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Doomed Women in Elizabethan Plays

It seems the topic of many Jacobean and Elizabethan era plays is that of a woman's virtue, and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is no exception. One of the most prominent issues throughout is the question of the value of Isabella's virtue, and whether she should be expected to relinquish it to save the life of her brother who is condemned for engaging in premarital sex. This is a blackmail situation in which if she refuses, her brother will face an excruciatingly torturous death. The characters sway back and forth on the topic, save for Isabella who wants to remain pure, but the reality is that Isabella's virtue is doomed from the very beginning of the play simply because she is a woman of the Jacobean era. It was a vicious cycle that women faced: they must remain pure, yet men consistently attempted to convince them to give in to temptation. But if they did, they were ruined, unmarriageable wenches. The fact that women had very little control over their lives at this time was often reflected in the literature produced. Shakespeare highlights this, among many other issues, throughout *Measure for Measure*, resulting in a very uncomfortable play with an even more unsettling ending.

From the start, the content of the play revolves around sex and prostitutes, including the language, which pops up throughout. One of the very first lines in the play, spoken by the Duke himself is, "You're as pregnant in/ As art and practice hath enriched any/ That we remember," (1.1.11-13). This word choice by Shakespeare foreshadows

the overall subject matter of the play. The use of the word "pregnant" in a manner not pertaining to childbirth occurs two other times, both by Angelo. This was very intentional on Shakespeare's end. He is flooding the reader's senses with sexual vocabulary, thus making the conflict surrounding Isabella's virginity omnipresent. Just moments later, words spoken by Angelo to the Duke are, "I come to know your pleasure" (1.1.28). And in the very next scene, we are introduced to the world of sexual freedom in which Vienna has been indulging. Lucio announces the Bawd's arrival: "Behold, behold, where Madam Mitigation/ comes! I have purchased as many diseases under/ her roof as come to -" (1.2.44-46), which implies that it is not only commonplace to visit brothels in Vienna, but it has been socially acceptable to do so and to discuss in public arenas. The moral dissolution seems to trouble only the Duke, and rather suddenly at that, but the citizens of Vienna have no issues with this way of life. They give in to temptation without any repercussions and are perfectly content with it, it seems. We are only exposed to characters that participate in casual sex, never any families or married couples and there seems to be no desire by any of the characters to change that.

Yet the Duke finally begins to acknowledge the fundamental issue with Vienna: "We have strict statutes and most biting laws,/ ... Which for this fourteen years we have let slip," (1.3.19–21). He explains that those laws are now "more mock'd than fear'd" (1.3.27) because of the lackadaisical manner in which the people of Vienna view them. Yet even with the change in leadership and appointing Angelo in charge, the play still

revolves around sex, but it has shifted to the eradication of it. Claudio is not only arrested for engaging in sex, but he is sentenced to die for "getting Madam Julietta with child" (1.2.70), the woman to whom he is engaged. Angelo punishes nobody who has casual sex, such as Lucio. It is only Claudio, who fully intends to and desires to marry Julietta, who is forced to be an example for everyone, which proves how arbitrarily Angelo is ruling Vienna. With this drastic enforcement of the law, many people, such as the Bawd, who made their living off of sex, will now be faced with the task of finding a new way to support themselves. "Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat,/ what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am/ custom-shrunk," (1.2.79-81) she says in response to learning that Angelo intends to shut down all the brothels in Vienna.

