

‘The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?’: Love and Lust in *Measure for Measure* and *The Law Against Lovers*

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On 8 December 1660, following a long history of the prohibition of actresses in England, a feminine presence took to the London stage and altered it.⁴⁸ The addition of women to the professional stages of England led to changes in the way in which plays were written and presented. This piece explores the relationship between page and stage, looking at it as one that is mutually reflective but non-deterministic. This essay first contextualises the presence of the actress by looking at the sparsely documented contemporary theatre culture in Renaissance and Restoration England, while raising questions about the male narrative. Subsequently this piece uses a comparison of William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* with Sir William Davenant’s 1662 adaptation, titled *The Law Against Lovers*, to demonstrate that, at least in terms of adaptations, the feminine presence on the English stage may have resulted in a toning down of the more licentious and sexualised content in Shakespeare’s original.

Whilst there appears to have been no specific law in England which forbade women from performing publicly, traditionally the practice was discouraged prior to the Restoration. Indeed, the idea was so unacceptable to the English theatre going public that when, in 1629, a French troupe had attempted to perform with actresses, they were ‘hissed, hooted and pippin-pelted from the stage’.⁴⁹ Consequently, English drama was coloured by this custom of male exclusivity, and it was in this world that William Shakespeare created each of his plays. Following the introduction of women to the professional stages of London, a number of changes were made to the English theatrical tradition, reflected in its textual history. Subsequently, it has been argued that the presence of the actress corrupted the stage; Allardyce Nicoll claimed such immorality was so pervasive that ‘no one in that age could possibly conceive of such a thing as innocence’, and John Wilson accused the actresses of being

⁴⁸ The identity of this actress who played Desdemona in Thomas Killigrew’s production at the Vere Theatre is still unknown. Research has since contradicted the previous guess that this was Margaret Hughes and there is no evidence that it was Anne Marshall, as Sandra Richards posits in *The Rise of the English Actress* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁴⁹ John Payne Collier, *The History of English Dramatic Poetry: Volume II* (London: John Murray, 1831), pp. 23-24.

‘generally debauch’d and of lewd conversation’.⁵⁰ Both of these theatre critics were writing mid-twentieth century, yet such views can be found in the rhetoric of theatre historians and critics from the late seventeenth century until today. Gary Taylor, in his *Reinventing Shakespeare*, tells us that ‘women began to appear on English stages at the same time as pornography began to appear on English bookstalls’ and he goes on to refer to these actresses as ‘sexual bait’.⁵² This rhetoric is indicative of the current and historical English cultural view that, as a direct result of women being on the stage, the Restoration Theatre was a licentious place, a hotbed of sexual activity that promoted lustful, immodest and immoral behaviour, in an era remembered for its ‘grossness [...] immorality [...] and indelicacy’.⁵³ In their introduction to *The Late English Theater*, Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burton write that ‘what was now wanted in the theatre...was sexual titillation’.⁵⁴ Gilli Bush-Bailey, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Actress*, does not directly blame the actresses for the lewdness of the stage; yet, she does highlight the links made during the Restoration between actresses and prostitutes, stating that ‘the very public sphere in which her craft was practised quickly led to parallels with prostitution in a patriarchal society employing the binaries of private/public, virgin/whore as constructs of femininity’.⁵⁵

The Restoration is of particular interest to theatre historians; when English theatres reopened following the Interregnum, theatrical parameters were effectively reset. What we see in the original Shakespearean texts is a Renaissance discourse of femininity, taking into account the fact that Shakespeare was writing for boy players and not actresses. In the Restoration, the rewriting of his plays shows a new, distinctly different discourse. As Rosamund Gilder writes, ‘The theatre is a product of its public as well as its creators and performers’.⁵⁶ What makes Shakespeare rare among English dramatists is the fact that his works have been continuously performed from the time he wrote them. Marianne Novy (1999)

⁵⁰ Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660-1900: Volume I, Restoration Drama, 1660-1700* (London: Cambridge at the University Press, 1967), p. 22.

⁵¹ John Wilson, *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 107.

⁵² Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth Press, 1989), pp. 18-19.

⁵³ Edmund Gosse, ed., *Restoration Plays* (London: Aldine Press, 1964), p. vii.

⁵⁴ Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto, ‘Introduction’, in *The Genius of the Later English Theater*, ed. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), pp.7-27 (p. 8).

⁵⁵ Gilli Bush-Bailey, ‘Revolution, legislation and autonomy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to The Actress*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 15-32 (p.15).

⁵⁶ Rosamund Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press), p. 12.

writes that ‘The use of Shakespeare dramatizes a link among...“multiple intersecting pasts,” and thus helps us to understand a condition of cultural hybridity’.⁵⁷ Similarly, the different performances of Shakespeare’s works through the years allow us to evaluate the different contemporary representations of his female characters.

