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Frail patriarchy and the authority of the repressed in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*¹

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ABSTRACT

Critical assumptions on William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* usually centre on the relationship between sex and moral issues. However, the play also questions political control and the supervision of human behaviour. This paper offers an alternative, personal, feminist reading of *Measure for Measure* by focusing on the differences between male and female moral values in the play. After exposing a brief summary of the problems that traditional and feminist critics face concerning *Measure for Measure*, I will pay special attention to the articulation of social subversion and to the connection between sexual and political frailty in Shakespeare's work by referring to some characters and specific scenes. It is my aim to explore the complex ways in which male and female spheres reflect and influence each other in *Measure for Measure*, a dark play which questions the limits of patriarchy and the workings of unethical behaviour.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, gender studies, patriarchal constraints, sexual subversion

1. Introduction: a feminist defeat?

Measure for Measure occupies a special position in the Shakespearean canon. It has frequently been regarded in negative terms by critics such as Samuel Johnson, and by Romantic authors, including Samuel T. Coleridge or William Hazlitt,² so we have to wait until the

¹ I planned this paper while my mother was in hospital last summer, so I would like to dedicate it to Dr. Campuzano, Dr. Moran and Dr. Torres, the throat specialists and haematologists at Juan Canalejo Hospital (A Coruña), who, together with their excellent staff, have contributed to her prompt recovery. I would also like to thank Paul Herron, who helped me to revise minor stylistic mistakes.

² See the introduction to the Arden edition (Iv-Iviii). My analysis is more sceptical than Lever's, since I do not think that authority is upheld in the play.

twentieth century to find positive evaluations of the play.³ Besides, while *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* have become favourite sites to deal with gender issues (Hidalgo 1997: 130), *Measure for Measure* has been considered an “uncomfortable” play. It has no tradition of feminist criticism behind,⁴ and, though there are feminist vindications in the play, scholars have not emphasised them so much as some speeches in tragedies depicting suffering women (*King Lear*, *The Winter’s Tale*), or in comedies on the war of the sexes (*As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*).

One main problem is that stereotypes do not work in *Measure for Measure*, and, perhaps, this neglect is related to an attitude that privileges the study of some plays to the detriment of other ones difficult to classify in traditional feminist terms.⁵ Any analysis of women in Shakespeare resorting to a black-and-white reductionism is totally useless.⁶ Middle positions must be acknowledged since, even in tragedies, females are as susceptible to change as patriarchy itself. In this regard, the idea of women in Shakespeare as complex and flawed as men – and also as capable of passion and pain – maintained by Carolyn Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (1980: 5)⁷ may be a handicap, but also a fascinating site for interpretation. As we will see, in *Measure for Measure* a woman

³ See L. C. Knights (1942) and F.R. Leavis (1942). More recently, Pilar Hidalgo defines *Measure for Measure* as “una obra difícil e inquietante” stressing its “crítica al poder, a la hipocresía religiosa y al control político de la sexualidad” (1997: 171).

⁴ I will use ‘feminist’ as ‘feminocentric’, that is, in a broad sense including both moderate and radical tendencies within the studies concerned with woman. “Gender studies” appears more suitable for my approach. In this way, I stress the application of our particular point of view as female critics and spectators to appreciate male characters and their motivations. There are many types of feminism differently evolving in time and space, but, regarding the initial and paramount distinction female/feminist/feminine, see Elaine Showalter (1979: 137-139). Despite the impossibility to condense or summarise the different approaches to Shakespeare and women in one article, we cannot omit paramount works, such as the ones by Dusinberre (1975), Pitt (1981), French (1982), Dollimore and Sinfield (1985) or Drakakis (1985).

⁵ Ann Thompson vindicated the study of Shakespeare’s middle comedies and histories (1988: 85), which has already been accomplished by Pilar Hidalgo (1997) in Spain.

⁶ See Claire McEachern’s (1988: 287) and Marilyn French’s approaches (1982: 25).

