

# SHAKESPEARE AS BIBLICAL PERFORMANCE CRITIC

**Sheila Rosenthal**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5087-0325>

Independent Researcher, United Kingdom

[rev.s.rosenthal@gmail.com](mailto:rev.s.rosenthal@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss a moment from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, which may be seen to present elements of Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) techniques. I explore the revealing of Claudio in Act 5, Scene 1 as an example of Shakespeare's appropriation of Biblical material for use in a stage play. I then examine the attitudes of some theologians and film-makers to the presentation of the raising of Lazarus and to comedic festivity. I suggest that Shakespeare's use of Biblical material in his plays may afford insight for further exploration by and use in Biblical Performance Criticism.

**Keywords:** Bible text as script; comedy; festivity; Lazarus; *Measure for Measure*; performance; Shakespeare

## GOD ON STAGE

The intertwined roots of liturgy and theatre are buried deep in Western society. According to conventional wisdom, the Greeks began theatre with the Dionysian festivals; although one commentator has claimed this honour for Judaism (Feldman 1960, 215–37). The use of theatre to spread the Gospel is not new, despite the early opposition faced from Christian hierarchy by actors and theatre in general—an attitude which persisted into the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

The regular presentation of the Mystery Plays offered entertainment and education to a largely illiterate population throughout the Middle Ages and up to the time of Shakespeare. When they were banned<sup>2</sup> the amateur Guild-based theatre was replaced

1 For the attitude of the early Church to theatre, see Halliwell (2008). See also Barish (1981).

2 The plays were banned in 1534, although it was likely that Shakespeare saw a version of the Mystery

by professional actors. Playwrights were eventually prohibited from portraying the Christian God, Anglican ministers, sacraments and the Prayer Book on stage, but not of biblical material.<sup>3</sup>

The many Biblical references in Shakespeare's plays suggest that he was very much familiar with the Bible, and might have owned a copy,<sup>4</sup> or, through required church attendance he would have heard the Bible read several times a week. Quotations and allusions in his plays to Biblical passages refer to passages other than those set out in the lectionary, strengthening the claim that Shakespeare privately read a Bible.<sup>5</sup>

Paffrath (1994), like Benson (2009) and Marx (2000) has shown how Shakespeare's use of the Bible gave inspiration for some of his action—perhaps most easily identified is the resurrection scene of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. When we watch the moment when Hermione returns to life, we may imagine how the disciples felt at the quickening of any of those whose life was restored in the Gospels. Other biblical themes are identifiable—the prodigal son, for example in *As You Like It*. The theological polemic of his age was set out in his plays. *Hamlet* discusses so much theology such that it is invidious if not foolhardy to isolate just one.

Shakespeare freely used the Bible as a source no less than he used Ovid and Holinshed. It is not my intention in this article to reiterate literary criticism of the plays nor theological exegesis of the Gospels. Instead, I will refer to performance history to show how the acted play presents cameos of Biblical events—in this instance, the unbinding of Lazarus as found, I suggest, in *Measure for Measure*.<sup>6</sup>

## MEASURE FOR MEASURE AND JOHN 11

With regards specifically to John 11 and its brief appearance in *Measure for Measure* (hereafter *M for M*), John 11 would have been read according to the contemporary lectionaries at Evenson in January and Morning Prayer in March, July and November.<sup>7</sup>

However, before this narrative becomes an exploration of the Biblical knowledge of Shakespeare I want to propose Shakespeare as an early exemplar for Biblical Performance Criticism techniques.

- 
- Plays as a boy. See Hamlin (2013, 104) especially fn 63. See also White (2004), and Cox (1989, 39).
- 3 See Noble (1935, 82). The 1559 Act of Uniformity banned the presentation on stage of any clerical (i.e., the clergy) office or any mockery of the Book of Common Prayer.
- 4 See Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (2013, 11).
- 5 For authors setting out Shakespeare's Biblical references see Shaheen (1999); Battenhouse (1994); Taylor and Beauregard (2003).
- 6 Max Harris (2005, 24–25, 99–101), also uses *Measure for Measure* as an example of the variability of performance and how actions add to the interpretation of words. Harris is not drawing a comparison between John 11 as I am doing here, but cites the scenes in which Claudio talks with the disguised Duke and in which Isabella decides whether or not to marry the Duke.
- 7 The 1559 Prayer Book was used in Elizabethan and Jacobean times.

## THE PLAY'S THE THING....

Rhoads is attributed with having first used the term Biblical Performance Criticism as a theological methodology in 2006 (cf. Wendland 2008, 1). Maxey (2007, 1, 36) defines it thus:

Biblical Performance Criticism seeks to understand the performance of Christian traditions in the oral cultures of the early church, aspects of which include the performer, audience, context, and text. ... [It] analyses a biblical text through the translation, preparation, and performance of a text for group discussion of the performance event. Such a methodology seeks to foster the appreciation of performance for the appropriation of the Bible in the modern world.

