

**Harassment, Exploitation, and Rape: Sexual Offences in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well***

By Jeff Carr

The works of William Shakespeare are filled with examples of extreme sexual misconduct, and there exists a significant amount of scholarly attention regarding these misdeeds. However, previous generations of readers and critics may not have discussed these frequent, disturbing occurrences in great detail. In order to fully comprehend Shakespeare's work and the context in which he wrote, it is necessary to read his plays and sonnets from a feminist perspective. Although some conservative literary critics will surely disagree, approaching these works as a feminist is a crucial exercise, as scholars and readers are then able to examine the male/female power structure of Renaissance England. This knowledge, of course, allows us to better understand Shakespeare and the times in which he wrote. Sexual misbehavior occurs in many of Shakespeare's plays, but *Measure for Measure* is an especially intriguing case. In this work, Shakespeare weaves a web of entangling sexual offences with Isabella, Mariana, and Angelo emerging as the foremost victims and participants. Indeed, several offences, including sexual harassment, exploitation, and even rape, appear throughout *Measure for Measure*.

Let us first examine sexual harassment in the play. Although some traditionalists may argue that sexual harassment is a twentieth century term and thus not applicable to Shakespeare's England, they are naïve to suggest that such did not occur or that the author was not aware of it. Isabella serves as evidence. Noted feminist Nicholas Radel

describes her as “the victim of criminal sexual harassment” (123). Indeed, her encounter with Angelo is the most vivid example in the text of what the modern reader would recognize as sexual harassment. A possible influence on Shakespeare in his development of Isabella as victim comes from the *Book of Susanna* in the *Apocrypha of the Old Testament*. Susanna is described as “a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord” and had been trained “according to the laws of Moses” (Sus. v. 2). In Act I, Scene IV of *Measure for Measure*, Isabella commences the process of becoming a nun, desiring a “more strict restraint / Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare” (1.4.4-5). Both women are revealed as ardent followers of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and appear to be virtuous. Their connection develops further, of course, as Susanna and Isabella both become victims of sexual harassment.

In the case of Susanna, she is stalked by two elders, respected patriarchal figures in her community. As she bathes in the garden at her home, the two men attempt to abuse their power when they say, “We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you” (Sus. v.20-21). The preceding passage is a clear example of sexual harassment, as the two men attempt to blackmail Susanna into an adulterous affair. Susanna illustrates her understanding of her powerlessness when she replies, “I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord” (v. 22-23). As a victim of sexual harassment, Susanna is forced to decide whether or not to submit to the carnal desires of the elders. If she is to lie with them, she will compromise her integrity and her sexual autonomy; if she refuses, death is imminent, as the elders will

accuse her of the crime they are asking her to commit with them. Susanna decides to risk losing her life rather than to compromise her sexuality.

Like her possible model Susanna, Isabella also endures sexual harassment from a man of great power. With her brother Claudio set to be executed for fornication, Isabella attempts to persuade Angelo to pardon him. Initially, Angelo refuses, but on the following day, he presents an unethical proposition to the woman who is about to become a nun:

Which had you rather, that the most just law

Now took your brother's life, or, to redeem him,

Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness

As she that he hath stained? (MM 2.4.51-54)

In this selection, Angelo employs tactics similar to those used by the elders in *Susanna*, abusing his power in an attempt to satisfy his lustful cravings. Isabella, however, follows Susanna's example when she says, "Sir believe this, / I had rather give my body than my soul" (MM 2.4.55-56). In other words, Isabella would rather be executed than to surrender her sexual autonomy. Isabella's courage is tremendous in this difficult circumstance. It is fair to speculate that countless women in both Biblical times and during the Renaissance faced such undesirable choices. Isabella is heroic in that she maintains her sexual autonomy, despite the efforts of a very powerful patriarchal oppressor.

