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Bed-trick and forced marriages. Shakespeare's distortion of romantic comedy motifs in *Measure for Measure*

The genre of *Measure for Measure* keeps baffling critics. Although the Folio ranks it among the comedies, it is conventionally defined as a "Problem Play"[1], a genre exploding the very notion of genre itself. Although *Measure for Measure* ends with marriages and thus looks like a comedy, it is devoid of celebration and its ending resolves none of the tensions aroused by the action. The Problem Plays in general, and *Measure for Measure* in particular, especially contrast with Shakespeare's earlier, "romantic" comedies although one finds in it some of their features and patterns. But these motifs are treated in an ironical way and seen through a distorting mirror. The marriage bed to which couples withdraw at the end of romantic comedies here takes the shape of the morally puzzling bed-trick, and marriage itself, which is conventionally the emblem of fulfilment and embodies a promise of happiness and harmony, is garbed with negative connotations. One of the most blatant consequences of the distortion of romantic comedy motifs in *Measure for Measure* is the disempowerment of female characters. Indeed, at the end of the play, they are violently levelled out, at the lowest possible level: they all become like the street prostitute Kate Keepdown, that is to say women who are totally dependent on men and who exist above all through their sexual status.
This article purposes to demonstrate that Shakespeare uses traditional comic devices such as the bed-trick and the concluding marriages in a very unusual way, which participates in the generic ambiguity of *Measure for Measure* and in its confusion of female roles. In this perspective, the questions of genre and gender appear as tightly linked: the problematic genre of the play entails a heightened ambiguity of female roles. The borderlines between both generic and gender categories blur, and elements and roles which are traditionally kept apart overlap. After a brief presentation of the problems the genre of *Measure for Measure* poses, I will dwell on the use Shakespeare makes of the bed-trick and the concluding, supposedly happy marriages, to show that these reworkings lead, among other things, to the blurring of the categories of female characters.

Measure for Measure shares attributes with other types of plays such as Shakespeare's romantic comedies or romances, and even reflects concerns central to tragedies, without quite belonging to any of these genres. It has the apparent conventional ending of a comedy but the rest of the play does not include such prominent features of romantic comedy as the courtship between lovers. There is no sense of harmony and completeness at the end. The comic design of the play thus emerges as highly unsatisfactory. So that, as Jean E. Howard puts it in her article "The Difficulties of Closure", one may say that there is the presence of conflicting generic codes in *Measure for Measure*[2]. To her, if the play poses a problem to readers and audiences, it is mainly because it repeatedly evokes comic expectations only to make us aware of the gap between those expectations and the features of the play, be it in terms of structure, characterization or style, refusing to fit in with the comic frame[3]. In other words, critics and audience are invited to understand the action of *Measure for Measure* in terms of the dominant generic code, but they are unable to do so without strain[4].
One finds in the play a variety of influences of other genres. As Richard Hillman argues in *Shakespeare. The Problem Plays*, the Problem Plays have been seen in terms of romantic material subjected to fundamentally disjunctive, sometimes jarring, realistic treatment[5]. The stories dramatized in these plays have medieval origins and appear to have come to Shakespeare in versions preserving the typical qualities of romance[6]. According to Hillman, Shakespeare was making different uses of familiar and old-fashioned fables, rendering them more ambiguous and complex than their original Manichean design[7]. In the Problem Plays,

Shakespeare also distorts the conventions of his own comedies[8] and in *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio, the substitute playwright, strives to promote and construct romantic conditions in order to match inherited romance premises[9].

Hillman traces elements coming from earlier English drama in the play. For instance, Lucio seems to derive from the character of the Trickster inherited from the Vice figure of Morality plays[10]. In the same way, the first scene of Isabella's confrontation to Angelo recalls the allegorical mechanisms of mediaeval Morality plays, with Isabella in the position of the human soul poised between the emblems of vice and virtue, torn between her evil and good angels, Angelo and Lucio[11]. Yet, the universe of *Measure for Measure* must not be seen as that of a Morality play populated by allegorical personifications and purely allegorical readings fail to account for its complexity.