⁷ Together with Neeley’s contribution, Thompson’s article is the best in explaining the dangers of reading Shakespeare from a feminist point of view. Thompson stresses Shakespeare’s complexity both for readers and audiences, and she considers *Measure for Measure* a work about female cooperation and “a female sub-culture separated from the male world” (1988: 77).

appears challenging male achievements and undermining a ruler's self-esteem through rhetoric. Elizabeth Brunner quotes Irene Dash's words explaining that "Shakespeare's women characters testify to his genius [...] they learn the meaning of self sovereignty for a woman in a patriarchal society" (2004: 1), and Louis Adrian Montrose points out that

With one vital exception all forms of public and domestic authority in Elizabethan England were vested in men: in fathers, husbands, masters, teachers, magistrates, lords. It was inevitable that the *rule of a woman* would generate peculiar tensions within such a 'patriarchal' society (1983: 64-5).

This paper focuses on subversion and the notion of the rule of woman. For this purpose, I will make use of Swift Lenz, Greene and Neely's point of view (1980), which can be labelled essentialist feminism and attempts to humanise female characters and to challenge stereotypes, but also to analyse patriarchal structures by exploring genre distinctions (1980: 7). Neely's idea that feminist critique must be revisionary, historicized, and that it must resist being monolithic and monological (1988: 16) will be specially taken into account to study the divergence between male and female moral values in *Measure for Measure*. I will resort to specific scenes, precisely those depicting Isabella's ethics, Angelo's lack of integrity as a ruler and the Duke's manipulation of others. As in the historic plays, women in *Measure for Measure* prove how incompetent men are, they align themselves with powerlessness and ultimately become instruments to confirm patriarchal insufficiency and weakness.

2. Female rhetoric before law

The play begins when Claudio's imprisonment triggers Isabella's participation in the events. Juliet, Claudio's lover, is pregnant, and Angelo has resurrected an old law punishing unsanctioned unions.⁸ Therefore, Isabella, who is a novice, leaves the private sphere of the convent to expose herself before the public masculine realm of the law represented by Angelo. In *Richard II*, the Duchess of York complains of John of Gaunt (1.2. 22-34) and, in *Measure for Measure*, a woman dares to plead before a powerful man and defends her

⁸ On the nature of marriages in the play, see Lever (Introduction: liii-liv and xv-lxvi), Smith (1950: 215) and Thatcher (1995: 36-37).

brother against her principles: "At war 'twixt will and will not" (2.2. 33).⁹ At this point, it is important to remark that not all critics have praised Isabella,¹⁰ who is heavily conditioned by Lucio. This character recalls Cassio in *Othello* and has already made Isabella aware of "the power [she] has" (1.4. 76). He has also noticed that "Men give like gods; but when they [maidens] weep and kneel,/All their petitions are as freely theirs/As they themselves would owe them" (1.4. 81-3), and now he is urging her to exaggerate more and more before Angelo in a scene which would certainly appeal to a late eighteenth-century audience accustomed to sentimental outpouring. The power of feigning and theatricalisation is here as remarkable as it was at the beginning of *King Lear* when Regan and Goneril play the role of devoted daughters.

Isabella's skills as portrayed by Lucio are extremely important and immediately put into practice. She exhibits at its best Shakespeare's linguistic ambiguity and rhetoric expertise emphasised by William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) (Bate 2000: 392-393, 408). Tricksterlike, Isabella dissembles authority by depicting it like a balm, as something positive, not as a whip. The statement immediately arouses Angelo's desire. Mixing sex and power, she shows that, if men are vulnerable to sin, the strong sex does not exist as such, nor any socially conferred authority. It is individual merit that matters and blurs boundaries:

No ceremony that to great ones long,
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. 59-62)¹¹

⁹ Unless otherwise specified, quotations belong to the Arden edition of *Measure for Measure*.

¹⁰ Charlotte Lennox in *Shakespeare Illustrated* considered that that torrent of abusive language, those coarse and unwomanly reflexions on the virtue of her [Isabella's] mother, her exulting cruelty to the dying youth; are the manners of an affected prude, outrageous in her seeming virtue; not of a pious, innocent and tender mind (qtd. in Smith 1950: 213).

