

The portrayal of women in measure for measure



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'Measure for Measure' features female characters from various backgrounds, representing the whole of Viennese society. Women from the upper-classes, such as Isabella, are featured alongside their lower class compatriots, such as brothel keeper Mistress Overdone. However, all of them have one thing in common; in male-dominated Vienna, women are portrayed, first and foremost, in terms of their sexuality.

One of the ways in which Shakespeare presents women is through dialogue, or lack thereof. In the play, Isabella is the main female character, and the one to whom the most lines are given. However, she speaks entirely of her own volition in only two scenes- that of her second meeting with Angelo and her chastisement of Claudio. She uses strong language and fiery rhetoric in order to express her emotions and reject the attempts of both men to make her give up her maidenhead (which, in her 'measure', weighs more than Claudio's head). In every other scene she is encouraged by Lucio or has her words scripted by the Duke, making her a mere conduit for someone else's words. As soon as the Duke takes over, Isabella's speech gradually fades away. Her words are taken over by the Duke, as she submits to his control ("Show me how, good father."). At the end of the play she is completely silent, forcing the Duke to repeat his marriage proposal twice. This can be interpreted as a silencing of the independent voices of women, forcing them to conform to masculine control.

Further proof lies in the fact that Isabella is the only woman who has over a 100 lines, a privilege shared by other male side characters including Pompey and Escalus. By contrast, the next most important female, Mariana, has only 68 lines, far lower than Isabella's 420 lines. Thus, women are meant to be

seen and not heard. Even when they do speak, their words eventually become layered with sexual overtones. This is expected from characters such as Mistress Overdone, whose usage of sexual slang differentiates her from upper-class women such as Isabella. However, Isabella's metaphysical debate on the nature of justice with Angelo, in Act 2, Scene III only serves to awaken his lust (" she speaks, and ' tis such sense that my sense breeds with it"). In Act 2, Scene IV, her words language reflects how she subconsciously responds to Angelo's sexual overtures, with imagery reminiscent of masochistic beating fantasies (" Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies/And strip myself to death as to a bed....").

Instead of their voices (and by extension, their rational thoughts), the body language of women is emphasized as a means of communication. The pregnant Juliet is silently present on stage for an entire scene, and Claudio refers to her pregnant body (" the stealth of our most mutual entertainment, with character too gross is writ on Juliet). In Act V, Mariana uses physical gestures to emphasize her point, including kneeling, unveiling (" this is thy hand...thy face.. and so on)"). In speaking of his sister, whom he wants to persuade Angelo, Claudio speaks of her body first- " A prone and speechless dialect" refers to her body language. He places her talent for rhetoric second, although theoretically it is the latter which should be more important as an instrument of persuasion. The dramatic device of a bed-trick also shows how women's bodies are more important than their speech. The substitution of Mariana for Isabella satisfies Angelo's desire. But ironically, it was Isabella's rhetorical skill which attracted him in the first place. When women are objectified, they cease to become individuals. Hence Angelo asks

Isabella to “ put on the destined livery”, indicating that a woman’s sole purpose is to satisfy a man’s desires.

Besides that, in the play, women are also identified in terms of their relationship to a man. In Act V, the Duke questions Mariana, invalidating her existence if she is “ neither maid, nor widow, nor wife”. These three categories have one thing in common- firstly, they designate women to a particular role in society based on her relationship to a man. Secondly, they fit a woman’s sexuality into socially acceptable boundaries. In a patriarchal society such as Vienna, women being seen as sexual objects mean that their sole purpose is to fulfill a man’s sexual desires in a socially acceptable way- marriage. Those who do not do so seem unnatural, because they resist masculine control. This is shown by the two figures who are at opposite ends of the sexual spectrum- the nun and the prostitute, who are conflated into one by the corrupting gaze of Angelo. By staying chaste and being hypersexual respectively, both step out of the acceptable categories of sexual behavior, and must be subjugated as both do not derive their identities from any single man. Hence, the Duke acknowledges the identities of neither, and proposes to Isabella to fit her sexuality into a socially acceptable category. An argument which takes a favorable view of the Duke’s proposal to Isabella is that sexual abstinence is unnatural.

Shakespeare shows this by having various initially abstemious characters, such as the Duke and Angelo, eventually show interest in a woman. So, the Duke is giving Isabella a chance to stop surprising her latent sexual urges (shown by the sexual overtones of her words in Act 2, Scene 4, as mentioned earlier). Simultaneously, the other figure, the prostitute Kate Keepdown, is

made more respectable by being married off to Lucio, symbolically bringing that aspect of a woman's sexuality under control.

However, it can be argued that the ambiguity of Isabella's decision is a sign of hope for independent women. In the play, the power of women to arouse desire in men does constitute a kind of power, and is the only one they have. As soon as a woman gives up her chastity, she becomes an object like all the rest, but the chaste woman exudes a purity that makes men desire her. Although he sees Isabella's beauty first ("as your cheek roses proclaim that you are no less"), the foul-mouthed Lucio initially holds her in high regard ("I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted, by your renouncement an immortal spirit"). Her purity attracted Angelo ("with saints doth thou bait they hook!"). Even the Duke, when he first sees her, equates beauty with goodness ("the hand that had made you fair hath made you good.") An alternative reading of the Duke's proposal to Isabella is that he, like his substitute, Angelo, is attracted to Isabella because of her purity- this makes him strive to assist her, and in the end, propose marriage, which is advantageous for her. Lucio commented "when maidens sue, men give like gods". To make both the Duke and his substitute desire her is a sort of achievement. However, the consequence is that both attempt to control her. Isabella is only saved from either giving to Angelo or watching her brother die at the expense of becoming the Duke's pawn, and lying in public in Act V, thus sullyng her reputation. Thus, Isabella's power is somewhat superficial.

Nevertheless, unlike the other three women married off in the end, Isabella is the only one with her chastity intact, which lends another interpretation to her silence- she is immortalized as a woman who has the power to make her

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own choice. Kate Keepdown and Juliet's illegitimate children are proof of their sexual activities, for whose maintenance the Duke may have ordered them to get married. Mariana's confession is endorsed by the Duke. She also risks getting pregnant. Throughout the play, references to sexually transmitted diseases and illegitimate children abound, and are always taken as evidence of sexual transgression. Only Isabella is still a virgin. Although her reputation is tainted by her initial confession of having slept with Angelo, she has none of the aforementioned physical evidence to betray her. The ambiguity of her silence thus reflects that she is free to accept the Duke or refuse him and return to the nunnery, as per her own wishes.

In conclusion, women in Vienna are effectively portrayed in terms of their sexuality and their relationship to men, which enables the rulers of Vienna to control them. Out of all the women in the play, only Isabella resists control- yet critical views of her chastity are divided, with some seeing it as unnatural, while others see it as a way to escape the hotbed of vice that Vienna has become. In any case, audience reactions will be influenced by their personal attitudes towards women and sex- Shakespeare's usage of complex characters creates uncertainty and admits multiple interpretations.