If *Measure for Measure* is neither a romantic, festive comedy, nor an allegorical Morality play, what is it then? A satire? A tragicomedy? Although the play shares some features with all these genres, it belongs to none of them.

Because of the generic problems it poses, *Measure for Measure* has frequently been seen by critics as a comedy about comedy, or, in other words, a comedy questioning the conventions of comedy. To Northrop Frye though, the ending of *Measure for Measure* is not stranger than that of most comedies in general. To him, a genuinely comic resolution to a play very seldom seems the logical outcome of the action; there is inevitably something unrealistic about it[12]. Yet, Frye's view dismisses all too easily the contradictions between the ending of *Measure for Measure* and the expectations it raises. He sees it as essentially a happy one[13] in accordance with Shakespeare's romantic conception of comedy[14], which features a festive conclusion, witnesses the birth of a new society and leaves the audience reassured about the future[15]. But Frye's assertions seem to neglect the very special tone of the play and demand serious qualification. The ending of *Measure for Measure* is by convention a happy one, but of a very dubious nature. To Howard, "*Measure for Measure* deliberately toys with our expectations about comedy to make us aware of our desire for an interpretative framework." In doing so, the play "puts the audience in an analogous position to the great seekers of an ordering system within the text [the duke, Angelo, Isabella], each of whom wants life to be tidier and more tractable to human designs than it proves"[16]. The main result of this is to force the audience to recognize that truth and rigid formulas cannot work together[17].

It is a fact that at first glance, *Measure for Measure* looks very much like a comedy. We expect that at the end, the Duke will redeem Vienna from vice and disorder. But although it is what happens up to a certain extent, a significant number of details unsettle the audience's comic expectations, forcing them to re-examine the generic codes they rely on in order to make sense of what they are watching[18]. Howard closes on the idea that form and matter are at war throughout *Measure for Measure*, thus undermining the comic perspective[19].

Among the elements of comedy which are put under strain in *Measure for Measure*, two emerge in an especially blatant way: the bed-trick and the marriages which normally form the happy conclusion of romantic or festive comedy. The bed-trick has long represented a problem for critics, for reasons of both morality and realism[20]. It is one of the elements in the play which is inherited from romance and it is also found in Shakespeare's main source for the play, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566). Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were familiar with the device and a great number of playwrights resorted to it as a piece of plot-mechanism, so that spectators probably did not question its realism as they tend to do nowadays. Rosalind Miles notes in *The Problem of Measure for Measure* that Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights use the device in a way that differs from the authors of romance before them: whereas in romance, it is generally a means for the deserted bride to retrieve her errant beloved, it is rarely used in a context of furthering love in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama,

and it is rather, in Miles' words, "distinctly abrasive and unromantic[21]". Taking several examples of bed-trick scenes in the works of such Jacobean dramatists as John Fletcher, she notices that the punitive element in the device is highlighted and that the bed-trick "picks up and amplifies the suggestion of lustfulness in the man and cunning in the woman which are inescapably implicit in the device[22]". Although mainly found in comedy because of its obvious comic potential, the bed-trick is also used in tragedy (see for instance Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622)). So that depending on the context of the play in which it appears and the characters resorting to it, the bed-trick appears either as a device used by a devoted and constant woman, which will lead to the penitence and reformation of the man, or as the trick of a predatory and scheming woman will resort to against a man governed merely by lust, these two aspects being not that far removed from each other[23].