A prominent aim of BPC scholarship is, as Wendland (2008, 4) states:

to analyse the entire hypothetical performance event, including the complete oral composition in relation to performer and audience, their historical circumstances and social location, the physical locale and interpersonal setting, the audience's reactions, as well as the presumed rhetorical and transformative impact of the communication event as a whole.

With this in mind I suggest that the “communication event” of *M for M* affords an insight through the performance of the moment when Lazarus was unbound. It may give us a glimpse of what may have been the Gospel-writer's understanding. While Shakespeare's works are patently not of the “early church”, the stage performances nevertheless, have pertinence to BPC scholarship, if the case for their being examples of performances of the Gospel narrative is accepted.

## A HISTORY AND RESUMÉ OF *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

The play was probably written in 1604. In the play Shakespeare explores many theological themes and doctrines. Schliener (1980, 227) writes that:

No one well acquainted with both the New Testament and Shakespeare's plays can believe that the ‘Christian colouring’ of *Measure for Measure* is merely incidental. In no other play do the central characters evoke specific biblical passages and theological concepts to explain their crucial deeds; in no other are the allusions so prominent; in no other do they define so distinct and consistent a pattern. The duke need not be God, but we must account for these allusions somehow; this is Shakespeare's most theological play.

*M for M* is often referred to as a “problem play”, but this is a description Shakespeare would not necessarily agree with. The term was first used, as Jamieson (1972) points out, by Edward Dowden in 1875. The play appears in the First Folio as the fourth of 14 listed comedies; there is no category for “problem plays.” There is much “adult” humour in *M for M*, in both the subplot and main plots. As with all Shakespearean comedies, the play ends with marriages—although modern productions may cavil to such an ending; for to be sure to our modern sensibilities, the marriage of at least two

of the three couples on stage may be said to be as “cruel” as is the forcing of Shylock to become a Christian in the *Merchant of Venice*.

For those unfamiliar with the plot or characters in *Measures for Measure*, here follows a brief resume:

The setting is Vienna, with Duke Vincentio as the head of the city. Perturbed by the immorality of its citizens (the city is rife with promiscuity and bawdiness) and wanting to re-establish law and order, Vincentio proposes to leave the city and hands over control to his deputy, Angelo. The Duke appears to leave but later returns, disguised as a monk who frequents the prison as a confessor. Angelo sets about closing the brothels and enforcing strict morality laws. This includes the punishment for the sin-now-crime of intercourse outside marriage. Such an offence has been committed by Claudio, whose girlfriend is pregnant and Claudio is therefore to be executed. Claudio’s sister, Isabella, a novice, pleads with Angelo for her brother’s life. Angelo falls for Isabella at their first meeting and contrives to have sex with her, setting this as a condition for sparing Claudio’s life. Isabella is horrified and conflicted at having to choose between her chastity and her brother’s life. The disguised Duke hears of this and arranges for several deceptions to be put in place to trap Angelo and ensure that the life of Claudio is preserved. The Duke also encounters Isabella in prison when she is visiting her brother. However, he does not reveal his true identity.

The Duke arranges for a woman known as Mariana, to whom Angelo was once betrothed to take Isabella’s place when Angelo exacts his price for freeing Claudio. The meeting takes place at night and therefore, Angelo doesn’t know with whom he is having sex. Nevertheless, Angelo orders Claudio’s execution. But on hearing this the Duke arranges with the prison governor for a substitute severed head to be shown to Angelo. Isabella is then later told by the disguised Duke that her brother is dead.

There is a subplot centred on the life of the brothel and a pimp Lucio, who joshes with the Duke-disguised-as-a-monk, claiming to know the Duke well. Lucio brags of making a woman pregnant but that the woman was so ugly that he would never marry her. The comic bawdiness of the brothel and its inhabitants makes up the raucous adult-humour subplot and set a foil for the relationships of the main plot.

