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Strict Restraints: Abstinence's Gender Problems in *Measure for Measure*

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the English and History Departments

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* poses questions about sexual coercion and governmental corruption that resonate with readers and audiences today. Recent scholarship has examined sexual abstinence in *Measure for Measure* in terms of its historical economic and religious context, analyzing how protagonist Isabella challenges the seventeenth-century English sexual economy.¹ However, Angelo and the Duke, the play's other central characters, also make claims about the values of abstinence, and those claims are at odds with Isabella's claims. I put these claims into dialogue with each other in a broader historical context than recent scholarship. Locating Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke's parallels in Shakespeare's 1583-1604 English culture can further critical interpretation of the play and contribute to today's feminist discourse. Hence, I put *Measure for Measure* into dialogue with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and extensive scholarship on Shakespearean England. I argue that abstinence is the axis around which *Measure's* main characters revolve, and that *Measure* locates these characters' abstinence as competing performances of manhood and womanhood to normative manhood and womanhood in 1583-1604. I further suggest that we see parallels to *Measure's* gendered double standards today, and that *Measure* studies should engage in more interdisciplinary work.

¹ For example, Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central; also James M. Bromley, *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Introduction

My unsoiled name, th' austereness of my life...

—Angelo²

Believe not that the dribbling dart of love

Can pierce a complete bosom.

—The Duke³

More than our brother is our chastity.

—Isabella⁴

I first read these lines in October 2017, and between these and other lines in *Measure for Measure*, I deduced *Measure* had a lot to say about proper sexuality. It seemed to me that each of these main characters—Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella—prioritized their sexual abstinence, or the practice of refraining from sexual activity.

But as I discussed *Measure* in Shakespeare's Comedies with Dr. Matthew Kozusko, I realized that connecting these characters through their abstinence left more questions than answers. Why would governmental figures like Angelo and the Duke care about abstinence? Would Isabella's abstinence as a nun represent another yielding to patriarchy? How could Angelo and the Duke switch from complete sexual restraint to sexual aggression and an unprompted marriage proposal, respectively? What could Isabella's non-response to the Duke's proposal mean? I was not the first person to pursue these questions, but it seemed to me that many answers to these questions did not answer these questions with historical context that was contemporary to *Measure*. As I researched *Measure's* Isabella for

² William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, ed., *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 2.4.156.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.3.2-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.4.186.

Shakespeare's Comedies, I developed a broader research question: where (and when) did *Measure* locate sexual abstinence relative to its time period?

I write here to offer my own answer to this question of time period. I make two principal arguments about *Measure for Measure* in the context of 1583-1604 English culture. First, I assert that sexual abstinence is at the center of *Measure for Measure*. By enumerating the various ways in which Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella perform abstinence, I demonstrate that abstinence is the axis on which their character spokes turn. Furthermore, the abstinence of these characters represents competing gender performances of manhood and womanhood to the dominant gender performances of marital manhood and womanhood in 1583-1604 England. *Measure's* intra-play discussion of abstinence engages with the time period's discourse on abstinence, and two of these characters (the Duke and Angelo) discard abstinence in favor of different gender performances.

Theorizing Abstinence in 1583-1604 England

In reading sexual abstinence in *Measure for Measure*, I contend that sexual abstinence is a viable interpretation of these characters' practices in *Measure for Measure*. The evidence for this point is muddled. While Shakespeare's corpus includes some other characters who swear off sex, some of whom I explore on pages 15 and 16, I argue *Measure* contains three: Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella. This is exceptional, especially given that these three characters represent *Measure's* antagonist, deuteragonist, and protagonist, respectively. Furthermore, the word "abstinence" is used just twice in *Measure* and four times in Shakespeare's writing, while the related word "chastity" is also used twice in

Measure and twenty-eight times in Shakespeare's writing.⁵ Furthermore, as the Oxford English Dictionary evidences, "abstinence" and "chastity" had amorphous definitions even in Shakespeare's day. While sexual abstinence as this study defines it is self-restraint from sexual activity, "abstinence" can also denote "abstemiousness or fasting," and in Early Modern England, "abstinence" could even denote "cessation of hostilities."⁶ Meanwhile, "chastity" denotes "purity from unlawful sexual intercourse," but also denoted "abstinence from all sexual intercourse" in Early Modern England.⁷ Noting this broad and overlapping range of denotations, this study takes the terms "abstinence" and "chastity" as sites of its investigation into Early Modern English ideas. Though the specific phrase "sexual abstinence" does not exist in *Measure*, this study unpacks related terms and phrases in its sources, reading these related terms and phrases as stand-ins for abstinence. Before assessing abstinence in *Measure for Measure*, the validity of "abstinence" as an interpretation of the play must be established.

Abstinence in early modern England was a consequence of virginity, "the state of not having had sexual intercourse." As Margaret Ferguson notes, the "virgin is 'intact' but also she (or he) who has *not* (or not yet) been defiled by sexual contact with another human being, usually construed as a member of the opposite sex."⁸ The virgin is defined both as whole in an important bodily way, but also unfinished in that the virgin has not yet been

⁵ These statistics are derived from search results using the keywords "abstinence" and "chastity" in *Open Source Shakespeare* (George Mason University, 2018), <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org>. Shakespeare uses "abstinence" in *Measure* I.3 and IV.2, and uses "chastity" in *Measure* 2.4. and 5.1.

⁶ *OED Online*, s.v., "abstinence, n.," (June 2018, Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/752?redirectedFrom=abstinence>.

⁷ *OED Online*, s.v., "chastity, n.," (June 2018, Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30924?redirectedFrom=chastity#eid>

⁸ Margaret W. Ferguson, "Foreword," in Kelly Kathleen Coyne and Marina Leslie, *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 1-2.

entered into a different stage of sexual order. Indeed, “virginity” in early modern England was associated with a temporal stage of women’s lives, and an important index of women’s cultural worth in early modern England. Though men could theoretically be virgins, both the pressure to control women’s sexuality and the inability to measure whether or not men were virgins (using the biologically-essentialist conflation of virginity with an unbroken hymen) drove virginity to be gendered feminine.⁹ Virginity had a clear relationship to abstinence in early modern England, as virginity would necessitate abstinence. However, as Ferguson notes, virginity was not the only positive sexual state for women in early modern England.

Rather, chastity ultimately took precedence over virginity, as chastity implied a productive female sexuality that put itself to use for patrilineal hierarchy, while virginity could be menacing as an “active” rebellion against the household’s carrying on through procreation. In this regard, nunnery could pose a significant threat to a patriarch’s authority to control his household.¹⁰ As Frances Dolan argues, nuns were used as the objects of derision both because they were Catholic and because they represented a limit case for femininity: a feminine extreme that threatened the aristocratic family model in which daughters reproduced.¹¹ Chastity was theorized as *essentially* positive, while *virginity’s* positivity was an incidental feature tied to a certain temporal stage in women’s lives.

⁹ Ferguson, 10-11.

¹⁰ Ferguson, 8-9.

¹¹ Frances E. Dolan, “Why Are Nuns Funny?,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2007), 512.

Indeed, early modern English people often disdained lifelong virginity as an ideal.

Paroles articulates one such criticism of virginity in Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, urging female protagonist Helen to sexual activity with men:

It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is a rational increase, and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost. That you were made of is mettle to make virgins. Virginity by being once lost may be ten times found; by being ever kept it is ever lost. 'Tis too cold a companion, away with't.¹²

According to Paroles, it is not “natural” or “politic,” here meaning expedient, to preserve virginity. Losing virginity is a “rational increase” for humanity, and virginity couldn't be begotten without the coitus in which virginity is lost. Indeed, Paroles claims here that “virginity by being once lost may be ten times found” in the reproduction of more virgins, but that “keeping virginity” results in its ultimate death with those who keep it. Paroles concludes with the statement that virginity is “too cold,” or too feminine, according to early modern schema of biology.¹³ Paroles' criticism is that virginity is an excess of femininity, and that in such excess, the only rational thing to do is to dispense with that excess and procreate. Paroles' comments and advice here are partly a joke, and indeed, he voices this criticism as part of his set piece banter with Helen.¹⁴ Yet his critique also reflects the “wise fool” archetype typical in period comedy, exposing the absurdity of human pretenses like virginity.¹⁵ From this perspective, Paroles represents a voice of wisdom about virginity, even if his statements are somewhat hyperbolic.

¹² William Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*, 1.1.119-125.

¹³ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge, 1995), 172-173.

¹⁴ Helen begins discussing virginity by asking Paroles, because he has “some stain of soldier in” him, how to “barricade” virginity against men—not a very serious question. Shakespeare, *All's Well*, 1.1-106-108.

¹⁵ Indira Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 6.

Furthermore, extreme attacks on lifelong virginity in comedy reflect late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century discourse on virginity in prose. For many Protestants, complete abstinence was “fighting nature,” and as “the lustier sex,” women were assumed to suffer under monastic vows.¹⁶ Nuns were especially encouraged to marry in the English Dissolution of the Monasteries, as marriage’s healthy outlet for sexual desires was propped up by Reformation thought.¹⁷ Sex was not merely perceived as natural for women’s personalities, but also considered to have medical benefits by driving away mental and physical maladies.¹⁸ With texts ranging from sermons to medical tracts to Shakespeare’s comedies extoling the virtues of marriage, cynicism toward virginity as a permanent state rose in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity can help parse the gendered relationships between chastity, abstinence, and virginity. For Butler, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*...bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds.”¹⁹ In this theory of gender performativity, gender is done through the enactment of a certain kind of body, so gender is a process of “social temporality” or producing and reproducing social norms and ideas in a body.²⁰ The debates about sexual activity in early modern England surveyed so far, which revolve around competing ideals of total abstinence (i.e., lifelong virginity) versus ideals of temporary abstinence (i.e., temporary virginity followed by chaste sex within marriage) are fundamentally problems of gender performance. And these ideals are local to their specific

¹⁶ Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77.

¹⁷ Crawford, *Sexualities*, 79.

¹⁸ Crawford, *Sexualities*, 123.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 180.

time period, another trait Butler emphasizes: the styles of performing a body are conditioned and limited by “historical possibilities.”²¹ Gender is both unstable in that it must be constantly performed and unstable in the sense that such performance is also a product of changing times. As the scale tipped against virginity during 1583-1604 in England, the ideal of total abstinence was popularly viewed by English protestants as a deviant gender performance for women. Meanwhile, the socially-acceptable performance of gender in this time period appears at the core of Paroles’ comic argument against virginity.

And gender identity in early modern England was a marker of social position. In this, a brief *Measure* exchange is instructive. The Duke asks a veiled Mariana if she is “married,” “maid,” or “widow,” all of which she rejects; when the Duke replies that “you are nothing then, neither maid, widow, nor wife,” Lucio interjects: “My lord, she may be a punk [prostitute], for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife.”²² This drawn-out joke illuminates an important aspect of early modern English culture: a woman’s status as a societal being was determined by her sexual activity. If she was not a virginal “maid,” chaste “wife,” or once-married “widow,” then a woman had extramarital sexual relations, which instituted her as a “singlewoman” or prostitute regardless her profession.²³ A woman’s gender performance was intimately bound up with her sexual activity, as gender performance was bound up to societal standing, whether or not a woman engaged in sex was critical for her own status.

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 177.

²² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.177-185.

²³ Natasha Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central, 176-177.

For example, the performance of “singlewoman” was increasingly punished in early modern England. There was economic pressure toward sex work for single women, particularly in Shakespeare’s early modern England—roughly 20 to 30 percent of all adult women were “singlewomen” who had never been married, and those not attached to a household in either a servile or familial capacity could generally only support themselves through unlicensed work or prostitution.²⁴ While unmarried women existed who did not have sex, as I discuss on page 10, they were often lumped together with those who did have sex.²⁵ Elizabeth Poor Laws sought to regulate this problem of unmarried poverty by aiding the “deserving” poor, such as widows, and criminalizing “masterless” single people; while the Poor Laws included men and women, given the aforementioned narrower options for women, the regulation most affected the body of “singlewomen.”²⁶ To be a woman and unmarried was to be pushed toward sex work by economic pressures and simultaneously punished for sex work by laws prohibiting prostitution.²⁷

For Butler, gender performance involves a choice between multiple possibilities, and multiple performances occur in each historical moment. These possibilities are both the product of the historical moment and also chosen from among those available possibilities; gender performance is not a static repetition of ideals but constantly evolving as people imperfectly replicate differing ideals, some ideals falling out of use and some rising to greater prominence.²⁸ Consider that twenty-first century America no longer have

²⁴ Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 176-177.

²⁵ See Amy Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) for more on the term “singlewoman,” particularly pages 8-9.

²⁶ Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, 178.

²⁷ Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800*, 175-176.

²⁸ My thinking on this point is indebted both to Butler’s own words and to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s interpretation of post-structuralist history theory. Trouillot argues that if all structures of domination are

the exact distinction between “wife,” “widow,” “maid” or “punk” today as that of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Yet twenty-first century America has a distinction between “Mrs.” and “Ms.” as polite honorific, which is indicative of a similar plurality of performances for women today, and similarly based on women’s marital status. Gender is not necessarily performed the same across all times and places, and more relevantly for my current argument, there are competing gender performances even within the same time and place. The femininity of “wife” competes with “maid,” for example, within *Measure’s* historical moment. Each gender performance is in competition with each other performance, with the “winning” performances rising toward a dominant standing in society and “losing” performances placed lower in society (such as the lower placement of “singlewomen”).

It is thus my contention that lifelong abstinence was a gender performance of manhood and womanhood that competed with the gender performance of normative marital sexuality.²⁹ It is important to make several qualifications regarding abstinence as a competing gender performance. First, although these performances competed, abstinence was not as popular as marriage in early modern England between 1583 and 1604 or even legally supported in this time period. Marriage was the dominant gender performance of sexuality for both men and women, as I will demonstrate, though this did not prevent other

exactly the same, then they would exactly replicate themselves at each opportunity, which does not reflect the historical variety between systems of domination nor the possibility for change in those systems of domination and rebellion against those systems of domination. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).

²⁹ I am speaking here of biologically-essentialist normative sexual activity between men and women, which was supported during the time-period through marriage laws. See Richard H. Helmholz, “The Legal Regulation of Marriage in England: From the Fifteenth Century to the 1640s,” in Silvana Seidel Menchi and Emlyn Eisenbach, ed., *Marriage in Europe, 1400-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016) for a comprehensive examination of how marriage was supported in England at the time.

sexual performances (such as abstinence) from being real options or going without discussion. Second, because abstinence was a gender performance, abstinence was performed differently by people of different genders (and different social positions) during 1583-1604. Men performed abstinence differently than women performed abstinence, as I will illustrate, and men's abstinence signified something different than women's abstinence. Third, lifelong abstinence is difficult to distinguish from periods of abstinence; particularly given the typical late age of marriage in early modern England, lifelong abstinence might not just be viewed suspiciously as a competing gender performance but also because many might claim abstinence as part of a phase.³⁰ Though as many as one quarter of women and men never married, marital status did not prevent early modern English people from having extramarital sex.³¹ Fourth, as the product of historical possibilities, abstinence was performed differently over time in early modern England, including over 1583-1604. Again, the abstinence of monasticism was still within fifty years of memory during 1583, and the period of 1583-1604 itself includes many different historical moments.

However, some cultural elements in early modern England did remain relatively constant over 1583-1604. Shakespearean times in early modern England saw a sexual economy that was particularly patriarchal regarding the status of single women. To

³⁰ Crawford notes that for "peasants and common folks," "age at first marriage for women in the late sixteenth century was about 25 to 27 years old; for men, it was 27 to 28 years old"; for elites, "elite women married around age 20" and for "oldest sons," "age at first marriage" was generally between 21 and 24 (*Sexualities*, 23). It should additionally be noted that attacks on sexuality as "just a phase," then and now, do not do justice to the pains, pleasures, anxieties, and fantasies we commonly associate with sexuality; furthermore, although abstinence and periods of sexual activity may be impermanent, these periods may have enduring effects on our lives.

³¹ Crawford points out that sex occurred outside of marriage in many contexts, including non-reproductive sex acts (which also occurred within marriage) and in prostitution (*Sexualities*, 24-25).

understand this, it might be helpful to consider the two terms of “sexual” and “economy” separately. “Sexual” suggests a cultural set of values regarding sexual activity—or erotic intimacy and cultural portrayals of erotic intimacy—and “economy” suggests a social exchange of goods and services—including such exchanges as the marriage agreement to share property. As agents and as commodities, women participated in the sexual economy in Shakespeare’s day and were afforded their social standing based on their sexual activity—particularly whether or not that sexual activity was marital, which put unmarried women in an unenviable position. As Ruth Mazo Karras puts it, “If not a wife, virgin, [or widow], a woman was a prostitute; there was no other category.”³² A single woman who had sex was regarded by the same Latin term in law, *meretrix*, as a woman who sought sex for money—and by the contemporaneously-new term “prostitute,” Latin for “one who stands out front.”³³ Women who were sexually active outside of marriage in early modern England were commodified as much as sex workers. Combined with the dearth of economic opportunities outside of marriage, women were pressured by the sexual economy into marriage between 1583 and 1604.

With these real material and social pressures toward marriage, the nunnery would have been unthinkable as a real option for women in Isabella’s historical period of 1583-1604. Audiences would perhaps remember nuns in England, but audiences would be wont to view nuns as somewhat fantastic or suspicious. There were English people who became nuns. But English nuns were exceptions, especially as they could only become a novice

³² Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 139.

³³ Karras, *Sexuality*, 132; *OED Online*, s.v., “prostitute, n.,” (July 2018, Oxford University Press). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/153082?rkey=pReYbx&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

abroad.³⁴ Although some English women were probably indeed lifelong-abstinent, *Measure's* nuns call up the specific specter of a Catholic past.

For the purposes of examining 1583-1604 England, too, it is important to note that Catholicism was far from past. Many of Catholicism's doctrines were enshrined in English Church statutes, for example. Both Catholicism and the English Church preached women's subservience to men, whether as nuns subservient to God or married women subservient to husbands. English church adherents had more in common with Catholic adherents than their respective names indicate. Furthermore, a small but substantial section of the English population identified as Catholic.³⁵ Yet the aforementioned discourse on marriage figured Catholicism as inimical to England, and Catholicism was not a state-sponsored religion for Elizabeth or James' government. Although Catholicism was present in England, it was increasingly trivialized or erased from popular discourse.

This study thus focuses on Catholicism in *Measure* less for what *Measure* says about actual Catholicism in England and more for *Measure's* use of Catholicism as a stand-in for puritanical, wrongheaded austerity. In typical Shakespearean comic narrative, several of *Measure's* central characters confidently proclaim that they are immune to erotic love. *Measure* uses the setting of Catholic "Vienna" (complete with nuns) to hold a mirror against pretenses to self-control and purity in sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century England. In *Measure's* view, Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella are performing abstinent manhood and womanhood, and they each are challenged for their performance.

³⁴ Claire Walker, "Loyal and Dutiful Subjects: English Nuns and Stuart Politics," In James Daybell, *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700* (Florence: Routledge, 2004), ProQuest Ebook Central, 229.

³⁵ Ronald Corthell and Frances E. Dolan, eds., *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 4.

Overview of Thesis

This focus on Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella's performances of abstinent manhood and womanhood drives the organization of this study. Chapter 1, "Corrupt with Virtuous Season," examines Angelo's superficial abstinence. I begin with an overview of Shakespearean comedy's *topos*, or traditional theme, of men who claim to abnegate their erotic desires like Angelo. Examining Angelo's abstinence as part of his severe reputation, this study illustrates how Angelo uses abstinence to obtain power—much like Elizabethan and Stuart government pretenses to sexual purity. But when Angelo encounters Isabella, he discards male abstinence to instead perform aggressive male sexuality, even though he continues to use his reputation for abstinence to his own benefit. Angelo mirrors governmental corruption and hypocrisy on sexual morality.