The harassment of Isabella is furthered, as Angelo attempts to gain advantage in his desire to fornicate with her, as he tells her he can

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

Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,

Could fetch your brother from the manacles

Of the all-abiding 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? (MM 2.4.88-98)

In response to the question of whether her virginity is more valuable than her brother's life, Isabella answers that surrendering her purity is a greater sin than allowing Claudio to die when she says, "Better it were a brother died at once / Than that a sister, by redeeming him, / Should die forever" (MM 2.4.107-09). Isabella's language is comparable to that of Susanna, when the latter states that fornicating with the elders "will mean death" for her (v. 22). Of course, neither Isabella nor Susanna speaks of a literal death; rather, they refer to a loss of honor, respect, and sexual autonomy, which to them is worse than the demise of the body.

Unlike Susanna, however, Isabella does not face death if she refuses her offender's advances. The fact that her brother's life is instead at stake may make her appear less sympathetic than Susanna, but she is still the victim of what modern readers would identify as criminal sexual harassment. Therefore, it is absurd for critics to label her unsympathetic. Yet, many literary critics have traditionally viewed Isabella unfavorably (Kamps and Raber 194). In *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays*, Richard Hillman makes such an assessment when he writes, "Isabella's withdrawal from the world, together with her moral rigidity and intolerance, manifests a lack of emotional sympathy, which renders hollow her preaching of the doctrine of mercy" (120). Hillman and other critics who share his perspective do not seem to fully grasp the complexity of Isabella's dilemma. Although many readers and critics may prefer that she comes to her brother's rescue, they overlook the fact that she is also a victim here. When critics suggest that Isabella surrender her sexual autonomy to a corrupt man in power, they offer a disturbing – and in many ways sexist – solution to the obstruction of justice.

Isabella, who was, after all, about to become a nun, has true religious convictions, which she cannot compromise. Contrary to the opinions of less sympathetic critics, R.W. Chambers, in an early criticism of *Measure for Measure*, reveals that Isabella remains consistent to the fundamental Christian thinking of her day when she quickly denies Angelo's unwelcome sexual advance. Chambers writes,

Now whatever we think of that instant decision, it is certainly not un-Christian. Christianity could never have lived through its first three hundred years of persecution, if its ranks had not been stiffened by men and women who never

hesitated in the choice between righteousness and the ties to their kinsfolk. We may call this fanaticism; but it was well understood in Shakespeare's day. (107)

Isabella's faith in a benevolent God and her fear of sinning against him not only explain her unwillingness to fornicate with Angelo to save her brother's life, but they are also consistent with the actions of Susanna. Chambers's comments can be supported by looking at a "A Prayer Against the Flesh" from Richard Day's *A Book of Christian Prayers*, which states that sex will "carry us into destruction, turning us away from God, to her own earthiness and rottenness" (221). Considering the religious climate of her time, it is reasonable to assume that Isabella would have been influenced by selections such as this one. Understanding context enables readers to understand Isabella's thinking.

If Isabella's piety is still in question, consider her conversation with Claudio in Act II, Scene I. While not capable of sacrificing her sexual autonomy for her brother's life, she claims that she would gladly surrender her existence instead when she states, "O, were it but my life, / I'd throw it down for your deliverance / As frankly as a pin" (MM 3.1.105-08). There is little reason to doubt the sincerity of Isabella's declaration. Readers should notice a sense of powerlessness in Isabella that is often felt by victims of sexual harassment. Chambers describes Isabella as a "human body in the extremity of torment" to whom "the honour of her family and her religion are more to her than mere life, her own or Claudio's" (111). Clearly, Isabella is revealed as a virtuous woman placed in a compromising situation rather than the cold, selfish sibling some critics have portrayed her as being.