Miles notes that Jacobean dramatists mainly used the latter aspects of the bed-trick, and she sees Shakespeare as trying to restore the device to its original context of loving devotion on the part of the female and lust as a temporary or youthful mistake on the part of the male. It is a key element in Vincentio's master plan. Although it leads eventually to Angelo's marriage with Mariana, it is primarily designed to prevent the unacceptable sexual union of Angelo and Isabella and to preserve the already consummated union between Claudio and Juliet. It is also a way to secure a comic ending for the play. But because of the problems it poses, the bed-trick is kept at a distance. It takes place at night, in the most confined of settings, that is to say Angelo's enclosed garden, "circummur'd with brick" (4.1.28), a perverted Garden of Eden where Angelo's fall is going to take place[24]. We do not see anything of the agreement or of the transaction itself (as is traditionally the case), which makes the ploy much less real and immediate to us. The emphasis is on speed and silence. The main problem which the bed-trick poses is that it is orchestrated by two supposedly morally irreproachable figures, namely the duke dressed as a monk and the novice Isabella. In doing so, they behave in a way which bears similarities with the trade of Mistress Overdone and Pompey, the professional bawds of the play. Thanks to the bed-trick, Isabella can gain the upper hand without doing the "dirty work" herself.

The bed-trick is at the centre of the problems posed by sexual and gender relations in the play. One of its effects is that it makes women, especially virgin women, interchangeable. James Black suggests that, with the bed-trick, we have an exchange of maidenhead for maidenhead, which announces the trading of a head for a head in which Ragozine works as a substitute for both Claudio and Barnardine[25]. Similarly, women all become equivalent, in a very negative way. In her psychoanalytical analysis of the bed-trick, Janet Adelman argues that the device stresses above anything else the basic incompatibility between sexuality and marriage in the perverted urban society of Vienna[26]. The arranged meeting between Angelo and Mariana is the only sexual intercourse actually taking place in the play, and it happens despite the unwillingness of one of the parties. Adelman explains that Angelo negotiates his sexual desire between two women, one of whom (Isabella) is apparently violated and shamed, the other (Mariana) remaining mysteriously unsoiled and hence available for marriage[27]. She further argues that in *Measure for Measure*, women are split apart and then violently yoked together through the device of the bed-trick, thereby simultaneously illustrating the fundamental incompatibility between marriage and male desire, and providing a magical solution to it[28]. This enables Shakespeare to turn the tragic ending of *Othello* (since Othello saw in Desdemona a whore he had married) into comedy, though comedy of a problematic sort[29]. To Adelman, the bed-trick is the primary device through which desire is regulated, legitimized and relocated in the socially sanctioned bond of marriage. But in this perspective, marriage appears in a particularly negative light. According to Adelman, the swiftness and silence accompanying the bed-trick lay the emphasis on the depersonalization of desire and on the interchangeability of women's bodies[30]. Through the ploy, the nun, the sexually soiled woman

and the wife become a single figure. The confusion is heightened by the fact that Mariana and Angelo's situation bears many similarities with that of Claudio and Juliet. Whereas the Duke condones the bed-trick, which seals an old betrothal but lacks mutual consent, he condemns the union of Claudio and Juliet despite their mutual love. This contradiction is exacerbated by the collective opinion of Lucio, Pompey and the Provost that premarital sex hardly violates Viennese norm, which leaves the audience in doubt as to what constitutes legitimate sexuality and sin.

Of course, the confusion of female roles is not only effected through the bed-trick: it is also carried out through Angelo's desire for Isabella, which conflates into one the two antithetical figures of the nun and the prostitute into one. Under his gaze, the nun is turned into a sexually provocative woman, and the dichotomy between the virgin and the prostitute is blurred. The instability of the dichotomy is particularly blatant in Angelo's monologue after his first interview with Isabella:

> Never could the strumpet,
> With all her double vigor, art and nature,
> Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid
> Subdues me quite. (2.2.183-86)

