Names, Reference and Meaning in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract

This paper will illustrate how Shakespeare uses names and references in Measure for Measure with symbolic and especially descriptive meanings. He borrows no names from his two plot sources. Instead, he uses names and references as signs of the social status and/or specific action of the characters. Those with aristocratic status have Latinate names, such as Angelo, Escalus, Claudio, Mariana, and even Lucio. Most of these names are symbolically descriptive of general character, especially of Angelo and Lucio in an ironical sense. However, references to most characters describe their specific action. Even references to the Duke suggest the Latin meaning of the word Duke, i.e., 'ruler,' which is what the Duke in fact does. As a sovereign, the character alludes to King James and a book the king wrote on the "properties" of good government. Similarly, the name Isabella is the Italian form of Elizabeth and probably alludes to Queen Elizabeth and the image she cultivated of virginity. Characters with common status, 183 especially those who are in jail, usually have English names that also describe what they do.

That is to say, family names function as occupational labels, such as Overdone, Keepdown, Abhorson (who does what most people abhor), and the reference Provost, who simply does exactly what a provost should. There are also an unusual number of tag names (lexical equivalents) developed purely for the sake of word play and sight gags. These names and references emphasize Shakespeare's focus on character action.

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This paper comes from a book-length project in which I hope to catalog Shakespeare's uses of proper names and other specific references to characters such as occupational and dramatic labels. I hope to finish rough draft analyses of Shakespeare's fourteen comedies by February of 2012. Today I'll share with you my draft analysis of the names in *Measure for Measure*, a play he probably wrote in late 1603, roughly in the middle of his career.

It is not grouped by scholars among his "festive comedies," but is commonly referred to as a "problem comedy," focusing at least ostensibly on the properties of good government as the central issue but reflecting the ironies of justice, morality, and power. In 1603, Queen Elizabeth died, and James I came to the throne after he himself had written a book describing good government as a balance of strict laws and merciful enforcement.

Shakespeare borrowed a plot (but none of the names) about a puritanical deputy who is given power by the duke to enforce the moral laws of Vienna more strictly. Vienna, as the audience is led to assume, is full of thugs, drunkards, and especially prostitutes – much as London actually was in Shakespeare's time, especially in the area of the theaters.

In contrast to the riffraff, there is also a young nobleman named Claudio whose marriage has been delayed because of technicalities with the dowry, but who has gotten his fiancée, Juliet, pregnant. According to the letter of the law, he is guilty of fornication, which is a capital offense, and the deputy says he must be beheaded as an example and deterrent to the common elements of society.

Claudio asks his sister, Isabella, who is about to take her final vows as a nun and is very proud of her virtue (i.e., her virginity) to plead for his life. She does so, and the puritanical deputy is enthralled by both her virtue and eloquence – so enthralled, in fact, that he offers to

spare Claudio's life if Isabella will sleep with him. The deputy is named Angelo, but he proves to be not at all angelic in his enforcement of the law.

The play is not a tragedy because the duke, named Vincentio, did not leave town as he told Angelo but went into disguise as a friar. In his disguise, the duke arranges for Marianna, who had been affianced to Angelo long ago, to substitute for Isabella in Angelo's bed. Thus, Angelo becomes guilty of the same crime as Claudio; however, Angelo compounds his hypocrisy by reneging on his promise and confirming his order that Claudio be executed. The name *Angelo* is obviously ironical, but more importantly the name also points to the ambiguity of the moral principles for which the character stands.

There is similar ambiguity in all the major characters. Isabella chooses to maintain her virginity rather than save her brother's life. Then in the last lines of the play, the duke offers to make her a duchess:

> Dear Isabel,
> I have a motion much imports your good,
> Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
> What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine.
> So bring us to our palace, where we'll show
> What's yet behind, that's meet you all should know. (5.1.534-539)

Shakespeare ends the play with these words and doesn't have Isabella give her answer, leaving us to guess her answer and the degree of her commitment to virginity and service to God.

All the names and references in this play are listed below and are of two general sorts. First of all, there are the names of characters with aristocratic social status. As with the name *Angelo*, these names relate to the general themes of the play, functioning in some ways like the allegorical names of the old morality plays but usually in an ironical sense. Obviously, these are the characters that matter the most in a stratified society – characters such as Duke Vincentio, Angelo, Isabella, Escalus, and even the degenerate Lucio.

The second type of name refers to the commoners or impoverished gentlemen. These names describe either what the character does (dramatically or occupationally) or the physical appearance of the character. Examples include Mistress Overdone, Kate Keepdown, Abhorson, Pompey, or Elbow. These characters often appear initially with simple labels referring to their occupations or dramatic functions and are later referred to by a name that lends color to the action. Pompey, for example, is at first referred to as Thomas Tapster, one of his jobs in Overdone's establishment, but the name *Pompey* is a joke about his physical appearance. The Provost, on the other hand, has a specific dramatic function in the story that is also his occupation, and he does not become the subject of a joke or a comment with which to color the action.

Thus, Shakespeare's imaginative process appears to have begun with a focus on the types of characters needed within a story. Common characters are referred to initially with dramatic or occupational labels, and as the play develops, names emerge as jokes or epithets, giving greater specificity and color and relating the action to what the audience can see or may know from the cultural context.

For the remainder of my presentation I would like to read the analyses I have written for two of the names, *Escalus* and *Pompey*, and to ask you to choose additional names from the list below that I might read my analyses of those as well.

