Syllabus: A Performance History of MEASURE FOR MEASURE (HEREAFTER often MM)
Kathleen George, Professor, Theatre Arts

RATIONALE AND DESCRIPTION
The Source of the Course
I once almost wrote a stage history of Measure for Measure for my dissertation in theatre. I had fallen in love with the play and studied it a great deal when I realized I would rather write about something else—Rhythm as an organizing concept in drama. (I was directing all the time and I wanted to write about how plays carried meaning through rhythm.). But I carried with me for years the history on MM as I saw it: how different eras chose to focus interest, including what star actors wanted to play. In the Restoration period in England, for instance, MM was changed/ adapted by William Davenant into The Law Against Lovers (a mishmash with Beatrice and Benedict imported from Much Ado). There was also a version by Charles Gildon as Beauty The Best
Advocate. Both playwrights were interested in improving Shakespeare’s language and Davenant seems to have been intent on *cheering up the play.*

Scholarship for me will always focus on text and performance and how text comes to performance because of what I do. I was a long time director and am now a writer. In the graduate seminar in Spring of 2023, I will be using my specialties to help this class (likely, at this writing) made up of PhD theatre scholars and MFA actors and even hopefully wonderful surprises from other departments. We will examine, tear apart for study, and then examine the performance history of MM—a brilliant play many people call “difficult.” I’ve started work on what I think my own strongest contribution will be: an analysis of the writing choices made by William Davenant and Charles Gildon in their adaptations of MM for the Restoration stage.

Mainly after we study the play and critical commentary on the play, we will examine other performance histories in order to eventually make some decisions about how we want to structure the whole study. *Constantly reporting, speculating, and performing portions of our work will make this project people friendly, a study of an academic subject meant for the bigger world.* We will ask: What is the story we want to tell? What is the narrative of the performance history of *Measure for Measure?* We will examine other studies that have told the history chronologically and others that do case studies of certain important (defined as having a large reach and an accessible history) productions. I even think it is possible to tackle this play by its three prominent characters because different productions, even different centuries, appear to decide *whose play it is,* whose story is being told. Is it Angelo’s? Isabella’s? The
Duke’s? To some extent we come to understand this by which actor is considered the featured role in a given production.
It is important to me to tell the story of this play in a way that anyone can understand. We have to examine why the low comedy characters (the pimp and the bawd and the brothel customers) and even the idea of sexuality among the main cast is fraught with upsetting actions—so much so that the play itself has been called odious and suffered periods of invisibility. A sampling of disturbing aspects: The Duke deputizes Angelo to clean up the city of vice but while pretending to be traveling, he skulks around the city, disguised as a friar, examining both Angelo and the larger populace. Angelo not only pulls down houses of prostitution but sentences a young man, Claudio, to death for fornication. Claudio “pimps” his sister, Isabella, a novitiate to plead his case with Angelo. It turns out Isabella, about to become a nun, is sexually attractive to Angelo who propositions her with a deal. If she’ll sleep with him, he will release her brother. In other words, this is a play in which everyone is compromised.
Actors know Shakespeare was able to suggest physicalization with words alone. It is likely that Isabella pursues Angelo in Act Two sc. ii only be pursued by him in Act Two, sc. iv. Did most actors play it that way? We will often be examining physical choices. And we will analyze why the characters are likely frozen in the Davenant adaptation. How was the life of the body manifested on stage in the 18th century? Or the 19th?

In the 20th and 21st centuries we have some video sources to help us to write this performance history. But for these centuries and also earlier ones, we will do so by also reading reviews of performances and by studying paintings, drawings, and other photos.
Can we speculate when we read about an actor’s specialties, what their talents were in performance after performance and how they likely played the role in question?

We will attempt, both in writing and in presentation, to bring the history alive.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To get comfortable presenting critical material in a verbal essay
2. To draft and polish writing on what can be a chapter on the subject
3. To understand enough of Shakespeare performance history to be able to teach an undergrad course in the subject
4. To record and share research in a usable way

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Always class participation
2. Five individual reports on a reading when we have a week in which we need to break up the assignments. See week four for example. 50 pts.
3. Two public presentations (including both in person and podcasts). 20 pts.
4. Final paper in two drafts 30 pts.

**Week One**

Introductions, plans for the class, and a reading aloud of portions of the play with pauses for discussion. In this way we will be doing the first preparations for a public reading and discussion.

Arden Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Bloomsbury 2020
**Week Two**

Intensive study of the play text and of essays of interpretation.


Nuttal, A.D. *Shakespeare The Thinker,* Yale, 2007: pp. 262-276


**Week Three**

Study of other performance histories of other plays. What can we learn about the general histories of production? What is like and unlike the fate of MM? Everyone in class will read both books.


**Week Four**

Reports on other stage histories. Everyone will read and report on at least one of them.
Bulman, Jim; Shaughnessy, Robert. *As You Like it*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2017


**Week Five**

The Restoration adaptations. The adapters changed a lot, and their choices are part of the story. Everyone will read the adaptations and class members will report on the other readings.


Davenant, William, *The Law Against Lovers, recording, librivox*.


**Week Six**

18th and 19th c actors and directors


**Week Seven**

18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} C actors and directors continued. Study of visual sources. How can we speculate about performances.

**Week Eight**
19th C preparation for public presentations of material.

Week Nine
Class members will give public presentations: Readings of the MM to audiences, readings of parts of *Law Against Lovers* and *Beauty the Best Advocate*. With discussion. We will record portions of what we do as a podcast.

Week Ten
20th c productions. We will work on the Stratford Ontario Festival season in which James Mason appeared as Angelo in MM. We will also view the BBC TV production of MM featuring Kate Nelligan.


Kennedy, Dennis. *Looking at Shakespeare: A visual History or Twentieth Century Performance* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993

**Week Eleven**

20th and 21st C interpretations.
We will view (provided I can get a copy) Mark Rylance playing Duke Vincenzo. And we will study feminism’s effect on the role of Isabella through actor’s voices. And continue with Carol Rutter’s book on the Isabellas.

**Week Twelve.** Initial presentations of papers that will become chapters.

**Week Thirteen.** TBA. Assessment of what we need to catch up on.
**Week Fourteen**  TBA. Preparing more public humanities presentations/podcasts.

**Week Fifteen**  Presentation of chapters/papers