The hegemonic, and largely gendered, discourse on the role of women in the Restoration continues to influence how this theatrical era is viewed today. It is important to note that William Davenant’s *The Law Against Lovers* was not the only adaptation which made changes to ‘accommodate’ the female presence on the stage, an act that Allardyce Nicoll terms as ‘giving some rising actress’ the opportunity to shine on the stage.⁵⁸ Between 1660 and 1700 there are believed to have been twenty-one English adaptations of Shakespeare’s works by various authors.⁵⁹ A number of the changes made by many of the playwrights can be seen to reflect the new presence of the actress. Some roles were made more chaste and the female characters’ behaviour less sexually explicit. For example, in Dryden’s 1679 adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida*, the character of Cressida is not the inconstant woman from Shakespeare’s play—rather she remains faithful to Troilus and ultimately kills herself when Troilus believes her to have been false. In Davenant’s adaptation of *Macbeth*, he enlarged the role of Lady Macduff and made her the epitome of the ideal woman—likely, to counter the sexual forwardness and ambition evident in Lady Macbeth. In Davenant’s *Hamlet*, all reference to Ophelia’s ‘chaste treasures’ (I.iii.31) has been removed in an attempt to sanitise the character of Ophelia.⁶⁰ Similarly, Nahum Tate’s adaptation of *King Lear* reduces Cordelia’s act of self-expression, in telling her father ‘nothing’ (I.i.78), to a ploy designed to allow her to stay home with Edgar, her new love interest.⁶¹ These are only a few of the changes made to Shakespeare’s texts which reflect the re-workings deemed necessary now that women were playing women’s roles.⁶²

⁵⁷ Marianne Novy, *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women’s Re-visions in Literature and Performance*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁵⁸ Nicoll, p. 176.

⁵⁹ Melissa Merchant, ‘The Actress and Shakespeare’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Murdoch University, 2013), p. 130.

⁶⁰ Stephen Greenblatt and other eds., *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 1707.

⁶¹ *Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2340.

⁶² In some cases, the sanitisation of the female role reveals latent humour in mixed-gender situations, such as in *The Enchanted Island* (1712), the Dryden / Davenant adaptation of *The Tempest*.

In his patents to William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew, Charles II cited the ‘extraordinary licentiousness’ of the pre-Restoration theatre as a justification for permitting only two licensed theatre companies to operate in 1660.⁶³ There is an absence of regular records or audience testimonies of the staging of such productions. However, the dominant critical discourse as reflected in historical and theatrical texts, which considers the Restoration Theatre to be lustful and lewd, can be challenged through a comparative examination of playtexts such as Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and Davenant’s Restoration adaptation *The Law Against Lovers*. The nature of the relationship between the plays’ heroine, Isabella, and villain, Angelo, is particularly enlightening in comparing the changing nature of the stage depiction of human attraction between the Renaissance and Restoration eras. If we look at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we can see that the word ‘love’, during the time of the Restoration as well as during Shakespeare’s time, meant ‘a feeling or disposition of deep affection or fondness for someone,’ whilst ‘lust’ meant ‘sexual appetite or desire’. Put simply, Shakespeare’s play deals more with lust, whilst Davenant’s highlights love.

Most likely first performed in 1604, Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is considered to be one of his ‘problem’ plays; despite its Folio classification, contemporary critics believe that it cannot be classified clearly as either comedy or tragedy.⁶⁴ Poet and critic W.H. Auden opened a 1947 lecture on *Measure* by claiming that the play was focused on three themes: ‘the nature of justice, the nature of authority, and the nature of forgiveness’.⁶⁵ A close examination of *Measure* suggests that Auden may have missed an important fourth theme, the nature of lust and love. To give a brief summary, Shakespeare’s play focuses on the enforcement of an ancient Viennese law against premarital sex, a law which does not recognise the difference between lust and love and one that prosecutes equally transgressions arising from both. As temporary ruler of Vienna, the puritanical Angelo decides to enforce the law. He begins by punishing Claudio, a young man who believes himself to be married to Juliet in the eyes of God; however, they are not considered man and wife in the eyes of the State. Claudio is sentenced to death for the crime of impregnating Juliet; his sister, Isabella, comes to Angelo to plead for her young brother’s life. Angelo agrees to spare Claudio if Isabella, a novice nun,

⁶³ Percy Fitzgerald, *A New History of the English Stage from the Restoration to the Liberty of the Theatres, in Connection with the Patent Houses* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1882), vol I, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁴ Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors* (Oxford: Horace Hart, Printer to the University, 1910), pp. 357, 344.