Chapter 2, "The Life Removed," carries the discussion of governmental corruption into the Duke's impermanent abstinence. Considering how the Duke prioritizes his reputation for abstinence, this study illustrates how the Duke also uses abstinence to obtain power, paralleling Elizabethan and Stuart ruler's focus on reputation. While the Duke is more benign than Angelo, the Duke nevertheless discards his abstinence to instead perform normative marital manhood. The Duke mirrors governmental emphasis on reputation and the good of marriage.

Chapter 3, "In Probation of a Sisterhood," turns from Angelo and the Duke's inconstancy to Isabella's principled abstinence. Focusing on Isabella's devotion to the Poor Clares and moral reform, this study shows that abstinence is at the core of Isabella's moral program. Isabella parallels the specter of lifelong-abstinent monasticism, which Protestant

reform targeted in its pro-marriage agenda. In embodying abstinence, Isabella represents an inherent threat to the Protestant order embodied by Angelo and the Duke, because Isabella represents an argument against marriage and proof that a more-consistent morality is possible. I read Isabella's final silence against the Duke's marriage proposal, then, as a refusal to conform to his Protestant order. Isabella thus references a past of Catholic nuns in England, as well as contemporary Catholic or abstinent women in England.

But what does the centrality of abstinence to *Measure for Measure* have to do with our lives today? In my Conclusion, I explore several takeaways for the twenty-first century. First, as shown by the 2018 Kavanaugh hearings, we still engage in much the same gendered double standards as those from 1583-1604 England. Abstinence may not be the field of contest these days, but patriarchy pressures non-men to surrender their desires for the sake of male privilege. Simultaneously, male privilege reinforces itself through the framing of male narratives about desire as the only narratives worthy of attention. Second, while scholarship on *Measure* has synthesized historiography and literary criticism to good effect, deeper interdisciplinary dialogue can further *Measure* studies. Work on early modern English print culture requires both close reading and historical context, and until scholarship cites both critics and historians alike, scholarship will misread or misplace its analysis of *Measure*. I offer Natasha Korda's scholarship relating Isabella to English Clares as an example of *Measure* scholarship done right. Structural sexism is a complex problem in need of complex solutions, and interdisciplinary scholarship is one piece of a more complex solution.

It is difficult to argue that *Measure for Measure* informs our contemporary realities, and more difficult to argue that *Measure* should inform our practice for solving today's problems. Many historical particulars that inform *Measure*, like the internecine Protestant Reformation, are not reflected in our own realities. But having studied *Measure*, I argue, its questions about gender and power—particularly how sexuality can enforce or destabilize patriarchy—should help us think through our feminist practice.

“Corrupt With Virtuous Season”: Angelo’s Superficial Abstinence

That a woman conceived me, I thank her. That she likewise brought me up, I likewise give her most humble thanks. But that I will have a recheat winded in my forehead, or hang my bugle in an invisible baldric, all women shall pardon me. Because I will not do them the wrong to mistrust any, I will do myself the right to trust none. And the fine is—for the which I may go the finer—I will live a bachelor.³⁶

Benedick of *Much Ado About Nothing* (first published in 1600) here explains why he has a

“hard heart” that prevents him from love: he does not want to be abused by a woman.³⁷

While he is grateful for being born and raised by women, he shuns sexual relationships with women, because he does not want a “recheat winded in his forehead” or to “hang his bugle in an invisible baldric,” both symbols of cuckoldry. Because he “will not do them the wrong to mistrust any,” or mistrust any who would be faithful to him, he proposes to “trust none” and live as a bachelor. Benedick seems confident in this proposal, proclaiming that he “may go the finer” in having more money to spend on his dress; Benedick is proud in his misogynistic restraint against relationships. Yet as Benedick interacts with Beatrice, a woman whose own disdain of men leads her to a similar restraint against relationships with men, Benedick comes to trust and love Beatrice.³⁸ By the end of *Much Ado*, Benedick is humbled from his misogynistic restraint against loving women, and he intends to marry without any regard to “any purpose that the world can say against it.”³⁹ Once self-assured

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1.1.195-201.

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* ([N.p.]: First Avenue Editions, 2014), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=687395&site=ehost-live>; Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, 1.1.102-104.

³⁸ Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, 2.1.48-54.

³⁹ Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, 5.4.101-104.

in his “hard heart,” Benedick now admits his restraint was foolish and loves Beatrice openly.

Comparing Benedick to the King of Navarre’s court in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (first published in 1600), the court nobles exemplify another self-assured celibacy, this time for the purpose of philosophical transcendence.⁴⁰ As a representative noble, Dumaine, says to the King of Navarre’s proposal to fast, avoid interaction with women, and avoid sleeping:

My loving lord, Dumaine is mortified.
The grosser manner of these world’s delights
He throws upon the gross world’s baser slaves.
To love, to wealth, to pomp I pine and die,
With all these living in philosophy.⁴¹

Dumaine views himself as “mortified” or dead to worldliness, giving up his share of the world’s excesses—“love,” “wealth,” and “pomp”—to live with the other nobles of the court in philosophical transcendence of the world’s base nature. Unlike Benedick’s swearing-off relationships due to misogyny, the court nobles of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* swear off relationships as part of their ascetic oath. And unlike Benedick, who is confident in “living finer” as a result, the court nobles take pride in viewing their restraint as a way to “philosophy.” Yet like Benedick, the court nobles’ pride takes a fall when the nobles encounter the women of the French court, and the nobles give up their oath to “woo these girls of France.”⁴² At last, the humbled nobles agree to a new oath of hermitage as a

⁴⁰ *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Love’s Labour’s Lost,” <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Loves-Labours-Lost/152>.

⁴¹ William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1.1.24-27; for the specific tenets of the King’s proposal, see 1.1.34-48.

⁴² Shakespeare, *Love’s*, 4.3.345.

prerequisite for marrying the women of the French court.⁴³ Having thought over “these world’s delights,” the nobles decide that the delight of erotic love is worth having.

The nobles and Benedick are both examples of a Shakespearean comic *topos*, or structural feature of a comic narrative. In both instances, self-assured men swear they don’t need erotic relationships with women, and in both instances, the men find that they desire exactly those erotic relationships they have foresworn. Benedick and the nobles both sort out those desires over the course of their plays, initially promising themselves to celibacy and making their wedding promises in the final acts. Furthermore, in both instances, the men swearing to celibacy do so to maintain their reputation. The court nobles take up celibacy to fulfill their king’s proposal, while Benedick displays his “hard heart” in banter with Beatrice and his companions as a point of superiority.⁴⁴ In Shakespearean comedy like *Much Ado* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, men proudly claim sexual restraint to project a certain social image, develop relationships with women to whom the men become attracted, and ultimately ask for the women’s hands in marriage after being humbled.

As Angelo values his abstinence as a political weapon, his character plays on the *topos* shown in these earlier plays. Consider his taunt to Isabella when she threatens to “tell the world aloud / What man thou art”:

Who will believe thee, Isabel?
My unsoiled name, th’ austereness of my life,
My vouch against you, and my place i’ the state
Will so your accusation outweigh

⁴³ Shakespeare, *Love’s*, 5.2.774-798.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, 1.1.101-104 and 186-201.

That you shall stifle in your own report
And smell of calumny.⁴⁵

Although Angelo is severally-advantaged over Isabella—he notes his “place i’ the state,” or his authority as governor of Vienna, and also enjoys the privileges of masculinity in his patriarchal society—he leads his list of advantages with his “unsoiled name” and the “austereness of his life.” Angelo prioritizes his reputation as “a man of stricture and firm abstinence” higher than his political authority as a credit to his case, which is especially telling considering Isabella’s reputation as a nun-to-be.⁴⁶ Angelo is so confident in his reputation as a sexless and incorruptible man that he places it foremost in his reasons why he would win a political contest against someone whose career relies on being “unsoiled” and “austere.” For Angelo, his abstinence is the star of his political career.

But as Angelo’s use of his abstinence here is more to use his reputation for corrupt ends, so *Measure’s* course largely shows the dark side to Angelo’s abstinence. It may be objected that *Measure* shows the dark side of Angelo, period, as Angelo is a clear villain. Yet Angelo’s villainy is inextricably bound to both his moments of calculating abstinence and his later use of that abstinence as a political weapon. Consider this excerpt from Angelo’s soliloquy after Isabella first argues before him in 2.2:

It is I
That, lying by the violet in the sun,
Do, as the carrion does, not as the flower,
Corrupt with virtuous season.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.153-160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.3.12.

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.172-175.

Angelo's metaphor to describe his temptation is laden with the imagery of abstinence and its opposite, sexual excess. He imagines himself prostrate and "doing as the carrion does," in a powerless position where he rots and is presumably penetrated by maggots and scavengers; Angelo's corruption has overturned his place as an upright and "complete" official. While "virtuous season" causes all other things to flourish, Angelo has been overturned and rotted by his erotic desire. The same sun that lets Isabella grow has rendered Angelo effeminate and powerless. Furthermore, reading Isabella as that "violet in the sun," Angelo clearly identifies Isabella with abstinence. Violets were a symbol of chastity and faithful love in Shakespeare's England, as illustrated by Laertes' comparison of Hamlet to a fast-blooming violet.⁴⁸ While "chastity" may not have always equaled "abstinence" in early modern England, as I argue on page , Isabella is performing abstinence. By comparing his own state of incontinence to Isabella's devoted abstinence, Angelo emphasizes that his own abstinence has failed him. Abstinence may be Angelo's weapon, but because he obsesses over his abstinence in figuring his self-control, abstinence also engenders Angelo's downfall.

I maintain that Angelo's abstinence reflects his political position more than his genuine ideals. Angelo focuses less on maintaining sexual abstinence than controlling others' sexuality. Indeed, Angelo attempts to coerce Isabella, breaking his veneer of abstinence as an attempt to prevent Isabella's abstinence from fulfilling its radical reform. In doing so, Angelo reveals the hollowness of his claim to "gravity," symbolically problematizing the claim to sacral kingship that they rely upon for their governance. In the

⁴⁸ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), ProQuest Ebook Central, 225-226.

backdrop of 1583-1623 debates about kingship, Angelo represents the festering corruption of Protestant English state reform.

1.1 to 2.2: Angelo's Pretense to Abstinence

To elaborate on the relationship between Angelo's abstinence and English state reform, it is necessary to discuss Angelo as a character. Having set aside what Angelo *does* in the play, as that was discussed in the introduction's synopsis, an examination of what Angelo *says* in the play is in order. In Angelo's first appearance, the Duke praises Angelo and gives him the commission of governor of Vienna:

There is a kind of character in thy [Angelo's] life
That to th' observer doth thy history
Fully unfold. Thyself and thy belongings
Are not thine own so proper as to waste
Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee...
Nature never lends
The smallest scruple of her excellence
But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines
Herself the glory of a creditor,
Both thanks and use...
In our remove be thou at full ourself.
Mortality and mercy in Vienna
Live in thy tongue and heart.⁴⁹

The Duke begins his speech to Angelo with one metaphor: there is a "character," or inscription, in Angelo's life that shows the sum of his existence. And that existence has

⁴⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.1.28-46. The excerpted passage above derives from a much longer speech (all of 27-48) in which the Duke praises Angelo and commends him to spread his virtues, but I have here stuck with the parts that Angelo seems to find most relevant when responding.

many talents or “virtues” which Angelo ought to use for others than just himself. Indeed, extending the motif of inscription, the Duke compares Angelo to a borrower from a deified Nature, who has lent him “scruples of her excellence,” small weights of these virtues. As Nature is Angelo’s creditor, Angelo ought to respect the character inscribing his borrower’s contract on his life, and benefit the natural order with the weight of his virtue. Therefore, the Duke announces, Angelo will be “at full,” or in every way, the Duke, invested with the power to kill or give mercy in his body. Having described Angelo’s life as one borrowed from Nature, the Duke prescribes Angelo to use his natural gifts in the weighty office of governor.

Angelo accepts the Duke’s metaphors, but uses them to protest the Duke’s urgency:

Now, good my lord,
Let there be some more test made of my mettle
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamped upon it.⁵⁰

Angelo agrees that he has “mettle,” or the virtue of Nature’s weights. But although Angelo agrees with the Duke’s description, Angelo is more tepid about the Duke’s prescription: there ought to be a further test of mettle before being stamped with the Duke’s noble and great “figure,” or inscription. Angelo may agree with the Duke’s basic assessment of his own self as one weighted with authority and virtues to carry out that authority, but Angelo is uncomfortable with obtaining further authority.

Angelo’s next conversation with Escalus sees significantly less discomfort from Angelo. In response to Angelo’s sentencing of Claudio, Escalus pleads for mercy, asking

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.1.48-51.

Angelo to consider if Angelo would have at some point in his life also “erred in this point which now you [Angelo] censure [Claudio], / And pulled the law upon you.”⁵¹ Escalus challenges Angelo with a counterfactual: if Angelo’s erotic desire aligned with his circumstances to fulfill that desire before marriage, might he too err in committing premarital sex? Angelo’s response is blasé: “’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, / Another thing to fall.”⁵² Angelo does not challenge the substance of Escalus’ counterfactual, not disputing the possibility of desire coinciding with circumstance. Instead, Angelo emphasizes the fact that he has not fornicated (even if he has been tempted), returning to the evident reality of his unfallen probity. Furthermore, Angelo is here playing on another of Escalus’ warnings to “Let us be keen and rather cut a little / Than fall and bruise to death.”⁵³ While Escalus’ admonition to avoid “falling and bruising [Claudio] to death” suggests a diminished sentence for Claudio, Angelo’s conflation of “fall” as “mistakenly penalize” with “fall” as “mistakenly do wrong” elides the difference between his public authority as a judge and his personal morality. In Angelo’s view, his severity as a judge is equivalent to his moral austerity.⁵⁴

Additionally, 2.1 sees Angelo extend the Duke’s metaphor of inscription into a prescription for himself that is more confident and more austere than the Duke offered. In addition to his distinction between temptation and falling, Angelo makes a second argument against mercy for Claudio:

⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.10-16.

⁵² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.17-18.

⁵³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.5-6.

⁵⁴ Debora Kuller Shuger similarly analyzes Angelo’s words later in this scene, focusing on “What knows the laws / That thieves do pass on thieves?” Shuger argues that Angelo does not view his moral character as relevant for his “public administration of justice.” See Shuger, *Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure* (GB: Palgrave, 2001), 64.

When I that censure him do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death
And nothing come in partial.⁵⁵

“If I really do fornicate,” Angelo says, “inscribe the judgment I stamped on the Claudio case apply, so I die and the law is impartial.” As opposed to his tepid response to governorship, Angelo is completely confident here, seemingly unperturbed by the possibility of fornication—this is a figure he does not anticipate will ever be stamped upon his mettle.

Angelo next defines the austerity of his office when Isabella appeals for Claudio’s sake. When Isabella argues that Angelo should just condemn fornication and not Claudio, Angelo dismisses her:

Mine were the very cipher of a function,
To fine the faults whose fine stands in record
And let go by the actor.⁵⁶

By Angelo’s logic, his only function as judge is to punish or “fine” the “faults” recorded by statute, which can only be done by punishing the “actor” of said faults. Angelo makes this point more explicitly when Isabella, similar to Escalus’ counterfactual argument, appeals to the possibility that God might judge Angelo:

It is the law, not I, condemn your brother.
Were he my kinsman, brother, or my son,
It should be thus with him.⁵⁷

Angelo abdicates his agency, as it is the law that condemns Claudio—he is merely enacting it, as he would do to any man who fornicated.

⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.29-31.

⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.37-44.

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.76-87.

Yet Angelo's vision of himself as a neutral dispenser of justice has clear tension with Angelo's implicit acknowledgment of his faults. As Angelo conflated making judicial errors with making errors as a person to argue against Escalus, it is clear that Angelo's authority exists only to the extent that he proves a responsible person, and even if he is just following the law in dispensing justice, his impartiality is limited by his ability to be "tempted." English audiences would sympathize with the above critique of Angelo, believing that no matter how just any person is on Earth, that person's justice is still less than God's.⁵⁸ So the tension between Angelo's private austerity and his use of that austerity to promulgate a putatively-neutral "justice" would be uncomfortable to audiences, even if the basic "death to fornicators" law he exacts would be at home in rigorous Protestant state reform.⁵⁹ From the moment Angelo slips from his acknowledgment of his own humanity into his denial of that humanity as an instrument of justice, *Measure's* first English audiences would be leery.

In terms of the play's chronology, Angelo next defines himself in the carrion speech with which I began this examination. Having already discussed Angelo's metaphor of carrion as feminizing, I turn to Angelo's discussion of Isabella's abstinence. "Can it be / That modesty may more betray our sense / Than woman's lightness?," Angelo asks.⁶⁰ Using the royal "our"—an indicator of Angelo's pride—Angelo rhetorically asks if Isabella's abstinence or virtue ("modesty") is more tempting than the incontinent lust he expects in women (maintaining misogynistic assumptions common in the period that women were more lustful).⁶¹ He continues

⁵⁸ Shuger, *Political Theologies*, 60.

⁵⁹ Crawford, *Sexuality*, 78-79.

⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.175-177.

⁶¹ Crawford, *Sexuality*, 121.

Dost though desire her foully for those things
That make her good?...
O cunning enemy that, to catch a saint,
With saints dost bait thy hook! Most dangerous
Is that temptation that doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet,
With all her double vigor—art and nature—
Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid
Subdues me quite. Ever till now,
When men were fond, I smiled and wondered how.⁶²

Angelo associates Isabella's "good," "virtue" and "saintliness" with the "enemy" (Satan's) "foul desire."⁶³ For Angelo, Isabella's virtue (including her abstinence) is at fault for the foul eros that makes him "stir his temper" against his abstinence. Unlike the incontinent "strumpet," or prostitute, whose beauty and cunning vainly attempt to catch Angelo's attention, Isabella has "subdued" Angelo. Thinking back to Angelo's carrion metaphor, Angelo seems to view the same sun of virtue that inspires Isabella's flowering to have toppled him and left him rotting, feminized. While Angelo previously smirked at men who felt "fond," he now laments a vulnerability to the same kind of desire, and he attributes that vulnerability to Isabella's out-performing of him in restraint and morality.

Angelo's crisis over Isabella's virtue sends him into his own confusion of sexual morality. "What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?," he also asks himself.⁶⁴ Feeling unmanned by Isabella's stronger performance, Angelo is no longer sure of his identity, nor how to proceed. "O, let her brother live! / Thieves for their robbery have authority / When

⁶² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.181-195.

⁶³ Kamps and Raber, *Texts and Contexts*, 50.

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.180.

judges steal themselves,” he also declares.⁶⁵ Harkening back to his self-assured rhetorical question to Escalus—“What knows the laws / That thieves do pass on thieves?”—that rebuked Escalus’ counterfactual of Angelo being tempted, Angelo questions his ability to act as a judge.⁶⁶ In Angelo’s view, as he conflated mercy and “falling” as an instrument of justice, his sympathy for Isabella has stolen his authority. In being unmanned by eros, Angelo no longer believes he can fairly dispense justice, as Escalus’ counterfactual has become a real possibility: Angelo could fornicate.

As Angelo conflates “falling” with “mercy” and “mercy” with his erotic desire for Isabella, he returns to the motif of weight to describe his desire. “My invention, hearing not my tongue, / Anchors on Isabel,” he ruminates—his imagination has focused on Isabella to the extent of a fallen weight.⁶⁷ He goes on to note that

My gravity,
Wherein—let no man hear me—I take pride,
Could I with boot change for an idle plume,
Which the air beats for vain.⁶⁸

Figuring his austerity as “gravity” or weight, Angelo takes pride in that austerity. But at this point, he could exchange all the weight of his severe personality for a light feather. Angelo is both emptied of his weight and simultaneously pinned down by his position relative to Isabella:

O place, O form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.182-184.

