

The Individuation of Isabella in *Measure for Measure*

Measure for Measure is one of William Shakespeare's more controversial comedies. Despite the humorous caricatures present as in all Shakespearean plays, the levity of *Measure for Measure* is in conflict with moral questions regarding the human condition, and the hedonism abundant in Vienna is at odds with the religious rigidity presented as the solution for corruption. At the heart of this conflict, soon-to-be-nun Isabella has gone against her beliefs in order to save her brother Claudio from execution for having sex before marriage. Isabella represents the dichotomy between virtue and vice; through a Jungian psychoanalytical lens, she is torn between following her moralistic development as a virginal woman and setting aside her chosen path to rescue Claudio from prison. She is further tested when deputy Angelo offers sex in exchange for Claudio's life, while Duke Vincentio orchestrates her actions in disguise. I contend that Isabella's individuation was denied not by her own actions but by the actions of Angelo, Claudio, and Duke Vincentio, wherein Isabella's journey to the Self as a virginal woman is fractured by the instability of her animus—unable to reconcile with the archetype and reach autonomy.

In *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, C. G. Jung defines individuation as "becoming an 'individual,' and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self" (173). Thus, individuation is seen as coming to terms with one's self. Isabella's individuation goal is established as a life devoted to God as she prepares to enter the convent, but Claudio's imprisonment complicates her path of self-actualization; his crime (premarital sex) opposes her moral beliefs, but his punishment (execution) upsets her dedication to religious mercy. In *Jung's Advice to the Players: A Jungian Reading of Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, Sally Porterfield argues that Vienna is caught in a virgin/whore configuration, where "sexuality has been perverted from a natural human function to a subject of childish, twisted humor or unnatural horror. . . . so that people either overvalue or undervalue sex" (25). As a result, premarital sex becomes punishable by death, while marriage is promoted as the solution to Vienna's prostitution concern, "making [sex] either a god or a devil instead of a healthy part of human experience" (13). Because sex is viewed in such extremes, Isabella serves as the character who adamantly rejects sexual activity with

men, yet by denying sex, it is still embedded in her life. H. R. Coursen's analysis of Porterfield's argument adds that "the comic resolution is that women, both virgins and whores, become wives" (354). Isabella defies both concern and solution by planning to be a nun, yet consequently faces both concern and solution when she attends to Claudio's imprisonment.

In *The Jung Lexicon: A Primer of Terms & Concepts*, Daryl Sharp explains that a goal of individuation "is to differentiate the ego from the complexes in the personal unconscious, particularly the . . . anima/animus" (27). The sexual-versus-moral conflicts of *Measure for Measure* become Isabella's means of making a distinction between her ego as a woman devoted to God and her personal adamancy against sexual desires, introducing her animus, "the compensating figure . . . of a masculine character" identified in women (Jung 205). Jung simplifies the differences between the animus and the anima, its counterpart in men, as follows: "As the anima produces *moods*, so the animus produces *opinions*. . . . Animus opinions . . . have the character of solid convictions that are not lightly shaken, or of principles whose validity is seemingly unassailable" (206-07). For example, Angelo projects his anima onto Isabella,

eclipsing his demands for purity by serving as a symbol of goodness, as seen when she pleads for Angelo to show mercy:

Well, believe this:

No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,
 Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
 The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe
 Become them with one half so good a grace
 As mercy does. (2.2.63-68)

Isabella exalts "the values of love, mercy, kindness, and compassion," and to Angelo, she represents his female self, becoming "passionately obsessed with the idea of possessing his own image" (Porterfield 15, 10). Angelo is sexually aroused by Isabella's purity, the seductress *imago* erupting from his unconscious desires; however, Isabella sees Angelo's proposition as the preface to rape, confirming her anguish against sexual desires as Angelo uses sex as a tool of blackmail. Although in Angelo's perspective, Isabella propositions *him* subliminally as much as he propositions her verbally, Isabella rejects his anima and instead comes into conflict with her animus.

In *The Psyche on Stage: Individuation Motifs in Shakespeare and Sophocles*, Edward F. Edinger's chapter "Measure for Measure: Wholeness Lost and Found" argues that

Angelo represents Law and that Isabella represents Mercy. When Angelo is "[ambushed]" by his unconscious, now "a traitor to his partial principle of Law," Isabella as Mercy is also tested (25). Both Angelo and Isabella must reach moral despair in order to continue toward individuation, wherein Angelo becomes sexually depraved and Isabella becomes ruthlessly honest, refusing him *and* Claudio when both men demand she betray her beliefs:

CLAUDIO. Sweet sister, let me live.

What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue.

ISABELLA. Oh, you beast!

Oh, faithless coward! Oh, dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
From thine own sister's shame?

. . .

I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

. . .

Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade.
Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd;

'Tis best that thou diest quickly.