⁶⁵ W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 185.

will 'give up' her 'body to such sweet uncleanness' (II.iv.54) and sleep with him.⁶⁶ Shakespeare's Angelo is in earnest; it is clear that after meeting the chaste Isabella, he has fallen in lust. Isabella agrees to the indecent proposal, but only after setting up a 'bed trick' with Mariana, Angelo's contracted fiancée. By the end of the play, Angelo is exposed, Claudio is saved and able to legally wed Juliet, and the Duke of Vienna, who has been secretly watching and orchestrating much of the action, proposes marriage to Isabella.

Measure for Measure is a complex text in its treatment of sexual desire, one described by Harold Bloom as 'Shakespeare's farewell to comedy.'⁶⁷ It is a play that looks at the lust the character Angelo has for the virginal Isabella. Yet Davenant's *The Law Against Lovers* changes the plot so that Angelo's actions arise from love rather than lust. In adapting *Measure*, Davenant may have been following instructions that Charles II had given to him and Killigrew. In 1662, a new royal patent, issued to the two theatre managers, had instructed them to ensure that any 'old or revived plays' were 'corrected and purged' of 'all such offensive and scandalous passages'.⁶⁸ This meant that the two patentees were expected to amend existing plays and make them more suitable for a Restoration audience. Subsequently, in 1662, Sir William Davenant staged *The Law Against Lovers*. This was the first of many Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare's works. Davenant kept the Angelo/Isabella/Claudio/Juliet plot from *Measure for Measure*; however, while Angelo propositions Isabella in both the Restoration and Renaissance versions, Davenant's Angelo is actually merely testing the authenticity of her vow of chastity. There is no Mariana in Davenant's play, and Angelo does not carry out his seduction. Thus the difference between Shakespeare's Angelo and Davenant's counterpart is one of the character's intent.

In each text, the differentiated emphasis on lust versus love is apparent from the first meeting between Angelo and Isabella. Zdravko Planinc, in 'Shakespeare's critique of Machiavellian force, fraud, and spectacle in *Measure for Measure*', actually lays much of the blame on Isabella for Angelo's reaction in this scene; she goes to him with her face unveiled and claims that she will bribe him, and when he asks 'how', she deliberately misrepresents her 'aye' as an 'I'.⁶⁹ Harold Bloom calls Isabella Shakespeare's 'most sexually provocative female

⁶⁶ Norton *Shakespeare*, p. 2069.

⁶⁷ Bloom, Howard, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 358.

⁶⁸ Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1888), vol I, p. lxi.

⁶⁹ Zdravko Planinc, 'Shakespeare's critique of the Machiavellian force, fraud and spectacle in *Measure for Measure*', *Huminatas*, 23 (2010), pp. 1-9 (p. 5).

character' and writes that Angelo's desire is to 'dedicate Isabella's body to the wholly temporal gratification of his lust'.⁷⁰ Underlining Angelo's temptation, Shakespeare's text follows Isabella's exit with Angelo's twenty-six line monologue; he immediately asks, 'What's this? What's this? It is her fault or mine?/The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?'(II.ii.167).⁷¹ Shakespeare's Angelo goes on to show that he believes the sin to be in himself, yet the fact that he asks the question at all indicates that even from the beginning, he is attempting to shift blame for the actions he knows he will carry out. The Restoration adaptation omits these lines and contains no equivalent. Davenant's Angelo speaks only six lines, which leave out most of the angst-ridden questions posed in Shakespeare's text. Davenant's Angelo simply tells us:

I love her virtue. But, temptation! O!
Though false and cunning guide! Who in disguise
Of virtues shape lead'st us through Heaven to Hell.
No vitious beauty could with practis'd art
Subdue, like virgin innocence, my heart. (II.ii.158-161)⁷²

Already, Angelo uses 'love' to describe his feelings towards Isabella: in this instance, a love that is focused on her virtue.

When Isabella and Angelo next meet, Davenant has removed Shakespeare's opening monologue on lust in II.iv. In Shakespeare's text, Angelo opens the scene by exclaiming that all he can think about is Isabella, and that contained within his heart is 'the strong and swelling evil/Of my conception' (II.iv.6-7).⁷³ He is focused on the sin he intends to commit: 'Blood' he tells us 'thou art blood/Let's write 'good angel' on the devil's horn'(II.iv.15-16).⁷⁴ Angelo apparently believes that human nature cannot overcome a lust as strong as this; therefore, in this case, the devil shall win. Shakespeare's Angelo here decides to pursue Isabella, regardless of the sins associated with such an action. His motivations are not predicated on love, for love would not typically be mentioned in the same sentence as the devil, but rather they are predicated on lust, the 'original sin'. By removing this monologue from his adaptation, Davenant makes his Angelo later able genuinely to claim a love for Isabella, and the audience are more inclined to believe him.

