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# Isabella's Sanctity and Sexuality in *Measure for Measure*: Historical and Textual Approaches

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## 1. Introduction

The conflict between sanctity and sexuality, which is a major theme in *Measure for Measure*, is primarily represented in two of the main characters, Isabella and Angelo; we can consider them to be mirror-characters of a kind, sharing common dispositions. In this paper, however, I shall concentrate on the female member of the pair, Isabella, and study her sanctity and sexuality.

Isabella's characterization has been a major topic among critics, who have assessed her both positively and negatively. She is presented as a saintly figure in the play, but her zeal for Christianity is too extreme, so that in her dealings with other human beings she is also seen as severe and cold. It is not necessary, however, either to praise her flawless chastity or to criticize her as being too strict in pursuit of it: We should rather consider the reason why her saintly aspect entails severity towards herself as well as others. Moreover, although she is presented as a saintly figure, some critics notice that there is a sexual atmosphere

around her. J. W. Lever, for example, admitting her “aspirations to celibacy and sanctity” on the one hand, also recognizes sexual elements in her remarks, such as ‘I had rather give my body than my soul.’<sup>1</sup> But what Lever manifests is that sanctity and sexuality coexist in Isabella, and he does not inquire in what way or why. If you see this speech of Isabella’s in its context, her purport is to show her unwillingness to give up her virginity, and, accordingly, her saintliness seems to be invulnerable. It is, therefore, necessary to consider how Isabella is portrayed as a flawless saintly figure on the one hand, while she is given a sexual dimension at the same time; and we must suggest its reason as well. This is nothing but to ask what kind of figure Shakespeare intends to depict when embodying Isabella, and to this question Frye’s observation seems to offer a helpful clue:

If I were casting Isabella, I’d want an actress who could suggest an attractive, intelligent, strongly opinionated girl of about seventeen or eighteen, who is practically drunk on the notion of becoming a nun, but who’s really possessed by adolescent introversion rather than spiritual vocation.<sup>2</sup>

Strictly speaking, Frye is talking about the casting of Isabella, and this is not a direct description of her dispositions, but the features he mentions must have been derived from the text of *Measure for Measure* and, therefore, are in some sense convincing.

In this paper, I shall discuss Isabella’s two apparently incompatible features, sanctity and sexuality, from historical and textual points of view. To look at Isabella’s situation against historical backgrounds, especially how dowries functioned to preserve the family lineage in the period of the setting of the play, will reveal the inevitable circumstances that force her to enter a convent. This may help to explain the severity and coldness of Isabella’s, and may give rise to some doubts about her

perfect saintliness. In the next section I shall examine, from a textual point of view, how the two incompatible features, sanctity and sexuality, are presented all at once in a single character. That will explain by what means Shakespeare intends to depict the figure of Isabella as a whole human being.

## 2. The Dowry System in *Measure for Measure*: A Historical Approach

In *Measure for Measure* there are many references to dowries, as these affect the fates of three major couples, Claudio-Julietta, Angelo-Mariana, and the Duke-Isabella. At the opening of the play we learn that Claudio has made Julietta pregnant while he has been waiting for the “propagation of a dower / Remaining in the coffer of her friends” (1. 2. 139-40). In the middle of the play, in order to rescue Isabella from the possible loss of her virginity, the playwright had to invent Mariana whose marriage contract was breached because “her brother Frederick was wracked at sea, having in that perished vessel the dowry of his sister” (3. 1. 216-8). Towards the end, when Angelo receives sentence to death, the Duke advises Mariana to marry again and says “For his [Angelo's] possessions, / Although by confiscation they are ours, / We do instate and widow you with all, / To buy you a better husband” (5. 1. 420-23). When the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella at the denouement of the play, he refers to his own monetary assets, saying, “if you'll a willing ear incline, / What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine” (5. 1. 533-34). Although in the last case what is referred to is not a dowry, but a jointure, in the strict sense, both are the prenuptial agreements between the two involved parties and, therefore, must be treated together. This dowry system might to modern eyes seem to be an unpleasant mercenary custom, but it was quite natural to Shakespeare's contemporaries, whose sense of values

was different from ours, and we must restore their ways of looking at things. Ann Jennalie Cook says, “the constant references to dowries, portions, jointures, and dowers give ample evidence that Shakespeare’s plays recognize the financial basis on which marriages rested,” and she reproaches the modern critics’ lack of understanding of this aspect.<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Stone might have the same opinion on this point, when, speaking of *Romeo and Juliet*, which is usually seen as a tragedy of “a pair of star-crossed lovers,” he points out that to an Elizabethan audience, the cause of their destruction was partly themselves, for they violated “the norms of the society in which they lived, which . . . meant strict filial obedience and loyalty to the traditional friendships and enemies of the lineage.”<sup>4</sup> In *Measure for Measure*, too, the dowry system affects the development of the plot as we have seen, and a consideration of the dowry system seems necessary for an adequate interpretation of the play.

