “mental anguish” at the friar’s hands. After doubting the authenticity of Juliet’s repentance, the duke offers no consolation whatsoever. Instead, he leaves her with these words: “Your partner, as I hear, must die tomorrow” (2.3.37), a parting that leaves Juliet inconsolable. Her last chilling words of the scene reflect the desperation of her soul: “O injurious love, That respites me a life, /whose very comfort / Is still a dying horror!” (2.3.40-42). Juliet, burdened by pregnancy, imprisonment, and news of her lover’s impending execution, is left desolate by an ostensible spiritual authority. The “friar’s” exchange with Juliet is consistent with the duke’s behavior throughout the play. As we will see, though the duke cultivates a role as a benevolent paternal figure, he repeatedly deals psychological blows to his subjects--mirroring again the behavior of Shakespeare and Helwys’s king.⁷⁴

⁷²Helwys, 39. (emphasis mine)

⁷³Groves, xxviii

⁷⁴Space does not allow treatment of all the various ways in which the duke uses mental anguish as a means of manipulating his subjects: one of the cruelest mental games he devises is making Isabella believe her brother has died, when in fact he has not.

“Show me how, good father”

As a friar, the duke immediately capitalizes on his religious role and presents himself as a paternal figure to other characters in the play. When he visits Claudio, the man facing execution for immoral behavior, he addresses the young man as a “Son” (3.1.159), and proceeds to offer what Claudio expects will be spiritual guidance in his final hours. The duke, instead, however, engages in a monologue on death that descends into a nihilistic diatribe. One excerpt from his speech reveals the despair he imparts to Claudio: “Reason thus with life: If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing / That none but fools would keep” (3.1.6-7). Like Juliet, Claudio is denied the comfort he clearly seeks. Following the friar’s visit, Claudio articulates his despair to his sister Isabella saying, “what’s the comfort?” (3.1.53). Though the duke presents himself as a benevolent father figure, he toys with Claudio, taunting him with inevitable execution, while knowing all the while he never intends to allow his execution to actually take place.

Just as the duke exploits his role as a paternal figure to Claudio, he similarly positions himself as a father figure to Claudio’s sister, Isabella. Greeting her in act four, for instance, he remarks, “Good morning to you, fair and gracious daughter” (4.3.111). This exploitation is especially deceptive because the duke is cognizant of Isabella’s intention to pursue holy orders, and he exploits the seemingly spiritual bond that they share from their earliest exchange. When Isabella encounters him as Friar Lodowick, his external demeanor recommends him as a fellow spiritual devotee and “father” figure. His own language, however signals his specious motives in regards to Isabella. When asking for time alone with her, he vows, “my mind promises with my habit, no loss shall touch [Isabella] by my company” (3.1.176-77). As his habit is nothing but a ruse, his mind’s joint promise is of little worth. When meeting with Isabella later in the play, he

unabashedly refers to his feigned spiritual vocation to gain her trust saying, “Trust not my holy order, / If I pervert your course” (4.3. 147-148). The duke’s adamant disavowal coupled with a reference to “perversion” hints at the true motivation of his actions. He does pervert the trust she grants him as a spiritual father figure, and Isabella obediently respects his authority, showing complete submission to his leadership, saying “Show me how, good father” (3.1.238).

Scholars have often noted how James depicted himself as not only a divine figure, but as a paternal one as well. In *Basilicon Doron* he describes himself as the “nutritious” father (nursing father), an image he cultivated repeatedly. This image has its foundation in Isaiah 49:23 (“kings shall be thy nursing father”), and as Stewart notes, “the nursing father captured James’s belief that he was a teacher-nurturer to his children.”⁷⁵ Doleman observes that James “envisioned himself” as a father “not just in reference to the church, but for the religious life of the nation in general,” and members of the Anglican hierarchy were happy to invoke this terminology in reference to James.⁷⁶ At James’s coronation, Bishop Bilson described princes as “fathers by God’s law, that have or should have fatherly care over us, whether it be to aid us in the things of this life, as masters and teachers; *or to guide us the true way to heaven, as pastors and ministers.*”⁷⁷

Such a role, James insisted, required absolute obedience from his subjects. As Battenhouse notes, James insisted that 1 Samuel 8 dictates that “even though a King should practice tyranny and extortion . . . the people are bound to love him as their father and as God’s

⁷⁵Stewart, 206.

⁷⁶ Doleman, 1.

