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Fiddling With Female Sexuality Sexuality, Sin and Marriage in William Shakespeare's Measure for Measure

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Abstract: It is by going back to such stalwarts of literature as Shakespeare and their treatment of women, that we can question the very sexist and inhibiting assumptions about women that have been deeply embedded in our psyche: therein lie the grounds for questioning the age-old patriarchal mindset of our society, therein lies the possibility of change. It is by breaking those shackles of stereotyping that women can get the impetus for demanding a revision of history and classics, and thereby enjoy freedom in the real sense of the term. The paper will attempt to locate the treatment of female sexuality in Shakespeare's play Measure for Measure within the matrix of the relationship between female sexuality and sin, and will proceed to uncover how marriage serves as a check on a woman's right to her sexual choices, thus befitting the resolution that the greatest English playwright achieves at the end of the play.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Sin, Marriage

If the purpose of art is not to provide answers but to pose questions, *Measure for Measure* (*MFM*) offers many such opportunities in the opinion of Bock (1992). She describes the play as an enigmatic comedy, full of antithesis and contradictions, mixed motives and shifting allegiances, thus designating it as a particularly open text. In a similar vein, Hawkins (1987) suggests that the internal, dramatic dialectic whereby differing questions and arguments give rise to altogether differing counter-questions and counter-arguments, may explain why there is never a critical consensus concerning the correct answers to any of the major sexual, social, moral, and political questions posed in, and by, the text itself [12].

Any history of human civilization has created a lot of hype and hoopla around the subject of female sexuality, favourable or otherwise. However, Hawkins succinctly identifies some crucial questions relating to female sexuality that the play raises, questions concerning the ideal of female chastity, the definition of rape, the instance of blackmailing/tricking someone into bed with a person with whom the former would otherwise not choose to have sexual intercourse with, the conflict/choice between Christian virtues like chastity and charity, the justifiability of a brother allowing his sister to prostitute herself in order to save him, the dilemma of a young novice sacrificing her chastity in order to save her brother's life or encouraging another woman to do it for her [12]. Further enquiry into the play would lead one to debate the category of incest and what constitutes incest: the physicality involved in a relationship between siblings, or even intention of a brother 'prostituting' his sister to save his own skin?

In fact, on careful consideration, one might realize that the aforementioned questions (as well as the ones following) are poignant ones even today, in the face of recent spurt

in the cases of violence against women. Hawkins adds to the itinerary of such universal questions concerning women and their sexuality, questions which, without dispute, are relevant and stand unanswered irrespective of spatial and temporal boundaries: What if certain laws 'set down in heaven', or on earth, conflict with the biological and psychological laws of human nature; how socially disruptive, or socially acceptable, are premarital sex, organised prostitution, and gun-point weddings; isn't the free consent of both parties just as important in marriages as in sex; and, how binding is a legal certificate if there is not a marriage of true minds [12].

As one proceeds with the plot of the play, different characters give us conflicting, contradictory answers to the problems listed above, thus defying the possibility of reaching a critical consensus regarding any. Hawkins embarks on a study of the answers given by some of leading characters—Isabella, Angelo and Claudio—to the major conundrum debated in their confrontation scenes. Would it be a 'sin' or an act of 'virtue', for Isabella to save Claudio by yielding to Angelo? Isabella believes that it will be a mortal sin: 'Better it were a brother die at once/ Than that a sister, by redeeming him,/ Should die for ever' (II. iv. 106-8). The reactions of the two men is noteworthy: Angelo argues that there would be a 'charity' in sinning to save a brother's life, whereas Claudio goes even further and tells Isabella that 'What sin you do to save a brother's life,/ Nature dispenses with the deed so far/ That it becomes a virtue' (III. i. 135-7). Taken aback by the opinion o her brother, Isabella asks Claudio: 'Is't not a kind of incest to take life/ From thine own sister's shame' (III. i. 139-41) [13].

Exposing the problem of dealing with the sticky situation highlighted above, Hawkins concludes that is difficult to deem any of these characters, or arguments, as right or morally/ethically justifiable, given their differing personal and moral priorities and premises, as well as their differing vested interests and desires [14]. In fact, as Hawkins has rightly pointed out, because the issues are so complex, and the contradictory arguments are so powerful, it would seem quite impossible to prove which, if any, of the arguments Shakespeare gave to Isabella, Claudio, Angelo or the Duke (an instance of whose 'moral' stance is referred to below) was deemed to be right by Shakespeare himself [14].