In both *Measure for Measure* and *Susanna*, the resolutions to the problems created by sexual harassment can only be resolved by men. Just as Susanna is about to face execution, “God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, ‘I want no part in the shedding of this woman’s blood’” (v. 45-46). Daniel then acts as Susanna’s attorney and tricks the two elders into admitting their guilt, ultimately saving Susanna’s life and honor. Duke Vicentio, disguised as a friar, compares to Daniel only in regards to gender and that he resolves the problems created by Angelo. He introduces the idea of the bed-trick, telling Isabella to,

Only refer to 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. This being granted in course – and now follows all – we shall advise this wronged maid to stand up your appointment, go in your place. (MM 3.1.226-31)

The Duke persuades Isabella to take part in his scheme by assuring her that it will “do a poor wronged lady a merited benefit, redeem [Isabella’s] brother from the angry law, do no stain to [Isabella’s] own gracious person, and much please the absent Duke” (MM 3.1.192-95). This last consideration is of particular interest to Vicentio, a crafty, manipulative politician who seems influenced by the writings of Machiavelli (Kamps and Raber 132-34). The fact that both Susanna and Isabella can only have their dilemmas resolved by men shows the Biblical and Shakespearean woman’s reality: not only does she face sexual harassment from men, but she must also rely on them exclusively to undo their chaos. Radel states, “In its general treatment of female characters, then,

*Measure for Measure* assumes that their sexuality is not their own to manipulate and explore” (112). Indeed, male characters, especially the Duke, ultimately determine the fate of Isabella and Mariana.

Harassment is the not the only sexual offence that occurs in *Measure for Measure*, of course. Duke Vicentio, continuing to act as a Machiavellian, convinces Marianna to participate in the bed-trick, telling her that she is committing a righteous act by deceiving Angelo when he states,

He is your husband on precontract;  
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,  
Sith that the just of your title to him  
Doth flourish the deceit. Come let us go.

Our corn's to reap, for yet our tithe's to sow. (MM 4.1.68-72)

Besides providing a convenient loophole for Isabella, Mariana, the jilted fiancé of Angelo, emerges as a victim of sexual exploitation. Although she is an eager participant in the Duke's conspiracy, Mariana is in fact being manipulated by Vicentio in order to achieve his desired goal: acquiring Isabella. Vicentio takes advantage of the fact that Mariana, left without a dowry and possessing a damaged reputation thanks to Angelo, is likely to have no other prospects for a husband (Kamps and Raber 203). In this context, Mariana appears vulnerable, and the Duke uses her as a pawn in his game of sexual chess.



Isabella's role in the exploitation of Mariana is a topic worthy of further scholarly attention. The prominent view among critics is that her involvement proves that she is self-serving and manipulative like Vicentio. Proponents of this perspective claim that she loses her credibility as a pious woman and victim, which, for this study's purposes, establishes her as a participant in *Measure for Measure's* complex web of sexual offences. According to Hillman, Isabella agrees to the bed-trick because she understands that "she can gain the upper hand without doing the 'dirty work' herself" (127). The problem with this viewpoint is that it fails to consider the possibility that the Duke is also manipulating Isabella into taking part in his sexual conspiracy. Readers should recall that Isabella is to become a nun, and Vicentio is dressed as a friar. Her respect for him as a representative of God must lead her to believe him when he says, "To the love I have in doing good a remedy presents itself" (MM 3.1.191-92). The Duke (or friar, as Isabella perceives him) continues, assuring her that "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof" (MM 3.1.235-36). Although Isabella ultimately participates in the sexual exploitation of Mariana, perhaps she is less deserving of scrutiny than Vicentio.

The Isabella/Mariana bed-trick, while perhaps laughable to modern readers, actually results in the most serious sexual offence in the play: the rape of Angelo. Expecting to engage in intercourse with Isabella, Angelo is deceived into unwanted sex with Mariana, as she reveals in Act V, Scene I when she states, "Why just, my lord, and that is Angelo / Who thinks he knows that he ne'er knew my body, / But knows he thinks that he knows Isabel's" (5.1.206-08). While this occurrence provides a resolution to the play and, quite possibly, humor for the reader, it should, in fact, be correctly identified as rape.

Although Angelo is largely unsympathetic to most readers, one cannot readily dismiss the seriousness of the sexual offence committed against him. Here, Angelo shifts from offender to victim. The violated Angelo is then forced to marry Mariana and, in the process, loses his own sexual autonomy to a degree.