On the other hand, J.W. Lever compares Isabella with Antigone and Dorothea Brooke (Introduction: xciv).

¹¹ We can compare these words with Hermione's ones defending her virtue before Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*:

... mistake me not: no life,
I prize it not a straw, but for mine honour
Which I would free – if I shall be condemn'd

The novice is subversively appealing to equality before a man embodying authority, and she reminds Angelo that he is a man who can also sin (“Who is it that hath died for this offence?/There’s many have committed it” [2.1. 88-89]). His punishment on Claudio is simply excessive and typical of a weak tyrant (2.2. 108-110). Furthermore, Isabella advises him: “Go to your bosom,/Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know/ That’s like my brother’s fault.” (2.2. 137-139), and she resorts to blackmail by assuring she would devote to Angelo “prayers from preserved souls,/From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicated/To nothing temporal” (2.2. 154-156).

The process of making Angelo feel proud of his newly acquired power (and frailty, as we will see) facilitates his detachment from the law (“It is the law, not I condemn your brother” [2.2.80], and “I – now the voice of the recorded law –” [2.3. 61]). From his privileged position, he soon learns that *onus est honos* and that he is not a Machiavellian prince trained to properly understand and apply the law. Angelo’s behaviour clearly does not correspond to that of a ruler, and the play exposes the problem of how to administer justice properly and how to avoid being corrupted by power.

Once that Isabella’s virtue, understood as her moral strength and courage, not her virginal looks, has aroused Angelo, he yields to emotion. In Andrew Gurr’s terms, Isabella is “paying with falsehood false exacting” (1997: 103), and Angelo is unable to discern between Isabella and Mariana in the bed-trick scene, an age-old device that Shakespeare had already employed in *All’s Well That Ends Well*.¹² Ultimately Angelo loves what he rejects: he wants Isabella to be a woman, not an ideal presence detached from earth – she is a nun though she does not appear before him as such –,¹³ but a sensual

Upon surmises, all proofs sleeping else
But what your jealousies awake, I tell you
‘Tis rigour, and not law. (3.2. 109-114)

¹² One of the aspects of *Measure for Measure* that strikes Clare Marie Walls is female solidarity, which is clearly depicted in this scene: “Throughout the play, however, Isabella’s strong sense of sisterhood is revealed, not just for the nun Francesca and the Mother Superior of her order, but more actively in her concern for Juliet, Mariana, Kate Keepdown and herself” (2007: 4).

¹³ Andrew Gurr in a perceptive article explains that “Having appeared barefaced to Lucio, with the prospect of Francisca’s visible black veil before her, there is more than a little aptness in her appearing subsequently to Angelo in the secular equivalent, the Tudor gentlewoman’s familiar outdoor wear, a black velvet mask” (1997: 99), and the same happens in the final scene with Mariana.

creature more ordinary than she seems. Angelo desires “the treasures of [her] body” (2.4. 96) and wants her not to resist.

Despite Isabella’s efforts, act five proves how women’s version of reality is eventually devalued. Isabella and Angelo’s verbal skirmish represents male and female points of view face to face. Women’s ideas in *Measure for Measure* become frail arguments confronting sanctioned truth while men refuse to admit publicly their failures. Insults grow stronger on both sides, and Isabella begins to unveil Angelo’s authentic self as something quite different from his public image. The novice already warned against Angelo and seeming in the third act:

This outward-sainted deputy,
Whose settled visage and deliberate word
Nips you i’t’h head, and follies doth new
As falcon doth the fowl, is yet a devil;
His filth within being cast, he would appear
A pond as deep as hell. (3.1. 88-93)

In the last act, Isabella assumes the discourse of madness represented through conventions such as parallelisms and repetitions, what Nancy K. Miller calls italicized writing (1985: 339-360) and is perfectly distinguishable from the rest. Her speech is like a witch’s curse, but also a piece of dangerous social criticism when she calls Angelo “forsworn”, “murderer”, “adulterous thief” and “an hypocrite, a virgin-violator” (5.1. 40-44). Far from being a tool to affirm herself, Isabella’s attitude will have negative consequences. It is true that her audacious words before an audience on stage demolish Angelo’s reputation as an honoured ruler, but he has previously made clear in one of their interviews that her speech will not do, and people will only respect his version, even if Isabella’s rhetoric of the socially discredited is more appealing: “you shall stifle in your own report,/ And smell of calumny” (2.4. 157-158). Therefore, speech functions as a weapon against her, and, instead of debilitating patriarchy, Isabella injures her own reputation, which confirms how men always have the last say.