Hawkins goes further to suggest that what makes certain conflicts even more difficult to resolve, is that very often, the major characters in the play contradict themselves [16]. For instance, Hawkins cites the Duke's disapproval of Julietta 'sin' in having voluntarily had sexual intercourse with Claudio (Act II, Scene iii), whom she dearly loves, and to whom she had been pre-contracted (I. ii. 138-42), but had not yet finally married in church [16]. Thus, Julietta's act of love is seen as an act of sexual and social violation by the Duke, and denounced as immoral and unethical. The hypocrisy inherent in our largely male-chauvinist society comes full circle in the play when, as brought to light by Hawkins, the identical act that is here deemed by the Duke to be a 'wrong', a 'sin', a 'most offenceful act' to be repented as an 'evil', is, in the case of Mariana, proclaimed to be 'no sin' at all: 'Fear you not at all,' the Duke (still disguised as a friar) tells Mariana, 'Angelo is your husband on a pre-contract./ To Bring you thus together 'tis no sin,' (IV. i. 70-73) [17].

Jonathan Dollimore (1984) states that "sexuality becomes subject to intensified surveillance working in terms of both an enforced and an internalised discipline. *Measure for*

Measure. . . is about both kinds of discipline, the enforced and the internalised. Their coexistence made for a complex social moment as well as a complex play" [75]. Digangi reads the relentless definition and manipulation of female sexuality in the play as the graphic symptom of male anxiety about female agency: to unravel male-constructed meanings for erotic pleasure, pregnancy and abortion is to discover a fear of the dangers thought to ensue from a woman's control over her own body [590]. He observes that because it measures the perceived cost of a woman's autonomy in marital and reproductive affairs, *MFM* foregrounds female sexual desire only to deny the desirability of seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake [590]. Paradoxically, suggests Digangi, the central emblem of this dangerous desire is the pleasure-seeking body of a woman who is excluded both from the personae of drama and from the pages of critical texts: Mistress Elbow, who is also the only legal wife in the play [590].

Rackin (1987) in a review of Marilyn L. Williamson's book, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies*, observes that Williamson associates *All's Well That Ends Well* and *MFM* with two contemporary subgenres—"the drama of enforced marriage and the disguised ruler play"—which, she suggests, "form part of a culture preoccupied with problems of sexuality and the restraint of desire by authority" [525].

Williamson, writes Rackin, cites a number of factors that intensified these concerns after the beginning of the seventeenth century, including increasing sales and abuses of warships and a population explosion that depressed the wages of labour, elevated the price of food, swelled the ranks of the poor, and doubled the number of illegitimate births [525]. Rackin suggests that plays written during this period express their audiences's conflicting anxieties about patriarchal attempts to control sexuality and about sexuality itself: "male desire constrained by society becomes negative from both the constraint and the guilt attached to the lack of responsibility. This in turn leads to a pejorative view of women and of desire" [525].

Digangi (1993) begins his essay with the observation that despite its initial promise of equity and levity—a balanced title and a folio classification as a comedy—*MFM* delivers what many readers have felt to be a skewed and dismal account of sexual desire [589]. There is wide gamut of positions on sex in *Measure for Measure*. At one pole are people associated with the brothels, such as Pompey and Mistress Overdone, who see male desire as necessary to populate the city, and as beneficial because it enables them to make a living. They have no guilt about sex, but are uncomfortable with its illegality. On the other hand, we have the 'civilized' society which would deem marriage as the only license one can have for sex, irrespective of the consent of the partners involved, leave apart the willingness of the woman to go ahead with the marriage or sexual intercourse.

There are also deviations from the sexual norms and the social mores of the society in the play. There are stray references to possibility of incestuous relationships too, something which is considered to be a taboo across cultures and boundaries. The most pronounced of them all is Isabella's outburst at her brother Claudio, who wants her to compromise her chastity so that his death sentences is revoked by Angelo. Thus, Isabella is not only desired by Angelo, but, in a way, also by her brother Claudio, who wants to save his life at the expense of his sister's body, thus leading to the possible incestuous interpretation of the same. We find Isabella at the crossroads of another such possibility of incest in the

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proposal of marriage that the Duke, disguised as a Friar, makes to her (one ought to note that in his guise, the Duke called Isabella 'sister', and Isabella addressed and perceived the Duke as 'Father').

For Macdonald (1990) however, the avoidance or denial of sexuality is a recurrent theme in *MFM*, sounded most obviously in the fiercely repressed Angelo and the chaste Isabella, but present as well in the Duke's denial that "the dribbing dart of love" can pierce his "complete bosom" (I. iii. 2-3) [269]. In a similar vein, Bevington (1982) suggests that *MFM* is troubled by intractable problems of sexuality that is in keeping with the great tragedies contemporaneous with this "problem" play: Angelo represses desire into a repudiation of all sexual longing; he both idealizes feminine purity and equates sexuality with evil, thus polarizing "the pre-oedipal union of infantile sexual desire and tender regard", while Isabella, in her self-imposed chastity, seeks a solution to carnality by avoidance [412].