(3.1.135-153)

Isabella reverses her mercy toward Claudio when Claudio urges her to accept Angelo's sexual proposition, rejecting another man's test to tarnish her faith. She refuses to disobey her principles, and she vilifies Angelo and Claudio for expecting her to do so; she has become "too cold" (2.2.61). Although the scene reads as Isabella wildly changing her moral convictions, it is actually indicative of her animus repression.

According to Jung, "The animus is obstinate, harping on principles, laying down the law, dogmatic, world-reforming, theoretic, word-mongering, argumentative, domineering," traits Isabella displays when facing Angelo and Claudio (124). Arguably, Isabella's clash between her identification with purity and her opposition against vice results in her trying repress her animus, which is why she comes across as reserved to the point of acting religiously superior to others—she is battling with her animus. Isabella's determination to be a nun has evolved into a righteous hatred toward the sexual temptations of man. As Porterfield states, Isabella is "a prisoner of her persona," leading "to a feeling of 'unshakable rightness

and righteousness'" (22). However, Isabella's complications with her animus does not prime her character for marriage. Although Porterfield agrees that "she is faced with the dilemma of reconciling her moral convictions with her actions," the only suitable answer to Isabella's identity confusion is to maintain her relationship with God, as opposed to commencing an earthly one with man (17-18). Angelo wishes for *coniunctio*, or "conjunction," with Isabella in the form of sex, but Isabella is already working toward her own version of *coniunctio*—joining with God (Sharp 22). Her animus instability does not mean the correct course of action is to submit to sexual temptation. Instead, it prevents her from reaching autonomy as a chaste woman, arresting her in a panicked and enraged state and forcing her to face her third test against man: Duke Vincentio.

Behind the events of *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio employs deception to orchestrate the power of Vienna back in his favor. During his machinations, the Duke also grows aroused by Isabella's virginity, albeit discreetly. According to "Duke Vincentio and Angelo: Would 'A Feather Turn the Scale'?" by Richard A. Levin, the Duke uses Angelo as a scapegoat to "ingeniously [protect]

himself from criticism," and then succeeds in both voiding responsibility and obtaining Isabella's chastity for his own consumption (258). While Isabella is able to withstand Angelo and Claudio's demands upon her purity, she is made vulnerable by her animus repression; thus, she is unable to recognize how the duke leers toward her in the same manner as Angelo. Edinger claims that the "dynamic relationship between ego and Self" is exemplified in Duke Vincentio and Angelo: "The Duke [the Self] . . . delegates his transpersonal authority to Angelo (ego)," "Angelo (ego) exercises his delegated authority and . . . identifies with it as though it were his personal possession," and then "the missing Self reappears and there is a Day of Judgment in which the ego is held accountable" (17). Isabella is so caught up in her animus repression, angrily determined to see Angelo and Claudio brought to justice, that she is unprepared when the duke reveals himself, having no opportunity to respond to his advances.

Herein, *Measure for Measure* asserts itself as a problem play. As Coursen asks, can "such a radically dichotomized society . . . be resolved by the conventional ending of comedy, particularly when silence or objection greets segments of the proposed resolution" (354)? Duke

Vincentio unmask in time to demand marriages of several couples, ending with the decision that he and Isabella will marry. Isabella does not have a chance to reply, either negatively or positively; her identity as a virgin is as easily dismissed as if she were a whore, simplified into the role of wife, regardless of her dedication to God. Porterfield argues that Duke Vincentio's marriage proposal to Isabella represents "the whole of the individuation process" (30). However, this assumes that the "phallogentric" solution of turning women into wives provides individuation to all parties (Coursen 354). The fact that Isabella is clearly at odds with her animus signifies that marriage is not the right choice for her; her individuation as a nun is rejected in favor of Duke Vincentio's individuation as a husband for her, though she is not autonomous enough to identify either path. Overall, the morally problematic nature of *Measure for Measure*, punishing those who are sexually active or inactive yet rewarding those who are sexually active *and* married, complicates Isabella's journey to the Self as a virginal woman, fracturing her psyche: because Isabella cannot reconcile with her repressed animus, then she cannot accept "the Duke's assumption that she is willing and able to

leave her chosen calling and meekly agree to be his wife," but she can also not enter the convent with the same religious conviction that she held before (Porterfield 29).

Ultimately, Isabella's animus is left in a state of disrepair, where neither her original dedication to God nor her marriage to the Duke can salvage her identity. She is surrounded by sex—Duke Vincentio's sexual urges are prioritized over her spiritual independence, just as Claudio originally compromises her virtue by being unable to restrain his sexual urges, and Angelo's proposition merely catalyzes sex as preferable to chastity. Thus, Isabella responds viciously against sexual temptation and represses herself, unable to reconcile with her animus and continue toward individuation. Like Shakespeare's other comedies, *Measure for Measure* ends with marriage, but unlike his other comedies, the marriage announcements here are suspicious, forced by a conspiratorial mastermind onto broken characters. While Isabella's response to the Duke's proposal is hotly debated, Isabella has shown that she is no longer prepared for God or man when trapped in the morally-gray world of *Measure for Measure*, leaving her future identity unknown.

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