While in the first act, Claudio is aware of Isabella’s “prone and speechless dialect/Such as move men” (1.2. 173-174), in the last one the novice paradoxically confesses that she cannot describe Angelo’s

evil spirit¹⁴ since it surpasses her rhetoric skills. From a new historicist position, Stephen Greenblatt has stressed the power of inaction or extreme marginality: “[it] is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention [...] Agency is virtually inescapable” (1990/2: 164), which is here embodied by Mariana and Isabella. In *Measure for Measure*, female rhetoric fluency does not correspond with sexual agency (in fact, the women participating in sexual liaisons, such as Juliet, have few speeches). Mariana and Isabella represent attitudes opposing male order and are accordingly seen as madwomen or marginalised human beings before the Duke, who comes to admit her reasoning powers (5.1. 50 and 63-65) and can neither mark her as insane nor condemn her. I insist that, by having positioned herself as a woman, Isabella’s statement acquires strength, but the tension between power and frailty permeates the whole play. Every word from Isabella’s mouth becomes useless before patriarchy if we recall Michel Foucault’s idea of the power of omission: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it [...] In like manner, *silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions*” (1990: 101, my italics). When Isabella, a sexualized object of male gaze, enacts her simulated shame in public, slander deflowers her socially, and she gives Lucio the opportunity to laugh at the expense of a woman he revered not long ago. For Michael Friedman, only matrimony can wipe away her stain (2007: 11); the Duke restores her honour and Isabella keeps silence.

3. Man as the dark sex

Despite the efforts to single it out, *Measure for Measure* is not a rarity in the Shakespearean canon, and it has the atmosphere characterising other productions of the same period. Ernest Schanzer defined a “dark” play as that one in which a moral problem is “presented in such a manner that we are unsure, of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible and even probable” (1963: 6).¹⁵ Masculinity is related to such darkness in *Measure for Measure*, and it is seen in a way much resembling tragedies such as *Othello*, *King Lear*

¹⁴ Though the situation is different, Isabella’s silence always reminds me of Cordelia’s inability to praise Lear, and both have an audience on stage.

¹⁵ Not only the so-called dark plays present problems of interpretation, and Ann Thompson perceptively disagrees on the label: *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, is, according to her, a dark or problem play (1988: 77).

and *Macbeth*. All of them reveal more uncertainty than self-assurance in male characters' asides and monologues. The idea of the gentleman introduced in some men's conduct books of the period – Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528) or Stefano Guazzo's *Civil Conversatione* (1574), for example – as a compendium of justice, temperance, friendship and education, among other virtues, is completely reversed in Shakespeare, who draws no perfect heroes in a revising and rebellious attitude. This will always provide us with space for discussion and definitely constitutes one of the playwright's achievements.

Shakespeare offers, from his androcentric perspective, a realistic picture of male desire, libertinism and masculine frailty, and women stand as mirrors of men's faults. As Neely stresses, in *Othello*, "The men see the women as whores and then refuse to tolerate their own projections" (1980: 228). Passion is never sanctioned in *Measure for Measure*, and, for Angelo, women are inherently related to men and men are as corruptible as women. Isabella also states that women are frail like mirrors because of men:

Women, help heaven! Men their creation mar
In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail;
For we are soft as our complexions are,
And credulous to false prints. (2.4. 126-129)¹⁶