In the final scene the Duke returns. In the public forum he seeks to address grievances. As Angelo’s deception and hypocrisy come to light, the Duke orders Angelo to marry Mariana and then be executed for the self-same crime that Claudio was accused of—sex outside marriage. The Duke orders that prisoners be brought from the jail to be dealt with, and these include Claudio. He appears on stage bound and muffled. The Duke orders that the prisoners be unbound and un-muffled, instantly revealing that Isabella’s brother is still alive. Angelo realises that he has been caught-out, Isabella realises she still has her brother. Claudio marries his girlfriend, Angelo marries Mariana, Lucio is made to marry the ugly woman and the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella. If this play is realised as a comedy then the marriage of Isabella and the Duke is inevitable. If *M for M* is played as a dark comedy (or a problem play) the marriage of Isabella to the Duke

will be left in the balance.<sup>8</sup> In the 2011 RSC production this is exactly what happened and each night the play's ending would be left to the actor playing Isabella to decide.<sup>9</sup>

## POSSIBLE STAGE REACTIONS

The moment where Shakespeare interprets a Gospel narrative is the unmuffling of Claudio. The stage directions implicit in John and the stage action of the play at this point are like for like—that is, I suggest a presentation in cameo of John 11:44; for this presentation of Claudio closely resembles the appearance of Lazarus at the very moment he is unbound and “unmuffled.” I further argue that by looking at the unmuffling of Claudio we are able to have a glimpse of two scenes superimposed on one and the other. The reading of the Gospel script needs to be a careful and meticulous one to see how theatrically clever both John and Shakespeare have been. On stage the reaction to this unmuffling—that is, the unbinding and letting go—is a moment of wonder and joy, surprise, shock and delight—and there are several aspects of interest observed by the Biblical interpreter. We see Shakespeare's use of dramatic tension and the building up to revelation and judgement—will the monk reveal himself, will Angelo get his comeuppance, will Mariana get her man, how will it turn out? We have some idea because this is billed as a comedy.

In John 11 we also see the built up of tension, the waiting before Jesus goes to Bethany, His apparent callousness when He took his time before going to Bethany, rolling the stone away (presumably effected by the heftier disciples), the calling out to

8 For theatre performances of *M for M* that present a variety of endings, see D. J. Hopkins and S. Orr (2005, 97.versity). Hopkins writes of the 2004 Globe Theatre, London production: Many of the actors in the Globe production incorporated silences into their lines, silences in which the characters and the audience could register the magnitude of one of Angelo's commands or a decision hanging in the air before Isabella. Early in the play Isabella's attempts to regroup and appeal to Angelo's mercy on behalf of her brother, and a silence marked Angelo's realisation of the magnitude of his attraction for Isabella. These and other moments of wordlessness paved the way for Isabella's silence at the end of the play, when the Duke suddenly reveals his love for her by asking for her hand in marriage. Simon McBurney in *'Measure for Measure' by William Shakespeare: A Collaboration between the National Theatre and Complicite Background Pack* p.4. Accessed September 2014. [http://www.complicite.org/pdfs/Measure\\_for\\_Measure\\_Workpack.pdf](http://www.complicite.org/pdfs/Measure_for_Measure_Workpack.pdf). McBurney writes: For some it is a play of tests, or a play of judgments; for others it is all about the relation between divine and secular law; yet more see it as a play about sex and punishment. In rehearsal one thing is clear above all. When it is 'stood up' it works. The meaning is revealed in the body...All questions must be reduced to one question. Not what does it mean, but how does it come alive? See also Aebischer (2008, 1).

9 See RSC Education Pack for 2011 production. Accessed September 2014. [http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc\\_measure\\_2011\\_teachers\\_interview\\_pack.pdf](http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_measure_2011_teachers_interview_pack.pdf). Note the following part of an interview with Raymond Coulthard who played the Duke “[I]n rehearsal you make choices, and what the director's choice is and the other actor's choices are aren't necessarily what your choice is. So I'd been playing that the Duke loves Isabella, but there was always the possibility that when we got to the end Jodie [McNee who played Isabella] would decide that she couldn't possibly go with the Duke.” I have not been able to establish who conducted the interview.

what everyone believes is a corpse, and the moment of suspense as onlookers wait for something (or nothing) to happen, until all heaven breaks lose.

## JOHN AS PLAYWRIGHT

In this section I will move between the play and the Gospel to illustrate their similarities.

John seems to me to have been a man with a strong sense of theatre with more than just a passing idea of how to write a scene for the play—perhaps he frequented the theatre at Sephoris. He nevertheless, has an annoying habit of putting “stage directions” inside the speech or adding them later in the text such that in preparing the scene for performance the whole narrative has to be read to gather all the information—as does Shakespeare. The 1623 Folio edition of the play has no stage direction for the unmuffling of Claudio because it is implicit that for the action of the play to proceed this will need to be done.<sup>10</sup>

John has a single line deep in his Gospel text, which is easily overlooked which simply says:

When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’<sup>11</sup>

The action of the moment, both implicit and explicit in the Gospel text and play requires that Lazarus/Claudio comes out of the tomb/on stage. Claudio must come on stage with his head covered (to be unrecognisable). The need for Lazarus’ head to be covered is the “stage direction” given in verse 44. Because he is a prisoner Claudio may be bound, hand and feet—therefore he has shuffled on to the stage but he is, most decidedly, muffled. The script of the play requires this—the Duke asks “What muffled fellow’s that?”<sup>12</sup> In many productions a sack covers Claudio’s head, sometimes with eye holes. In some productions Claudio is bound with shackles.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, here Claudio is thought to be dead and he literally *returns* to life. The overall imagery is, I argue, one which mirrors that of the story of Lazarus.