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.22-23.

⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.3-4.

⁶⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.9-12.

Wrench awe from fools and tie the wiser souls
To thy false seeming! Blood, thou art blood.⁶⁹

Angelo's "place" and "form," or officiousness and political status, has tied even his "wise soul" to the simple conflation of authority with virtue. But beneath his judge's robes, his "blood" is still the "blood" of passion like everybody else. The weight of Angelo's authority deceived him into believing himself virtuous, and now he is tied to a terrible position.

Further, Angelo's admission that his "blood art blood" is part of a larger discourse on his own restraint, figured as his blood. This is unsurprising given early modern medical thought, which linked blood to cholera in humorism.⁷⁰ The Duke initially notes that Angelo "scarce confesses / That his blood flows or that his appetite is more to bread than stone."⁷¹ In this regard, the Duke views Angelo's pretense to dispassion as false: he does not confess that he really enjoys eating bread more than stone. Lucio is less discerning between Angelo's front and Angelo's interior feelings, claiming that Angelo's blood

Is very snow broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense,
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge
With profits of the mind, study, and fast.⁷²

Figuring Angelo's blood as "snow broth" or icy, Lucio makes out Angelo as one who never feels the "edge" or cut of his passions ("stings and motions of the sense") without blunting those passions through fasting and focus. Escalus' counterfactual, discussed earlier, also noted the potential for Angelo to slip by some "resolute acting of blood"—in which

⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.12-15.

⁷⁰ Cadden, *Meanings*, 184; Crawford, *Sexuality*, 101-103.

⁷¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.51-54.

⁷² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.57-61.

instance, Angelo's passions would be closer to the Duke's perceptions than Lucio's.⁷³ While Angelo believed himself to have "snow broth" blood before, and used that impression to attain his lofty authority, his realization comes closer to the Duke's test and Escalus' counterfactual as he figures his own blood to literally be passionate as everyone else.

Knowing that Isabella is back to see him, Angelo views his incontinence with a further extension of his blood metaphor: his blood is an insubordinate subject to his orders.

Why does my blood thus muster to my heart,
Making both it unable for itself
And dispossessing all my other parts
Of necessary fitness?⁷⁴

Like soldiers assembling for battle, Angelo's blood has "mustered" to his heart, which both makes his blood "unable" or ineffectual and "dispossesses" his other faculties. In his view, his passions have accrued in the seat of his emotions as opposed to healthily circulating throughout his body. But this is not because Angelo's blood is malicious, just misguided: "So play the foolish throngs with one that swoons, / Come all to help him, and so stop the air / By which he should revive."⁷⁵ In the vein of his army metaphor, Angelo figures his blood as "foolish throngs" come to assist a fainted man who "stop the air by which he should revive" or suffocate him in their swarming. Angelo's final metaphor on this subject most resonates with his own governmental position:

The general subject to a well-wished king
Quit their own part and in obsequious fondness

⁷³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.8-16.

⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.20-23.

⁷⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.24-26.

Crowd to his presence, where their untaught love
Must needs appear offense.⁷⁶

In the absence of the Duke, who stands in for a king, Angelo figures himself a king surrounded by subjects with “obsequious fondness” for his presence, whose subjects’ “untaught” or ignorant love necessarily “appears offense.” With this metaphor that touches on Angelo’s political position most directly, Angelo aligns the “general subject” of his passions with slightly over-fond subjects to his kingly self, empathizing with the “love” of his passions. Their wrong is just loving a little too fervently, and it only “appears offense,” unlike the unmaning done by “blood mustered to the heart” or the killing done by “foolish throngs.” This is a stark reverse from Angelo’s pride in the “gravity” of his abstinence. Clarifying his discontent with the “blood” of his passions further, Angelo actually comes to identify with his erotic lust, viewing its excess as only a mere superficial wrong and switching from masculine restraint to the different masculinity of sexually-dominating others.

2.4 to 5.1: Angelo’s Aggressive Masculinity

So by the time Angelo attempts to coerce Isabella, he has taken a pragmatic approach to his sexuality, admitting his desire to her while using his abstinence as a shield. He tells her “plainly conceive, I love you.”⁷⁷ Isabella remarks that Claudio will die for loving Juliet, to which Angelo responds that “He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love.”⁷⁸ Angelo has decided to obey his lust and attempt to coerce Isabella, and he equates his erotic desire with “love,” writing her potential response to the coercion as “love” in the process.

⁷⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.27-30.

⁷⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.142.

⁷⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.145.

However, when Isabella threatens to “with an outstretched throat...tell the world aloud / What man thou art,” Angelo dares her to challenge his reputation in the passage already analyzed, where Angelo says his “unsoiled name” and “th’ austereness of [his] life” would defeat her accusation.⁷⁹ Angelo’s coercion relies on both his stark acknowledgment of his own erotic desire and his reputation for being sexually abstinent.

As Angelo delivers his ultimatum to Isabella, he revisits the metaphor of weight for his character’s restraint, twisting “weight as scruples” into “weight as force.” His reputation and status “will so your accusation outweigh / That you shall stifle in your own report / And smell of calumny.”⁸⁰ Although Angelo no longer exercises the restraint on which he prided himself, the restraint is useful for “overweighing” Isabella’s “report” of his wrongdoing and making her appear “calumnious” or a slanderer. “Say what you can, my false o’erweighs your true,” Angelo repeats.⁸¹ Angelo acknowledges that his reputation is “false” now, but he no longer cares about morality, only “overweighing” Isabella. His reputation for abstinence is no longer based in morality but still is a tool for him. Angelo’s abstinence is not an actual weight on his behavior, but it is a bludgeon against his opponents.

Yet Angelo feels more discomforted by his lust after the bed trick, in which he has sexual contact with “Isabella,” than before. He goes on to say of sex that

This deed unshapes me quite, makes me unpregnant
And dull to all proceedings. A deflowered maid,
And by an eminent body that enforced

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.154-156.

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.159-161.

⁸¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.171.

The law against it!⁸²

The “deed unshapes” Angelo, making him “unpregnant” or unapt and “dull to all proceedings”; the “edge” of his passions is no longer blunted by his abstinence, but by actually enacting those passions. His “eminent body” has “deflowered” Isabella, but he doesn’t seem any happier. But he has not lost any of assuredness in his reputation:

How might she tongue me! Yet reason dares her no,
For my authority bears of a credent bulk
That no particular scandal once can touch
But it confounds the breather.⁸³

While Isabella could “tongue” or accuse Angelo, “reason dares her no,” because his authority is so incredibly huge that no “particular scandal” could defame Angelo. Instead, in his thought, Isabella would only be “confounded” herself. Angelo doesn’t believe Isabella could successfully press her case, but he nevertheless seems in mourning. Again, he laments that “when once our grace we have forgot, / Nothing goes right; we would, and we would not.”⁸⁴ Angelo has “forgotten his grace,” and so “nothing goes right.” But being still corrupt, Angelo would rather “nothing go right” in a way that keeps his “credent bulk” than in a way that involves people finding out his own incontinence and coercion.

So when Angelo finally defends his reputation before the Duke, Angelo lies blatantly, applying the veneer of his reputation instead of the substance of his character. In response to Mariana’s charge that she had sex with Angelo, Angelo replies their “speech of marriage” was

⁸² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 4.4.17-20.

⁸³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 4.4.22-25.

⁸⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 4.4.30-31.

Broke off,
Partly for that her promised proportions
Came short of composition, but in chief
For that her reputation was disvalued
In levity. Since which time of five years
I never spake with her, saw her, nor heard from her,
Upon my faith and honor.⁸⁵

Angelo claims to have ended any talk of marriage before formalizing the marriage, which fits together with Mariana's story.⁸⁶ Indeed, Angelo's comment that her "proportions" or dowry came short of agreement resonates with what the Duke said of Angelo's reasons for disengaging Mariana.⁸⁷ But Angelo adds a second "chief" reason for discontinuing his engagement: Mariana's "reputation was disvalued / In levity." Harkening back to Angelo's weight metaphor, he casts aspersions on Mariana's reputation as one of "levity" or lightness—sexual incontinence. This is at odds with the Duke's account of Mariana as one who "hath yet in her the continuance of her first affection" for Angelo; there is no textual evidence to support Mariana as incontinent, and every bit of evidence (other than what Angelo says here) to view Mariana as devoted to Angelo.⁸⁸ Both defending his own reputation for virtue and relying upon his reputation of abstinence, Angelo denigrates Mariana. Angelo's appearance of "faith and honor" helps him quash Mariana's claim.

When Mariana contests Angelo's claim again, Angelo uses Mariana's contesting of his word to create a narrative in which Angelo is a victim. "My patience here is touched," or

⁸⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.223-229.

⁸⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.210-217.

⁸⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.199-215.

⁸⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.222-225.

injured, Angelo claims.⁸⁹ Therefore, Angelo presses, the Duke ought to give him “the scope” or total authority “of justice.”⁹⁰ On Angelo’s thought, the “poor informal women” Isabella and Mariana are “instruments of some more mightier member / That sets them on.”⁹¹ Angelo claims Isabella and Mariana are “informal” or uninformed and rash, disparaging their intelligence. Then in a parallel to the narrative of “witch hunts” today evoked by political figures to ridicule official investigations and accusations, Angelo makes Isabella and Mariana out as tools of a “more mightier member.” This is a double entendre, conflating “member” as person with “member” as male genitals to represent Isabella and Mariana as manipulated by another man—that has “set them on” himself. By declaring his patience “touched” and noting that he “did but smile till now”—he was pleased until these accusations disrupted his meeting with the Duke—Angelo frames himself as a victim. By framing himself as a victim, he presses to gain “the scope of justice” in counter-investigating the women he has abused.⁹² Angelo’s apparent victimhood allows him to perform his aggressive masculinity until the Duke reveals himself.

Final Lines: Angelo’s Return to Abstinence

Challenged by the Duke, Angelo admits his reputation was an act and he has lied in pretending his abstinence. In doing so, Angelo reinserts himself into the restrained performance of masculine abstinence to which he first made pretenses.

Oh my dread lord,
I should be guiltier than my guiltiness

⁸⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.242.

⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.241.

⁹¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.243-245.

⁹² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.140.

To think I can be undiscernible
When I perceive Your Grace, like power divine,
Hath looked upon my passes. Then, good prince,
No longer session hold upon my shame,
But let my trial be mine own confession.
Immediate sentence then and sequent death
Is all the grace I beg.⁹³

Angelo confesses his sins to his “dread lord,” “guiltier” than the mere “guiltiness” of attempting to coerce Isabella because Angelo has thought himself “undiscernible” or capable of hiding his sins. Because the Duke “like power divine” has looked upon Angelo’s “passes” or trespasses, Angelo would rather die than lived shamed of his crimes: first attempted coercion, then hiding information and lying to the Duke. The only divine “grace” Angelo seeks now is death.

Angelo’s final lines occur after his belief in his coming capital punishment is confirmed.

I am sorry that such sorrow I procure,
And so deep stick it in my penitent heart
That I crave death more willingly than mercy.
‘Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it.⁹⁴

Like “guiltier” than my “guiltiness,” Angelo is “sorry” that he “procures” such “sorrow,” playing on the “apology” meaning of “sorrow” with its meaning of “mourning.” He will “stick” that sorrow or “mourning” into his “penitent” heart in another moment of

⁹³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.362-370.

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.472-476.

penetration, calling back the Duke's use of Protestant-aligned penitence.⁹⁵ In penetrating his own heart, Angelo again performs through self-restraint rather than dominating others. In "craving death more willingly than mercy," Angelo claims he genuinely deserves death, not the mercy that Isabella desired. Angelo wants to be punished because he sees himself as completely fallen, again pushing himself into the binary view of justice he promulgated; rather than his performance of domination, he has reinserted himself into his old performance of abstinence.⁹⁶

Conclusion

I have argued that Angelo performs superficial abstinence: he performs abstinence to attain political "gravity" early on, switching to aggressive sexuality as a more expedient political tool against Isabella, and finally falling back to abstinence when caught by the Duke. In the context of 1583-1604 England, then, Angelo would be performing deviant masculinity throughout *Measure*. But the Duke also performs abstinent masculinity in *Measure*, falling into the same *topos* of self-assured, restrained manhood. In my next chapter, I will consider the Duke's temporary abstinence in comparison to Angelo's, considering how the Duke also performs different masculinity when it is politically-expedient to do so.

⁹⁵ Sarah Beckwith, "Medieval Penance, Reformation Repentance and Measure for Measure," in Gordon McMullan and David Matthews, *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194-195.

⁹⁶ While Angelo is ultimately married to Mariana instead of executed, I am more interested in Angelo's words here than speculating about the content of his marriage after the play's end.

“The Life Removed”: The Duke’s Temporary Abstinence

No, holy Father, throw away that thought;
Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
Can pierce a complete bosom. Why I desire thee
To give me secret harbor hath a purpose
More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends
Of burning youth.⁹⁷

Here, the Duke takes pride in sexual restraint; inaccurate (“dribbling”) love cannot penetrate a perfect (“complete”) body like his.⁹⁸ The Duke asserts his sexual abstinence, or restraint from engaging in sexual activity, as a valuable attribute. But his abstinence is not intrinsically valuable—rather, as the first line hints, the Duke is only speaking about his sexuality to maintain the reputation that this abstinence affords. Indeed, the Duke’s next three lines reassure the friar that the Duke has a purpose more mature “than the aims and ends / Of burning youth.” In this context, the Duke’s abstinence is but part of his crafted persona as one who has “ever loved the life removed” from foolish ventures.⁹⁹ By conjuring this persona, the Duke persuades the friar to let the Duke enter the disguise of a friar so he can covertly observe and test his subjects. His abstinence allows him to disguise as one who is sworn to abstinence, and then to use that disguise to see if Angelo’s “appetite / Is more to bread than stone.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, ed., *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 1.3.1-5.

⁹⁸ Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, ed., *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 29.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

¹⁰⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.31-32.

Similarly, the Duke's relationship to his abstinence is problematic as a point of hypocrisy. The Duke spends much of the play engaged in an apparent "life removed" under the guise of a friar, and he critiques Angelo's attempt to coerce Isabella. For the Duke, "lying in the sun" as Angelo figuratively does is not an option, because a ruler should have the "grace to stand, and virtue" to follow the correct path.¹⁰¹ Yet the perennial flashpoint for *Measure* criticism, the Duke's proposal to Isabella, returns with a vigor when discussing the disjunction between the Duke's "complete bosom" of abstinence in 1.3 and his asking Isabella to marry him in 5.1. The Duke repeatedly asks Isabella to marry him (5.1.490-491, 532-533), neither time mentioning a reason for his proposal other than Isabella's "lovely sake" or "good."¹⁰² Against the Duke's proposal, how do we read his use of abstinence?

I maintain that abstinence, in the case of the Duke, reflects his political position more than his genuine ideals. Furthermore, I maintain that the Duke's proposal to Isabella reflects more on the Duke's similarities to Angelo than his differences, particularly the similarity of their need to control women's sexuality. While the Duke and Angelo have clear differences in their method of asserting control over women, the Duke's marriage proposal to Isabella breaks his veneer of abstinence as an attempt to prevent Isabella's abstinence from fulfilling its radical reform. In doing so, the Duke reveals the hollowness of his own claim to "the life removed," symbolically problematizing the claim to sacral kingship that he relies upon for their governance. In the backdrop of 1583-1604 debates about kingship, the Duke represents the fallibility of Protestant English state reform.

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.208-11.

¹⁰² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.489-492; Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.532-535.

1.1 to 5.1: The Duke's Use of Abstinence for Reputation

The Duke first speaks of his popular reputation when explaining how he's leaving Vienna.

I'll privily away. I love the people
But do not like to stage me to their eyes;
Though it do well, I do not relish well
Their loud applause and "aves" vehement,
Nor do I think the man of safe discretion
That does affect it.¹⁰³

The Duke will leave Vienna "privily," because although he "loves the people," he "does not like to stage himself" or make a show of himself. He is less concerned with "doing well" in meeting political purposes and more concerned with not "relishing well" or taking excessive pleasure in people's approval. This is because, as he hints, that he does not think "the man of safe" or sound "discretion" that courts the people's attention. The Duke is offering an implicit warning to Angelo here, telling Angelo to avoid the reputation-mongering in which Angelo engages in (as shown in Angelo's pride in his "gravity"), but the Duke is doing this by revealing a bit of his own political philosophy: a good ruler does not desire the approval of his people.

The Duke expands on this while courting the approval of Friar Thomas in *Measure* 1.3. Having moved from telling the "holy Father" to "throw away the thought" of the Duke abusing the guise of a friar, the Duke elaborates:

I have ever loved the life removed
And held in idle price to haunt assemblies

¹⁰³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.1.68-73.

Where youth and cost witless bravery keeps.¹⁰⁴

The Duke has “ever lived the life removed” or retired from “assembles where youth and cost” or expense produce a “witless” display. Harkening back to the Duke’s disdain for “the aims and ends of burning youth,” he characterizes himself as a lover of a different life, one aimed at ruling and not display. The Duke makes himself as unconcerned with common opinion.

Yet the Duke then goes on to justify letting Angelo rule through protecting the Duke’s own reputation. As the Duke notes to Friar Thomas, “the baby beats the nurse” in Vienna, so he has set Angelo’s “stricture and firm abstinence” upon the city to corral its excesses.¹⁰⁵ But in response to Thomas’ implicit question—why didn’t the Duke unloose the “tied-up justice” at the Duke’s preference, as the Duke would be “more dreadful” or frightening than Angelo?—the Duke’s answer revolves around his own reputation:

I do fear, too dreadful.
Sith ‘twas my fault to give the people scope,
‘Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them,
For what I bid them do; for we bid this be done
When evil deeds have their permissive pass
And not the punishment. Therefore indeed, my father,
I have on Angelo imposed the office,
Who may in th’ ambush of my name strike home,
And yet in my nature never in the fight
To do in slander.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.6-10.

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.11-13; *ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.31-43.

The Duke fears that him imposing justice might come as “too dreadful,” because as it was his fault “to give the people scope” or authority, it would be his “tyranny” to punish them for what he allowed them to do. He virtually ordered crimes to be done “when evil deeds have their permissive pass” to go done. So the Duke has “imposed” the duty of imposing law on Angelo so Angelo may “strike” evil under cover, and yet never allow “slander” to touch the Duke’s “nature” or identity. Though the Duke may distrust others for seeking the people’s approval, he is very concerned with protecting his own reputation from backlash from the people.

Indeed, the Duke demonstrates this concern when Lucio speaks to the Duke as the Duke is disguised as a friar. Lucio claims that the Duke would have “paid for nursing a thousand” illegitimately-born children, and that the Duke’s mercy derived from “some feeling of the sport,” knowing “the service” of prostitution.¹⁰⁷ The Duke questions this: “I never heard the absent Duke much detected” or accused “for women,” but Lucio continues with further claims that the Duke’s “use” or custom was to pay for sex and adds that “he would be drunk too, let me inform you.”¹⁰⁸ Lucio gleefully associates the Duke with incontinence in both the sense of sexual licentiousness and drinking, to which the Duke insistently says “You do him wrong, surely.”¹⁰⁹ Lucio only expands his claims: “a shy fellow was the Duke” because although “the greater file of the subject held the Duke to be wise,” the Duke was really “a very superficial, ignorant, unweighing” or injudicious “fellow.”¹¹⁰

The Duke is infuriated:

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.94-98.