If in *Measure for Measure* both sexes are weak (women because patriarchy renders them socially weak and men because they easily succumb to sexual desire), the play exceeds the limits of a feminist theory based on any *différance* (see 2.2. 55-66). However, Neely insists on the pervading role of history when we analyse texts and states in an article that "Denying the unitary subject, declaring the end of difference, does not do away with the difference between men and women or with the subordination of women; it merely conceals it" (1988: 13). On the other hand, the image of woman as a mirror has further implications considering Clare Marie Wall's statement: "When men try to "profit" by women, [...] then their own male likeness to God is marred, is destroyed, even as they destroy the women's God image" (2007: 5). Whereas women perfectly know that men rule and develop their own strategies to face this fact, men are

¹⁶ This resembles the quotation "Frailty, thy name is woman" in *Hamlet* (1.2. 146), which was used by the American feminist Margaret Fuller to begin her essay "Woman in the Nineteenth-Century" (1844).

persuaded that they have absolute control of those around them. The result is a play within the play, and order is never restored. Shakespeare is dealing with seeming, but also with passions and with ethics when law is seen in two ways. On the one hand, it is God-given, socially codified and respected by the community; but law must also be understood and applied, and it is in this aspect that men are tested in *Measure for Measure*. Things complicate if we add that, apparently, instincts are and should be punished. As Neely states:

In the dark comedies, the men are almost too foolish (Bassanio, Bertram) or too bestial (Shylock, Angelo) for the happy endings to be possible or satisfying. The women must work too hard, and the men are not changed enough for either sex to be entirely likeable or for their reconciliation to be occasion for rejoicing. (1980: 215)

Angelo, "the admitted success of the play," according to Knights (1942: 223), is, together with Isabella, a tragic figure of passionate feelings. He cannot realise that resurrecting "drowsy and neglected" laws (1.2. 159) is absurd, in the same way that Lear needs flattery and does not perceive who his faithful daughter is. Lacking consistent criteria is Angelo's *hamartia* or tragic flaw. Isabella and Angelo have something in common: erasing sexual dichotomies, Angelo is as feminine and feminised as Isabella, and he competes with her before the Duke. Both Isabella and Angelo feel uncomfortable in their imposed roles: he is not a Renaissance prince trained to govern, and she is neither a novice nor a lover, but a woman acting against her will and principles to defend her brother. Therefore, male and female spheres come into contact.

Angelo struggles to appear as a man of integrity and resorts to restraint and repression. He considers himself fallible, humane and sinful: "Let there be some more test made of my metal,/ Before so noble and so great a figure/ Be stamp'd upon it. (1.1. 48-50). According to Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1968), woman constitutes a degrading and regenerating force: "She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth" (Bakhtin 1968: 240), and Angelo is, in a way, reborn thanks to Isabella. Appointed as the representative of law, he regards himself as just another participant in desire and prefers "an idle plume/ Which the air beats for vain" (2.4. 11-12) to the affairs of state.

Isabella's words have an effect on him, and Angelo becomes morally or intellectually corrupted by a woman he wanted to corrupt sexually. In a soliloquy resembling one in *Hamlet*, the Duke's deputy is conscious and ashamed of his feelings: "What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?/ Dost thou desire her foully for those things/ That make her good?" (2.2. 173-175). Unable to fight against instinct, he admits: "Thieves for their robbery have authority/ When judges steal themselves" (2.2. 176-177). A temporal representative of God on earth, Angelo paradoxically feels like a criminal with undeserved power, a position comparable to Claudio's because Angelo cannot recognise himself: "Even till now,/ When men were fond, I smil'd and wonder'd" (2.2. 186-187).

