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ENGH 305, Section 003

Dr. Nanian

**Measuring Gender Inequality**

In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*

***Research Project***

**Scholarly Books**

**1)** The authors of tragicomedies “strategically manipulate gendered generic conventions to heighten the villainy of the persecutors and to denote the innocence of their victims” (Burks 86).

**(Extend)** I plan to use this quotation in my discussion of Isabella to show how her awareness of these conventions allows her to use them for her own purposes. Responding to Angelo’s assertion that men are not immune from weakness, Isabella rigorously highlights the established convention that women are frail: “Nay, call us ten times frail, / For we are soft as our complexions are, / And credulous to false prints” (II.iv.127-29). Isabella’s synopsis of women’s accepted roles demonstrates the common acceptance of these gender roles. However, while Angelo uses his position of power over Claudio’s fate to coerce Isabella into fulfilling his desires, Isabella cleverly takes advantage of these established standards of delicate femininity to evade Angelo’s pleas for her body.

**2)** The women in tragicomedies are usually exposed to mistreatment specifically related to their sexual honor, but “their matchless virtue is underscored by their resistance to both the bribes and the threats of predatory males” (Hope and McMullan 128).

**(Apply)** This quotation helps me discuss how this view of virtue places women on a pedestal where their control of their sexual nature is revered above all else. We see this when Isabella and Mariana use the Duke’s bed trick to fool Angelo into thinking that his bribe exchanging sex for saving Isabella’s brother’s life, has worked. In reality, Isabella demonstrates her virtue through her successful calculated attempts to save Claudio’s life while retaining her chastity. This interaction contributes to the crafting of women’s sexuality as their central defining characteristic.

**3)** Natasha Korda explains how restricted women’s options are in the world of the play, and how dangerous it is for a woman to opt out of those options: “the Duke’s bold statement that a woman is ‘nothing’ if she does not fit into the categories of maid, widow, or wife recalls Isabella’s earlier remark that a woman in this situation [unassigned] is better off dead” (186).

**(Extend)** This quotation will help me explain how Shakespeare uses Isabella’s character to demonstrate how deeply entrenched such rigid societal expectations of women were at that time. Rather than being given the opportunity to disagree with Duke Vincentio’s assessment of Mariana’s complicated position, the female characters in the play are only permitted to quietly consent to his inequitable analysis.

**4)** “The ruse of *Measure for Measure*’s solution to the problem posed by the figure of the placeless singlewoman is that marriage represents a reciprocal exchange of value or ‘worth’ between husband and wife and that this exchange ‘imports’ the wife’s own ‘good’” (Korda 188).

**(Extend)** This quotation will be key to my analysis of the play’s resolution. While glossing over otherwise obvious complications in the name of quickly administering justice, the ending leaves the reader unable to accept any notion of equality between women and men; multiple women are placed into marriages by one man who holds the position of head of state. Situating single women into marriages as the way to avoid sexual corruption and remain with the bounds of acceptable sexual behavior, as defined by the patriarchal state, reinforces the notion that women are incapable of controlling themselves if not restricted by marriage.

**5)** Carol Neely describes how the society Shakespeare depicts both exploits and depends on women: “The primary institutions of the play – Church, Law, Marriage – need women, on the one hand, to ratify their power and authority and, on the other hand, to ameliorate their failures and rigidities – in effect, to confirm and subvert them simultaneously” (16).

**(Apply)** *Measure for Measure* portrays this dynamic through two opposing characters: Isabella, a prospective nun of the Saint Clare order who abjures any sexual desires, and Juliet, a betrothed woman who has prematurely given in to her sexual desires. Isabella takes the role of ratifying the primary institutions of the play while Juliet unintentionally subverts them by being impregnated by Claudio. This quotation thus helps me explicate the central paradox of the play.

**Articles Published in Scholarly Journals**

**1)** Commenting on what many critics have described as Isabella’s quiet acceptance of her own tragic ending, Barbara Baines counters that she “is not silenced but, instead, chooses silence as a form of resistance to the patriarchal authority and to the male discourse within which this authority operates” (299).

**(Rebut logically)** At the end of the play, Isabella is left without the opportunity to voice either her acceptance or opposition to the Duke’s offer. Isabella’s supposed intentional resistance to patriarchal authority does not serve as adequate explanation for her decision to remain silent. Instead, her silence exemplifies the overall silencing of women during this time period by men who determined the terms and outcome of issues involving sexual customs.

**2)** According to Mario DiGangi, Angelo’s arguments to Isabella betray his insecurity regarding women: “Angelo’s doubt, discovered in his evasive grammar, reveals an anxiety about female autonomy (as the super-feminine virgin) and its threat to male desires for ownership and control” (596).

**(Extend)** Referring to the exchange between Angelo and Isabella where he scrutinizes her efforts to refuse his demands, DiGangi comments on the commonly accepted view that men sought to control women’s sexual behavior as a way to retain authority over them:

 Be that you are,

That is, a woman; if you be more, you’re none.

If you be one, as you are well expressed

By all external warrants, show it now,

By putting on the destined livery.

(II.iv.133-37)

Angelo’s proposal to Isabella, and the language describing it, reduces her worth to a purely sexual commodity. This analysis will provide support for my contention that by calling attention to the injustice and cruelty of Angelo’s behavior, as well as his *evasive grammar* and *anxiety*, the play undermines its stated attitudes toward female sexuality.

**3)** “Men mar their own creation in taking sexual advantage of women, a sex whose representatives created them in the first place; a man’s sexuality is a sin against his origin” (MacDonald 270).

**(Apply)** MacDonald’s point applies most clearly when Isabella informs Claudio that she will not trade her virginity for his life. Affronted by his attempt to dissuade her from her original decision, she informs him that his selfish desire not only mimics the general reason for his imprisonment but also counteracts the natural order of things: “Is’t not a kind of incest, to take life from thine own sister’s shame?” (III.i.138-39) This point will help me argue that Isabella is not only a victim of the attitudes in the play, but also participates in them.

**Thesis:** Through the female characters in the fictionalized Vienna of *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare explores issues of sexual morality and gender equality during England’s Jacobean period. Isabella, Juliet, and Mariana all explicitly occupy contrasting positions that demonstrate women’s limited options and 17th century society’s limited view of women’s potential. However, rather than merely reflecting the culture of this era, Shakespeare’s play functions as a sustained critique of this view and its consequences ⎯ a critique made all the more devastating by the play’s use of comedic conventions.

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