10 See the Folger Internet Shakespeare Edition of the 1623 Folio Edition of *Measure for Measure*. Accessed April 24, 2017. [http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/MM\\_F1/scene/5.1/](http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/MM_F1/scene/5.1/).

11 I have used the NRSV translation here. See below for Geneva and Bishop’s Bible texts.

12 *Measure*, Act 5:1, line 484. William Shakespeare (2005).

13 In the 1978 RSC production (Director: Barry Kyle) Claudio wore “ankle manacles with a straight bar across the ankles” and a “head-bag.” Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford upon Avon, Stage Manager’s script, list of properties for the play; ref. 71.21/1978/RST/MAE/s.2801: *Measure for Measure* props and furniture list, 2nd copy, 30 May. In the 1991 production directed by Trevor Nunn the properties list shows a head bag for Claudio and Barnadine (Shakespeare Centre ref. RSC/SM/1/1991/MEA1 15 August 1991). A head bag with eyeholes was used in the BBC 1994 production directed by Desmond Davis.

When Claudio is presented as still alive, his sister's delight is very evident. This moment, depending on the production, can last moments or minutes.

## ISABELLA

Isabella's reactions are varied, because each production and performance is a live matter, and is subject to the emotions and chemistry generated by the moment and the play's performance agenda. In some plays she swoons, in others she touches Claudio hesitantly, and in others still, her hand is guided by the Duke to touch Claudio. In some plays she hits Claudio, angry with him, then hugs him. We might read into Isabella's reactions those of either Mary or Martha. Also on stage is Mariana, so we see two women reacting to the return to life of one man, as Martha and Mary do in the case of Lazarus.

## THE DUKE

The Duke, who has engineered and manipulated this scene (as Jesus has dictated the timing and action of the Lazarus narrative) sometimes displays satisfaction and joy. Sometimes the Duke unmuffles Claudio, in other productions it is the Provost. For Jesus' reaction we might have to watch Shakespeare's Duke for his reaction and we might superimpose, as it were, the Duke onto Jesus.<sup>14</sup> We might imagine Jesus grinning from ear to ear, hugging Lazarus, Martha and Mary and chuckling, enjoying the adulation and joy of the moment. We rarely wonder how Jesus felt when He performed miracles, but by looking at the Duke we may see something similar to how Christ felt. Why shouldn't we see Jesus being well-pleased with Himself and laughing? For this to happen, we need to be seeing the Duke as motivated by genuine love and compassion. Some productions play the Duke as malicious and lustful, as in The National Theatre's 2004 production.<sup>15</sup> We know from John that Jesus was moved by the people's sufferings; and the crowd's

---

14 This is often a theme of literary criticism of the play, which I have not spaced here to develop.

15 See Michael Billington *The Guardian*, 28 May 2004:

[The National's] production used that silence to underscore Isabella's ultimate powerlessness. In the shocking dual moment when the Duke reveals both his craftiness (at keeping Isabella's brother alive) and his lust for Isabella (and in this production, it was lust), the show came to an absolute, silent standstill. Isabella's shock was palpable and clearly not related to seeing her brother raised from the dead, but rather to the lack of an escape route for herself. She remained in an attitude of shock as the Duke continued his business of arranging marriages all around. At the final moment of the play, there was one more reveal. The Duke said, "What's mine is yours," then with an ominous change in tone, "and what's yours is mine." While saying this line, he gestured upstage, where the scrim flew out to reveal the full vastness of the theatre. In the distance was a small white room containing only one thing: a bed, with a red rose on the pillow. As the lights faded, Isabella was left gasping and choking, desperately trying to find words with which to respond to a proposal that left her with neither choice nor voice.



reactions give us some clue regarding some of the emotions He was experiencing. The gaps in the Gospel description can, to some extent, be filled in on Shakespeare's stage for on stage there *have to be* reactions for the audience to see and engage with, there is no place for silently skating over the difficult moments as some have done (see below). By watching the Duke we can superimpose some of the reactions of Christ. When we do this we engage more directly with Jesus the man, and wonder at the God among us.

