

Streaming Problem Plays: Complicating Narratives of Privacy and Violence

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Although Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is technically categorized as a comedy, its ending has been labeled contrived and its resolution deeply problematic by many scholars. Proposing a production of one of Shakespeare's problem plays is frankly like navigating a minefield, but I believe certain creative choices may prove fruitful in our understanding of the play as it relates to contemporary themes of social justice. This is not to say that *Measure for Measure*—or any of Shakespeare's plays, for that matter—transcend historical or cultural bounds, but that the play's uniquely problematic handling of the themes of sexual assault and concepts of justice lends itself to being interpreted in (perhaps, in this case, satirical) ways that might be more palatable for a modern audience, and thus prompt conversations about contemporary issues on the same themes. All this in mind, I propose a film adaptation of *Measure for Measure* as an animated mockumentary.

Quickly, I want to establish that this essay does not conflate animation and children's media. This production is not meant for children by any means, and although child-friendly (however that may be defined) versions of Shakespearean plays are indeed very important in conversations of literary accessibility and more, that is not the primary goal of this particular production.

We understand that the material conditions of a performance also inform how the audience makes meaning of the actual performance. That is, costumes, set choices, and even a theatre's architecture and location within a city play into how meaning is created and interpreted. A play's content (what happens on stage, or in this case, on screen) is not the only factor informing their understanding. In brief, the medium is the message (Harvie 24). Then comes the question of which venue will host an animated mockumentary of *Measure for Measure*. I approached this question with two main options: should the film be optimized for movie theaters, or should it be made for at-home viewing (i.e. streaming services)? First, I considered the possibility of hosting the film in a large, lavish theater like the El Capitan in LA. I thought this could be an interesting option in that it replicated, in a certain way, the environment created by early modern public executions—which are very present throughout *Measure*

for Measure, seeing as Claudio is to be killed as punishment for impregnating Juliet, “I saw [Claudio] arrested, saw him carried away; and, which is more, within these three days his head to be chopped off” (1.2.64-66), and Lucio and Angelo are both sentenced to be executed by the Duke in act 5, scene 1.

However, I ultimately thought that constructing this production with at-home viewing in mind, whether it be video-on-demand or streaming, would yield much more interesting results. Although I mourn the loss of most of the social features of in-person theatrical attendance, a made-for-streaming approach would beg questions from the film’s audience. For example, *Measure for Measure* grapples with concepts of justice as they relate to surveillance. The Duke goes undercover as a Friar to observe the way Vienna is being run in his absence, although he maintains a close watch on all his subjects, completely unbeknownst to them: “And to behold his sway I will, as ‘twere a brother of your order, visit both prince and people [...] Hence we shall see, if power change purpose, what our seemers be” (1.3.47-58). Nowadays, we’re seeing a rise of online data collection and the prevalence of algorithms to understand users’ preferences. In constructing this production to be viewed on a streaming platform, we may raise questions about surveillance, as it is tightly embedded into our modern culture. Yes, the viewer is watching the production, but on some level they must be aware that their device is “watching” them back. For example, how did the viewer of this production come to view it? Did they see an ad for it online—perhaps presented to them based on their search habits? Was it recommended to them by the streaming service based on what they’ve watched in the past? As *Measure for Measure* deals with literary characters’ private lives (e.g. Claudio and Juliet’s sex life) being forced into the public sphere (through Claudio’s arrest and execution), here we channel our interpretation of the private-turned-public for viewing in a so-called private space (the home), while simultaneously complicating the definitions of the private space. In this age of technology and information, questions about privacy and what constitutes a private and a public figure, or where to draw the line on data collection, are not being answered as quickly as the technology for surveillance is being developed—and often used for

corporations' financial gain. This hypothetical production understands these questions, and leans into forming an accomplice relationship with its viewers as they seek answers to these questions.