⁷⁷ Thomas Bilson, *A Sermon Preached at Westminster before the King and Queenes Majesties, at their Coronations* (London, 1603).Qtd. in Doleman, 1. (emphasis mine)

minister.”⁷⁸ Helwys, however, rejected the Old Testament model of kingship as inappropriate for a contemporary monarch. As Timothy George explains, Helwys insisted that “kings may not serve as ‘nursing fathers’ unto the church. This custodial model of church-state relations, with the attendant policy of coercion based upon it, has been abrogated by Christ’s ‘last will and testament.’”⁷⁹ Again Helwys opposed James characterizing himself in any way that suggested his subjects were compelled to obey him in spiritual matters.

Helwys also demonstrates a clear opposition to the use of spiritual titles of any kind. While he does not directly address James’s use of the name “father,” he does condemn the Anglican hierarchy’s use of titles he deems befitting only God. Addressing those who are referred to as “Most Reverend” and “Right Reverend Fathers,” he says,

When you shall meet Christ in his coming, what will you answer him for the breach of his straight commandment herein, where he says, ‘Call no man father upon the earth, for there is but one, your Father which is in heaven.’ Are you not exalted above your brethren by this name? Then you are they of whom Christ speaks of in this place, and whom he will bring fallow, (Matthew 23: 9-11) for thus taking upon you the name of God, and exalting yourselves above the brethren.⁸⁰

While he does not mention James by name, his attitude toward the appropriation of “titles and names of God” is clear:

What names of blasphemy are here. They are the titles and names of our God, and of our Christ . . . Is it not sufficient to despoil and rob Christ of all his power? But you will also take from him the titles of honor due to his name . . . there is only one spiritual Lord, which is the Father of Spirits, and therefore whoever takes the title and this power upon themselves, they take upon them the name, title, and power of God.⁸¹

⁷⁸Battenhouse, 198.

⁷⁹Timothy George, “Between Pacifism and Coercion: the English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58, 1 (January 1984): 30-49, 42.

⁸⁰Helwys, 22.

⁸¹Helwys, 21.

Helwys articulates the Baptist belief that God alone is worthy of such a title. Just as James is not entitled to God's power, he is not entitled to God's numerous appellations, and Helwys denounces efforts to appropriate God's names as blasphemy.

Isabella and Joan

In *Measure for Measure*, the duke is not deemed blasphemous; none of his subjects dare to contradict him, or the numerous decisions he pronounces, in the final scene of the play. The play ends, however, on a less than comedic note—leading some scholars to characterize it as a “problem play” rather than as a comedy. This is, in part, because of the unease demonstrated by various characters at the discovery that their duke has so intimately insinuated himself into their spiritual lives.

In particular, many scholars have noted how Isabella's behavior in the final scene may indicate, if not overt defiance of the duke/friar's behavior, at least a subtle resistance to his efforts to control her spiritual life. In the final moments of the play, the duke “unmasks” and announces that he has been Friar Lodowick all along. He then abruptly shifts his persona regarding Isabella, announcing, “Your friar is now your prince” (5.1.380), and reveals his own sexual desire for Isabella with his sudden marriage proposal: “Give me your hand and say you will be mine” (5.1.490). This proposal, as numerous scholars have discussed, is famously left unanswered. Whether she agrees to marry the duke, or instead returns to the spiritual vocation she had previously chosen, is left for each production to decide. It is unclear whether Isabella would see “blasphemy” in the duke's appropriation of spiritual titles, but her uneasiness with his rapid transition from father to suitor is indicated by her complete silence in response to his

marriage proposal. Isabella's resolute determination to resist such invasion in her spiritual calling, Catholic though it might be, might have pleased Thomas Helwys very much.

Another heroine who similarly confronted and resisted interference in her own spiritual life was a historical figure with special significance to Thomas Helwys--his wife Joan. Little is known about Joan's life, but records indicate that Thomas had died by the year 1616, four years after he had been imprisoned for his incendiary work. This was not the first tragedy Joan had endured in her life as the wife of an early Baptist leader. In 1608 during Helwys's time in Holland, Joan remained in England, and because of her nonconformity, she was arrested and incarcerated. While Shakespeare's Isabella desired the most stringent of restrictions in her life as a nun, Joan, doubtless, did *not* desire the restrictions of confinement--imprisonment in Jacobean England would have broken many a hardened criminal. Yet rather than violating her conscience, she *chose* physical restrictions and social isolation. Miles from her husband, this mother of seven still chose confinement over conformity.

Though at times Helwys lamented that his fellow nonconformists were too frightened to contradict the Anglican Church, Thomas's own wife was an example of another early Baptist who demonstrated remarkable bravery. The fictional Isabella and historical Joan, like the men who made them famous, intersect in fascinating ways: both provided James I with examples of the irrepressible courage of those who protested a government's dominance over the individual soul.

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