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.99-100; *ibid.*, 103-105.

¹⁰⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.109.

¹¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.106-114.

Either this is envy in you, folly, or mistaking. The very stream of his life and the business he hath helmed must, upon a warranted need, give him a better proclamation. Let him be but testimonied in his own bringings-forth, and he shall appear to the envious a scholar, a statesman, and a soldier. Therefore you speak unskillfully, or if your knowledge be more, it is much darkened in your malice.¹¹¹

The Duke claims Lucio is either foolish, mistaken, or envious; the Duke's "stream of his life" and the "business he hath helmed," or governance, gives the Duke a "better proclamation" or reputation. His "own bringings-forth" or public actions are the only testimony the Duke needs for successful performance of the masculinities "scholar, statesman, and soldier." Hence, Lucio is either "unskillful" or ignorant or tainted by hatred of the Duke, according to the Duke.

While Lucio continues to call the Duke indulgent, claiming the Duke "would mouth" or kiss "a beggar, though she smelt brown bread and garlic," the Duke doubles down on reputation as an item of value.¹¹² Once Lucio leaves, the Duke ruminates that

No might nor greatness in mortality
Can censure scape; back-wounding calumny
The whitest virtue strikes. What king so strong
Can tie the gall up in the slanderous tongue?¹¹³

The Duke is not concerned with the quality of his virtue, implying that his morality is "whitest" or spotless, but rather with the limits of his "might and greatness" to escape "censure" and "back-wounding calumny." The Duke wishes for the "strength" to "tie the gall up in the slanderous tongue," concerned with Lucio's apparent slander to the point that he

¹¹¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.115-120. Note Lucio's use of class here in labeling the Duke's sexual partners as "beggars" who smell of cheap food: the Duke is not just being insulted for basic incontinence but for "consorting beneath his station," conflating lustful relationships with improper social relationships as typical of sexual morality.

¹¹² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.144-146.

¹¹³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.148-151.

would prefer to use violence against Lucio. And the Duke's concern with this reputation is not entirely motivated by his belief that his virtue is indeed "whitest," as evidenced by his questions for Escalus: "I pray you, sir, of what disposition was the Duke?" and "What pleasure was he given to?"¹¹⁴ Escalus answers that the Duke was "one that above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself" and "rather rejoicing to see another merry than merry at anything which professed to make him rejoice—a gentleman of all temperance."¹¹⁵ According to Escalus, the Duke was most devoted to "knowing himself" and was happier to see others "merry" than merry at anything that "professed" or attempted to make him happy, a noble man of all "temperance" or moderation. Although the Duke does not directly respond to Escalus' characterization of the Duke in the text, the Duke does not dispute this characterization, as opposed to Lucio's characterization. The Duke wants validation for his reputation, not merely his own assurance that he has "whitest virtue."

This finds an important parallel in the Duke's subsequent political manifesto on ruling, the "sword of heaven" speech. Standing alone on the stage, the Duke proclaims that

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe;
Pattern in himself to know,
Grace to stand, and virtue go;
More nor less to others paying
Than by self-offenses weighing.
Shame to him whose cruel striking
Kills for faults of his own liking!
Twice treble shame on Angelo,

¹¹⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.186, 189.

¹¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.187-188, 190-191.

To weed my vice and let his grow!
O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side!
How may likeness made in crimes,
Making practice on the times,
To draw with idle spiders' strings
Most ponderous and substantial things!¹¹⁶

The Duke argues that the ruler bearing the “sword of heaven” needs to be as “holy,” or equitable, as “severe,” or austere, harkening back to Escalus’ description of the Duke as “all temperance.” Moving to Escalus’ assertion that the Duke sought to know himself, a ruler should find a “pattern” or example in himself to behave morally and judge others, obtaining “grace to stand” upright and “virtue to go” straight. Equipped with this positive self-knowledge and restraint, a ruler ought not to “pay” or punish others just as equitably as he would punish after “weighing” his own offenses, also calling back to his use of the “weight” motif for Angelo’s character. Indeed, the Duke’s manifesto shortly moves into a rebuke of Angelo: “shame to him” whose cruelty kills others for “faults of his own liking” (i.e., killing others for fornicating while intemperately attempting to sexually coerce others); “twice treble shame on Angelo” to “weed” the vice of fornication that the Duke let happen while letting Angelo’s personal vice grow.¹¹⁷ The “man” in Angelo hides while the “angel” is all most others see; the “likeness” Angelo has made conceals with “spiders’ strings” the “ponderous and substantial things” of Angelo’s own vice. In challenging Angelo here, the

¹¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.2.207-223. I have not excerpted the entire speech here, as the speech goes on for six more lines, because those six lines deal with the bed trick—which is not the subject of my investigation here.

¹¹⁷ The Duke’s figuring of Angelo’s intemperance here as “letting vice grow” has a significant parallel with Angelo’s imagery of “lying by the violet in the sun,” which was discussed earlier in this study. The Duke also seems to view Angelo’s wrongs not as active faults but as Angelo letting control slip, so they both seem to view intemperance as a problem of passivity.

Duke implies that rulership should be both publicly and privately moral, as Debora Shuger argues.¹¹⁸ Yet when juxtaposed with the Duke's asking after his own reputation while in disguise, it seems that the Duke is also interested in being popular, not just being moral. It is not merely that the Duke wants to possess "the whitest virtue" but that he wants said virtue recognized by Escalus and Lucio. In this regard, abstemiousness is an important part of the Duke's performance, particularly the Duke's abstinence. Whether or not the Duke is actually kissing beggars or requiting sex from prostitutes does not hold as much value for the Duke in this sense as the perception that he is not engaged in this activity. In this regard, the Duke is substantially more Machiavellian than Shuger suggests, focusing on his reputation in addition to the confluence of his private and public morality.

The Duke values both reputation and the unity between private and public morality again when he finally tests Angelo in 5.1. Although the Duke knows the depths of Angelo's corruption by now, meaning that his quotes here are not necessarily reflective of his perceptions, the Duke nevertheless reiterates and develops rationales for valuing both that are cogent with the broader world of *Measure*. When Isabella first challenges Angelo, the Duke responds with two familiar arguments against her claims:

First, his integrity
Stands without blemish. Next, it imports no reason
That with such vehemency he should pursue
Faults proper to himself. If he had so offended,
He would have weighed thy brother by himself
And not have cut him off.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Debora Kuller Shuger, *Political Theologies in Shakespeare's England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure* (GB: Palgrave, 2001), 65.

¹¹⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.112-117.

Angelo's "unsoiled name" is a factor in his favor as "unblemished integrity." And that integrity comes before the argument that Angelo has already heard and the Duke has already voiced: it makes no "reason" that Angelo should "with such vehemency" punish those as faulty as he is; if Angelo had "so offended," he would have just "weighed" Claudio by Angelo's own faults, fulfilling Angelo's justice motif and being conscientious. In response to Isabella's despair, the Duke arrests her, rhetorically asking "Shall we thus permit / A blasting and a scandalous breath to fall / On him so near us?"¹²⁰ By injuring Angelo's reputation with "a blasting and a scandalous breath," Isabella has injured the Duke's reputation by proximity. Indeed, the Duke seems most incensed when Lucio claims "meddling friar" Lodowick (the Duke in disguise) "spake" slander against the Duke.¹²¹ While Isabella's recommendation of Lodowick first mentioned this culprit, it is not until Lucio's claims of slander that the Duke takes action:

Words against me? This' a good friar, belike!
And to set on this wretched woman here
Against our substitute! Let this friar be found!¹²²

With "words against" the Duke and "setting on" Isabella against the Duke's own "substitute," Angelo, the Duke again places his own reputation as the injured party in the dispute between Isabella and Angelo.

When Mariana is also heard and Angelo asks for the Duke to give "the scope of justice," the Duke only reaffirms the importance of Angelo's reputation for his status. Did the accusers seriously think their

¹²⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.125-128.

¹²¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.132-135.

¹²² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.136-138.

Oaths,
Though they would swear down each particular saint,
Were testimonies against his worth and credit
That's sealed in approbation?¹²³

Angelo could have “each particular saint” testify to his character, and yet Mariana, Isabella, and apparently Friar Lodowicko nevertheless challenged his “credit that's sealed in approbation” such as the Duke's. It is not the “he said, she said” on which the Duke focuses here, but Angelo's apparent character.

This meets an important contrast in the Duke's actions immediately after. Reappearing before Escalus and Angelo as “Lodowicko,” the Duke says “Respect to your great place! And let the devil / Be sometimes honored for his burning throne!”¹²⁴ Under cover, the Duke sarcastically contrasts the “place” of Escalus and Angelo to “the devil's burning throne,” noting that authority—and reputation—are not necessarily always good. Indeed, the Duke goes on to point out the apparent misuse of the Duke's authority, speaking to Isabella and Mariana:

The Duke's unjust,
Thus to retort your manifest appeal
And put your trial in the villain's mouth
Which you came here to accuse.¹²⁵

The Duke and his “substitutes” may have authority, but until the Duke delegates that authority responsibly, then the trial will not be fair, according to “Lodowicko.” Indeed, the

¹²³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.248-252.

¹²⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.293-294.

¹²⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.301-304.

Duke goes on to note—still in disguise—a disjunction between Angelo’s authority and Angelo’s morality:

I have seen corruption boil and bubble
Till it o’errun the stew; laws for all faults,
But faults so countenanced that the strong statutes
Stand like the forfeits in a barber’s shop,
As much in mock as mark.¹²⁶

“Lodowicko” has seen corruption simmer until it overruns the “stewpot” of Vienna (punning on the early modern sense of “stew” as “brothel”).¹²⁷ Although there are “laws for all faults,” their “strong statutes” are effectively the signs in a “barber’s shop” that command performance of said “faults,” not just “marks” against using figurative razors but “mocking” forbiddance of that use. Beyond the divorce between private and public morality represented by the Viennese state, the Duke views the state as doing false advertising: its apparent laws publicly stand as mockery of its ideals. Its reputation is “boiled over” with obvious corruption, and the Duke has come to restore the government’s image.

When the Duke finally drops the façade of “Lodowicko,” he immediately speaks to the importance of appearance in Angelo’s testimony. He asks Angelo

Hast thou or word, or wit, or impudence,
That yet can do thee office? If thou hast,
Rely upon it till my tale be heard,
And hold no longer out.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.317-323.

¹²⁷ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 106.

¹²⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.359-362.

The Duke asks Angelo if Angelo has “word, wit, or impudence” that can serve his cause— punning on “office” as service and as Angelo’s authoritative position. This pun, along with the list of increasing irreverence toward Angelo’s testimony in his “word” moving to “impudence” or truculence, demonstrates that the Duke wants a more substantive reputation to match’s Angelo’s position. Angelo should rely upon his “words,” and make sure they are not “impudent” or merely “wit” but provide a positive spin on the Duke’s “tale.” Angelo’s “unsoiled name” is no longer enough, and the Duke wants Angelo to give it a good coat. This is interesting given that the Duke concludes by taking on his own new coat: abandoning abstinence for marital manhood.

Final Lines: The Duke’s Switch to Marital Masculinity

Having spent the play obsessing over his reputation for abstinence, the Duke concludes the last act by repeatedly asking for Isabella’s hand in marriage. This scene routinely confounds critical interpretation, and my interpretation of it here as a trade between abstinence as a measure of reputation and chastity as a measure of reputation is a key intervention. The Duke says, after surprising Isabella with a living Claudio, that

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.¹²⁹

The Duke pardons Claudio for “his sake” and claims “he is my brother too” because Isabella, for her “lovely sake,” can marry the Duke and make Claudio and the Duke brothers-in-law. As noted before, this marriage proposal has no support anywhere else in the Duke’s

¹²⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.489-492.

previous interactions with Isabella. What this proposal does have is the suggestion that Isabella ought to marry the Duke for her own “lovely sake,” pressuring Isabella into a marriage that she could not have foreseen as a nun-to-be. Indeed, Isabella’s silence, as I argue on page 98, evidences that she also has not courted the Duke and resists his proposal.

Furthermore, the Duke’s language of Isabella “giving her hand” in marriage is misleading, as the Duke has just spent so much of the final act depriving others of agency. Immediately before this marriage proposal, the Duke forces Isabella to beg for Angelo’s life, which he has done after forcibly marrying Angelo.¹³⁰ The Duke cannot convincingly appeal to Isabella’s choice in marriage when he is exerting state power to marry those he wants married and kill those he wants killed. Furthermore, his manipulation of Isabella, forcing her to beg for mercy toward the person she believes ultimately killed her brother, speaks to an incongruity between the Duke’s reputation as a lawful authority and his actual practice of surveilling and controlling his subjects. Isabella’s consistent morality threatens to overshadow the Duke’s own reputation for morality—her existence symbolically threatens to expose his own moral failings.¹³¹ The Duke’s offer to Isabella thus recreates her as a subject of the early modern English sexual economy; by instantiating Isabella as a “wife” instead of nun, the Duke pressures Isabella to fit into a normative early modern English role for women. In turn, the Duke can turn Isabella’s challenge for the entire structure of the 1583-1604 English state into another component of it as another marriage. Isabella’s corresponding silence evokes the silence of those nuns forced to abandon monasticism thanks for Tudor reform.

¹³⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.439-449, 373-374.

¹³¹ I am indebted in this point to a question from Edward Onaci.

The Duke only goes on to reinforce his appeals to Isabella's agency when he finally returns to propositioning Isabella. He claims

I have a motion much imports your good,
Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.¹³²

The Duke reiterates his proposal as a proposal to which Isabella may willingly "incline an ear," using another body metaphor to token her consent but changing the recipient of the metaphor from her "hand" to her "ear." This helps him frame the proposal as less weighty in appearance—only asking Isabella to respond by listening, rather than by becoming physically intimate right away—but it does not change the substance of his proposal. Indeed, reiterating that "what's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" for "sharing Claudio as a brother" takes the same, slightly vaguer approach to a big topic. His language of agency is incongruent with the power he is actually exercising. It does not help that the Duke has just forcibly married Lucio, again recalling the Duke's power of state force to marry others.¹³³

"The Duke's Unjust": Final Thoughts on the Duke

I have argued that the Duke performs temporary abstinence: he performs abstinence as his "life removed" for most of *Measure*, switching to marital sexuality to subjugate Isabella. In the context of 1583-1604 England, then, the Duke moves from deviant to normative masculinity. But to further unpack why this shift is problematic, it is

¹³² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.532-535.

¹³³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.506-519.

first necessary to examine Isabella's own principled abstinence. I turn to Isabella in my next chapter.

“In Probation of a Sisterhood”: Isabella’s Principled Abstinence

ISABELLA: And have you nuns no farther privileges?

FRANCISCA: Are these not large enough?

ISABELLA: Yes, truly. I speak not as desiring more,
But rather wishing a more strict restraint
Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare.¹³⁴

This brief conversation marks Isabella’s first on-stage appearance in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella’s “elevator pitch,” or brief introduction as a character. At first reading through *Measure*, this particular pitch may seem like a piece of light comedy. Just two scenes ago, Claudio was begging for his sister to appeal his case to Angelo, extoling her eagerness, logic, rhetorical prowess.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, Isabella’s 1.4 introduction begins by asking Francisca—a nun who has presumably been showing Isabella the monastery—“do you have any other privileges?” Seemingly non-plussed, Francisca replies with another question: “aren’t these enough privileges?” Isabella replies by asking for “more restraint” and fewer privileges. From the get-go, Isabella’s conversation shows all the eagerness Claudio praised, but none of her apparent canniness.

Indeed, it is easy to assume that Shakespeare’s audiences would have reacted poorly to Isabella’s first appearance. As Kamps and Raber argue, “Isabella’s conversation...would likely have resonated with a Protestant audience as perverse indeed, given that the Clares were very strict in comparison to other Catholic female orders,” identifying the Clarissans

¹³⁴ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, ed., *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 1.4.1-5.

¹³⁵ *Measure*, 1.2.150-159.

as “Poor Clares” bound to strict poverty.¹³⁶ On the Kamps and Raber reading, Isabella might have seemed pathetically flagellant. This perversity only seems to grow as Francesca illustrates one of the Clare’s “restraints”:

When you have vowed, you must not speak with men
But in the presence of the prioress;
Then if you speak you must not show your face,
Or if you show your face you must not speak.¹³⁷

If Isabella wants more restraint for the Clarissans when the Clarissans can’t even communicate with men normally, then Isabella is really as great a “prone youth,” or eager and innocent figure, as Claudio made her out. Indeed, comparing Claudio’s praise for Isabella that she can “reason” with this dialogue, Isabella’s “elevator pitch” seems more like a punch line.¹³⁸

This is an instance where critics such as Kamps and Raber would benefit from more historical perspective when analyzing Isabella’s character, such as the perspective on Clares recovered by fellow *Measure* critic Natasha Korda. As Korda documents, English Clarissans were “poor” in name only. The Clare’s nunnery in London known as the Minories included many daughters of nobility, and its novitiates typically brought expensive trousseaus (or a nun’s “spiritual dowry” for the convent). Indeed, the Minories followed the Isabella Rule of female monastics, which allowed its nuns to hold income-generating communal property such as land for lease, and nuns often carried their families’ annuities

¹³⁶ Kamps and Raber, 196. Also see James M. Bromley, “Nuns and Nationhood: Intimacy in Convents in Renaissance Drama,” *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); I will engage with Bromley shortly.

¹³⁷ *Measure*, 1.4.10-14.

¹³⁸ *Measure*, 1.2.158.

with them into the convent. While I don't support Korda's assertion that Shakespeare knew of the Isabella Rule, I agree with her in saying that *Measure's* Clares were probably not poor.¹³⁹ In the context of the Protestant Reformation, Isabella's elevator pitch would have aligned her with English Protestant concerns. Protestant print culture targeted the opulence of Catholic religious practice, as Frances E. Dolan notes.¹⁴⁰ Against images of a miserly and morally-bankrupt Catholicism, Isabella has located herself as a reformer, gaining sympathy as one of *Measure's* protagonists.

Nevertheless, as a nun-to-be, Isabella would still be problematic for Protestant audiences for a related reason: she would leave male-dominated Protestant order. Francesca's reminder that Clares cannot, generally speaking, talk to men underscores this point. Even poor nuns were not subject to the patriarchal control of marriage, which was promulgated to control female sexuality that threatened patrilineal inheritance.¹⁴¹ By emphasizing her abstinence, as Isabella does in declaring "Isabel, live chaste, and brother die," Isabella represents an excess of the virginity that Protestant English culture denigrated. In the moment of *Measure's* composition, Isabella's abstinence would mark her as an extremist antihero, garnering sympathy for her focus on sexual morality but detraction for her idealizing of abstinence.

Reading the Clares: Isabella's Background

¹³⁹ Natasha Korda, "Isabella's Rule: Singlewomen and the Properties of Poverty in *Measure for Measure*," in *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 166-171. Korda links the name of the Isabella Rule and the *Measure* protagonist, and while I believe this is an interesting link, it is not the object of this study to validate that link.

¹⁴⁰ Frances E. Dolan, "Why Are Nuns Funny?," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2007): 509-35, 513; Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (University of Notre Dame Press: South Bend, IN, 2005), 28.

¹⁴¹ Kamps and Raber, 188.