Now, the mockumentary style was chosen with the influence of *Undercover Boss*. This production would satirize the elements of reality television to call into question the authenticity of bosses (in this production, the Duke) using their power and money “for good.” In this production of *Measure for Measure*, the Duke is a successful lawyer at Vienna Law Offices; the production is set in the modern day. The Duke has hired a camera crew to chronicle his journey undercover. As far as the animated aspect of the production goes, animating this story will enable us to stylize narratives of trauma in unique ways, as well as raise questions about realism and spectatorship, and additionally support a queer theory interpretation of the play which categorizes characters like Angelo and Isabella as “other” from society. While the use of animation immediately makes the viewer privy to the fact that the narrative of the film is fictive unlike the live-action mockumentary, other essential elements of the mockumentary style, like “leaving” a boom microphone in the frame or having the narrative subject interact with the camera crew, raise questions about the style of reality trying to be achieved by the production. Clearly, in an animated story, the audience will never be fooled into thinking that the mockumentary is a true documentary, and yet “the presence of fictionality hints [...] contribute to acknowledge the presence of the fictional camera and of the crew that is scrutinising the life of these imaginary characters” (Formenti 12). In a discussion of the semiotics and meaning-making of theatre, Ric Knowles writes in *How Theatre Means* that “audiences seem to have no difficulty ‘reading’ these signs” — in the case of this production the “signs” would be the fictionality hints of the animated mockumentary, like animating a boom mic into the frame— “and indeed take considerable delight in perceiving the unlikely connections” (Knowles 19). It seems that a level of suspension of disbelief is required to make these projects successful, and they often are, as suspending disbelief is a long-understood and commonplace agreement for those watching fictive narratives. He writes that

audiences know that the sign "is" not what it says it is, "but the idea of each is alternatively conjured in the mind." (Knowles 19).

To address casting, the most significant interpretive choices here are that Isabella will be played by a black woman and Angelo will become Angela, and played by a white woman. The Duke will be played by a white man. Harvey Young, in *Theatre and Race*, tackles the topic of "colorblind casting," which he says occurs most frequently in the professional theatrical world by Shakespearean companies and festivals. Of this phenomenon, Young writes, "It is possible that because Shakespeare's plays are produced with such frequency, audiences eagerly look forward to seeing new interpretations and, therefore, are more receptive to colorblindness in those performances than in less produced, newer fare" (Young 58). However, that makes the inclusion of diverse cast sound gimmicky, and not used to inform an audience's understanding of the playtext at all. "At its best, racial thinking can promote efforts to explore the history, cultural memories, and experiences of a particular group" (Young). I want to utilize what Young calls "color conscious" casting as opposed to blindness. An actor's race is not the least consequential element of their role. For this reason, I propose that Isabella be played by a black woman not as stunt casting, but as a racially aware choice. Black women have a history of being oversexualized and are frequently taken advantage of, especially by people "above them" in the demographic hierarchy. The intersectionality of their identity places them at a unique disadvantage from both the violence of misogyny and racism. Claudio, Isabella's brother, will be played by a black man. His treatment while under arrest and the way his fate is handled by the powerful characters in the play will draw parallels to the complicated and problematic systems of justice and incarcerations we see in our own world. As a white woman, Angela's sexual obsession with Isabella becomes doubly complicated through the same-sex narrative and the fact that it appears to be a racist fetishization of Isabella's features and sexuality, despite the way she dresses and presents herself, which I will elaborate on briefly in the next paragraph, as it relates to this production's setting. Before moving on, I want to quickly note that this

production, as it is animated, would absolutely cast voice actors who are congruent with the characters' race. There has been a widespread issue of animated productions casting white voice actors in the roles of characters of colors, and this production would *not* contribute to that.

Setting this production in a contemporary law office calls to the themes of justice in the play, and also serves as a professional space within which the characters can operate. Angela and the Duke will be costumed in professional suits. Angela will be seen wearing light makeup, a patriarchal bargain that, although her character might not find enjoyable in and of itself, would showcase her necessity to make herself presentable for her predominantly male co-workers, and perhaps showcase some insecurity within herself and her identity, and the way she handles her own power. Isabella would dress conservatively: a long, neutral-tone dress and a head-scarf to emphasize her modesty. A white or khaki color palette for her dress would effectively emphasize her dark complexion as well as symbolize her as a blank canvas upon which the threat of violence may eventually become visible. Seeing her is unsettling, like the audience knows there is always the potential for her to be taken advantage of. As Gina Vivona calls attention to Isabella's virginal status and how it is emphasized in her scenes. Isabella is often referred to by the fact that she is a virgin. In reference to an analysis of Angelo's soliloquy at the end of act 2, scene 2, "Isabella's virginity is a contributing factor in [Angelo's] seduction, but the 'good' intentions produced from her opening and closing mouth ignites the sudden need to dominate her" (Vivona 54). She is, in many ways, an ideal victim. And yet, in the case of this production, Angela is not necessarily the "ideal" perpetrator, thus complicating the stereotypical narrative of sexual assault.