## THE ONLOOKERS

We can imagine the reactions of the onlookers in John 11, informed by what we see on stage in *M for M*. Some may faint, some may become hysterical, while some may even run away. Mary might be sobbing because this is what she does, and Martha would be searching for food and a drink for a man who hasn't eaten or drunk for four days. The disciples might be scratching their heads, wondering about the nature of the man they are following. Some of this we may glean from watching the reaction of the crowd in the public forum of the Duke.

There are some reactions from the *on-stage crowd* at the sight of the "newly alive" Claudio—laughter, shock, delight. In the theatre also, there is a reaction from the audience to be accounted for, which often mirrors that of the performers (here we might pause to consider that "knowing" audiences may react as "knowing." Bible readers do, with casual familiarity rather than astonishment). The sense of wonder when we do not know what is going to happen is unalloyed and unedited, we do not readily self-censor wonder and shock. This matter of audiences needs further reckoning with than space here allows—for in the Gospels audiences and their reactions may also inform our understanding of what Jesus was performing.

## FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

Isabella is the feisty, articulate sister to Claudio and can be said to be like the equally articulate and feisty Martha. The less verbose Mariana (a familiar form of Mary, a name that I do not think was randomly chosen) is not unlike Martha's sister Mary. What John does not tell us in this scene Shakespeare does. John does not say what the reactions are to Lazarus coming out of the tomb; and neither does he say explicitly how Lazarus comes out, but having seen how Shakespeare presents a part of this scene, we may now use our imagination to see the rest. The "directorial" options are many: how Jesus says "Unbind him, let him go" might be as authoritative as when the Duke commands the appearance of Claudio. Is he sombre, mischievous, encouraging, with a sense of urgency? Our interpretation of this moment in the Gospel will derive from our own Christological interpretation and theology, but could be informed by the observation of the Duke in Shakespeare's play.



## STAGE OPTIONS

The staging of a play requires that a production “agenda” be established. If it is played as unproblematised then the marriage of Isabella is as assured as that of Rosalind and Orlando or Audrey and Touchstone in *As You Like It*—and the festivities logically follow.<sup>16</sup> The director’s imposition of an interpretation of the play is critical for the overall play and for the moment-to-moment assembling of the scenes. Similarly, our attitude to the understanding of the reading of the Gospels will predetermine how we read the text—sometimes without regard to the implicit stage directions that John inserts and sometimes without any self-awareness of what we are doing. In this latter case, we become more akin to a receiving uncritical audience than active participants of the message.

## THE PRACTICALITIES OF RESURRECTION

I now offer a brief look at funeral practices in Elizabethan/Jacobean England and in Jesus’ time.

The critical matter here is the nature of the grave clothes; for it affects how Lazarus is to move and therefore, sets the reactions of the audience and on-stage characters. The NRSV gives us, as we have seen, “hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth.” This tends to suggest single bindings rather than a mummy-type binding. The Greek has *κερίαια* which Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker (1979, 538) translate as “binding material...something like the strapping material used to web couches.” The Geneva and the Bishop’s Bibles, which Shakespeare may have had access to state that Lazarus was “bounde hande and foote with bandes and his face was bound about with a napkin.”<sup>17</sup> This is similar to Bauer et al.’s (1979) translation and gets us a little closer to identifying what Shakespeare may have had in mind when he read this passage in John. What may take us yet closer is the contemporary practice of

16 This indeed was the very case in a production critiqued by Virginia M. Vaughn by The American Repertory Theatre in 1984. Vaughn writes:

The drive behind these hi-jinx was clearly meant to be sexual. As the Duke complained of his lax people, the audience saw a choreographed pantomime suggesting in orgiastic proportions all the evils of fornication, prostitution, and sado-masochism. The Order of St. Clare was also highly stylised. Attired in rigid headpieces, the nuns entered singing “Salve Regina.” They were titillated however, by Lucio, who flapped his mammoth codpiece at them. Mistress Overdone, Pompey, and Lucio were played as broadly as the text allows. And in case the audience missed the sexual import, the final scene concluded with fountains rising from the stage in sudden ejaculations. The ART made the most of Measure’s lengthy finale. Vincentio and Angelo delivered their public speeches with highly stylised gestures. As the Duke/Friar was at last unhooded, everyone stood and sang. Isabella was suitably stunned by the Duke’s proposal, but when she did accept, fountains surged all over the stage.

It should be added that most productions of *M for M* tend towards adult-entertainment.

17 Hamlin (2013, 11); ff. Noble (1935, 1 – 13). I have quoted here from copies of the Geneva and the Bishop Bibles in private collection.

preparing the dead for burial in Shakespeare's day, but this route is inconclusive, both for Shakespeare and Johannine studies, because there was no set Elizabethan/Jacobean/Jewish way of burying the dead, with the rich or poor being dressed according to the protocol of the family/class—for example, poor families of the deceased burying the corpses naked.