In his monologue, Angelo analyses his own lust in standard theological terms. He sees himself as a saint tempted by a cunning enemy. But in the audience's eyes, the situation is reversed: it is Angelo who is the enemy trying to tempt the saintly Isabella, whose figure is heavily charged with eroticism. Angelo's speech (2.2.162-87) is fraught with ambiguities and double-entendres: to his great dismay, he discovers that polar oppositions, on which his whole value system rests, are illusory. He sees Isabella as a light temptress, the embodiment of virtue and the devil incarnate at the same time. In none of Shakespeare's sources is Isabella a novice. But the figure of the eroticized nun itself is not new. As Hanna Scolnicov explains in her article "Chastity, Prostitution and Pornography in *Measure for Measure*", the two opposed figures of the nun and the prostitute were fused into one by Pietro Aretino to create one of the archetypes of pornography, namely the prostitute dressed as a novice[31]. But here, it is Angelo's corrupting gaze which operates the translation from the nun to the prostitute. Not only are the nun and the prostitute put on the same level in Angelo's speech, but the nun turns out to be even more tempting than the prostitute. The distinction between vice and virtue dissolves, and virtue begets vice. It is literally a vicious circle: the more saintly Isabella behaves, the more ardently Angelo desires her. The nun and the prostitute meet in so far as they arouse male desire, whether by the absence or the excess of sexuality. What they have in common is their excessive behaviour in their relationship to sexuality, an excess which, though antithetical, comes down to the same result, namely, stepping out of traditional categories of female behaviour and arousing male desire.

But Isabella's eroticism is far more complex than the pornographic stereotype of the nun. It is indeed not only her body but also her speech which arouse Angelo's senses. In the scene of her plea for Claudio's life in 2.2, Isabella is not only eroticized by Angelo's gaze: eroticism oozes through her, as if it was part of her very essence. She put forward ethic principles with a passionate rhetoric, and she is feminine and suggestive without even seeming to notice it. When she first visits Angelo, it is Lucio who dictates to her the arguments she should use in the most suggestive terms: "You are too cold" (2.2.56); "Ay, touch him; there's the vein" (70); "O to him, to him wench! He will relent. / He's coming; I perceiv't" (124-25). When she comes for the second time, Lucio is absent but her speech is just as erotically charged, as if she had assimilated and interiorised Lucio's advice. "I am come to know your pleasure", she declares on entering (2.4.31). Her speech binds eroticism and death in the tightest way:

were I under the terms of death,
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death, as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (100-104)

The eroticism in Isabella's speech is f the same kind as that found in Jacques de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, where the description of the tortures inflicted on the virgin martyrs' bodies often verges on eroticism[32]. This speech, riddled with images of passionate sexuality underpinning a longing for martyrdom, torture, or even death, seems to be written in order to arouse Angelo's desire.

The confusion of female roles and the idea of women's interchangeability are reinforced by the recurring figure of the chiasmus in the play, as in Angelo's exclamation on reflecting on the effect Isabella has on him: "O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint, / With saints dost bait thy hook!" (2.2.184-85). In the same way, sin and virtue meet in Escalus' lament about Angelo's decision to condemn Claudio to death: "Well, heaven forgive him, and forgive us all! / Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall" (2.1.37-38). The predominance of chiasma in the play shows accepted moral categories as just as unstable as female roles. It complicates our perception and invites us to question and revise our judgments. The chiasmus uttered by Mariana about the bed-trick insists on the moral and legal problems posed by the device: "I have known my husband, yet my husband / Knows not that ever he knew me" (5.1.184-5). And she goes on: "[Angelo] thinks he knows that he ne'er knew my body, / But knows, he thinks, that he knows Isabel's" (198-99). Mariana's description sheds light on the confusion of female roles in the play. It also emphasizes the dubious aspect of the duke's justification for the bed-trick and the fragility of the very idea of marriage.

The bed-trick thus appears as a perverted version of the wedding bed, which symbolises the promise of a happy and fruitful future for the lovers. The marriage traditionally ending romantic and festive comedies undergoes the same distorting treatment as the bed-trick, and the promise of future happiness and harmony concluding the earlier plays seems a far cry away from the end of *Measure for Measure*.