While the real never-married often chose between prostitution and unlicensed work, the Poor Clares of *Measure for Measure* open a further choice for unmarried women in the Shakespearean sexual economy. As “brides of Christ,” Christian nuns could successfully maintain their “virgin” status permanently without worry for earthly marriage, obtaining spiritual riches through the sexual purity of their abstinence. Purity both prevented their conflation with prostitutes and gave them power, as symbolically illustrated in early modern accounts of Saint Clare’s miracles: when leaving the city of her birth to follow Saint Francis, “she wished not to go by a frequented place, so she entered a door much barred and obstructed by stones. And God gave her such marvelous strength that she opened it with her own hands.”¹⁴² Indeed, medieval and early modern authors conceptualized a “virago,” or woman who transcended her sex through masculine qualities, in reference to virginity.¹⁴³ Early modern conceptions of masculinity-as-restraint saw a slight overlap between masculinity and the sexual restraint of nuns. And much as sexual purity was a commandment for all nuns, poverty was a commandment for the Poor Clares as well. The founding Saint Clare famously gave her dowry to the poor and maintained until her death that the Clares choose a life of poverty, much as she had chosen to give her own riches.¹⁴⁴

But as I already noted, London Clarisses followed different monastic rules that allowed them greater access to wealth. So Clarisses often embraced wealth rather than the “privilege of poverty,” meaning that “votarists of Saint Clare” would hold a conflict between

¹⁴² Francis Dupuis, *La vie et la legend de madame sainte Claire*, trans. Charlotte Balfour, in Ivo Kamps and Karen Raber, ed., *Measure for Measure: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 246.

¹⁴³ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (New York: Cambridge, 1995), 205-206.

¹⁴⁴ Korda, “Isabella’s Rule,” 171.

theory and practice in early modern England. This conflict between theory and practice paralleled the conflict between monasticism and early modern English norms, as English monasticism was formally ended in the 1530s and the oath of chaste living undertaken by monastics was legally ended in 1549.¹⁴⁵ English Protestants commonly attacked abstinence as a form of sexual purity, maintaining the primacy of marriage alone in restraining lust. Contrary to the economic and gender opportunity represented by the Clares and other such orders, the Protestant discourse emphasized the subjugation of women through marriage, holding that women needed to be controlled.¹⁴⁶ But with the aforementioned dearth of economic options for women who wished to remain unmarried, most ex-nuns were in exactly the same position as any other single woman in Shakespeare's day.¹⁴⁷ Referencing the Poor Clares in Shakespeare's day would have thus conjured a specter of female power.

Isabella's circumstances then stand at the corner of early modern English typicalities regarding "singlewomen" and early modern English recollections of the Clarissans. Our first reference to Isabella comes when Claudio sends Lucio to tell Isabella of the planned execution, noting that "this day my sister should the cloister enter."¹⁴⁸ In an English early modern context, this hints to a middle-class background. Most novices entering urban monasteries were the daughters of merchants or tradespeople and brought

¹⁴⁵ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 196; Korda, 190.

¹⁴⁶ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 185-186. Similar to this Protestant discourse, Catholic discourse at the time held that nuns were "married to Christ" and so had to preserve their virginity for him; indeed, as Crawford points out, the Counter-Reformation saw an increase in restraints on nuns and restrictions on nuns' mingling with laity (Crawford, *Sexuality*, 87). But as Dolan argues, anti-Catholic polemic targeting women more responded to "a theology and an iconography in which women were understood as inappropriately visible, powerful, and esteemed"—such as Catholic focus on the Virgin Mary and other female saints—than women's actual empowerment (Dolan, *Whores*, 51-52).

¹⁴⁷ Korda, "Isabella's Rule," 191.

¹⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.2.149-159.

a dowry and trousseau that poorer women could not afford.¹⁴⁹ This makes sense considering the disparate evidence for Claudio and Isabella's social status throughout the play. Evidence that points to Claudio and Isabella as higher-class, or at least comfortably middle-class, is Claudio's friendship with gentleman Lucio as well as Escalus' note that "this gentleman / Whom I would save [Claudio] had a most noble father"—Escalus' knowledge of their father implies a certain level of standing.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, Claudio's problem is bridal pregnancy, a typical occurrence among the lower classes.¹⁵¹ Thus, the middle class makes sense as an "average" in which to place Isabella. Placing Isabella in the middle class also makes sense in the context of Isabella's question to the Clarissans: "Have you nuns no farther privileges?" Isabella is genuinely concerned with the order's wealth, coming from a status with only moderate wealth and not desiring much more wealth. Isabella is not excited to be wealthy but to have an option out of the commodification of her sexuality that marriage would entail. If Claudio dies per Angelo's order and the Clarissans of *Measure for Measure* experience similar dissolution, then Isabella's situation would exactly parallel that of thousands of singlewomen.

And if we can locate Isabella's circumstances within the play as parallel to that of a "singlewoman" of middling means, we can best locate Isabella's principles as parallel to that of early modern values. Isabella is genuinely "wishing a more strict restraint / Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare."¹⁵² Much as early modern English Protestants attacked monasticism for its supposed avarice, Isabella seeks to make the Clares poor.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Korda, "Isabella's Rule," 164.

¹⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.2.115; Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.1.6-7.

¹⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.2.122-132; Kamps and Raber, *Texts*, 189.

¹⁵² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.4-5.

¹⁵³ Korda, "Isabella's Rule," 174.

Isabella is also aligned with predominant early modern English views with regard to her own abilities. Early modern English conduct literature emphasizes that a woman should “keep silence,” and as Kamps and Raber note, Isabella is reluctant to value her own speech—“Alas, what poor / Ability’s in me to do good?” are her first words to Lucio’s proposal that she plead to Angelo, and Isabella initially gives up her case against Angelo’s resistance.¹⁵⁴ Early modern audiences would have perceived both Isabella’s restraint and self-doubt as positive, and these traits would have fit well within any positive conceptions of “singlewomen” in the sexual economy.

But with early modern values in a world where those values are at stake, Isabella is also driven to take a masculine role, particularly in response to the subversive Lucio’s entreaties. Isabella’s action begins when Lucio makes an appeal to her virginity:

Go to Lord Angelo
And let him learn to know, when maidens sue,
Men give like gods, but when they weep and kneel,
All their petitions are as freely theirs
As they themselves would owe them.¹⁵⁵

Lucio argues that Isabella’s “weeping and kneeling” as a maiden will “learn Angelo to know” that all her “petitions,” or requests, will be fulfilled as she wishes. Though Lucio mocks Isabella for her vocation as a nun-to-be, sarcastically holding her as “a thing enskied and sainted”—jibes often delivered to Catholics by Protestants in early modern England—he respects the power of virginity.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, his description of a virgin’s plea emphasizes

¹⁵⁴ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 201; Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.74-75; Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.45-46.

¹⁵⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.79-83.

¹⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.4.31-37; Frances E. Dolan, *Whores*, 52.

its humbling effect on men, calling to mind the virago. And Lucio's refrain to Isabella, against her despondency, is that "you are too cold."¹⁵⁷ While Lucio is urging Isabella to play the "maiden card"—"Kneel down before him; hang upon his gown," he is simultaneously urging Isabella to become "warmer," which is a more masculine quality in the medical discourse of early modern England.¹⁵⁸ Considered to be hotter than women, men were also considered to be more perfect; heat was also associated with a choleric disposition in the early modern theory of the four humors, which is notable both because it was thought to be more common among men and more conducive to an active role.¹⁵⁹ Lucio may instruct Isabella to use "womanly" methods, but Lucio is also implicitly couching these methods in their masculinizing strength, tasking Isabella to bring might to virginity and convince Angelo—a symbolic patriarch of the sexual economy—through her action. From the position of a "singlewoman," Isabella is driven to subvert the sexual economy.

2.2 to 2.4: Isabella's Reform Efforts

Acting on principle and using the masculinized power of virginity, Isabella strives specifically to reform the sexual economy, flipping the established hierarchy. One of Isabella's earliest appeals to Angelo is that

If he [Claudio] had been as you and you as he,
You would have slipped like him, but he, like you,
Would not have been so stern.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.49 and 61.

¹⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.44-49; Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 192; Crawford, *Sexualities*, 105.

¹⁵⁹ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 192; Cadden, *Meanings*, 184; Crawford, *Sexualities*, 103.

¹⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.69-71.

Unlike Angelo's "sternness" in carrying out the legal death penalty, Isabella makes a hypothetical where Angelo "slips" and fornicates, but Claudio—acting as judge in the hypothetical scenario, provides mercy instead of capital punishment. She subsequently questions the hierarchy by imagining a role-reversal with Angelo: "I would to heaven I had your potency, / And you were Isabel!"¹⁶¹ In this hypothetical, Isabella has the "potency" of Angelo's privileged magisterial position, while he entreats her. Most fiercely, Isabella claims there is yet a higher authority than Angelo by asking

How would you be
If He which is the top of judgment [God] should
But judge you as you are?¹⁶²

In this last hypothetical, Angelo is "judged as he is" by God, less of a stretch than the other hypotheticals in early modern English cosmology (as divine judgment would come with anyone's death).¹⁶³ These hypotheticals have a manifest purpose of convincing Angelo that he must be merciful to Claudio, but they also raise the issue of the sexual economy's hierarchy. As a middle-class and never-married woman, Isabella's worth is effectively tied to the "virgin card"—whether or not Isabella enters the monastery, she only maintains her societal standing through sexual behavior. On the other hand, as a governmental authority, Angelo's sexual behavior is not to be questioned, and the conception of government espoused by Angelo seems to exemplify his "stricture and firm abstinence" much as the

¹⁶¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.72-73.

¹⁶² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.80-82.

¹⁶³ This is the same cosmology referenced by the Duke when he monologues about how Claudio "should be absolute for death," attempting to bring Claudio to peace with Angelo's capital punishment and exhort Claudio to think of his judgment after death (see Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.5-41). An interesting counterpoint to this view of divine judgment is voiced by Claudio in his "but to die, and go we know not where" monologue later in the same act, where he voices his fear of the afterlife's uncertainty to Isabella (see Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.119-133).

Duke claims that “the dribbling dart of love / [Cannot pierce my] complete bosom.”¹⁶⁴ The reputation of these male governmental figures eludes the sexual element ascribed to other characters throughout the play precisely because they are privileged. In turn, Isabella’s hypotheticals cast that privilege into question, noting that the economy is human. Just as Isabella’s humility brings her to doubt herself, she asks Angelo to think of himself critically:

Go to your bosom;
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That’s like my brother’s fault. If it confess
A natural guiltiness, such as is his [Claudio’s],
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
Against my brother’s life.¹⁶⁵

Angelo ought to ask his own “heart” or feelings “what they know” like her brother’s incontinence, according to Isabella. If Angelo’s heart contains natural lust or *eros*, Isabella continues, then Angelo should not “sound a thought upon his tongue” to kill Claudio, because he is just as guilty as Claudio. For Isabella, authority is at its best when it acknowledges “that it err like others,” and a natural consequence is that authority must humanize itself.¹⁶⁶ Rather than attempting to rule detachedly over the sexual economy, Isabella suggests, Angelo and other authority figures need to insert themselves back into the sexual economy by acknowledging that they also have sexual feelings. This does not mean that Isabella is advocating that they act upon those sexual feelings—she only asks Angelo to discern if he experiences the same lust as Claudio, and Isabella maintains later that she hates fornication—but that Isabella’s concern with the sexual economy involves

¹⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.11-12; Shakespeare, *Measure*, 1.3.1-2.

¹⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.141-146.

¹⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.2.139.

subverting its hierarchy's privilege.¹⁶⁷ While using the tools available to her within the economy, Isabella is attempting to reform it.

In doing so, Isabella transcends the chaste-unchaste binary offered by early modern English Protestantism for sexual morality. Although Isabella does not explicitly argue against chaste sexual activity, by pursuing monasticism, Isabella implicitly offers a vision of lifelong abstinence contra Shakespearean norms.

In turn, Isabella validates actions based on their virtue, unlike Angelo's argument that coerced actions can be less terrible. This is a sticking point between Angelo and Isabella regarding Angelo's coercion threat. When Isabella claims she would "rather give her body than her soul," Angelo replies that "Our compelled sins / Stand more for number than for account"—in other words, the sin we do under duress is recorded but not spiritually "charged" in the afterlife.¹⁶⁸ Isabella immediately challenges this: "How say you?"¹⁶⁹ With Isabella's question, Angelo seems to retract his statement as playing devil's advocate: "I'll not warrant that, for I can speak / Against the thing I say."¹⁷⁰ Angelo's view, even if he apparently would "speak against it," is that coercion may not remove the fact of a sin, but does not result in the coerced individual being penalized for the sin in the afterlife. Meanwhile, Isabella promulgates a sin-virtue dichotomy: a sin is a sin and a virtue is a virtue, and whether or not a sinful action was coerced is of no matter to the fact of that

¹⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.115-121.

¹⁶⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.57-58.

¹⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.59.

¹⁷⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.60-61.

action being a sin. Angelo and Isabella represent polar views in this theological and moral debate for early modern English discourse, as seen in debates about the limits of mercy.¹⁷¹

Indeed, as Angelo hints at his coercion threat, he emphasizes the context of sin as well as virtue. He offers that “pleased you to do ‘t at peril of your soul / Were equal poise of sin and charity.”¹⁷² Isabella should, Angelo says, reframe the hypothetical so that her action has equal “poise” or balance of sin and charity for her soul. Finally, Isabella grants Angelo’s hypothetical, but instead of changing the content of her action to make it both sinful and charitable, reframes the action’s charity as pledge:

That I do beg his life, if it be sin,
Heaven let me bear it! You granting of my suit,
If that be sin, I’ll make it my morn prayer
To have it added to the faults of mine,
And nothing of your answer.¹⁷³

Isabella concedes that her begging for Claudio’s life could be “sin,” but would willfully take that sin even if Angelo is technically responsible for “granting her suit.” Isabella would indeed end up taking the sin as “a fault of hers” and not one to which Angelo must “answer,” recalling Angelo’s differentiation between “number” and “account” of sin. Isabella is willing to grant that her own cause may be sin, but this is an acceptable sin in her mind.

Angelo grants that, but explains that he is not concerned with denying the virtue of Isabella’s cause. He responds to her acceptance of responsibility by saying “Your sense pursues not mine. Either you are ignorant / Or seem so craftily; and that’s not good.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Kamps and Raber, 196-197.

¹⁷² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.67-68.

¹⁷³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.69-73.

¹⁷⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4

Isabella’s “sense” or reason—also punning on the early modern meaning of “sense” as sensuality—does not “pursue” Angelo’s, leading him to question if she is genuinely ignorant or just appearing ignorant “craftily” to no “good” end. While it is possible that Isabella could be putting up a façade of ignorance, there is no textual evidence otherwise to indicate that Isabella is attempting to fake her ignorance. Indeed, as I have argued with reference to Claudio’s introduction of Isabella, Isabella’s conversation with the Clarissan Francisca, and Isabella’s interaction with Lucio, Isabella’s innocence comes hand-in-hand with her idealism as an important character trait and driver for her actions. Indeed, Isabella wishes to remain innocent: “Let me be ignorant, and in nothing good, / But graciously to know I am no better.”¹⁷⁵ Isabella would not mind being ignorant as long as she can know, by dint of divine grace, that she is “no better” than anyone who is craftily feigning ignorance.

Acknowledging Isabella’s apparent ignorance, Angelo finally elects to put his words so they can be “received plain” and renders his coercion attempt as a hypothetical.¹⁷⁶ He outlines that “your brother is to die” and “his offense is so, as it appears, accountant to the law upon that pain,” to which Isabella can only say “true.”¹⁷⁷ Angelo has just reiterated that Claudio will die per Vienna’s capital-punishment penalty for fornication. Then Angelo advances his coercion attempt in reference to Claudio’s upcoming punishment:

Admit no other way to save his life—
As I subscribe not that, nor any other,
But in the loss of question—that you, his sister,
Finding yourself desired of such a person

¹⁷⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.76-77.

¹⁷⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.80-81.

¹⁷⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.81-87.

Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,
Could fetch your brother from the manacles
Of the all-binding law; and that there were
No earthly means to save him, but that either
You must lay down the treasures of your body
To this supposed, or else to let him suffer.
What would you do?¹⁷⁸

Angelo begins by establishing that there is “no other way” to save Claudio’s life that Angelo will allow in this “question,” or discussion. He then asks Isabella to consider the one possibility: that “finding herself desired of such a person” whose proximity to the judge or “own great place” can “fetch Claudio from the manacles of the all-binding law”—and, reiterating Angelo’s preface, that “there were no earthly means to save” Claudio, but that either Isabella “lay down the treasures of her body” to this hypothetical “supposed” or “else to let” Claudio suffer. “What would Isabella do?,” Angelo concludes. Although Angelo has still framed this coercion attempt as a hypothetical, Angelo’s framing here is clearly more pressuring than that of his previous questions to Isabella. Indeed, by framing Isabella as an agent in this hypothetical, figuring her as one who “finds herself desired of such a person” who can save her brother and having the choice to let her brother suffer or save him, Angelo diminishes the apparent duress of Claudio’s looming death sentence. Furthermore, in invoking “the treasures of Isabella’s body,” Angelo taps into a common early modern English metaphor for virginity, that of virginity as material value.¹⁷⁹ Angelo frames Isabella

¹⁷⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.88-98.

¹⁷⁹ Kelly Kathleen Coyne and Marina Leslie, “Introduction: the Epistemology of Virginity,” in Kelly Kathleen Coyne and Marina Leslie, *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 17. For an in-depth exploration of a particular metaphor of virginity as treasure, see Nancy Weitz Miller, “Metaphor and the Mystification of Chastity in Vives’s *Instruction of a Christen Woman*,” in Kelly Kathleen Coyne and Marina Leslie, *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

as someone possessing power and resources even though his hypothetical revolves around her almost-complete powerlessness in the face of death for one of her loved ones.

Although Isabella responds to Angelo by vehemently affirming her abstinence, it is not clear that she rejects his framing of her response to coercion as agential. Indeed, Isabella's response seems to affirm her agency as one who must defend her abstinence or risk a fate worse than death:

As much for my poor brother as myself:
That is, were I under the terms of death,
Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself down to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.¹⁸⁰

Angelo remarks "then must your brother die," to which Isabella doubles down:

And 'twere the cheaper way.
Better it were a brother died at once
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,
Should die forever.¹⁸¹

For her "poor brother" and herself, Isabella would refuse the coercion threat. Even if she were under his "terms of death" or death sentence and could evade that death sentence by "yielding her body up to shame," she would rather wear "th' impression of keen whips as rubies" and ready herself for death as to a bed that "longing have been sick for" or that she has been fervently longing for. Isabella clarifies this further when Angelo says "then must your brother die," his letting slip that the coercion threat is indeed real: Claudio's death is

¹⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.100-104.

¹⁸¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.105-109.

the “cheaper” price to pay than the immortal death of a sister who would “redeem” him by taking the coerced deal. Although Angelo has apparently revealed at last that the coercion hypothetical is a real possibility, Isabella would not fornicate at any price, even her life or her brother’s.

This passage is also difficult to interpret because Isabella’s claims are laden with both religious and sexual valences, emphasizing the multiple valences of abstinence. Here, James M. Bromley reads Isabella as envisioning her restraint from fornication as means of attaining sexual pleasure. For Bromley, “since she is rejecting sexual blackmail, not pleasure, we should not read Isabella’s preference for torture to sex with Angelo retroactively on her previous utterance” to Francisca “wishing for a more strict restraint.”¹⁸² According to Bromley, Isabella’s response to Angelo, continuous with her desire for an even-more ascetic life with the Clares, is not a rejection of sexual pleasure but a discrimination against some methods that would attain such sexual pleasure, aiming instead for a masochistic enjoyment of restraint. From this reading, Bromley extrapolates that “the masochistic desire for restraint [Isabella] expresses upon entering the nunnery lends her the conceptual resources to reimagine torture as pleasure and, by implication, to resist the state’s assertion of its authority over her relationship to her body.”¹⁸³ According to Bromley, Isabella’s apparent masochism here gives her the power to reframe violence as a pleasurable experience and envision herself as free from Angelo’s governmental coercion. Bromley evidences this extrapolation with reference to Isabella’s images of torture and death. For Bromley,

¹⁸² Bromley, “Nuns,” 139.