## JEWISH FUNERAL PRACTICES

With regard to Jewish regulations for the disposal of a corpse 2 Samuel 3:31 suggests that bodies were taken to be buried on a bier, but there seems to be no regulation as to whether or not the bodies were to be clothed or covered. It is likely that customs varied then no less than in Elizabethan England or today. John 19:40 tells us that spices were used along with linen cloths “according to the burial custom of the Jews”, but I have found nothing conclusive about the nature of burial cloths or clothing.

However, we should not be overly concerned with exactitudes; for Shakespeare was a practical man of the theatre and John was recounting a miracle. We may be fairly certain that to facilitate a dignified moving of the corpse Lazarus' feet were bound round the ankles and his arms tied to his side, whatever else was covering or holding the rest of his body. Lazarus had “his face wrapped in a cloth”; according to John 11: 44—perhaps as is the custom today (and among some orthodox English Jews among some undertakers when removing the body); his jaw tied up to prevent the lolling of the mouth. Either way, both Lazarus and Claudio have their heads covered prior to being revealed.

One can easily suppose a mummy-type of bandaging in keeping with Egyptian burial practices and familiar practices from films. Murphy (2003, 243) has something similar in mind when she comments on the passage: “Within the logic of comedy, a resurrection scene involves hopping around in one's winding sheet until someone — presumably Martha — unwinds it.”

Winding sheet or mummy-type bandages, either way there is some running around or spinning to be done. Murphy does not articulate what amuses her beyond “hopping around”—but what this whole uncertainty here affords is the exploration of the possibilities and to my point, the exegesis of this narrative by Shakespeare. Murphy's comment also brings me back to the essence of this scene—its intrinsic comedy.

As indicated, the feet are tied, hands bound to the side and the jaw tied with a cloth around the head.<sup>18</sup> This explains how the actor playing Lazarus is bound and how he is to move. If you take John's explicit stage direction seriously then Lazarus comes out as if he is in a sack-race, perhaps mumbling, “get me out of here”, to which Jesus replies—in order presumably to spur the in-shock onlookers into action—“Unbind him; let him go.” Of course this is full of serious theological implication; but is also cue for immense

---

18 I base this on my own experience as a mortician and now as a priest dealing with undertakers.

festivity and merriment, wonder and music, such as is found at the end of Shakespeare's comedies and in eschatological theology.

If one performing takes the stage cues seriously, John 11:44 cannot be ignored. This raises the question about the nature of "performance." Holland (2007) uses a broad definition of performance in relation to Biblical texts, which in my opinion is too broad. He writes:

Each community has an evolving tradition in regard to the performance of the biblical text, both of performance itself (reading aloud in worship, reading silently, reading aloud to family, and so on) and of how such performance is to be apprehended and understood by the community (334).

Silent readings, no matter how imaginative, do not constitute a performance, and do not therefore, spark the reaction of an audience.<sup>19</sup> Whether we take Brook's (2008) definition of any space walked across by A and watched by B, or the more complex definition offered by Fischer-Lichte (1991), silent readings do not offer a steel to sharpen the blade of interpretation. Thus, the performances of the Gospel as delivered by Shiner<sup>20</sup> offer a qualitative insight into the communicative potential of a narrative because, as with the staging of a play, the "awkward moments" have to be dealt with. Furthermore, acting in front of an audience immediately presents us with another set of reactions—those of the audience. With them in play, the performance does indeed become live. It is fundamental to the methodology of BPC that the words once spoken, remembered, re-performed and then written down are best received and perceived in performance—and in the performances of some of Shakespeare's plays we have the opportunity to see some Gospel two-dimensional texts undergo transformation to a three dimensional script.

## THEOLOGICAL BLIND-SPOT

The above comedic exegesis is anathema to some who recoil in horror that trivial, low comedy can be applied to the high theology of raising a man from the dead. Theology that is concerned with words and their meanings is not always given to seeing a picture—perhaps a case of not being able to see the wood for the trees? Rather than using examples of such I will look instead at a rare few examples where this passage has at least been glimpsed at through a less literal and more visual lens—and not always favourably.

---

19 For a discussion of the definition of performance and actor, see Stern (2014, 3 – 5) and Woodruff (2008).

20 Shiner (2003). Shiner's performances of Gospel narratives are also available online, see for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBxwqKozFpk>. Accessed January 25, 2018.