The juxtaposition between these loose, immoral characters and Isabella, whom we do not even meet until Act 1 Scene 4, is shocking, like crashing into a brick wall. The whole world has been described in such sexually explicit terms up to this point that it is no wonder she wants to escape from the feeling of incest and grotesqueness that plagues the city to become a nun. "And have you nuns no farther privileges?/ ... I speak not as desiring more,/ but rather wishing a more strict restraint/ upon the sisterhood," (1.4.1, 3-5) she pleads to a nun at the convent. By becoming a nun, she is attempting to completely rid her life of men and, consequently, sex. The nun at the convent says to her, "When you have vowed, you must not speak with men/ But in the presence of the Prioress" (1.4.11-12). She is so disgusted with the direction that Vienna has gone, that

she wants literally nothing to do with it; she is going to lock herself away with only women and a life so restricted and confined. This is such a severe reaction to her world and it is fascinating to think about the idea that this young woman was driven to such drastic measures. But this desperation for purity is evidence enough and foreshadowing that she will be unable to achieve such purity.

We are led to believe that Isabella remains in control of her integrity based on the conversations that occur between her and Angelo. But with the pressure from her brother to save him rather than her virtue, the audience realizes that there cannot possibly be a happy outcome from the play. Isabella is either going to give herself over to Angelo for the sake of her brother or she is going to remain pure at the expense of his life. Yet, after some consideration and a rather Protestant musing on death and the afterlife, Claudio begs her to give in:

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.

(3.1.149-152)

She is disgusted with this answer and storms out only to be stopped by the Duke disguised as a Friar, who magically presents her with a plan to save her brother and maintain her innocence. The audience at this point is unable to determine if this master plan will really work, but hopes for Isabella's sake that it will and she may return to her normal life and become a nun as she wanted from the start.

Perhaps Isabella's desire to join the convent, then, can be seen as the other end of the extreme, another form of being sexually immoral, as well. She lacks the desire to marry and create a family just as much as the characters engaging in sexual lewdness. In this case, the Duke's proposal

Duke: If he be like your brother, for his sake
 Is he pardoned; and for your lovely sake,
 Give me your hand and say you will be mine,
 He is my brother, too.

(5.1.61-65)

seems all the more a punishment similar to those of the other characters and not, in fact, an act of true love. While she strove so hard throughout the entirety of the play to maintain her purity and virtue, she is now essentially commanded to marry the Duke, because one cannot simply decline the Duke's marriage proposal. This seems especially ironic after he saved her from having to give up her virginity to Angelo, because now she is expected to give it to the Duke, with no real way out of the situation. At least with Angelo's blackmail, she had the freedom to refuse, albeit at the expense of her brother's life, but the fact remains that she had some control over it. It seems all the more heartbreaking, then, that the Duke essentially forces her into this marriage because she was so very close to the freedom she desires. In Act 5, as the Duke reveals to Angelo that he slept with Marianna instead of Isabella, the audience feels a sense of relief, completely disregarding the fact that Angelo was technically raped in this bed switch. Regardless, Isabella may finally go back to the convent and pursue her future as a nun; she finally gained her independence and control over her life. But as soon as we relax

and start to believe that justice has been served, Shakespeare rips the rug out from underneath us and takes that power away by having the Duke propose. Isabella's silence at the end only emphasizes this. In every other moment, she has fought for her virtue, refusing to give in to blackmail, even forsaking Claudio's life to remain virtuous. But now she has finally given up; there is no way out for her. She lives in a world of men obsessed with sex and no matter how hard she tries to rid herself of that atmosphere, she cannot.

So Isabella was doomed from the start; there was never a way for her to maintain her goodness. As a character in a Jacobean play, there is rarely a way for the woman to remain in control of her life with any semblance of real power. It is a function of the role of women in society during this time; they did not have any power to wield. Although, it can be interpreted that Shakespeare wrote *Measure for Measure* with a feminist lens due to the way he wrote the women as striving to change society and control their own destiny. While Isabella does not achieve the power she wishes for, she is one of the strongest characters. And while her silence is interpreted as giving up, there is also a certain strength to it. It is her final act of defiance. She never actually verbally accepts the Duke's proposal, thus maintaining her power and refusing to publicly or vocally acknowledge her loss of control; it is a gracious concession. It is a very powerful moment in the play, in a very bold and very tragic way. Isabella has no power, she never truly did. But she remained a strong fighter up until the very end.