The play closes on a series of four announced marriages, between Claudio and Juliet, Angelo and Mariana, Lucio and the prostitute Kate Keepdown, and, last but not least, the duke and Isabella. Marriages at the end of comedies are a standard feature of the genre. In comedies, obstacles impede the movement towards marriage, but at the end, everything comes back into place, conflicts are resolved, ambiguities dissolved, and the natural and social orders are restored. Yet, as Richard P. Wheeler underlines in *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies*, in *Measure for Measure*, the strategies wonderfully working in festive comedies no longer prove adequate to solve conflicts that have become increasingly intense[33]. The marriages concluding the play seem all the more artificial as none of them completes a relationship that has held a place at the centre of the action of the play. Besides, as we have seen with the bed trick, the identification between sexual consummation and marriage, which is an absolute rule in the early comedies, is disrupted here[34].

Although a brief look at comedies contemporary with *Measure for Measure* shows that concluding marriages are not always contrived in a romantic frame of mind, the marriages in *Measure for Measure* take on many dark aspects. First, they do not seem to free their protagonists from their ambiguous attitudes toward sexuality. Then, it is a fact that except Claudio and Juliet's, these unions are not based on love, and, even worse, they are presented as a means of punishment. Angelo and Lucio are forced to marry the women towards whom

they misbehaved by the duke, as a punishment for sexual sin. To Lucio, marriage to a prostitute is worse than death: "Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, / Whipping, and hanging" (5.1.520-21). For Angelo too, enforced marriage takes the place of a death sentence. No wonder that in this context, Pompey the bawd becomes the executioner, thereby linking in the tightest way the themes of sexuality and death[35]. In the process, women are reduced to the status of instruments of punishment. So that coercion seems to become the law of marriage itself. Even Claudio and Juliet's union bears dark connotations: these two should by convention be the romantic leads, as their names recall the passionate innocents of the early tragedies. But as early as the beginning of the play, they are introduced as sinners guilty of fornication. They are young and in love, the two basic conditions of a romantic union, but she is blatantly pregnant, to the point of being "groaning" (2.2.15-16), and he was condemned to death before being pardoned and sentenced to marry her by the duke.

Although critics generally agree to say that an early modern audience would not have questioned the idea that these marriages constitute a happy ending, these unions, according to Rosalind Miles, serve to question the romantic idealisation of marriage as the source of all harmony and of lawful sexual delight[36]. The matching with Kate Keepdown to which Lucio is condemned by the Duke in 5.1, although proceeding, like Angelo and Mariana's, proceeding from the convention demanding that the wronged maid be made into a "lawfully wedded wife", and highlighting the social function of marriage as an institution ordering sexuality, seems to subvert this particular convention. Because of its juxtaposition with the other unions, this compelled union of a whore and her client, which takes place in prison and is Shakespeare's invention, adds a satirical note to the other marriages and invites the audience to view them with suspicion and to question their potential for future happiness. Wheeler defines the marriage between Lucio and Kate Keepdown as "a degraded relationship which is forced to take the stamp of official respectability". According to the critic, this comes close to providing an emblem for the whole play[37]. All the couples of the play seem to mirror each other to a greater or lesser extent. For instance, the couple formed by Lucio and Keepdown, whom he has promised to marry and who has borne his child, repeats in a sarcastic way the central couple formed by Claudio and Juliet.

Professional prostitutes are remarkably absent from the stage, although almost everything that takes place implies their existence and everyone constantly refers to them. But they are neither seen nor heard. Those speaking in their name are either the representatives of law and order trying to repress them, the bawds exploiting them, or their clients. In this perspective, female characters in *Measure for Measure* are treated as the conceptual equivalents of the absent prostitutes of the play. The thematic presence of the prostitute Kate Keepdown in the final implies that if the latter is like Juliet, Mariana and Isabella, they are also like her. The Duke's final paradox and the conclusion Lucio draws from it make all women, including virgins, potential prostitutes:

> Duke: What, are you married?
> Mariana: No, my lord.
> Duke: Are you a maid?
> Mariana: No, my lord.
> Duke: A widow, then?
> Mariana: Neither, my lord.
> Duke: Why, you are nothing then. Neither maid, widow, nor wife?
> Lucio: My lord, she may be a punk. For many of them are neither maid, widow nor wife. (5.1.172-79)

Women in the play blur the categories of female roles and occupy the cracks between categories or the spaces where they overlap. Shakespeare does, undoes, separates and confuses the polar oppositions between wife and whore, and even between virgin and prostitute.