Murphy refers to Lazarus “hopping around.” Hendriksen (1961, 159) understates this:

How this happened we do not know, for it was a miracle and a miracle transcends human understanding....A vivid picture is drawn of Lazarus stepping out of the grave.... It seems that though bound hand and foot, Lazarus was able to walk, though perhaps with difficulty.

Stibbe (1993, 125) recognises this fact but shies away from the implicit festive comedy: “In what is essentially a comic story, the disciples function as the typical, ignorant buffoons.”

Brown (1966, 427) will have none of it:

The sceptical question of how Lazarus got out of the tomb if his hands and feet were bound is really *rather silly* [Italics my emphasis] in an account which obviously presupposes the supernatural. There may be a theological reason for mentioning the burial garments.

Keener (2003, 805) writes:

Some commentators suggest that Jews wrapped corpses less tightly than Greeks did which would have allowed Lazarus at least to shuffle out under his own power; yet such an activity would demand an extraordinary amount of patience from the bystanders.

If the miracle cannot be ignored then it is made more feasible. Films which portray this scene tend to be sombre, dull and miserable.<sup>21</sup> The 2003 film, *The Gospel of John*, directed by Saville claims to be a “faithful representation of that Gospel.” It avoids the issue of the moment of rising from death by having the narrator say “Lazarus’ hands and feet wrapped in grave cloths and with a cloth covering his face”, while a dim shadow of what is presumably a head looms into view but out of focus. The music is heavily pseudo-classical in a minor key. There is nothing celebratory or joyous about the occasion. The Zefferelli film (1997), *Jesus of Nazareth*<sup>22</sup> is better in that it at least shows some joyous reactions of the crowd (despite the music), but when he appears, Lazarus looks like an Epstein sculpture.

21 See for example *Son of God* (2014) directed by Christopher Spencer, which totally changes the order of events as well as the script. Accessed January 25 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ6z43EPPq8>. See also John Ortiz (2017) *The Chronological Gospel Movie About Jesus*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MHzM09fwNI>. The script is from the King James Version. This, at 2:40 mins in, shows the raising of Lazarus. There are some smiles but these are outdone by tears accompanied by mellifluously solemn music. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MHzM09fwNI>.

22 Franco Zefferelli, *Jesus of Nazareth* (ITC, 1977). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50liF1rTTGQ> (time in 3:50).

## COMEDY AND VERISIMILITUDE

Of critical understanding of this discussion of parallel texts is the fact that the moment in the play when Claudio is unmuffled is a mere moment of stage action, not the central act. It is unreasonable to expect a Shakespeare production to search out and present any supposed Biblical truth or allusion. The moment when Lazarus appears from the tomb however, is a central moment to that narrative and the avoidance, elision, re-writing or otherwise “doctoring” the moment is a matter of concern to translation and presentation ethics, as well as to Gospel integrity. When film or literary exegesis crop this piece of inconvenient direction they do a disservice and misinterpretation of a miraculous and festive moment. Shakespearean theatre has an excuse, the same may not be said for those involved in presenting the Gospel.

The raising of Lazarus is ultimately a moment of celebration. If we pursue Murphy’s line of thought and have Lazarus being unwound by Martha, then we have an even more festively comical “maypole moment”, when the choreography requires a processing round — and—round that is dancing to reveal and revel in the miracle. In theatre there is often dancing as the play ends and why isn’t this the case at the return to life of Lazarus? Why don’t we see mourners turning their dirge to a dance? The message of the Christian Gospels, as pointed out by Frye (1965, 141 –163), Steiner (1961) and others is one which is essentially the message of comedy in that the story ends happily ever after, with festivity and feasting, with reconciliation and forgiveness.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I used a brief moment from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* to suggest that there is value in using Shakespeare as a light by which to read John 11. I suggest that the performance possibilities in John 11 have been exploited by Shakespeare, and that we may gain insight into the Gospel from the manner in which this has been done. There are other similar moments tucked away in Shakespeare’s works, which may illuminate the Gospels and be fruitful for Biblical performance critique. The moments require an alertness for recognising fragments of scenes and Gospel narratives inside the secular script but the rewards for Christology, comedy and exegesis in general make the discipline worthwhile. This also applies to the epistles, but this is beyond the scope of this article.

