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Wendy Carpenter
College of DuPage

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The Power of Virginity: Isabella's Quest for Control

by Wendy Carpenter

(Honors English 228)

The Assignment: Choose a short scholarly article relating to the Shakespeare play or sonnet you chose, summarize the article's argument objectively and lucidly, then refute it with your own. Include documentation.

In Shakespeare's so called "tragicomedy" *Measure for Measure*, the protagonist, Isabella, has been the source of much debate among critics. She has been characterized as either wrong or right, selfish or virtuous. However, these simple labels miss the key point of Isabella's struggle—the struggle for power in her life and control over her own body. As critic Marcia Riefer suggests, "Over the centuries, Isabella has been labeled either "angel" or "vixen," as if a judgment of her moral nature were the only important statement to be made about her" (Riefer 131). The conflict in *Measure for Measure* is not whether Isabella's decision to remain a virgin is wrong or right; instead, her chastity demonstrates her attempt to exert power in a society in which women were often powerless. When Isabella is confronted with the choice of giving her body over to what she calls "abhorred pollution" or her having her brother executed, she opts to retain control by protecting herself first. She is neither wrong nor right; she is merely trying to "save her own skin," so to speak, from the oppressive forces that work in her society. Understanding this decision as anything else is to admit that Isabella is either angel or vixen, to which she is neither. Critic R.W. Chambers argues, "The honour of her family and her religion are more to her than mere life, her own or Claudio's" (109). This assumption would contend that Isabella always takes the moral high ground, but, in fact, the text shows that she often does what could be considered morally wrong while trying to exert power and control throughout her ordeal—ultimately proving that she is neither angel nor vixen, but merely human.

R.W. Chambers' assumptions are articulated in his essay "Isabella Approved" in which he begins by saying, "If we fail to see the nobility of Isabel, we cannot see the story as we should" (106). He contends that Isabella's instant decision to refuse Angelo's offer would be understood by Shakespearian audiences as a type of martyrdom. He says, "Christianity could have never 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" (107). He further argues this point by quoting biblical verses such as, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother,... and brethren and sisters,...he cannot be my disciple" (107). Chambers goes on to express amazement at critics' sympathetic responses to Claudio's plea for life when he says, "Sweet sister, let me live." Chambers then says, "And I am even more amazed at the dislike which the critics feel for the tortured Isabel" (108). As a result, he says, "Have the critics never seen a human soul or a human body in the extremity of torment?" (109). All along Chambers is extremely sympathetic towards Isabella's decision to choose chastity over her brother's life. The overriding theme of his essay presents only two viewpoints of Isabella; either she is "selfish and cold" or, as he supports, she is "noble," but he never deals with the idea that she could be a bit of both, making her human.

Although there are many scenes in which Isabella can be viewed as virtuous, there are also many that demonstrate a tendency toward self-preservation, or even selfishness. For instance, when she is confronted by Angelo's demand she says, "Better it were a brother died at once than a sister, by redeeming him, should die forever" (2.4.114). This line shows that she is more concerned with remaining in control of her own body than with her brother's life. In the scene when she tells Claudio of Angelo's demand and Claudio asks her to cooperate, Isabella says, "O you beast! O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!...Might but my bending down relieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed. I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death" (3.1.153). This strongly worded speech is unwarranted. Since Angelo's demand of Isabella is Claudio's only chance to live, Claudio must at least try to convince her. Another time in which Isabella shows her true colors is when she learns of Claudio's supposed death from the Duke as Friar and expresses her desire for revenge upon Angelo by wanting to "pluck out his eyes" (4.3.128). The last, and maybe most precarious, statement is when she is told of the Duke's plan to play the "bed trick" by switching Isabella's chastity for Mariana's. During this scene she says, "The image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous perfection" (3.2.286). These lines establish that Isabella is no angel.

Critic Madeleine Doran contrasts Chambers' essay by saying, "I think a careful reading of the play shows that Shakespeare meant to put the primary emphasis on the problem of the exercise of power, the problem he solves, and not on the problem of Isabella's chastity" (115). This makes perfect sense considering Isabella is just another pawn trying to remain in control while the Duke pulls the strings. Another interesting point is made by Marcia Riefer in her essay "'Instruments of Some More Mightier Member': The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*":

The prime victim of the Duke's flawed dramaturgy is, of course, Isabella, who, more than any of Shakespeare's heroines so far, is excluded from the 'privileges of comedy,' namely the privileges from which, Linda Bamber claims, it is Shakespeare's men who are typically excluded. Deprived of her potential for leadership, Isabella succumbs to the control of a man she has no choice but to obey—a man whose orders are highly questionable—and as a consequence her character is markedly diminished. (133)

This theory seems to explain Isabella's staunch conviction to remain chaste in light of her other actions and against the threat of her brother's death. Controlling her own body demonstrates the one thing she actually can control to a certain extent. This line of thought goes to show that Isabella is neither saint nor sinner, but simply struggling to maintain some semblance of self in the predicament to which she is trapped. She is trying not to become "markedly diminished."