As in *Othello*, where the protagonist suffers from honour and reputation paranoia, women in *Measure for Measure* are not only controlled and manipulated by men: they also become the means to recover and/or restore male honour. Kathleen McLuskie advances that among the problems for a feminist interpretation of *Measure for Measure* we find that "the dilemmas of the narrative and the sexuality under discussion are constructed in *completely male terms* – and the women's role as the objects of exchange within that system of sexuality is not at issue" (1985: 97, my italics). Likewise, for Luce Irigaray,

The exchanges upon which patriarchal societies are based take place exclusively among men. Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another; if it were otherwise, we are told, the social order would fall back upon incestuous and exclusively endogamous ties that would paralyze all commerce. (1998: 574)

In this sense, there are some striking coincidences between *Measure for Measure* and the subplot in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607), a domestic tragedy by Thomas Heywood.¹⁷ Both Claudio, another version of masculine frailty, and Sir Charles Mountford in *A Woman*

¹⁷ Rebeca A. Bach thinks that in Thomas Heywood "the ideal of male kinship destroys the woman in what looks like the modern heterosexual couple in order to preserve the homosocial links that configure the early modern English domestic sphere" (1998: 515). Homosocial must be here understood as Eve Sedgwick defines it: "a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'" (1985: 1). Up to a point, Shakespeare's play with Isabella in the Duke's hands confirms homosociability.

Killed with Kindness resort to family in order to blackmail their sisters, and Isabella, like Susan, gives more importance to her virtue than to her life: "In such a one as, you consenting to't,/ Would bark your honour from that trunk you bear,/ And leave you naked" (3.1. 70-72). As Angelo admits, "Blood, thou art blood" (2.4. 15), and Lucio, one of the most attractive characters, stresses "the vice is of a great kindred;/ it is well allied; but it is impossible to extirp it quite,/ friar, till eating and drinking be put out." (3.2. 97-99).

Main characters in *Measure for Measure* inhabit a repressed world while secondary characters, such as Pompey and Overdone, enjoy unrestrained freedom. Passion exists in the world, and it is linked to folly or pleasure in Claudio's case. He epitomises an alternative point of view to Angelo's one, and his proposal to Isabella ("Nature dispenses with the deed so far/ That it becomes a virtue" [3.1. 132-133]) only provokes her fury and insults to him (3.1. 140-146). As the victim of sexual instincts punished by law, Claudio simply does not believe in justice: "Thus can the demi-god, Authority,/ Make us pay down for our offence by weight"(1.2. 112-113).¹⁸ No matter how much they are affirmed, deviant attitudes are never rewarded: excessive restraint proves negative for Isabella and Angelo, and Claudio is aware that excessive freedom has enslaved him. He is linked to sensuality and to Isabella's celebration of earthly issues and the physical world when she says that only earthly laws count: "'Tis set down so in heaven, but not in earth" (2.4. 50).¹⁹ Of course, this statement must be related to political corruption, a major subject in Shakespeare, which is also present to the point that the Duke hears how Lucio disrespectfully defines him as "A very superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow" (3.2. 136).

4. The law and its fictions

Measure for Measure is basically about how to channel ambition when political, moral and sexual authority are related and males are not strong creatures. Leaving aside order, individuality must also be respected. The particular, the way *we* face *one* situation, is what really matters, and, for Knights, the merit of the play is

¹⁸ One interesting and refreshing reading of *Measure for Measure* would be to see the parallelisms with *Romeo and Juliet* (the names Claudio and Juliet are not a coincidence).

¹⁹ In Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, Susan emphasises that "Gold is but earth; thou earth enough shalt have/When thou hast once took measure of thy grave" (9. 18-19).

the continued reduction of abstract “questions” to terms of particular human motives and particular human consequences, and the more and more explicit recognition of complexities and contradictions that appear as soon as one leaves the realm of the formal and the abstract. (1942: 232-233)

At the same time, we cannot forget that Greenblatt points out in his influential “Invisible bullets” that “Shakespeare’s plays are centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder” (1985: 29), and, in *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*, “authority is subjected to open, sustained and radical questioning before it is reaffirmed” (1985: 29). The Duke will have the task to face subversion and to solve problems by reconciling individual desire with morality. As I try to emphasise, in *Measure for Measure* men hypocritically play with women and eventually with themselves, and, when both are sexually and morally tested, they fail. Manipulation exists everywhere and constitutes the central ethical dimension of the play: “judge not, that ye be not judged.” The three main characters are disguised or appear representing a role. In the Duke’s case, he willingly adopts the character of a friar, through the *deus absconditus* device.²⁰ He perfectly knows Angelo’s frailty, but, despite his efforts, he will neither win nor become more reassured than before in his power. His agency is limited, and he will simply try to restore order. In fact, for David Thatcher, there is no testing in *Measure for Measure*: “the element of testing [...] is certainly no more important than the ‘testing’ which runs through other Shakespeare plays” (1995: 33).