## REFERENCES

- Aebischer, P. 2008. “Silence, Rape and Politics in *Measure for Measure*. Close Readings in Theatre History.” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 26(4): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0036>.
- Barish, J. 1981. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Battenhouse, Roy W, ed. 1994. *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bauer, W., William Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. 1979. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*. 2nd ed., augmented. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Benson, S. 2009. *Shakespearean Resurrection. The Art of almost Raising the Dead*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Billington M. 2004. "Review: Theatre; Last night's show; Measure for Measure." *The Guardian*, May 28, 2004.
- Brook, P. 2008. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin.
- Brown, Raymond E. 1966. *The Gospel According to John*. New York: Doubleday & Company Inc.
- Cox, John D. 1989. *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400860012>.
- Feldman, Louis H. 1960. "The Orthodoxy of the Jews in Hellenistic Egypt." *Jewish Social Studies* 22(4): 215–37.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. 1991. "Theatre in Cultural Contexts." *Semiotica* 86: 112–132.
- Frye, N. 1965. "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy." In *Comedy Meaning and Form*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan, 141– 162. California: Chandler Publishing Company.
- Halliwell, S. 2008. *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511483004>.
- Hamlin, H. 2013. *The Bible in Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harris, M. 2005. *Theater and Incarnation*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199677610.001.0001>.
- Hendriksen, W. 1961. *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. London: Banner of Truth Trust.
- Holland, G. 2007. "Playing to the Groundlings: Shakespeare Performance Criticism and Performance of the Biblical Texts." *Neotestamentica* 41(2): 317 – 40.
- Hopkins, D. J., and Orr, S. 2005. "Performance Review." In *Review: Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare and Mark Rylance: Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare and Simon McBurney*, edited by Sonja Arsham Kuftinec, 97–100.
- Jamieson, M. 1972. "The Problem Plays, 1920 – 1970: A Retrospect." In *Shakespeare Survey*, edited by K. Muir, 1–10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi:10.1017/CCOL0521085284.001>.

- Keener, Craig S. 2003. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Marx, S. 2000. *Shakespeare and the Bible. Oxford Shakespeare Topics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maxey, J. 2007. "Performance Criticism and Its Implications for Bible Translation." Paper presented in the group *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, SBL San Diego. November, 1 – 36.
- McBurney, S. 2004. 'Measure for Measure' by William Shakespeare: A Collaboration between the National Theatre and Complicite Background Pack. Accessed September 25, 2014. [http://www.complicite.org/pdfs/Measure\\_for\\_Measure\\_Workpack.pdf](http://www.complicite.org/pdfs/Measure_for_Measure_Workpack.pdf).
- Murphy, F. A. 2000. *The Comedy of Revelation: Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Naseeb, S. 1999. *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark, London: Associated University Presses.
- Noble, R. 1935. *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge: And use of the Book of Common Prayer as Exemplified in the Plays of the First Folio*. London: SPCK.
- Ortiz, J. 2017. *The Chronological Gospel Movie about Jesus*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MHzM09fwNI&t=6s>.
- Paffrath, B. 1994. *Die to Live: Das Motiv der Auferstehung in Shakespeare's Dramen* (German Edition). Trier: WVT Scientific Publishing House.
- RSC Education Pack for 2011 production. Accessed September 13, 2014). [http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc\\_measure\\_2011\\_teachers\\_interview\\_pack.pdf](http://www.rsc.org.uk/downloads/rsc_measure_2011_teachers_interview_pack.pdf).
- Shakespeare, W. 2005. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare Centre Library, Stage Manager's script, list of properties for the play ref. 71.21/1978/RST/MAE/s.2801: *Measure for Measure* props and furniture list, 2nd copy, May 30 1978.
- Shakespeare Centre, Stratford upon Avon ref. RSC/SM/1/1991/MEA1 15 August 1991.
- Schleiner, L. 1980. "Providential Improvisation in *Measure for Measure*." *PMLA* 97(2): 227–236. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462189>.
- Shiner, W. T. 2003. *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Steiner, G. 1961. *The Death of Tragedy*. London: Faber.
- Stern, T. 2014. *Philosophy and Theatre: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.
- Stibbe, Mark W. G. 1993. *John*. London: T&T Clark.



Taylor, D., and David N. Beauregard, eds. 2003. *Shakespeare and the Culture of Christianity in Early Modern England. Studies in Religion and Literature, no. 6*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Wendland, E. 2008. "Performance Criticism: Assumptions, Applications, and Assessment." *TIC Talk: Newsletter of the United Bible Societies Translation Information Clearing House* 65: 1–11.

White, P. W. 2004. "The Bible as Play in Reformation England." In *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume I, Origins to 1660*, edited by Jane Milling and Peter Thomson, 87–115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521650403.004>.

Woodruff, P. 2008. *The Necessity of Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195332001.001.0001>.

#### Films

Ortiz, J. 2017. *The Chronological Gospel Movie about Jesus*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MHzM09fwNI&t=6s>.

Spencer, C. 2014. *Son of God*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJ6z43EPPq8>.

Zeffereilli, F. 1977. *Jesus of Nazareth*. Accessed January 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50liF1rTTGQ>.