With Angelo's offences sufficiently punished, the ultimate resolution to *Measure for Measure*, as with many of Shakespeare's comedies, is marriage, which as Radel points out, has been institutionalized to maintain social order and control (124). In the final act of the play, Vicentio also orders Lucio to marry Kate Keepdown, the prostitute with whom he fornicated. He also proposes to Isabella and pardons Claudio when he states, "If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake, / Give me your hand and say you will be mine" (MM 5.1.489-91). The Duke's solution to alleviate the victimization of Isabella and Mariana is marriage to the two men who are guilty of the sexual offences against them. Isabella is again placed in a compromising position. If she agrees to marry Vicentio, she must surrender her sexual autonomy. According to Radel, the Duke attempts to "control sexual license and women's sexual freedom by harnessing them to legal marriage" (123). If, however, Isabella refuses the Duke's offer, she could possibly face some degree of sanction. With Vicentio's record of sexual exploitation and Machiavellian manipulation, it is reasonable to assume that he might consider committing another sexual offence against Isabella.

The sexual offences occurring in *Measure for Measure* are also prevalent in *All's Well That Ends Well*. The latter play shares many similarities with the former, but it contrasts sharply by featuring a male character who faces sexual harassment. The victim in this

play is Bertram, an arrogant young nobleman who wishes to avoid a relationship with Helena, a beautiful, intelligent woman with common lineage. Bertram is victimized by the King of France, who abuses his authority by ordering Bertram to surrender his sexual autonomy by marrying Helena. The King states, "Why, then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife" (AWW 2.3.112). Of course, Bertram objects to marrying Helena, but he is ultimately forced to be with her. In this context, the King is guilty of an extreme form of sexual harassment. Being a cad, Bertram may be less sympathetic to the reader than Isabella and Mariana in *Measure for Measure*. However, the sexual offences committed against him are no less severe.

Sexual harassment is not the only sexual offence committed against Bertram, though. After he leaves Helena, preferring war to her companionship, he is deceived into intercourse with her. Shakespeare again employs the bed-trick plot device in *All's Well That Ends Well*. In Bertram's case, he believes he is meeting the beautiful Diana for an evening of carnal delight but is surprised later in the play to learn that he was actually with Helena, his jilted wife, who announces,

And look you, here's your letter; this it says:

'When from my finger you can get this ring

And are by me with child, &c. This is done:

Will you be mine, now you are doubly won? (AWW 5.3.312-15)

In this passage, Helena reveals the success of the sexual conspiracy: she has his ring and is pregnant with his child. Like Angelo, Bertram is the victim of rape committed by a woman. Both men are often perceived as scoundrels who may be reformed by the

institution of marriage. Under pressure from the king, Bertram is resigned to his fate when he says, "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (AWW 5.3.316-17).

*All's Well That Ends Well* was written just before *Measure for Measure*, so it holds the distinction of being the original Shakespearean play to feature the bed-switching gimmick. Comparing the two uses of this unlikely plot device, some might perceive Bertram as equally deserving of this victimization as Angelo. Further examination, however, reveals that while similar to each in other in some regards, their circumstances are not the same. The key difference is that Angelo wanted to be engaged to Mariana until she lost her dowry. Bertram never wanted to be with Helena, a fact made evident when he states, "I cannot love her, nor will I strive to do't" (AWW 2.3.152). Thus, Angelo is a miscreant who loses his sexually autonomy as punishment for his unethical behavior, but Bertram loses control of his sexuality for being arrogant. Through this comparison, it seems as though Shakespeare recognized the lack of justice with Bertram's punishment and later tried to make Angelo a much less sympathetic character. Regardless, the loss of sexual autonomy as punishment in both plays speaks volumes about the times in which Shakespeare wrote and lived. In addition, Shakespeare is again revealed as a visionary for approaching topics that would not emerge as material for scholarly discourse for another 400 years.

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