The Duke confesses that Angelo is making “an assay of her [Isabella’s]/ virtue to practise his judgment” (3.1. 161-162) and believes that nature does not produce great souls (1.1. 32-35). The question is then why he carries on his experiment, and critics do not agree on this point. Friedman thinks that the Duke’s proceedings are motivated by economic interest, namely the desire to avoid the care and sustenance of illegitimate children, which falls to the responsibility of the state (2007: 3). However, it seems clear that he is simply unethical and wants to alleviate himself from blame: “And yet my nature never in the fight/ To do in slander” (1.3. 42-43). Laura Lunger Knoppers, for instance, maintains that the Duke chooses Angelo to avoid seeming a tyrant, and Angelo’s final

²⁰ In *The Winter’s Tale*, Polixenes visits Bohemia disguised, and, thanks to this, he discovers his son Florizel’s feelings towards Perdita (4.4).

confession “serves less to reform Angelo than to enhance the Duke’s own power as he keeps Angelo in the society, forgiven and humiliated” (1993: 467). On the other hand, Andrew Gurr supports the existence of a learning process in the Duke and Isabella since both gradually depart from the anti-sexual rigor of the absolute law at the outset (1997: 93), and this perfect symmetry is reflected in their clothes in the play. I would like to go deeper and stress that, aware of the fact that princes are vulnerable to calumnious remarks, the Duke also tries to reassert power through Isabella and finds some benefit at the end. More than a punishment, the novice turns out to be a proper companion for the Duke. After hearing Lucio and Escalo, the Duke complains on human nature and treason (4.1. 60-65), so, instead of supervising a farce, he ultimately witnesses how his own experiment disintegrates because in Vienna interest and seeming rule, and the law is not really respected: “But faults so countenanc’d that the strong statures/ Stand like the forfeits in a barber’s shop,/ As much in mock as mark” (5.1. 318-320). Nature and reality have imposed themselves over appearances, all men in *Measure for Measure* have a past or a skeleton in the cupboard and the Duke himself is not an exception. Far from being a saint, he likes pleasure; according to Lucio: “He had some feeling of the/ sport; he knew the service; and that instructed him/ to mercy” (3.2. 115-117) and introduces Mariana, whose dowry was lost, so Angelo abandoned her (3.2. 225-230). Likewise, Lucio has also had a relationship with Kate Keepdown, who remains invisible and voiceless in the play. If Lucio suggests at the beginning that Isabella should visit Angelo, it is because he is certainly afraid of the punishment of his own crime.

Patriarchy works from above in *Measure for Measure*: Angelo manipulates Isabella and in the same way the Duke manipulates both suggesting that Mariana should pass for Isabella. Perhaps everything in the play has been orchestrated from the beginning by the Duke, who wants to marry Isabella, and Shakespeare concludes the play omitting Isabella’s answer, which could be a negative one.²¹ For Leavis, the Duke can be seen as the major victim of the

²¹ Laura Lunger Knoppers insists that shame affects all characters in *Measure for Measure* and that, in several ways, Isabella’s language pictures her like a prostitute (1993: 464-5). At the end, “Isabella’s silence blocks closure in the ending of *Measure for Measure* and exposes the play’s complicity in the (en)genderings of shame it professes to interrogate” (1993: 471). However, Michael Friedman gives evidence of “a growing romantic attachment to Isabella on the Duke’s part” (1995: 15). For him, she is attracted to the Duke and erotic charge brings them closer (1995: 16).

experiment: "He was placed in a position calculated to actualize his worst potentialities; and Shakespeare's moral certainly isn't that those potentialities are exceptional" (1942: 246). Authority is then only affirmed when it is accompanied by morality, which some characters really lack. The Duke regards laws as necessary as bridles are for horses: "The needful bits and curbs to headstrong steeds" (1.4. 20), and he comes to understand, and to admit, that even monarchs and virtues are limited: "What king so strong/ Can tie the gall up in the slanderous tongue?" (3.2. 181-182).