Escalus: This name evokes a sense of old nobility. It is the Latin form for the Italian name *Della Scala*, the ruling family of Verona from 1260 to 1389. The ruling prince in *Rom.* is also named *Escalus*, and in that play Shakespeare used the name found in his plot source. In this play, Escalus is an elder statesman, accustomed to influence, and, as the Duke says, knowledgeable "of our people, / Our city's institutions, and the terms / For common justice" (1.1.9-11). However, as knowledgeable as he may be, Escalus does not have the sternness the Duke wants to correct the laxness that has unraveled the laws of Vienna. In fact, Escalus shows the administration of the law with excessive laxness. After a comical interrogation, Escalus releases Froth and Pompey, who are totally unrepentant criminals, with meaningless warnings. He then, by contrast, tells his friend, who is named *Justice*, that "It is but needful" (2.2.282) for the truly remorseful Claudio to be executed. The contrast of these cases is highly ironic and illustrates the obvious absurdity of administering moral laws in Vienna. At the same time, it illustrates the natural mercy in Escalus's heart and the loyalty he feels to his superiors. Shakespeare often displayed these traits as essential marks of human nature and of true nobility.

Pompey: Shakespeare coins two names for this character in pursuit of a sight gag, *Pompey* and *Bum* (see entry). In the First Folio, all stage directions and speech prefixes refer to Pompey as *Clown* (see entry), a generic term for the player of such roles in the acting company, but this generic reference is never heard by the audience. In 1.2, Mistress Overdone refers to him as "Thomas Tapster," and again in 2.1, Escalus initially addresses him as "Master Tapster," a traditional occupational name with an alliterative first name. However, Escalus then asks for a byname, i.e., a name by which he is known among friends, "What's your name, Master Tapster?" (213), and he answers "Pompey." The pronunciation of *Pompey* would have been a near homophone of *pompion*, an old word for 'pumpkin,' and Shakespeare's pun is explicit when Costard refers to himself as "Pompion the Great" in *LLL* (5.2.502). Thus, Shakespeare seems to have inserted the name in this play to poke fun again at the physical appearance of the actor and, of course, at any comparison that might be made to the Roman hero (defeated by Julius Caesar in 48 BCE). The actor-clown would have been costumed with lots of padding or was, in fact, an obese person. At the same time, it may be that the *pompion* joke depended a bit too much on a rustic word because Escalus immediately asks for a second name, and Pompey offers the name *Bum*, a word used in common parlance to refer to a person's buttock, especially suggesting protuberance or rotundity. The visual reference is clear, and Escalus then laughs, "in the beastliest sense you are Pompey the Great" (2.1.218-219), confirming the descriptive function of the name and the ironical association of the clown and the Roman general.

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MM Names & References

Name	First use
Abhorson	4.2.19
Angelo	1.1.5
Barnadine	4.2.8
Bawd	1.2.44
Boy	4.1 osd
Bridget	3.2.79
Bum	2.1.216
Caesar	2.1.249
Caper, Master	4.3.9
Christians	2.1.56
Citizens	5.1 osd
Clare, Saint	1.4.5
Claudio	1.2.64
Clown	1.2.85
Constable, Master	2.1.258
Copper-spur, Master	4.3.13
Crassus	4.5.8
Death's fool	3.1.11
Deep-vow, Master	4.3.13
Devil, the	2.4.16
Dizzy, young	4.3.12
Drop-heir	4.3.12
Duke, the	1.1 osd
Elbow	2.1.41 sd
Elbow, Mistress	2.1.98
Emperor of Russia	3.2.88
Enemy, cunning	2.2.179
Escalus	1.1 osd
Flavius	4.5.6
Form, O	2.4.12
Fornicatress, the	2.2.23
Forthlight, Master	4.3.16
Francisca	1.4 osd
Frederick	3.1.210
Friar	2..3.3
Froth, Master	2.1.41
Gentlemen	1.2 osd
Grace, your royal	5.1.3
Half-can, wild	4.3.17
Hannibal	2.1.178
Heaven	1.1.32
Highness, your	5.1.514
Iniquity	2.1.172
Isabel(la)	1.4 osd

Name	First use
Jove	2.2.111
Juliet	1.2.114
Justice	1.3.29
Kate Keepdown, Mistress	3.2.199
King of Hungary	1.2.2
Liberty	1.3.29
Lodowick	5.1.125
Lords	1.1
Lucio	1.2 osd
Mariana	3.1.209
Mercy	2.1.283
Messenger	4.2.100
Mitigation, Madam	1.2.44
Morsel, my dear	3.2.54
Mother, the	1.4.86
Nature	1.1.36
Officers	1.2.115
Overdone, Mistress	2.1.83
Pardon	2.1.284
Peter, Friar	4.3.137
Philip and Jacob	3.2.201
Pigmalion's images	3.2.45
Place, O	2.4.12
Pompey	2.1.214
Pots	4.3.18
Prince	5.1.22
Provost	1.2.114
Pudding	4.3.15
Ragozine	4.3.71
Rash, Master	4.3.4
Rowland	4.5.8
Servants	2.1 osd
Shoe-tie, Master	4.3.17
Starve-lackey, Master	4.3.14
Tapster, Thomas	1.2.112
Thomas, Friar	1.3 osd
Three-pile, Master	4.3.10
Trot	3.2.50
Valentius	4.5.8
Varlet	2.1.167
Varrius	4.5.11 sd
Vincentio	d.p.
Virgin	1.4.16
Wench	2.2.123