The play's concluding marriages return women to normative categories, making them all wives. But if one studies each female character of the play in the light of the duke's paradigm, one notices that before the conclusion, none of them matches any traditional category of female roles. As Mario DiGangi shows in his article "Pleasure and Danger"[38], *Measure for Measure*'s women resist patriarchal strategies of definition. Before her official wedding, Mariana is indeed neither a maid, nor fully a wife, nor a widow nor a whore. Juliet occupies the space between wife and whore: she is not a maid, she is not really a wife, but she might become a widow. Her intermediary marital status makes it impossible to attribute to her a definite matrimonial status, but her body exposes an active sexuality which soiled her reputation. Juliet's indefinite status is revealed in the way the other characters allude to her: the provost tries to define her in terms of class ("gentlewoman", 2.3.10), and the duke, of physical beauty ("fair one", 19), whereas Angelo chooses the lexis of sin ("fornicatress", 2.3.23). As for Isabella, she occupies the space between maid and wife: a nun during the whole play, she is about to marry the duke at the end. Or so her silence implies. There is apparently no place for what might be considered an unproblematic, unambiguous definition of what a wife should be in *Measure for Measure*, nor for ordinary couples. There seem to be only hypersexual or asexual women.

The nun and the prostitute share the characteristic of stepping out of the traditional categories of female behaviour. Both shun marriage, although for very different reasons. Masculine sexuality in Vienna empties the categories traditionally defining women's identities of their meaning, thereby emptying women themselves of their significance, and making them "nothing". Only the category of prostitute remains open to them all. In the end, the only female character whose identity is devoid of any ambiguity is the bawd Mistress Overdone, who is nine times a widow[39]. Female categories conflate in the play to such an extent that in the end, the whore might not be "nothing", but, on the contrary, she may very well be "everything", in that all women are assimilated to her, in a more or less direct way.

The woman whose disempowerment is the most blatant is unquestioningly Isabella. In a purely dramatic perspective, she literally fades away as a character. Prior to the final scene, she appears as an elaborate character which we see become more and more complex as the play progresses. Yet, the final scene brings no answer to her complexity. In the space of only nine lines, Vincentio produces a living Claudio, proposes marriage to Isabella, and pardons Angelo, and Isabella is not given the opportunity to speak. The text gives absolutely no indication about her reaction to the duke's proposal. It comes as a total surprise both to her and to the audience. The control of the action is entirely taken over by the duke in the final scene, and what we are given to see is an idealized figure of masculine authority about to marry a chaste wife. Isabella's religious outfit makes the incongruity of the duke's proposal stand out: it disregards her choice of life in virginity and seclusion. In the end, she conforms to the norm of female behaviour and puts on the "destin'd livery" (2.4.137). The bride's veil will take the place of that of the nun. Not even in the convent can women escape male sexuality. The Duke, who has protected her sexuality so far, now urges her to forsake her virginity, which might lead one to argue that he performs lawfully what Angelo has tried to do illegally.

As Adelman suggests, in the context of the other marriages of the play, it makes sense to ask what crime in Isabella the duke proposes to punish through marriage[40]. And she concludes that Isabella's denial of sexuality made her particularly powerful, and even infringing upon the Duke's monopole of purity and righteousness. To her, Isabella's marriage to the duke re-

contains her dangerous desire to define a self outside the sphere of marriage, and hence beyond the reach of male power[41]. Isabella is deprived of a scenario of her own. She is totally dependent on the duke's authority. In yielding her virginity, which was the quality defining her identity, she will surrender the control she has over herself. Her choice of life is simply sacrificed to the duke's effort to create the appearance of social order. So that the supposedly joyful note of what has all the ingredients of the traditional ending of a comedy needs to be seriously qualified. The concluding marriages are clouded by their punitive dimension and the constriction of female power they imply. If *Measure for Measure* is a comedy, it is definitely a comedy of a very problematic sort.

