

## Puritan Economics in *Measure for Measure*

Yan BRAILOWSKY

Weber and Tawney's pioneering studies on Protestantism and the development of capitalism argued Protestantism was "greasing the wheels of the free market and the accumulation of wealth," and opposed it to the rigid medieval economic system. However, recent reappraisals of the links between religious reform and economic change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suggest that traditional distinctions between "medieval" and "Protestant" economics are fuzzy at best. In the words of Kenneth Graham, "Protestant theology itself, and in particular the core doctrine of justification by faith, may actively oppose at least some economic models of thought<sup>1</sup>". Similarly, distinctions between Puritans and Protestants, or between Calvinists and non-Calvinists within the Church of England, have been constantly reassessed, "Puritanism" encompassing a complex and changeable reality – Puritans in the 1580s occasionally held widely different views from their counterparts in the 1630s, and ideas which were deemed too radical for the younger Elizabeth had sometimes become mainstream by the time of James I<sup>2</sup>.

In light of this historical and theological background, I would like to consider *Measure for Measure* as a warning against Puritan economics in the early years of the reign of James I, as well as a paean to a commercial conception of mercy. As I will try to show, Angelo's downfall illustrates the aporetic contradictions at the heart of Puritan economics, the strictures of which contain the seeds of its undoing, whereas mercy – provided it is bestowed with good measure – encourages growth.

---

1. GRAHAM Kenneth John Emerson, "Distributive Measures: Theology and Economics in the Writings of Robert Crowley," *Criticism*, vol. 47, n° 2, Spring 2005, p. 137-158, p. 137; WEBER Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, Scribner, (1905), 1930; TAWNEY Richard Henry, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers, (1926), 1998. I would like to thank María Brander de la Iglesia and my colleague Anny Crunelle for their kind suggestions.

2. See, for instance, LAKE Peter G., "Calvinism and the English Church 1570-1635," *Past & Present*, n° 114, February 1987, p. 32-76.