⁷⁰ Bloom, p. 366.

⁷¹ *Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2066.

⁷² William Davenant, *The Works of William Davenant* (London: T. N. for Henry Herringman, 1673), p. 287.

⁷³ *Norton Shakespeare*, p. 2068.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The most damning scene for Angelo in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is in Act IV, Scene iv, in which he soliloquises:

This deed unshapes me quite, makes me unpregnant
And dull to all proceedings. A deflowered maid,
And by an eminent body that enforced
The law against it! But that her tender shame
Will not proclaim against her maiden loss,
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 (IV.iv.19-27).⁷⁵

These lines are spoken after his arranged rendezvous with 'Isabella.' Not only does Shakespeare's Angelo demonstrate an awareness of the wickedness of the act he thinks he has carried out, but he also clearly considers how he will get away with it. Angelo supposes that, given his reputation and advanced standing, should Isabella accuse him she will not be believed. There is nothing in this monologue which can be interpreted as love, and it becomes clear at this point that Angelo is motivated by pure lust. This motivation is further emphasised when Angelo is confronted in the final act of Shakespeare's play. When accused by Isabella, a woman he believes he has 'deflowered,' Angelo declares her to be mad and is content to witness her false imprisonment. These are the actions of a man who has now sated his lust. Angelo only confesses his deeds when he realises that the Duke himself has orchestrated the plot to trick him. Angelo's bravado collapses with the lines, 'When I perceive your grace, like power divine/Hath looked upon my passes' (V.i.361-362).⁷⁶

However, in *The Law Against Lovers*, as mentioned, Angelo never goes so far as to arrange a rendezvous with Isabella. Before it comes to this point, he confesses his ruse:

Stay Isabel! Stay but a moment's space!
You know me not by knowing but my face.
My heart does differ from my looks and tongue.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 2093.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 2102.

To know you much I have deceived you long.

To which she replies:

Have you more shapes, or would you new devise?

And he responds:

I'll now at once cast off my whole disguise.

Keep still your virtue, which is dignified

And has new value got by being tried (IV.vii.66-73).⁷⁷

Davenant's Angelo then informs Isabella that he had arranged for Claudio's arrest as a way to meet her. Also, now that she has 'fully endured the test', he deems her to be worthy of his love and tells her that 'Submissive I woo/To be your lover, and your husband too' (IV.vii.86, 88-89).⁷⁸ Initially, Isabella believes that he is deceiving her, and possibly also himself. She tells him that had she been weak and acquiesced to his demands, he would have taken advantage of her. She suggests that his actions were, indeed, motivated by lust rather than love. Yet Angelo spends the rest of Davenant's play seeking to prove otherwise. When talking with Eschalus, a counsellor, Angelo explains that no 'sickness' could be worse than his own (V.i.9).⁷⁹ Upon hearing of Claudio's supposed death, Angelo offers his fortune to Juliet, only to be informed it had already been forfeit to Isabella as compensation for his treatment of her. To this, he responds, 'Tis righteously bestowed' (V.vii.71).⁸⁰ From here, we see Isabella soften towards Angelo and, by the end of *The Law Against Lovers*, they are betrothed and the assumption is that they will live happily ever after.

Shakespeare's Angelo is fascinating and complex; he is a supposedly pure man who has previously abandoned his betrothed and subsequently propositions a novice nun. Although the temporary ruler plans to execute the nun's brother for a crime of lust, he himself intends to commit a similar offence. He acts out of lust for Isabella and intends to hide his wicked deed behind his supposed respectability. In contrast, Davenant's Angelo is supposedly motivated by love; his intention in propositioning Isabella is only to test her purity. Although the passages

⁷⁷ Davenant, p. 315.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 318.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 325.

examined in this essay necessarily present a relatively narrow view of their representative texts, they indicate a shift from lust to love in Angelo's character. This shift could be seen to result from the audience reaction to the professional presence of women on the stage for the first time. It could also be seen as an authorial reaction to the patent issued by Charles II in which he commanded that all the 'offensive passages' be 'corrected and purged' from the 'old or revived' plays.⁸¹ Admittedly, further research is necessary to resolve the apparent inconsistency in the levels of immorality and sexuality between the toned down Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare's works and the more licentious plays written during the Restoration period, such as William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Aphra Behn's *The Rover*. However, between Shakespeare's and Davenant's two different versions of the story of Isabella and Angelo, there is a definite contrast between love and lust. This difference on the page exemplifies the disparity between the received discourse of Restoration Drama as one of a loose and immoral stage, and the reality of the relative constraints observed by performance texts produced during the time when women joined men in the profession.

⁸¹ Cibber, p. lxi.