The coexistence of jarring tones in the final marriages is partly responsible for the difficulty in categorizing the play in a specific genre. Although it concludes with multiple marriages, the denouement is far from joyous, and leaves the audience disturbed. The end of *Measure for Measure* seems to hold no promise of the "they lived happily ever after" type, nor of social harmony restored. Comedies are often seen as plays endorsing society's values and confirming social order. The forces threatening this order are tamed at the end and traditional values restored. The whole movement of the play is teleologically directed towards this happy ending. A new life begins for the characters, which the audience does not see, but which is defined as a happy one. Although in the final scene, we leave the confined spaces of the prison, the convent and the courtroom and enter an open and public space by the city gates, problems seem to have been only superficially solved. Children, who usually symbolize life and renewal, here seem doomed to a gloomy future, be it Keepdown's or Juliet's child indeed, the former will be born out of the forced union between two outcasts, while the sheer existence of the latter sent its mother to prison and nearly caused its father's death ever before it was born. The comic ending seems hollow, or, in Howard's words, a lie, a wish more than a fact[42]. Duke Vincentio's mercy is problematic, as it mainly consists of punishments deeply resented by those who receive them. Everything in this scene is contrived by him and by him only, in a demonstration of his absolute authority. Of course, such a scene matches the taste of early modern audiences for trial scenes. But it also exposes the duke's unquestionable power over his subjects. Besides, the general corruption thriving at the beginning of the play remains largely unchecked. The underworld resists assimilation. Pompey and Mistress Overdone may be suppressed, but one can be sure that the sex trade will be kept alive in one form or another. In the same way as Barnardine's instinct for survival makes him resist the Duke's control, instinct as defined by Lucio[43] is still going to prevail, because it is the sap of life, a vital drive, contrary to Vincentio's marriage proposal to Isabella, a mock-monk and a quasi-nun, the appropriately barren culmination of a falsely comic play. In Vienna's corrupt and sordid world, marriage cannot be a vehicle of fairy-tale transformation.

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Bien que *Mesure pour Mesure* se conclue par des mariages et ressemble par conséquent à une comédie, la fin de la pièce est des plus déstabilisante pour le public. Les *Problem Plays* en général et *Mesure pour Mesure* en particulier contrastent avec les précédentes comédies romantiques de Shakespeare, même si l'on y trouve certains de leurs schémas. Ces motifs reçoivent cependant un traitement ironique et sont vus par le biais d'un miroir déformant. Le lit conjugal où les couples se retirent à la fin des comédies romantiques prend ici la forme du manège du lit, procédé moralement problématique, et le mariage lui-même, par convention emblème d'accomplissement et promesse de bonheur et d'harmonie, est affecté de nombre de connotations négatives. L'une des conséquences les plus flagrantes de la déformation des motifs de la comédie romantique dans *Mesure pour Mesure* est la réduction des personnages féminins à l'impuissance : à la fin de la pièce, tous sont mis au même niveau, le plus bas qui soit : les femmes de la pièce sont toutes des Kate Keepdown en puissance.

Although *Measure for Measure* ends with marriages and thus looks like a comedy, its ending leaves the audience unsettled. The Problem Plays in general, and *Measure for Measure* in particular, contrast with Shakespeare's earlier, "romantic" comedies although one finds in it some of their features and patterns. But these motifs are treated in an ironical way and seen through a distorting mirror. The marriage bed to which couples withdraw at the end of romantic comedies here takes the shape of the morally puzzling bed-trick, and marriage itself, which is conventionally the emblem of fulfilment and embodies a promise of happiness and harmony, is marked with negative connotations. One of the most blatant consequences of the distortion of romantic comedy motifs in *Measure for Measure* is the disempowerment of female characters: at the conclusion of the play, they are violently levelled out, at the lowest possible level: they all become Kate Keepdowns.