What is clear from all the fuss about sex and sexuality is that people have, since time immemorial, and irrespective of cultures, have always been divided in their opinions on the category of sexual relations: it is either seen as leading to reproduction, or, if unbridled (mostly in connection to women and their sexual choices), can cause annihilation. Schanzer (1963) has made an apt analysis of the two opposite attitudes toward sexual relations expressed through *MFM*: the view of them as something natural, creative and desirable, a view of which the chief spokesman is Lucio; and the other as something which leads to excess and thus to destruction, of which the chief spokesman is Claudio, who sees this excess in the sexual appetite and the consequent self-destruction as something inherent in human nature [82].

The play's primary argument, claims Watson (1990), is that neither individuals nor societies can thrive unless license and repression keep each other in balance: the polar outposts of this play are brothels and convents, its characters are most vivid for their prudery and lechery, and its two crucial actions are bouts of sexual intercourse, one a premarital impregnation, the other a form of attempted rape (412). Watson identifies that the dominant motive in the play is the need to convert lustful fornication into fruitful married sexuality (412).

The paper will now attempt to study the ending of the play, especially examining the use of marriage, which, according to Watson "becomes an over-determined resolution" to restore the normative social order at the end of the play [412]. Hopkins (2008) suggests that marriage in the play is conceived of as something utterly fundamental to a human's condition [9]. Hopkins writes that the ultimate remedy at the Dukes's disposal, in his desperate attempt to shore up the flagging morale and law and order of his beleaguered state, should be marriage, the sole behaviour modification which he exacts of the slanderer Lucio [10]. Hawkley (2008) observes that the Duke requires four marriages for bringing order to the community: he orders the performances of three unions, two of them are solemnized during the time span of the play, and he proposes a fourth between Isabella and himself [136]. According to many critics, writes Hawkley, the only marriage that makes any sense is that of Claudio and Julietta, two people who love each other and have consummated their contracted relationship, although it is not a legal marriage, and who would have performed the legalities sooner but for the want of a dowry—generally,

Lucio's marriage to Kate Keepdown is termed an overly harsh punishment, Angelo's marriage to Marianna is considered an inordinately light sentence for his crimes, and the Duke's proposal to Isabella is simply unfathomable as they have no previous relationships [136].

The debates around sex and female sexuality are compounded all the more by the marriage ties that Shakespeare chooses to end the play with. Hawkins suggests that Shakespeare frequently ends his comedies with matches which no marriage counsellor would sanction: none of the parties to his other matches in the play (with the noteworthy exception of Lucio) are characters originally endowed with personalities that seem so fundamentally hostile to the wedding-bells that toll for them, as Isabella and Angelo, who neither freely choose, nor verbally assent to, their domestic destinies [33]. In fact, Hawkins removes the veil from the order superimposed on the play in the end, which is itself challenged by the recalcitrance of certain characters (like Lucio), even as the Duke's order, 'Love her, Angelo', raises questions as to whether affections can be so ordered [37].

Hopkins makes a very interesting observation when she writes that the traditional ending of this sort of comedy is not the establishment of a well-run society with all major individual and social problems solved, not a blueprint for Utopia with the guarantee that past evils will be averted in the future, but a betrothal or a wedding feast [10]. In so doing, Hopkins reveals the ironic truth underlying the Duke's demand is that marriage, in this society, is not merely a personal relationship but the ultimate form of surveillance, that Fouauldian guarantor of good civic behaviour; for who will superintend the behaviour of a spouse so closely as the other spouse [10]. Watson succinctly brings to the fore that in so doing, domestic bliss is exposed as euphemism for the domestication of the human animal [416]. Watson also observes that for the individual, marriage becomes a way of reconciling unruly sexual desire with necessary sexual restraint; for the state, it becomes a way of maintaining the substance and order of the social fabric [412].

However, one wonders is marriages can really act as resolutions to the myriad problems raised in the play. Snyder (1983) observes that sexuality in *MFM* is surrounded with mistrusts and fears of debasement, which the marriages ordered up at the end don't really address constructively [493]. According to Foakes, it is, in the end an uncomfortable play because in spite of the marriages that round it off, it forces on us a sense of the gap between belief and act, between what people would be and what they are, or between justice and charity: it is not clear whether the marriage of Angelo to Marianna is more a reward or a punishment to both of them; the Duke's impending marriage to Isabella goes unexplained; and all through virtue gains no notable victories in opposition to licentiousness, but rather loses out in its strictness, while licentiousness carries in it a love of life that wins sympathy and seems generous by contrast [30].