¹⁸³ Bromley, “Nuns,” 139.

Isabella imagines that the whips make impressions as they attempt to penetrate the surfaces and break the boundaries of her body, but, imagining her body as encrusted with jewels rather than punctured, she indicates that she would respond to that attempted penetration with a spectacularized display of bloodied surface. In her comparison of flaying to undressing for bed, the removal of skin satisfies longing. Undressing reveals only another surface, and the comparison holds on this level too.¹⁸⁴

Isabella views the whips (metonymy for state violence) “attempting to penetrate the surfaces and break the boundaries of her body” as rebuffed by the “bloodied surface” of figurative rubies. “The removal of skin,” for Bromley, “satisfies longing,” continuing the metaphor of the bed for which Isabella figures herself “sick to death with longing.” These images of torture also involve an erotic fulfillment of desire for Bromley.

On a simple religious reading, however, 2.4 shows Isabella demonstrating her loyalty to God by wearing “th’ impression of keen whips” and “stripping herself down to death as to a bed” rather than commit the sin of fornication. Indeed, early modern English audiences might view Isabella’s references to whips and rubies as monstrous Catholic devotion. As Frances E. Dolan notes, “it was widely believed that Catholicism lured women with its ritual paraphernalia, offering them trinkets and toys rather than a Bible they could not read.”¹⁸⁵ Rather than Isabella’s response indicating erotic desire, Dolan might argue that Isabella’s response would signify the “deviant” religious faith of Catholicism. Rubies in particular might signify religious deviance to Protestant audiences.¹⁸⁶ So the very terms which Bromley reads as erotic in Isabella’s response could also be read as coding for her extreme religious devotion.

¹⁸⁴ Bromley, “Nuns,” 139.

¹⁸⁵ Dolan, *Whores*, 27.

¹⁸⁶ Shakespeare’s use of rubies in figurative speech is extensive. Consider Macbeth’s reference to Lady Macbeth’s “ruby-coloured cheeks,” for example.

Rather than deny the potential for either a sexual or religious interpretation, this study maintains that Shakespeare (and his audiences) had both interpretations in mind at these lines. This study acknowledges the validity of multiple interpretations regarding the same evidence, taking an explicitly-poststructuralist stance, but more relevantly here, that interpretation is not a zero-sum game, and that multiple interpretations of the same evidence may be sustained at once. Isabella's response indicates an intimate closeness to God, further exemplifying her practice as a "bride of Christ."

Angelo replies to Isabella's response by equating Isabella's refusal of coercion to his capital punishment, which Isabella denies. Angelo's question is "Were not you then as cruel as the sentence / That you have slandered so?"¹⁸⁷ For Angelo, Isabella is just as cruel as capital punishment for fornication. Angelo's equivalence here relies upon the assumption that the *result* of each action is what determines its "cruelty": if Isabella does not take the coercion threat, then her brother dies, just as if the capital punishment was carried out without the threat. So Isabella appeals instead to the *method* of each action:

Ignomy in ransom and free pardon
Are of two houses. Lawful mercy
Is nothing kin to foul redemption.¹⁸⁸

For Isabella, there is "ignomy" or ignominy in accepting the coercion threat, while the "free pardon" of being merciful is shameless. The mercy of one carrying out "lawful" actions cannot be "kin to foul redemption."

¹⁸⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.110-111.

¹⁸⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.112-114.

Here Angelo reads Isabella's response as inconsistent with her earlier arguments.

He says that

You seemed of late to make the law a tyrant,
And rather proved the sliding of your brother
A merriment than a vice.¹⁸⁹

Latching onto Isabella's use of the term "lawful" to describe authoritative mercy, Angelo argues that Isabella had "rather proved" or argued Claudio's "sliding" a "merriment" instead of a "vice." If so, Angelo implicitly argues, Isabella can't consistently maintain that the law is "tyrannical" in executing Claudio.

Isabella's response to Angelo here is crucial to interpreting Isabella's attitude about abstinence. To Angelo's accusation that Isabella is inconsistent, Isabella responds:

O, pardon me, my lord. It oft falls out,
To have what we would have, we speak not what we mean.
I something do excuse the thing I hate
For his advantage that I dearly love.¹⁹⁰

Isabella asks for "pardon," claiming that, "to have what she would have," she has "spoken not what she means." She "something" or sometimes "excuses the thing she hates," fornication, for Claudio's betterment out of her "dear love" for him. Isabella's hatred for fornication could evidence her sexual attitude as chastity rather than abstinence, but given all other available evidence—such as Isabella's desire to be a nun—I argue that this hatred of fornication is better viewed as evidence for abstinence. Isabella believes abstinence is

¹⁸⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.115-117.

¹⁹⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.118-121.

superior or at least equal to marital sexuality, but she excuses fornication in order to help her brother.

Angelo replies by musing that “we are all frail,” to which Isabella responds that Angelo should consider his own frailty.¹⁹¹ If everyone is indeed “frail,” Angelo might

Else let my brother die,
If not a fedary but only he
Owe and succeed thy weakness.¹⁹²

Claudio’s death would only be excusable, Isabella argues, if rather than a “fedary” or confederate in “frailty,” Angelo was the only one who “owed and succeeded” the “weakness” of which Angelo speaks. Once more, Isabella argues that Claudio’s sin is just like that of others.

Angelo attempts to turn the sin of fornication on Isabella now. He rejoins that “women are frail too”—frailty does not merely belong to Claudio, an incontinent fornicator, but to Isabella and other women.¹⁹³ Angelo thereby conflates Claudio’s “deviant” performance of masculinity with femininity. This is not an unprecedented move—consider the similar conflation of femininity with Catholic priests in print culture by such figures as King James I, as Dolan notes in *Whores of Babylon*.¹⁹⁴ As Tom Linkinen has demonstrated, late medieval discourses of homophobia (such as Chaucer’s lampooning homosexuality in the figure of the Pardoner) conflate “deviant” homosexual masculinity with femininity to derogate the “deviant” masculinity; Angelo’s words are not exact copies of Chaucer’s, but

¹⁹¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.122.

¹⁹² Shakespeare, 2.4.122-124.

¹⁹³ Shakespeare, 2.4.125.

¹⁹⁴ Dolan, *Whores*, 85-86.

the *topos* of attacking a different masculinity while attacking femininity was copied from a medieval discourse and still remains in modern homophobia.¹⁹⁵ The association of a competing masculinity with femininity in Angelo's discourse serves the purpose of decrying femininity as also weak.

Isabella does not deny women's frailty, but argues that men are worse in taking advantage of women, with an implicit accusation of Angelo. Isabella says that women are frail

As the glasses where they view themselves
Which are as easy broke as they make forms.
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.¹⁹⁶

Women are frail as "glasses where they view themselves" or mirrors, which are broken as easily as "they make forms"—a pun both on mirrors' ability to reproduce images and on women's ability to reproduce people. Women need the help of "Heaven" to handle their frailty, because men mar "their creation" in God's likeness "in profiting by" or taking advantage of women. Women are "ten times frail," Isabella concludes, by being as "soft" as their "complexions" or humoral constitutions—traditionally cold and moist—and "credulous to false prints," or susceptible to deceit. Isabella here unknowingly parallels the

¹⁹⁵ Tom Linkinen, "Chaucer's Pardoner, 'geldyng or mare' and more," in *Same-sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), ProQuest Ebook Central, 223. For more on modern homophobia conflating male homosexuality with femininity, see C.J. Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁹⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.126-131.

Duke's metaphor for Angelo as a coin of "character" by accusing Angelo of "false prints" stamped on his person. While Isabella does not directly accuse Angelo of being deceitful, her focus on men's taking advantage of women, as well as her emphasis on Angelo's own faults before, indicate a rhetorical turn on her part toward jibing at Angelo's two-faced nature.

Angelo's response to Isabella indicates his repeated attempts to attack Isabella on the grounds of her gender. Angelo reaffirms the sorry state of women:

I think it well.
And from this testimony of your own sex—
Since I suppose we are made to be no stronger
Than faults may shake our frames—let me be bold.
I do arrest your words. Be that you are,
That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none.
If you be one, as you are well expressed
By all external warrants, show it now,
By putting on the destined livery.¹⁹⁷

Angelo thinks it "well" that women are abused by men, and from Isabella's "testimony of her own sex," since men and women are "made to be no stronger" than the "faults" that can shake their "frames"—punning on Isabella's metaphor of mirrors for women—Angelo comes out "bold" with his intentions. He "arrests Isabella's words," holding her to what she said of women being taken advantage of for reproduction with men, and tells her to "be that you are...a woman." If Isabella is "more than woman," in the Aristotelian sense of womanhood as the incomplete form to be filled by male substance, then she is "none,"

¹⁹⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.131-139.

punning on Isabella's aspirations of nunhood.¹⁹⁸ If Isabella is indeed a woman, Angelo repeats, as she is "well expressed by all external warrants" or performance, then he commands her to "show her womanhood now" by "putting on the destined livery" or enacting the woman's destiny of having sex with men in fornicating with him. By asserting his right to kill Claudio or coerce Isabella, Angelo resembles the strict patriarchy of early modern English government, attacking the unmarried woman. For an unmarried woman cannot become a man, no matter how "hot" or masculine, and "singlewoman" is still synonymous with "prostitute": there can be no Poor Clares in England, but there is room for a criminalized and prostituted underclass of never-married women subjugated through Poor Laws. Rather than succumb to the "sense" of reform, Angelo reasserts the primacy of patriarchy through his attempt to coerce Isabella.

Isabella, however, still resists. She responds to Angelo's pressure by claiming that "I have no tongue but one. / Gentle my lord, let me entreat you speak the former language."¹⁹⁹ Isabella only speaks one "tongue," and she "gently" insists Angelo to speak the "former" or formal language as she does. Angelo indeed drops the threat in his response—"Plainly conceive, I love you," which Isabella challenges: "My brother did love Juliet, / And you tell me that he shall die for 't."²⁰⁰ If Angelo really "loves" Isabella in his pressuring her to fornicate with him, then the hypothetical Isabella has been pushing him to consider, that he is just as frail as Claudio, really ought to deter Angelo from killing Claudio. Angelo blithely

¹⁹⁸ Crawford, *Sexualities*, 102.

¹⁹⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.140-141.

²⁰⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.142-144.

responds that Claudio “shall not” die, “Isabel, if you give me love,” meaning that Isabella accept the coercion.²⁰¹ Isabella responds with disbelief:

I know your virtue hath a license in ‘t,
Which seems a little fouler than it is
To pluck on others.²⁰²

Isabella cannot “conceive” that Angelo wants her to “love him,” stating her assumption that virtuous Angelo is just “seeming more foul” to “pluck on” or mislead her. But Angelo reiterates his intent with reference to that virtue: “Believe me, on mine honor, / My words express my purpose.”²⁰³ Isabella at last accepts Angelo’s intent, though not his coercion:

Ha! Little honor to be much believed,
And most pernicious purpose! Seeming, seeming!
I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for ‘t!
Sign me a present pardon for my brother,
Or with an outstretched throat I’ll tell the world aloud
What man thou art.²⁰⁴

Angelo really has “little honor”—Isabella no longer believes in his virtue, considering it just “seeming” rather than authentic, and knows his purpose is “pernicious.” She proposes to “proclaim Angelo,” using the informal “thee” to emphasize her defiance.²⁰⁵ If Angelo does not sign a “present” or immediate pardon for Claudio, Isabella will “with an outstretched throat tell the world aloud” what “man Angelo art”—openly disclosing Angelo’s injustice

²⁰¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.145.

²⁰² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.146-148.

²⁰³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.148-149.

²⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.150-155.

²⁰⁵ Matthew Kozusko, “All’s Well That Ends Well,” seminar, ENGL-320 Shakespeare and Gender from Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA, November 14, 2018.

even if she has put her neck on the figurative chopping block. Having confirmed that Angelo is truly corrupt, Isabella will either have justice for her brother or unseat Angelo.

It could be argued that by letting Angelo's corruption continue and effectively blackmailing him on this corruption to save Claudio's life, Isabella is not behaving morally. While Isabella may be inconsistent in proposing that Angelo "sign a present pardon" while implicitly offering to hide Angelo's corruption, this scenario is not one that actually occurs in the play, and my purpose here is not to lionize Isabella but merely to argue that she is embodying abstinence as moral reform. It would also be anachronistic to consider Isabella's reform as like that of reform today—"sex positivity" was not named or defined in the early modern period, as I have noted. It is sufficient to note that Isabella is pushing her reform agenda to counter Angelo.

Angelo's subsequent speech, beginning with "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" and ending with "As for you, / Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true" counters Isabella, arguing that Angelo's words will counter Isabella's truth.²⁰⁶ Isabella accepts this argument, leading to her famous resolution to "live chaste" or maintain her abstinence without challenging Angelo further.

2.4 to 5.1: Isabella's "living chaste"

Because Isabella finds Angelo's coercion incompatible with her principled abstinence, Isabella rejects his threat. But because of Angelo's reputation and power, Isabella laments her own lack of power. She says

²⁰⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.155-171.

To whom should I complain? Did I tell this,
 Who would believe me? O perilous mouths,
 That bear in them one and the selfsame tongue,
 Either of condemnation or approval,
 Bidding the law make curtsy to their will,
 Hooking both right and wrong to th' appetite,
 To follow as it draws! I'll to my brother.
 Though he hath fall'n by prompture of the blood,
 Yet hath he in him such a mind of honor
 That, had he twenty heads to tender down
 On twenty bloody blocks, he'd yield them up
 Before his sister should her body stoop
 To such abhorred pollution.
 Then, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die;
 More than our brother is our chastity.
 I'll tell him yet of Angelo's request,
 And fit his mind to death, for his soul's rest.²⁰⁷

“To whom should I complain? Did I tell”—or in the event that Isabella told this account—
 “who would believe me?,” Isabella asks. She laments the “perilous mouths” of the populace
 that “bear in them one and the selfsame tongue,” harkening back to Isabella’s use of the
 term “tongue” to describe proper speech. This unitary “selfsame tongue” can either speak
 “condemnation” or approval, bidding the law “curtsy” to its “will” and attaching “right and
 wrong” to its “appetite” to follow wherever the tongue “drags” or draws. Isabella cannot
 hope to contend with the figurative tongue of Angelo’s reputation, which will drag “right”
 with it even though he has wronged her. So she resolves that she will “to her brother.”

²⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 2.4.172-188.

Though Claudio “hath fall’n by prompture” or prompting of his passion, he nevertheless has such “a mind of honor” that, she claims, “had he twenty heads to tender down” or lay down to pay dues “on twenty bloody blocks,” Claudio would yield up all twenty before Isabella should “stoop to such abhorred pollution” as the coerced fornication with Angelo represents. Figuring that Claudio will agree, Isabella elects to “live chaste, and, brother, die,” as Claudio could agree that “more than Claudio is Isabella’s chastity” or sexual purity. So Isabella will tell Claudio of “Angelo’s request” for coerced sex and assure Claudio has “fitted his mind to death” for the benefit of his own soul.

Isabella’s encounter with Claudio sees her attempt to fit Claudio to death, which leads into a discussion of the coercion threat. Isabella explicitly explains the threat thus:

O, ‘tis the cunning livery of hell,
The damned’st body to invest and cover
In prenzie guards! Dost thou think, Claudio:
If I would yield him my virginity,
Thou mightst be freed!²⁰⁸

Isabella laments the “cunning livery of hell,” which invests and covers “the damned’st body in prenzie guards”—dressing up a damned person in the decorous “guards” as a cunning trick. “Dost thou think, Claudio,” or would you believe, Isabella adds, that if she “would yield” Angelo her virginity, Claudio “mightst be freed.” Isabella frames the threat as a trick orchestrated by the devil. As Claudio responds that “it cannot be,” Isabella reiterates:

Yes, he would give ‘t thee, from this rank offense,
So to offend him still. This night’s the time

²⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.94-99.

That I should do what I abhor to name,
Or else thou diest tomorrow.²⁰⁹

Isabella explains that Angelo would “give ‘t,” or license, Claudio “to offend” Angelo “still” in fornicating, by the “rank offense” of her fulfilling the coercion threat. Tonight is “the time” that Isabella can fulfill what she “abhors to name,” or else Claudio “diest tomorrow.”

Claudio states that she “shalt not do ‘t,” which Isabella confirms:

O, were it but my life,
I’d throw it down for your deliverance
As frankly as a pin.²¹⁰

Isabella would “throw down” her life for Claudio’s deliverance as “frankly” or freely as a pin, but she will not perform the coerced fornication Angelo threatens for Claudio’s deliverance. Perceiving this as a conclusion once Claudio thanks her for this statement of support, Isabella once again tells him to “be ready” for “death tomorrow.”²¹¹

Claudio wants to live, though, and counters Isabella’s critique of the coercion threat with a simple proposition: that Angelo’s coercion threat is not the all-tainting sin Isabella makes out the coerced fornication to be. Claudio asks of Angelo

Has he affections in him,
That thus can make him bite the law by the nose
When he would force it? Sure it is no sin,
Or of the deadly seven it is the least.²¹²

²⁰⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.100-103.

²¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.105-107.

²¹¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.108.

²¹² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.109-112.

Claudio wonders that Angelo has “affections” or passions that can “make him bite the law by the nose” or flout the law when Angelo would “force” or enforce that law. “Sure it is no sin,” Claudio concludes cryptically, “or of the deadly seven it is the least.” Upon Isabella’s prodding, Claudio continues

If it were damnable, he being so wise,
Why would he for the momentary trick
Be perdurably fined? O Isabel!²¹³

Claudio continues his questioning: if the least sin of the deadly seven were really “damnable,” why would “wise” Angelo be so “perdurably fined” or eternally punished for such a “momentary trick” as coerced fornication? He implores Isabella,

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.²¹⁴

Claudio justifies his plea for Isabella’s accepting the coercion threat by counting that acceptance as a sin “to save a brother’s life.” In Claudio’s theology, the purpose of such a sin leads nature to “dispense with” or grant a dispensation for the sinfulness of such a “deed so far that” the deed “becomes a virtue.” Claudio considers Isabella’s sexual activity as secondary to Isabella’s purpose in conducting that activity—while he does not deny that accepting the coercion threat is sinful, Claudio proposes that Isabella’s abstinence is an unreasonable position to take, as sexual activity would free Claudio.

²¹³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.114-116.

²¹⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.135-138.

Isabella disagrees, viewing her abstinence as more important than accepting the coercion threat for Claudio's sake. She rejoins

O you beast!
O faithless coward! O 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? What should I think?
Heaven shield my mother played my father fair!
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issued from his blood. Take my defiance,
Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.²¹⁵

Isabella decries Claudio as a "beast," "faithless coward" and "dishonest" or dishonorable "wretch." In deriding Claudio's proposal as an attempt to make himself "a man" out of her "vice," Isabella conflates Claudio's "dishonest" and apparently-deviant masculinity with the hypothetical continuation of his life, challenging his own gender performance. In figuring his hypothetical continued life as "a kind of incest," taking his life from his "own sister's shame," Isabella conflates Claudio with further sexual deviance. "Heaven shield" or forbid "my mother played my father fair," Isabella exclaims, "for such a warped slip of wilderness" or deviant and beastly scion "ne'er issued" from her father's noble blood. Concluding from Claudio's deviance that he ought to take her defiance, "die," and "perish," Isabella provides Claudio a new hypothetical: "might but" her "bending down" save Claudio from his fate of

²¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.138-149.

execution, Isabella would let the hypothetical proceed as planned; reneging upon her earlier statement that she'd "throw down her life" as cheaply as if it were a pin to save Claudio, Isabella now states that she'd not even bend down to save Claudio's life. In a final insult, pious Isabella will "pray a thousand prayers" for Claudio's death. When Claudio protests, Isabella adds

O, fie, fie, fie!
Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade.
Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd;
'Tis best that thou diest quickly.²¹⁶

"Fie" upon Claudio, Isabella decrees, because his "sin's not accidental" or casual but an established habit or "trade." Granting mercy to Claudio would "prove itself a bawd" or give Claudio sexual license, so Isabella concludes that "'tis best" Claudio "diest quickly." Where Isabella previously saw Claudio's life as worth saving, pleading Claudio's case before Angelo, Isabella now tells Claudio that his life should be ended so that he does not commit more sexual sins. This is consistent with Isabella's hatred of fornication and her own devotion to abstinence, which Claudio now questions with his proposition that she fulfill the coercion threat.