Back to the role of animation in this production, an essay by David McCandleless discusses Julie Taymor's approach to a film production of *Titus Andronicus*, and how stylizing rape within the film forces audiences to grapple with their relationship to violence as entertainment. Stylizing trauma (like Isabella's trauma of Angelo—and perhaps, later, the Duke's—power being wielded against her) can represent it in a way that is "truer" to either the victim or the perpetrator's experience of the event, and additionally

make the event more palatable for wider audiences, and therefore open the floor for conversations about the film's (perhaps satirical) handling of themes of violence, misogyny, and sexual assault as they relate to our own culture and environment. In an era of the Me Too movement, where sexual abuse becomes publicized, we want to consider how we understand and react to the stories which become public. The animated medium of this production would allow us to create interesting stylizations of trauma and character portrayal. I want this production to incorporate new technology blending 2D and 3D forms to create a world that questions the ideals of reality and representation. I propose the setting of the law firm be rendered in 3D, painted in a stylized 2D form to create the illusion of 2D background paint (which is the traditional form of creating backgrounds for animated film). Similarly, most of the characters in the production will be rendered using primarily 3D animation methods but be painted for texture in 2D (much like the character animation seen in Netflix's *Arcane*), to establish the ways in which they are attempting to blend into the appearances of the environment they inhabit. They are three-dimensional people; that is, they bend and break the rules of what is socially acceptable, just as Claudio and Lucio do by having pre-marital sex, and just as Shakespeare himself did (his wife gave birth to their first child a mere six months after their marriage). However, the 2D textured paint on each character will show that they are trying to blend into the 2D painted society they inhabit. However, the rest of their world is also 3D at its core, showing that perhaps trying to assimilate to false notions of the world (false and problematic systems of justice, like Angelo/a's strict rule) may ultimately do more harm than good, and is not the true way to live.

On the other hand, Isabella and Angela will be rendered with heavily stylized 2D methods. Like Netflix's *Klaus*, the lighting and color of the production would follow an approach which borrows heavily from 3D styles, rather than from traditional 2D lighting and paint. This will mark the characters apart from the rest of their cast (thus creating an othered, or queer, interpretation of them, keeping in mind queer theory understandings of *Measure for Measure*, particularly when it comes to Isabella and

Angelo/a. Interestingly, too, rendering victim and perpetrator in the same style immediately places them in a category apart from others on a visual level, as if they were made for one another. Whether this is a mark of romance or affection gone terribly awry by corruptions of racism and power or perhaps merely logistical foreshadowing for the viewer or some mark meant to signal these characters were destined to be in each other's lives, but not for a positive outcome is a question for the viewer. However the last two options are the interpretations I am personally keeping closest in mind throughout this development.

Now, by casting the Duke as a white man, we return to some of the images of an ideal perpetrator of assault and violence. I want to discuss how this production would stage act 5, scene 1, particularly Isabella's reaction to the Duke's proposal of marriage. Although the marriages that will happen after the play's resolution (between Lucio and his one-night-stand, Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, and maybe the Duke and Isabella) seem to mark the play as a happy ending fit for a comedy, this production questions the authenticity of that so-called happiness. Although the Duke does not coerce Isabella in any sexual way, his proposal of marriage to her is met with silence within the text, leaving this open to many interpretive choices. In this production, Isabella will be shown as deeply uncomfortable with the proposal, but unable to escape, trapped mostly by the racist and misogynistic social convention of contemporary modern society. The Duke helped her; he saved her brother, he saved her virtue, and thus perhaps believes he is owed his prize of a bride in Isabella. The "camera" can shift to a shaky hand-held as Isabella looks towards the camera (it could be a slightly comic moment, think in the style of *The Office*), but there is real discomfort. I want this production to emphasize that this is not a happy ending and not a romance. Isabella is, essentially, out of the frying pan and into the fire, and her second time being manipulated by a white person in power is being played off as triumphant. Remember the Duke hired the camera crews, and therefore he controls the narrative.

Isabella's distraught look to the camera can be understood as hoping the camera crew, or even the *viewer* will somehow step in to help her, but the spectator relationship between the viewer and

Isabella means they (we) cannot do anything for her. And after all, she is not real, so her plight is not real. We understand this because it is an animated mockumentary, a blending of genres which twofold alerts us to its non reality. And yet this production forces you to feel for Isabella, really and truly, in this final moment. Additionally, the fact that the film is animated means the viewer knows that those quick glances to the camera are extremely intentional and calculated. Nothing is “accidentally” caught on camera because there is no camera. It is made for your spectating eyes, for you to consume, and thus brings the viewer face-to-face with the challenge of examining the relationship they have with a consuming violence and trauma as entertainment.

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