On careful exposition, one will find out that there are some problems with the resolution, or the lack of the same meted out at the end of the play. As identified by Smith, the Duke's pardoning of Barnardine, his leniency to the crime of 'lese majeste' committed by Lucio, and above all, his failure to deal out any justice to Pompey and Mistress Overdone also draw our attention to the possible lack of resolutions at the end of the play [114]. Bradbrook also notes that in the final scene, a surprising number of characters are mute; Angelo says nothing at the reprieve, Claudio and Juliet, Isabel and Bernardine—

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all seem to be quiet at the fate meted out to them by the Duke [153].

Hawkins observes that what seems least significant about *Measure for Measure*, and certain critical interpretations of it, are the solutions officially offered us, whereby 'all difficulties are but easy when they are known' (IV. ii. 192-3) and all its moral, sexual, psychological conundrums can be resolved through substitutions, bed-tricks and marriage certificates [38]. What seem most significant, continues Hawkins, are the open questions posed throughout the play—whether Shakespeare intended them to or not, the *kinds* of solutions to the problems offered to us at the end of the play seem obviously inadequate in the face of the psychological, social, sexual and moral conflicts that are supposed to have resolved [38].

But the play also gives some opportunities of alternative reading into the treatment of women and female sexuality in the play, readings which might sound music to the ears of feminists. Macdonald observes that perceptions from within *MFM* of the way purposes reverse themselves prove to be pervasively of a tragic order—the device of the bed trick has the oedipal effect of throwing the central male character into the embrace of the very woman he has spent all his energies trying to avoid [268]. However, what he seems to have failed to notice is that the 'much-feared' female sexuality engulfs masculinity, and leads to a tentative resolution in the play.

Another such instance of the interspersion of a feeling of loss and victory is in the scene in the brothel house at the time when the news of its closing down is broken to Mistress Overdone. Whereas it is disturbing that women are also expropriated from paid labour, as we witness in the case of Mistress Overdone, whose future remains shrouded in suspicion with the news of the brothel houses which are to be pulled down, but, at the same time, one cannot overlook the statement of Pompey, the pimp, who assures Mistress Overdone that her business will continue against all odds, thus giving women like Mistress Overdone the faint ray of hope amidst the darkness shrouded in the inner quarters of her brothel.

If we try to read the situations in the play against the grain, we might arrive at another epiphany: Julietta, Mariana and Isabella— all of them exercise their sexual choices in the play, at least, to some extent. Because Julietta goes for a physical relationship with Claudio, and the fact that Claudio already calls her his 'wife', it seems that their relationship is very much like the Indian *Gandharva Vivaah*. Mariana wins back Angelo, her erstwhile fiancée by using her sexuality as a weapon to win him back. It is another matter that she does so because of the opportunity provided by the Duke. Isabella may be a controversial case in point, but one may as well conclude that Isabella, in the play, exercises her choice of taking control of her sexuality and offering herself to Angelo to save the life of her brother. What is remarkable in her case, and worthy of applaud, is that she chooses her chastity over her brother's life, which she was so desperate to save at the beginning of the play even by giving up her life.

However, from the difficult positions taken by the text on crucial issues regarding sex and sexuality, one can assume that Shakespeare blurs the dialectics of such contradictory concepts as sexual intercourse with and without consent, premarital sex and sex after marriage, female sexuality and sin, virtue and vice, and morality and immorality.

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Hawkins also elaborates on such situations in the play where Shakespeare dramatically confronts us with specific occasions wherein 'virtue itself turns vice', while 'vice sometimes by action dignified, which is partly because of the fact that in Shakespeare's time, differing Christian denominations held conflicting views about a number of sexual and moral issues involved in *MFM* [24-25].

What makes the play so very interesting and relevant to us even today is the resounding of the present-day world that we inhabit, the questionable and volatile moral values, and the hypocrisy that is so very characteristic of the male dominated society (especially when it comes to the taming of a woman's right to her own sexual choices) which we find in *MFM.* Shakespeare, according to Hawkins, provokes speculation about the ways of an imaginary world wherein 'Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall' (II. i. 38), and the same individual may 'become much more the better/ For being a little bad' (V. i. 15) [38]. However, Hawkin's reference to Shakespeare's imaginary world promptly brings to one's mind the world which we live in, which is governed by treachery and debauchery, especially when it comes to matters related to women, and their assertions of their right to their marriage partners, sexual choices, or life in general. However, what seems most interesting about the play is that although it exposes the double standards of the society in matters concerning women, it also offers a fertile ground for alternative interpretations which might keep us from labelling the play as a parable of exploitation of women and female sexuality, and offers enough ground for readings which are contrary to the popular estimate of Shakespeare or his times as unfavourable for womenfolk.

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