The strides Isabella has taken to protect herself from the patriarchal society of her day are apparent when the reader first encounters her speaking to a sworn Nun of the Saint Clares. Their conversation is revealing and the reader learns the restrictions placed upon the vowed nuns in this particular cloister. For example, the vowed nuns are not allowed to speak to men except under very specific circumstances. The Saint Clare Nun says to Isabella, "When you have vowed, you must not speak to men" (1.4.11). Isabella's words also serve to show her determination to separate from society. After learning the "privileges" of the sisterhood, Isabella tells the nun that she was, "...wishing a more strict restraint" (1.4.4). One can conclude from

these lines that Isabella has made a decision to withdraw from the company of men. Marcia Riefer elaborates on this concept:

For Isabella, in light of the Vienna facing her, sexuality and self-esteem are mutually exclusive options. She has made her choice before she ever sets foot on stage. A woman in her position would not make such a decision without difficulty, even resentment. Isabella realizes that her 'prosperous art,' her ability to 'play with reason and discourse' (1.2.184-185), would be wasted in the city. (136-137)

Exactly why Isabella has made this choice is unknown, but one can assume that she has good reason and that experience has lead her to this point in her life. Isabella's decision and words represent her humanity and frailty.

The one thing Isabella has control over, her virginity, is eclipsed by the absolute control that the Duke has over her actions. One must question Isabella's virtuousness when she is completely willing to be an accomplice in the Duke's twisted plot. Upon learning of her brother's death from the Duke as Friar, Isabella is rightly upset and, then, wishes vengeance upon Angelo. The Duke insists that Isabella "...pace your wisdom in that good path that I wish it go...And you shall have...revenges of your heart" (4.3.143-147). Isabella promptly replies, "I am directed by you" (4.3.149). In the next scene, Isabella and Mariana converse about their role in accusing Angelo of misdeeds. Again, Isabella concedes her better judgment to the Duke. She says, "To speak so indirectly I am loath. I would say the truth, but to accuse him so that is your part; yet I am advised to do it, he says, to veil full purpose" (4.6.1-4). Admittedly, Isabella is trying to reconcile her own deception by justifying it as advice from the Friar. Marcia Riefer agrees that the Duke negates Isabella's strong-willed character. Riefer explains:

Whatever autonomy Isabella possessed in the beginning of the play, whatever 'truth of spirit' she abided by, disintegrates once she agrees to serve in the Duke's plan. As soon as this 'friar' takes over, Isabella becomes an actress whose words are no longer her own. (140)

Isabella's willingness to go along with the Duke's plan can be seen as a selfish device, but, under the circumstances, this action should also be recognized as self-preservation. She is neither wrong nor right, but just trying to survive her ordeal. Although the plan is flawed, what other options are available to Isabella?

Again the question arises: Is Isabella's decision right, wrong or somewhere in between? Critics have historically viewed her as angel or vixen and R.W. Chambers notes her decision as "noble." However, the play provides many examples of questionable ethics in Isabella's behavior. Madeleine Doran points out that *Measure for Measure* is primarily about the "exercise of power" not, necessarily, morality (115). The play also gives an exposition into Isabella's attempts to protect herself from the world through joining a convent—showing her humanity and frailty. As a result, the Duke is able to control her actions and negate her strength of character. What can be surmised of Isabella is that she is only human. She is not perfect or imperfect, but merely trying to survive the situation she has been plunged into. Her actions are akin to justifiable homicide or self-defense. The real genius of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is that Isabella is faced with a lose/lose situation and the audience is left to interpret for themselves

if she has made a wise decision. Thus, Isabella's overall struggle for power may be the main conflict element of the play, but her decision to remain chaste runs a close second. In the end, Isabella's "Catch 22" highlights the critical issue of women's rights in a time when there were none. Marcia Riefer confers:

But regardless of the playwright's intention, *Measure for Measure*, more than any of his previous plays, exposes the dehumanizing effect on women of living in a world dominated by powerful men who would like to re-create womanhood according to their fantasies. (144)

Works Cited

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