Appearances help in *Measure for Measure*, but truth cannot be hidden. It seems as if Isabella's discourses to Angelo (see 2.2. 59-66 and 108-110 above) were universal and directly addressed to the Duke. In fact, they do have an effect on him, following Irigaray's views of woman as a mimic, "a woman playing out her culturally assigned role in order to expose the operative structures by which women are marginalized" (1985: 76). The repressed linked to the feminine has been finally somewhat affirmed because Isabella's words have revealed patriarchal appearances and the Duke applies her philosophy to himself, realising that we cannot condemn faults we can also commit (3.2. 254-261). He has found a mirror to see his own image reflected, and eventually another truth is confirmed: the fallibility and frailty of human behaviour.

5. Conclusion

In the introduction to *The Woman's Part*, Swift Lenz, Greene and Neely state that we will never know what Shakespeare's ideas on the war of the sexes were (1980: 9-10). This contribution simply represents an alternative to more ambitious, exclusive and idealistic approaches to Shakespeare, and it has analysed male and female characters' dilemmas in the play by adding different dimensions and considering previous approaches. We have seen how female figures are interesting not for their actions, continually monitored by men, but for their defiant words and the consequences they have on the representatives of authority, who are questioned all the time. Women's voices and silences reveal much, and, though females inhabit a restricted world, they manage to relate authority to mercy, functioning as prosecutors against deceitful patriarchy and the traditional separation of sexual spheres. However, nobody definitely wins, and the play is characterised by permanent instability and ideological tension. In fact, the values espoused by women are duplicitous because they originated in the distorted projections and

repression of patriarchy and are conditioned by it. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that power helps men to satisfy their lust, but they cannot repress their sexual desire. Perhaps Shakespeare's work remains most valuable for its realistic portrayal of human motivations, and, although patriarchy ultimately restores order, we cannot forget the intricate means chosen by each sex to impose their views and to expose unethical behaviour.

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Measure for Measure is a play by William Shakespeare, probably written in 1603 or 1604. Its first recorded performance was in 1604. It was published in the First Folio of 1623. The Duke of Vienna steps out from public life. In his place he sets a very respectable and "precise" person. The Duke disguises himself as a friar in order to see if power will corrupt his chosen substitute. Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" asks the audience to consider how and to what extent people can judge one another. As we see in the play, just because someone holds a position of power doesn't mean that they are morally superior. The play questions whether it is possible to legislate issues of morality and how to do so. Had Claudio been executed, Juliet would have been left with both a child and a tattered reputation, and she would have no way to look after the child. Angelo was clearly in the wrong morally, but he was given a job to do and followed through. Isabella is told she can save her brother by having sex with Angelo, but she risks both spiritual death and the death of her reputation. Thus, the play questions whether it is right for government to legislate against sexuality. Marriage. Measure for Measure, a comedy in five acts by William Shakespeare, written about 1603-04 and published in the First Folio of 1623 from a transcript of an authorial draft. The play examines the complex interplay of mercy and justice. Shakespeare adapted the story from Epitia, a tragedy by. In actuality, the duke remains in Vienna disguised as a friar in order to watch what unfolds. Following the letter of the law, Angelo passes the death sentence on Claudio, a nobleman convicted for impregnating his betrothed, Juliet. Claudio's sister Isabella, a novice in a nunnery, pleads his case to Angelo. Productions of Measure for Measure at the close of the twentieth century illustrate the play's interesting, if irregular, stage career, which has seen it produced along a continuum from a serious drama concerned with a woman's struggle to preserve her chastity, to an irreverent comedy that mocks society's hypocritical attitude towards sexual morality. Libby Appel's 1998 Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of the drama places itself somewhere in the middle of the spectrum by resonating with both hard-edged sexuality and bawdy eroticism. Commenting on the performance, crit