At this point, the Duke (in the guise of a friar) intervenes, breaking up the conflict between Claudio and Isabella and asking Isabella her next intention. The Duke tells Isabella

The hand that hath made you fair hath made you good. The goodness that is cheap in beauty makes beauty brief in goodness; but grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall keep the body of it ever fair...How will you do to content this substitute [Angelo] and to save your brother?²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.150-153.

²¹⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.178-184.

The Duke begins by complimenting Isabella's "fairness" and "goodness," praising Isabella for maintaining her goodness in spite of her beauty. "Goodness cheap in beauty" or the abuse of beauty for licentious ends "makes beauty brief in goodness" or quickly ends morality in the beautiful, but "grace" is "the soul" of Isabella's "complexion" or essential, humoral character. So Isabella "shall keep the body" of her goodness "ever fair," according to the Duke—her devotion to her own abstinence will eternally maintain her morality as a beautiful (and thereby valuable) thing, which in turn gives her physical beauty positive value. The Duke then turns to Isabella's predicament, asking how she will "content" Angelo and save Claudio.

Isabella responds to the Duke by affirming her desire to fit Claudio to his fate, but also provides another perspective on Isabella's abstinence: it is out of fear of excessive enjoyment. She explains

I am now going to resolve him [Claudio]. I had rather my brother die by the law than my son should be unlawfully born. But, O, how much is the good Duke deceived in Angelo! If ever he return and I can speak to him, I will open my lips in vain, or discover his government.²¹⁸

Isabella intends to "resolve" Claudio or set his mind at rest, because she "had rather" her brother "die by the law" than her "son should be unlawfully born." In implying that fulfilling Angelo's coercion threat would result in unlawfully bearing a son, Isabella voices a fear based on early modern conceptions of conception. As Barbara J. Baines argues of Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece*, noting that female pleasure was figured as necessary for conception in Galenic early modern medical thought, Isabella is implying that she would illicitly enjoy fulfilling the coercion threat, and thus although her mind would think the fornication sinful,

²¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.185-188.

she would nevertheless “be betrayed by her own chaste body.”²¹⁹ Isabella recognizes herself as unwilling to engage in fornication, but that self-knowledge would be meaningless in the face of her physical flesh’s response, and so she would “unlawfully bear a son”—because she does not want to break her abstinence, losing her sexual purity against her rational will, Isabella would rather Claudio die.²²⁰ Isabella then turns to the issue of the Duke: “how much is the good Duke deceived” by Angelo, she laments, noting that if the Duke ever returns, she will tell the Duke of Angelo’s corruption—whether that telling be “in vain” or “discover” Angelo’s bad government, Isabella is resolved to speak.

The Duke responds by applauding Isabella’s resolution, but offering a counter-resolution. Angelo, the Duke says, “will avoid your accusation; he made trial of you only.”²²¹ The Duke claims that Angelo would evade Isabella’s “accusation” by claiming that Angelo was only making “trial of” Isabella’s virtue. Instead, the Duke offers, “you may most uprightly do a poor wronged lady a merited benefit, redeem your brother from the angry law, do no stain to your own gracious person, and much please the absent Duke.”²²² The Duke’s proposal can apparently do a “wronged lady a merited benefit,” save Claudio from the “angry law,” keep Isabella’s “gracious person” intact and “please the absent Duke.” After the Duke explains Angelo’s discontinuation of his betrothal to Mariana, the Duke proposes his solution:

²¹⁹ Barbara J. Baines, “Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation,” *English Literary History* 65, no. 1 (1998): Johns Hopkins University Press, 86-88; Katherine Crawford, *European Sexualities, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 123.

²²⁰ It could also be argued at this point that Isabella is just as concerned with her own reputation as the Duke and Angelo. However, as I will demonstrate in my reading of 5.1 on pages 91 through 94, Isabella is willing to claim she has lost her virginity to get the justice she wants.

²²¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.189-190.

²²² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.192-195.

Go you to Angelo, answer his requiring with a plausible obedience; agree with his demands to the point. Only refer yourself to this advantage: first, that your stay with him may not be long, that the time may have all shadow and silence in it, and the place answer to convenience...We shall advise this wronged maid to stand up your appointment, go in your place. If the encounter acknowledge itself hereafter, it may compel him to her recompense...If you think well to carry this as you may, the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof. What think you of it?²²³

According to the Duke, Isabella should go agree to Angelo's "demands to the point." She should "refer" herself to the "advantage," or condition, that her "stay with him may not be long" and that the "time may have all shadow and silence in it"—or be dark, clandestine, and quiet. The Duke will meanwhile advise Mariana to "stand up" or go instead of Isabella. Should the truth of the apparently-fulfilled coercion "acknowledge itself hereafter," Angelo may be compelled to Mariana's "recompense." The Duke closes by arguing that the double benefit of this solution—consummating Mariana's betrothal with Angelo while keeping Isabella from losing her abstinence—"defends the deceit from reproof."²²⁴ And Isabella agrees: "The image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection."²²⁵ Isabella is contented by this way of maintaining her abstinence and granting Mariana leverage with Angelo, and so assents to a bed trick where she apparently fulfills the coercion threat while Mariana actually fulfills the coercion threat.

From our present perspective, Isabella and the Duke have just created a problematic plan. Note that this "bed trick," like all other "bed tricks," involves one of those engaging in a sexual act (Angelo) being deceived by the other person engaged in such a sexual act

²²³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.225-236.

²²⁴ The Duke here parallels Claudio's "the ends justify the means" argument for Isabella fulfilling the coercion threat. However, these terms are more acceptable to Isabella (and Mariana) because they fulfill Isabella's goal of abstinence and Mariana's goal of consummating her marriage with Angelo—although not definitively officiating the marriage, as I will demonstrate later in my reading of 5.1.

²²⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 3.1.237-238.

(Mariana) into believing that they are engaged in such an act with another person (Isabella). Hence, Isabella and the Duke are here conspiring to rape Angelo: as Angelo did not consent to have sex with Mariana, the sexual act is nonconsensual and thus rape.²²⁶ Rape is a terrible moral wrong and ought to be derided. It is also important to note, however, that within the world of *Measure* and *Measure's* early modern English context, consent was figured differently, and that as Angelo and Mariana were betrothed, early modern thought would have considered Angelo to have a conjugal debt to sex with Mariana.²²⁷ Indeed, the Duke assures Mariana that Angelo

Is your husband on a precontract;
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
Sith that the justice of your title to him
Doth flourish the deceit.²²⁸

Because Angelo and Mariana have a “precontract,” or legally binding agreement entered before the church officiated the wedding, Mariana’s sex with Angelo is “no sin,” since “the justice of” her “title to him” only “flourish” or adorns the deceit. This is not to excuse Isabella and the Duke’s bed trick but rather to explain why the bed trick might be valorized during its time period, and why the Duke only notes “deceit” as a moral problem of the bed trick, as opposed to that deceit’s removal of consent from the sexual activity. By legally agreeing to marry, Angelo and Mariana have already agreed to all normative sexual activity between them (in early modern thought); consent was not sought for each sexual activity

²²⁶ I am indebted in this point to Kyla Jermin, who argues that Isabella is the only character in *Measure* who approaches modern notions of consent. Kyla Jermin, “Isabella’s Beautiful Body: Authority, Access, and Consent,” (paper presented at Eastern Association of Pennsylvania State Universities Spring 2018, Lock Haven University, Lock Haven, March 23, 2018).

²²⁷ Crawford, *Sexualities*, 27.

²²⁸ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 4.1.67-70.

in this view, which is morally problematic for Mariana—as Angelo has unwittingly agreed to sex that he did not want to have thanks to her intervention.²²⁹ Bracketing any comparison of coercion versus rape in terms of moral evil, the Duke and Isabella’s bed trick solution to Angelo’s coercion is committing its own wrong in denying Angelo consent.

The bed trick is enacted, but Angelo nevertheless orders for Claudio’s execution, and due to the Duke’s trickery, Isabella believes Claudio is killed.²³⁰ At the disguised Duke’s urging, she promises to bring her suit before the Duke for the Duke’s return.²³¹ Isabella thus finally kneels before the Duke and implores him

Justice, O royal Duke! Vail your regard
Upon a wronged—I would fain have said a maid.
O worthy prince, dishonor not your eye
By throwing it on any other object
Till you have heard me in my true complaint
And given me justice, justice, justice, justice!²³²

Isabella’s plea is apparently for “justice,” asking the “royal Duke” to look down (“vail your regard”) upon her “wronged” self. She claims that she is not a “maid” or virgin and asks the “worthy prince” to honor his “eye” by not “throwing it on any other object” except her until

²²⁹ The assumption the marriage is consent to all subsequent sexual activity began with Saint Paul’s articulation of “marriage debt” and carried through the early modern period in Europe (see Crawford, 26-27). This remains today in barriers to prosecuting marital rape due to the assumption that married people generally have consensual sex; see Samantha Allen, “Marital Rape is Semi-Legal in 8 States,” *The Daily Beast*, June 9th, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/marital-rape-is-semi-legal-in-8-states>. Also see Joe Makuc, “’Tis No Sin’: The Bed Trick and Sex Crime,” *Arguments About the Past: Public History at Ursinus with Joe Makuc* (blog), February 20, 2019, <https://argumentsaboutthepast.wordpress.com/2019/02/20/tis-no-sin-the-bed-trick-and-sex-crime/>.

²³⁰ The Duke’s actions here in telling Isabella that her brother is dead are terrible, but might have been understood in early modern England as a method of testing Isabella’s virtue (as is common in Biblical absent master narratives); as Kamps and Raber argue, authors contemporaneous to Shakespeare produced stories of rulers in disguise who used such disguises for benevolent purpose (*Texts*, 131).

²³¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 4.3.

²³² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.21-26.

he has heard her “true complaint” and given her “justice, justice, justice, justice.” Isabella implicitly claims that she has lost her virginity, also calling herself an “object,” and imploring the Duke to give her justice. Although she is clearly agential in this role, actively kneeling before the Duke and imploring him, Isabella’s words frame her as a passive victim who can only be given “justice” by the Duke.

Angelo claims that Isabella “will speak most bitterly and strange” or strangely, to which Isabella replies

Most strange, but yet most truly, will I speak.
That Angelo’s forsworn, is it not strange?
That Angelo’s a murderer, is ‘t not strange?
That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
An hypocrite, a virgin-violator,
Is it not strange, and strange?²³³

Isabella’s accusations are “strange” but true: Angelo’s “forsworn,” “a murderer,” “an adulterous thief,” a “hypocrite,” and a “virgin-violator.” She explains her story:

I am the sister of one Claudio,
Condemned upon the act of fornication
To lose his head, condemned by Angelo.
I, in probation of a sisterhood,
Was sent to by my brother; one Lucio
As then the messenger—²³⁴

Isabella’s revelation that she is “sister of one Claudio condemned upon the act of fornication” is self-explanatory. More important for considering Isabella’s abstinence is her

²³³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.38-44.

²³⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.73-78.

definition of herself “in probation of a sisterhood”—if Isabella is “in probation,” then she is a novice, and has already taken the monastic vows. We know from Isabella’s interactions with Francisca that Isabella has yet to take the Clarissan vows, but Isabella claims to be a novice nevertheless. It is possible that Isabella could be falsely claiming this “probation” as a rhetorical device, but as I’ve noted, nunnery was not viewed positively in 1583-1604 England and faces derision during *Measure*. There is also little textual evidence to support Isabella as lying here when she is consistently noted to be “honest” and innocent. Indeed, Isabella goes on to discuss Lucio’s working messaging her, which would hardly be currying favor with the Duke given Lucio’s disreputable behavior; Isabella tells the truth about Lucio, indicating she is not attempting to be dishonest (bracketing her pretense that she fulfilled the coercion threat). So Isabella says she is a novice not because she is attempting to manipulate the Duke. Instead, I argue that her claim to “probation” represents her strong identification with nunhood. Although Isabella may not have taken the Clarissan vows formally, she is already devoted to the abstinent life Clarissans represent. In this regard, Isabella is correct in saying she is a novice, and uses this statement to reaffirm her own sense of identity.

Isabella continues by proclaiming that she fulfilled Angelo’s coercion threat. She explains, of going to Angelo,

How I persuaded, how I prayed and kneeled,
How he refelled me, and how I replied—
For this was of much length—the vile conclusion
I now begin with grief and shame to utter.
He would not, but by gift of my chaste body
To his concupiscible intemperate lust,

Release my brother; and after much debatement
My sisterly remorse confutes mine honor,
And I did yield to him. But the next morn betimes,
His purpose surfeiting, he sends a warrant
For my poor brother's head.²³⁵

In spite of how Isabella has “persuaded,” “prayed,” and “kneeled,” Angelo only “refelled” or repelled her despite how she “replied.” After this process of “much length,” Isabella arrived at a “vile conclusion” that she can only utter with “grief and shame.” Angelo “would not but by gift” of Isabella’s “chaste body” to his “concupiscible,” or lustful, “intemperate lust,” “release” Claudio, and after “debatement,” or debate, Isabella’s “sisterly remorse,” or pity, “confutes,” or confounds or silences, Isabella’s “honor,” and she “did yield to him.” Isabella figures her body as a gift delivered to Angelo’s incredibly lustful and intemperate sin, out of her sisterly pity for her brother—but what has her sisterly pity for her brother done to her own sense of honor, given the ambiguity of the term “confutes”? The ambiguity of this verb is neatly resolved by its use in the present tense. Isabella’s pity “confounds” her honor now, but it certainly does not silence her honor—she is vocalizing her moral scruples now, so her honor is very clear and public, even if she is “grieved and shamed.” While Isabella’s honor may be confounded in her story, it is not quiet. Isabella’s confused-but-vocal honor stands in opposition to Angelo’s, which she claims to be a sham, as Angelo took Isabella’s “brother’s head” even though Angelo’s lustful “purpose” had been “surfeited” or satiated.

The Duke pretends disbelief at Isabella’s claim, noting that Angelo’s “integrity stands without blemish” and that it “imports no reason” that a lustful Angelo would execute

²³⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.92-108.

Claudio for fornicating.²³⁶ So Isabella concedes to the Duke and prays for a higher power to help instead:

Then, O you blessed ministers above,
Keep me in patience, and with ripened time
Unfold the evil which is here wrapped up
In countenance! Heaven shield Your Grace from woe,
As I thus wronged hence unbelieved go!²³⁷

Appealing to “blessed ministers above” rather than earthly powers, Isabella prays for patience, and that as time goes by, the “evil” of Angelo’s misdeeds “wrapped up” in his “countenance”—punning on Angelo’s composed features and his authority—may be “unfolded” or revealed. Although Isabella has been wronged and “unbelieved,” she asks Heaven to “shield” the Duke “from woe,” remaining courteous and gracious to the Duke. Isabella despairs of the Duke’s ability to help her cause, but nevertheless thinks of the Duke positively, consistent with her belief that authority “hath a medicine in itself.” This would have been a point of sympathy to Isabella for early modern audiences in that she respects legal authority even when it seems to disagree with her.²³⁸

Isabella only speaks again when the Duke reveals himself and urges her to take comfort that Claudio is in a better place.²³⁹ The Duke claims Claudio has been killed, claiming “the swift celerity” of Claudio’s death prevented the Duke from saving Claudio; the Duke now urges Isabella to remember that Claudio’s “life is better life past” and make that

²³⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.110-119.

²³⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.119-124.

²³⁸ Kamps and Raber, *Texts*, 127.

²³⁹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.130.

her “comfort,” echoing her own words to Claudio.²⁴⁰ Isabella responds “I do, my lord.”²⁴¹ This brief response is difficult to interpret when juxtaposed with Isabella’s vigorous cries against Angelo’s hypocrisy and stern remonstrance of Claudio’s attachment to life, but is clearer when considering that Isabella indeed cares about Claudio. Indeed, when Mariana subsequently asks Isabella to “lend me your knees” and beg for Angelo’s life, the Duke notes

Against all sense you do importune her.
Should she kneel down in mercy of this fact,
Her brother’s ghost his paved bed would break,
And take her hence in horror.²⁴²

There is no “sense” in asking Isabella to plead for mercy regarding Angelo’s crime, as she can only respect Claudio’s ghost—which the Duke figures as a kind of restless undead capable of breaking from the ground to “take” Isabella “hence” if disrespected—by letting Claudio die. While Isabella’s solitary line here manifestly says that she “takes comfort” in Claudio’s death, her silence and the Duke’s note seem to indicate that she is not apparently taking comfort at all, and that she has a hard time letting go of Claudio. Mariana continues to implore Isabella, however:

They say best men are molded out of faults,
And, for the most, become much more the better
For being a little bad. So may my husband.
O Isabel, will you not lend a knee?²⁴³

Mariana argues that even the “best men are molded out faults,” and that “for the most” part, men become better “for being a little bad,” or improve for their sins; so, too, may Mariana’s

²⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.383-395.

²⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.395.

²⁴² Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.429-432.

²⁴³ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.435-438.

husband Angelo, if Isabella can “lend a knee” for the Duke to grant mercy. Isabella at last assents to Mariana, telling the Duke:

Look, if it please you, on this man condemned
As if my brother lived. I partly think
A due sincerity governed his deeds,
Till he did look on me. Since it is so,
Let him not die. My brother had but justice,
In that he did the thing for which he died.
For Angelo,
His act did not o’ertake his bad intent,
And must be buried but as an intent
That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects,
Intents but merely thoughts.²⁴⁴

Isabella urges the Duke to “look” at Angelo “as if” Claudio had not been executed. She thinks “a due sincerity governed” Angelo, punning on Angelo’s former status as governor of Vienna, till Angelo “did look on” Isabella; so “let him not die.” Claudio’s death was “but justice,” Isabella argues, because “he did the thing for which he died” in fornicating before legally married. But Angelo’s “act did not o’ertake his bad intent” because Angelo did not actually fulfill his coercion threat by fornicating with Isabella; Angelo’s bad intent only resulted in the fulfillment of his legal betrothal to Mariana. So Isabella argues that Angelo’s bad intent “must be buried” as “an intent that perished by the way” to action. As an intent, Angelo’s “concupiscible intemperate lust” is not among “subjects” to the state’s authority, instead among “merely thoughts.” Isabella’s stance here may seem inconsistent with her vituperation at Angelo’s coercion threat, but considering that one of Isabella’s original

²⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.440-450.

reasons for assenting to the bed trick was fulfilling Mariana and Angelo's marriage, Isabella's stance is consistent with her thought that sex is permissible so long as it is marital sexuality. Angelo's intent to fornicate with Isabella, which Isabella found repugnant and a threat to her own abstinence, was effectively nullified by replacing Isabella with Mariana. Similarly, although it may seem inconsistent that Isabella claims Claudio's death was "justice," Isabella never debated that Claudio's death was against the law—she merely debated that Angelo should have had more mercy in carrying out that law. So Isabella is consistent in taking up Mariana's suit and pleading for Angelo's life. But although the Duke shortly pardons Angelo, he has one final challenge for Isabella's morality: a marriage proposal.