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[1] The category of Problem Plays comes from F.S. Boas's 1896 study *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*.

[2] Jean E. Howard, "The Difficulties of Closure: An Approach to the Problematic in Shakespearian Comedy." *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan*. Ed. A.R. Braunmuller and J.C. Bulman. Newark: The University of Delaware Press, 1986. 113-128. p. 113.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 119.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 119.
[5] Richard Hillman, *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. p. 8.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 6.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 7.
[8] For example, none of these plays uses the two-world principle of the court opposed to nature or a green world, although remnants of these patterns exist in them. Yet, there is no alternative setting in which the rules of reality are suspended and true lovers magically unite.
[9] Hillman, *op. cit*., p. 8.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 99.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 100.
[12] Northrop Frye, *The Myth of Deliverance. Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1983. p. 5. The incredible nature of the ending often comes from the fact that it is presented as the result of the workings of divine providence. One may also note in passing that the part ascribed to Providence has led some critics to classify *Measure for Measure* as a homiletic tragicomedy.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 27.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[15] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[16] Howard, *op. cit*., p. 119.
[17] *Ibid*., p. 119.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 120-121.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 121.
[20] Hillman describes it as "a moral quagmire masquerading as a way out"Hillman, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
[21] Rosalind Miles, *The Problem of* Measure for Measure. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976. p. 238.
[22] *Ibid*., p. 238.
[23] *Ibid*., p. 242.
[24] The garden is an addition by Shakespeare.
[25] James Black, "The Unfolding of *Measure for Measure*". *Aspects of Shakespeare's "Problem Plays"*. Ed. Kenneth Muir and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. 77-86. p. 83.
[26] See Janet Adelman, "Marriage and the Maternal Body: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*" in Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers. Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992. 76-102.
[27] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 78.
[31] Hanna Scolnicov, "Chastity, Prostitution and Pornography in *Measure for Measure*." *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 134 (1998): 68-81. p. 68.
[32] See for instance the description of the martyrdoms of Saint Agatha, Saint Lucy or Saint Margaret. Here is for example the way Saint Margaret's martyrdom is recounted: "Le préfet ordonna alors de l'attacher à un chevalet et de la frapper, d'abord avec des verges puis avec des peignes de fer, et si cruellement que ses os étaient à nu et que le sang coulait de son corps comme de la source la plus pure… et comme elle refusait de sacrifier, elle fut déshabillée. Et

son corps fut brûlé profondément avec des torches enflammées, de telle sorte que tout le monde s'étonnait qu'une jeune fille si délicate pût endurer autant de tourments. Le juge la fit ensuite ligoter et jeter dans un bassin plein d'eau, afin que le changement de supplice fasse croître la violence de la douleur… Elle se releva ensuite et dit au bourreau : 'Frère, prends ton épée et frappe-moi !'" Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*. Ed. A. Boureau et al. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

[33] Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies. Turn and Counter-Turn*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1981. p. 3.

[34] Hillman, *op. cit*., p. 7.

[35] Adelman, *op. cit*., p. 87.

[36] Miles, *op. cit*., p. 253.

[37] Wheeler, *op. cit*., p. 7.

[38] Mario DiGangi, « Pleasure and Danger: Measuring Female Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*". ELH 60:3 (1993): 589-609.

[39] Escalus: Hath she had any more than one husband?
Pompey: Nine, Sir; Overdone by the last. (2.1.198-99)

[40] Adelman, *op. cit*., p. 102.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 102.

[42] Howard, *op. cit*., p. 121.

[43]" … it is impossible to extirp [vice] quite, till eating and drinking be put down." (3.2.98-99)