The Ending: Isabella's Final Silence

The Duke tells Isabella her "suit's unprofitable" and proceeds to hold her in suspense, then unveils Claudio, revealing Claudio is still alive. The Duke then delivers his proposal:

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.²⁴⁵

Claudio is pardoned, and for Isabella's "lovely sake," the Duke insists she "give" him her "hand" and say she "will be" the Duke's—Claudio is the Duke's "brother too," both as a companion and as a potential brother-in-law, should Isabella accept this marriage proposal.

²⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.489-492.

Isabella does not respond to this proposal. The Duke asks Isabella to marry him again in his last speech, which concludes the play:

Dear Isabel,

I have a motion much imports your good,

Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline

What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.²⁴⁶

The Duke has a “motion,” or proposal, that “much imports” good for “dear Isabel,” and if she’ll only incline “a willing ear,” they will share property (including each other’s bodies, due to the marriage debt). However, Isabella does not get to respond to this reiterated proposal either. The Duke has removed some intimacy from his proposal’s metaphors—stepping back from Isabella giving him “her hand” to just lending “a willing ear,” and stepping back from Isabella saying she will be his to both Isabella and the Duke sharing their lives—but Isabella is silent. Reading silence is always problematic, especially given that this silence is gendered—as the woman-coded modesty Isabella has already performed during *Measure* is conflated with quietness, it is difficult to interpret if Isabella is refusing the Duke or being modest. However, I contend this silence is because Isabella does not want to marry the Duke. As I argue on page 92, Isabella already sees herself as “probate” to the Clarissans, devoted to an abstinent life without marriage. While Isabella accepts marital sex as legitimate, as demonstrated of her positive views toward Mariana and Angelo’s sex, Isabella does not want to marry the Duke. Isabella is not interested in marriage nor in the attendant sex, and so Isabella’s silence is a refusal. But why is Isabella’s refusal not voiced?

²⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.532-535.

Although the Duke has limited power to force Isabella to marry him—if the Duke wishes to retain his own reputation, he must token some consent from Isabella before her marriage, as she has not otherwise indicated any interest in him—I argue that Isabella is nevertheless silent because she senses that she must be silent to avoid appearing impolitic against the Duke’s coercive proposal. Although the Duke uses the language of agency in his marriage proposal, he has just forced Isabella to beg for Angelo’s life, and the Duke is forcibly officiating Angelo and Lucio’s weddings.²⁴⁷ While it could be argued that the Duke forced Isabella to beg for Angelo’s life as a test of her character, which would be congruent with the Duke’s test of his subjects’ characters while in disguise as Friar Lodowick and call on the *topos* of the Biblical absent-master narrative, such a test of Isabella is never made explicit. On the other hand, the Duke has just emphasized that he controls actual “mortality and mercy in Vienna,” meaning that Isabella ought to tread carefully around him. Even if the Duke is well-intentioned, Isabella has every reason to be silent to him and maintain her abstinence without speaking.

“Should the Cloister Enter”: Final Thoughts on Isabella

I have argued that Isabella performs principled abstinence: from her opening scene through her final silence, Isabella maintains abstinence as part of her moral project. In the context of 1583-1604 England, this would place Isabella in an uncomfortable category of Catholic deviance from normative marital femininity, making Isabella an antihero. Although Isabella’s sense of morality would win sympathy then, she receives derision for her challenge to the period’s centrality of marriage, and Isabella’s outcome at the end of the

²⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *Measure*, 5.1.516-517.

play is substantially bleaker than the Duke and Angelo. There is a double standard in *Measure's* challenge to abstinence based on gender, and Isabella is on the losing side of the standard. In my subsequent Conclusion, I examine how we also maintain a gendered double standard about sexuality today, finishing with a call to more interdisciplinary scholarship (in part to challenge such double standards).

Conclusion

Go see *Measure for Measure* at Lantern theater in Philadelphia. It's an incredible objective presentation of Shakespeare's best and most relevant problem play.
#Shakespeare #theatre #Philadelphia #philadelphiatheatre
—Stephen Peterson²⁴⁸

I have seen *Measure for Measure* at Lantern Theater Company in Philadelphia, and I can confirm that it is an incredible presentation of *Measure*.²⁴⁹ But putting this Tweet in dialogue with what I have argued throughout this study, I would be cautious in calling the Lantern's production "an objective presentation of Shakespeare's best and most relevant problem play." First, there is no way to objectively present *Measure*.²⁵⁰ Interpreting *Measure* produces *Measure's* meaning; as I demonstrated reading "th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies" line on pages 70 and 71, there is no way to understand a line without assigning it meaning from a subjective viewpoint. *Measure* interpretation is local and therefore subjective.

Indeed, *Measure's* relevance is limited by the locality of its interpretation. While this study is not principally interested in comparing *Measure* to Shakespeare's other problem plays, this study has noted the ways in which *Measure's* relevance is limited as much as the ways in which *Measure* remains relevant. For example, I have shown that religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants is an important context for *Measure*—and Christian

²⁴⁸ Stephen Peterson, Twitter Post, March 20, 2019, 11:51 PM, <https://twitter.com/SJSPeterson/status/1108622200188399616>.

²⁴⁹ I saw *Measure* at the Lantern Theater on March 14 and 20, 2019.

²⁵⁰ It could be argued that the fact "*Measure* exists" is objectively true, and that this is an objective presentation of *Measure*. While I do not have time to deal with this counterargument in full, I would argue that *Measure's* existence is actually subjective because it is a cultural construction, and I would also argue that even a choice of words like "*Measure* exists" is informed by a subjective perspective.

sectarian violence is not a common context in Lantern Theater's Philadelphia.²⁵¹ Indeed, Lantern Theater's *Searchlight* series treats *Measure's* moments of religious extremism as a problem of "Shakespeare's country" and not today's United States.²⁵² Peterson's hashtags reflect the limited relevance of Lantern's *Measure*, too. Hashtags are ways to enter a broader conversation on social media, and Peterson's conversation is about #Shakespeare and #philadelphiatheatre (and derivations of #philadelphiatheatre) as opposed to #MeToo, which is a hashtag Lantern discusses relative to *Measure*.²⁵³ Peterson constructs *Measure's* relevance as tied to its status as a performance more than its problems.

But as I have argued, the competing performances of abstinent manhood and womanhood presented by Angelo, the Duke, and Isabella were problems in 1583-1604 England as much as they are now. As Lantern notes, *Measure's* questions are "at its heart those we ask ourselves today."²⁵⁴ The remainder of this conclusion will look at two questions related to *Measure's* presentation of these characters. Comparing Angelo's superficial abstinence and the Duke's temporary abstinence to Isabella's principled

²⁵¹ There are histories of Christian sectarian violence in the United States and ongoing religious violence throughout the world. For Christian sectarian violence in the United States, see Kenneth C. Davis, "America's True History of Religious Tolerance," *Smithsonian Magazine* (2010), Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/americas-true-history-of-religious-tolerance-61312684/>. For more on religious violence today, see Jonas Baumann, Daniel Finnbogason, and Isak Svensson. "Rethinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts," *Center for Security Studies Policy Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2018), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/PP6-1.pdf>.

²⁵² Lantern Theater Company, "Extremism in Shakespeare's Time," *Lantern Theater Company: Searchlight* (Medium, March 20, 2019), <https://medium.com/lantern-theater-company-searchlight/extremism-in-shakespeares-time-dd0bd386309f>.

²⁵³ Lantern Theater Company, "Shakespeare's Problem Plays," *Lantern Theater Company: Searchlight* (Medium, March 5, 2019), <https://medium.com/lantern-theater-company-searchlight/shakespeares-problem-plays-74968258206d>. I am indebted to Ed Moorhouse for my thought about hashtags here. See Joe Makuc, "Representing Pasts: Public History on Social Media," *Arguments About the Past: Public History at Ursinus with Joe Makuc* (blog), September 18, 2018, <https://argumentsaboutthepast.wordpress.com/2018/09/18/representing-pasts-public-history-on-social-media/>

²⁵⁴ Lantern, "Problem Plays."

abstinence, *Measure* questions whose performances are valid, and I turn this question to male privilege in the 2018 Kavanaugh confirmation hearing. In analyzing these narratives, I move to another *Measure*-related question: how should we do scholarly work on *Measure*? I argue that historiography and literary criticism must enter dialogue, as shown by Natasha Korda's brilliant research, if *Measure* studies and other cultural history on written sources is to do feminist work.

The Austereness of Kavanaugh's Life: *Measure's* Questions about Gender

A woman accuses a powerful man of sexual assault, and the powerful man claims the accusation has victimized him, placing his emotions above those of the woman. This is Isabella's interaction with Angelo early in *Measure's* 5.1, but it is also the interaction between Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh in Kavanaugh's Senate confirmation hearing on September 27, 2018.²⁵⁵ Of course, unlike Angelo, Kavanaugh was confirmed and is now a Supreme Court Justice.²⁵⁶ Yet Angelo receives approval from Escalus and (apparently) the Duke for his claims. Meanwhile, Isabella's claims are denied. The women's testimony may be heard, but the man's testimony receives validation.

News outlets ran editorials probing the denial of Ford's claims and the validation of Kavanaugh's. Anticipating the hearing on the 27th, pundits like Amy Nelson noted that in the US, "we have a history of not believing women when they come forward with

²⁵⁵ Eric Bradner and MJ Lee, "Ford '100%' certain of assault claim; Kavanaugh says 'I am innocent,'" CNN (September 28, 2018), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/27/politics/brett-kavanaugh-hearing/index.html>.

²⁵⁶ Sarah Siddiqui and Lauren Gambino, "Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to US supreme court gives Trump a major victory," The Guardian (October 7, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/06/brett-kavanaugh-confirmed-us-supreme-court>.

allegations about the bad behavior of men.²⁵⁷ Indeed, while many senators supported Ford, Lindsey Graham said it was “very suspicious how [the testimony] came out,” and Orrin Hatch claimed it was “too early to say” if Ford’s account was credible.²⁵⁸ The 50-48 vote in favor of Kavanaugh reiterated a dire conclusion from the 1991 Clarence Thomas hearing, in which Anita Hill testified that Thomas had sexually harassed her: women’s voices don’t matter.²⁵⁹ This history of silencing women neatly parallels the Duke’s dismissal of Isabella’s testimony.

This willful denial of women’s testimony relies upon a willingness to presuppose men’s innocence. As Nelson also notes, Kavanaugh received “humanizing” treatment early in the confirmation hearing process as examiners delved into his fatherhood.²⁶⁰ Kavanaugh was granted an empathetic and friendly public presentation, and with this presentation in mind, he was able to claim that himself and his family had been “totally and permanently destroyed” by Ford’s allegations.²⁶¹ Between Kavanaugh’s own testimony and Graham’s sympathetic comment to Kavanaugh that “you’re looking for a fair process—you came into town at the wrong time,” it is easy to render Kavanaugh as an innocent victim.²⁶² The supposition of Kavanaugh’s innocence parallels the Duke’s rebuttal of Isabella with reference to Angelo’s integrity, or the performance of his abstinence.

²⁵⁷ Amy Nelson, “The Humanization of Kavanaugh and the Undoing of American Women,” *Forbes*, (September 17, 2018), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amynelson1/2018/09/17/the-humanization-of-kavanaugh-and-the-undoing-of-american-women/#43d0e18c1fbf>.

²⁵⁸ Bradner and Lee, “Ford.”

²⁵⁹ Siddiqui and Gambino, “Kavanaugh’s”; Nelson, “The Humanization.”

²⁶⁰ Nelson, “The Humanization.”

²⁶¹ Bradner and Lee, “Ford.”

²⁶² *Ibid.*

Of course, the Duke subsequently exposes Angelo's aggressive performance, and Angelo quickly turns penitent—unlike Kavanaugh's confirmation. Yet both processes confirmed a patriarchal bias: when it comes to sexual assault allegations, a man's performance is easily validated, while a woman's performance is interrogated. As Luca Akard writes, "When we interrogate survivors about their stories, what we are really asking is 'Are you the type of woman who could be raped? Are you the type of woman who would lie? Was what you experienced actually even rape?'"²⁶³ As Butler might say, the credibility of a woman's gender performance—"type of woman"—becomes the focus of a woman's allegation of what a man has done. Consider Hatch's evaluation of Ford's testimony that she is "an attractive, good witness," conflating Ford's performance of "attractive" femininity with her testimony's value. A woman survivor's femininity is scrutinized, while the actual actions that the man has done disappear into the background.

Indeed, in scrutinizing women's performance, the Kavanaugh hearing and 5.1 both show how allegations of assault can be rhetorically twisted into the problem themselves. As Sarah Ahmed writes of complaint in an institutional setting, "to locate a problem is to become the location of a problem."²⁶⁴ In locating a problem with Kavanaugh or Angelo, Ford and Isabella become viewed as problems. Ahmed continues

the institutional response to complaint is to treat the complaint not necessarily as malicious...but as being motivated in some problematic way: as if the complainer has some other agenda such as a desire to target others.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Lucia Akard, "A Medieval #MeToo," *The Public Medievalist* (blog, October 18, 2018), <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/metoo/>.

²⁶⁴ Sarah Ahmed, "Complaint as Diversity Work," *Feminist Killjoys* (blog, November 10, 2017), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/11/10/complaint-as-diversity-work/>.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Whether asking “who set” Isabella “on Angelo,” or connecting Ford’s allegations to Democrat’s “wanting power,” the focus on women’s performance leads to speculation that women come forward to benefit their political patrons.²⁶⁶ The judicial process comes to focus less on women’s personhood and how men generally violate that personhood than on women as tools of a political agenda.²⁶⁷

This objectification of women who come forward has drastic consequences for the outcomes women receive. As Akard puts it of the Kavanaugh hearing, “a man’s career was prioritized over a woman’s clear and honest pain.”²⁶⁸ The disappearance of Ford’s pain enabled Kavanaugh’s confirmation without regard for Ford. Similarly, although the Duke exposes Angelo’s crimes in 5.1, the Duke proposes to Isabella without regard for her clear and honest devotion to abstinence. The Duke does not need to challenge Isabella’s motivations directly to consider them less important than his. In the Kavanaugh hearing and in 5.1, governmental men weigh women’s desires as less important than their own.²⁶⁹

Measure is limited in its solution for this problem—the text gives Isabella no response. But as I have argued, *Measure* acknowledges this as a problem, and thus asks us how to respond. The first half of 5.1 probes the audience to consider “Whose performances are valid?” Isabella’s performance of abstinence and suit against Angelo go up against Angelo’s performance of abstinence and his governmental heft, and Angelo and the Duke

²⁶⁶ In time allotted to question Kavanaugh, Senator Lindsey Graham addressed Senate Democrats with the remark “boy, y’all want power. I hope you never get it.” Bradner and Lee, “Ford.”

²⁶⁷ For statistics on the low prevalence of sexual assault false reporting, see Holly Yan and Nicole Chavez, “Trump Says ‘It’s a Scary Time’ for Men. Here Are the Stats on False Sexual Assault Claims,” CNN, October 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/03/health/sexual-assault-false-reports/index.html>

²⁶⁸ Akard, “A Medieval.”

²⁶⁹ At 21 women out of 100 senators, the Senate that confirmed Kavanaugh was overwhelmingly male. See Gabrielle Levy, “The 115th Congress by Party, Race, Gender, and Religion,” US News (January 5, 2017), <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/slideshows/the-115th-congress-by-party-race-gender-and-religion>

figure Isabella's performance as the problem. Furthermore, when Angelo is exposed, *Measure* continues its interrogation with another question: "Whose desires matter?" The Duke's proposal is a disturbing challenge of Isabella's desire to keep "living chaste." Angelo and the Duke's oppressive actions in this scene disturbed audiences in the period of *Measure's* composition, and these actions still force us to question gender's relationship to power now. In the context of the Kavanaugh hearing, thinking with *Measure* can help us think through the disparate reactions to women and men's performances.

Get Interdisciplinary: Korda's Scholarship as a Model for *Measure* Studies

Thinking with *Measure* is best done through interdisciplinary scholarship, as demonstrated by Natasha Korda's "Isabella's Rule: Singlewomen and the Properties of Poverty in *Measure for Measure*." Korda acknowledges the difficulty of interrogating "the rift between ideology and material practice" as a problem of women's history.²⁷⁰ To examine early modern English women's relationship to capitalism, Korda thus turns to "documents of practice," like deeds.²⁷¹ Korda's English PhD and focus on material culture cohere in a methodology of "historical materialist semantics," tracing the historical significance of specific words and "key-silences" in the text.²⁷² Korda thus combines close reading of individual words and lines in *Measure* with social and economic history to complicate today's narratives about early modern women.²⁷³

²⁷⁰ Natasha Korda, "Introduction," in *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), .7

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁷² "Natasha Korda," 2018, <http://nkorda.faculty.wesleyan.edu/>; Korda, "Introduction," 14.

²⁷³ Korda, 12.

Korda's methodology creates truly insightful scholarship about Isabella's relationship to the Poor Clares. In response to critics' inferences that Isabella has no dowry because she is entering the Clares, Korda reiterates historical secondary sources evidencing that nuns had valuable dowries and trousseaus, and goes on to analyze a nun's inventory at the Dissolution of Monasteries.²⁷⁴ Korda brings together economic history with her criticism to make historiographic interventions within Shakespeare historicism. As I enumerated on pages 57 and 58, Korda makes a strong intervention against the assumption that Shakespeare's Clares were indeed poor. Rather, Korda demonstrates that the London Clares that informed Shakespeare (and other English Clares) exercised economic clout.²⁷⁵ Korda's scholarship on *Measure in Domestic Economies* ultimately links Isabella's final silence to the economic silencing of nuns by Protestant state reform.²⁷⁶ By combining historians' attention to other primary sources with close reading of *Measure's* silences, Korda demonstrates the significance of Clares in *Measure's* early seventeenth-century context.

Yet Korda's work on the Clares has been ignored in *Measure* studies. Again, on pages 57 and 58, I noted that Kamps and Raber ignore the "documents of practice" that inform Korda, mistakenly using hagiography to make arguments about Clarissans' real practices in the sixteenth century.²⁷⁷ James Bromley claims that "the Rule of the Holy Virgin Saint Clare...would govern the order Isabella is joining," and goes on to claim that the order was reputed for its asceticism.²⁷⁸ But Korda's work shows that the London Clares used the Rule

²⁷⁴ Korda, "Singlewomen," 164-166.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 165-166 and 172.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 189.

²⁷⁷ Kamps and Raber, *Measure*, 200-201.

²⁷⁸ Bromley, "Nuns," 137 and 140.

of Isabella instead of the Rule of Clare and were not reputed for their asceticism. Without acknowledging Korda's insights on the Clares, *Measure* scholars do not grasp the gravity of Isabella's "wishing more upon the sisterhood."

Measure scholarship that understands Isabella's context in early modern England, then, must cite Korda. Further, *Measure* studies should take after Korda's interdisciplinary approach. I have done a close reading of *Measure* in dialogue with 1583-1604 history to produce my own *Measure* scholarship here, and I want to end my scholarship with a call for more questions. If it is helpful to think with *Measure's* questions of gender and power, as I argued on 106, then *Measure* scholars can best do that by entwining close reading and historical context. I have not found an easy or definitive answer to my question of *Measure's* relationship to 1583-1604. But I have argued some possible answers relating *Measure* to discourse on abstinence at the time, and as *Measure's* questions recur with each instance of sexual coercion today, I urge scholars to keep questioning.

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