Stone explains the dowry system in relation to family lineage and moral premises in his *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. According to Stone, the three objectives of family planning amongst the landed classes in pre-Reformation England were “the continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances.”<sup>5</sup> The first was possible just by industrious procreation, the second by primogeniture, and the third by the dowry system. Stone explains that this dowry system governed the structure of the English family at all levels of the propertied classes from the sixteenth century on through the nineteenth century:

In England, brides who were not landed heiresses were unable, because of primogeniture, to provide landed property, but were expected instead to bring with them as a dowry a substantial cash sum, called a ‘portion.’ . . . In return, the father of the

groom guaranteed the bride an annuity, called a 'jointure', if she survived her husband as a widow.<sup>6</sup>

But this system directly clashed with the second objective of the family plan. Patrimony through primogeniture was meant to deter younger sons and daughters from marriage, or to debar them from marrying altogether. Stone explains:

If the second objective were given priority, as it often was, it meant the sacrifice of daughters by putting them into nunneries, and the extrusion of younger sons to fend for themselves as military adventurers or clergy or otherwise. The ideal of virginity so valued by the Catholic Church provided the theological and moral justification for the existence of nunneries, which contained considerable numbers of upper-class girls placed there by their fathers in order to get rid of them.<sup>7</sup>

Another factor which had strong influence over marriage was that of kin relationships. Stone explains that the higher the social rank, the higher the degree to which the kin interacted with the family, and explains why:

The reason for this is the preoccupation with the preservation, increase and transmission through inheritance and marriage of the property and status of the lineage, of the generations of ancestors stretching back into the remote past. The larger the property and status, and the more ancient the family on its ancestral acres, the more intense was the preoccupation with the lineage, and thus the greater the participation of the kin in the formation and daily life of the conjugal family.<sup>8</sup>

This zeal to preserve the family lineage interacted with those moral premises which concerned marriage and the individual. Stone's analysis makes manifest that it is necessary to rid ourselves of three modern Western culture-bound preconceptions and the first of these is:

... that there is a clear dichotomy between marriage for interest, meaning money, status or power, and marriage for affect, meaning love, friendship or sexual attraction; and that the first is morally reprehensible. In practice in the sixteenth century, no such distinction existed; and if it did, affect was of secondary importance to interest, while romantic love and lust were strongly condemned as ephemeral and irrational grounds for marriage.<sup>9</sup>

Marriage was not so much a matter of importance for the individuals as for their families and relatives, with their paramount interest in property, status, and social power.

Given this historical background, we can think of the matrimonial situation in which Claudio and Julietta were placed as this involved Isabella. The first and foremost premise is that both Claudio and Julietta are of gentle family.<sup>10</sup> Escalus, who tries to persuade Angelo to save Claudio, speaks about his father:

Alas, this gentleman,

Whom I would save, had a most noble father. (2. 1. 6-7)

This speech implies that the social status of Claudio's family lineage was quite high. Because the dowry system functions only amongst the landed class, the fact that both of them are of gentle family is the essential premise.

What, then, was the matrimonial situation of Claudio and Julietta? Claudio himself explains his case to Lucio:

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract

I got possession of Julietta's bed.

You know the lady; she is fast my wife,

Save that we do the denunciation lack

Of outward order. This we came not to

Only for propagation of a dower

Remaining in the coffer of her friends,  
From whom we thought it meet to hide our love  
Till time had made them for us. But it chances  
The stealth of our most mutual entertainment  
With character too gross is writ on Juliet. (1. 2. 134-44)

Many background facts relating to Claudio's and Julietta's situation can be deduced from this speech. First, Claudio's plea that they married "upon a true contract," and that Julietta is fast his wife, could be admissible, because this contract is considered to be the contract of *sponsalia de praesenti*, which is effective on the spot.<sup>11</sup> From Escalus' speech above, it is inferred that Claudio's father is dead, and the fact that Julietta's parents are also dead can be deduced from the circumstance that her relatives ("her friends") look after her dowry.<sup>12</sup> Because usually the custodian of the obtained dowry was not the bridegroom, but his father, who controls his family assets, the fact that Claudio's father is dead now means that he would have received the dowry directly.<sup>13</sup> Claudio and Julietta decided to hide their marriage until time sided with them and Julietta's relatives, who had a control over her dowry, came to agree with their marriage. Furthermore even Isabella did not know of their marriage (1. 4. 40-49), and these concealments mean that Claudio had been devising a careful scheme in order to receive the most substantial dowry possible. (Moreover, to Julietta the large amount of the dowry might have guaranteed the dower after Claudio's death.) All those factors might give the impression that Claudio is a mercenary and avaricious person. Although Lever interprets that the word, "propagation" as simply meaning "breeding," or "actualizing of what was potential," and exclude the meaning, "to increase," Bawcutt, though tentatively, suggests the possibility that it may mean "increase or enlargement," and the latter interpretation might encourage the impression that Claudio is merce-

nary.<sup>14</sup> But Claudio is of gentle family, and not only to preserve the inherited property intact but also to increase it is his responsibility to his family lineage, and, at the same time, it will be expected of him by his relatives.

These monetary and matrimonial circumstances of Claudio and Julietta affect Isabella greatly. Although she is presented as a flawless saintly figure and is entering into a convent voluntarily, her situation raises some doubts about her saintly characteristics. According to Stone, as I have discussed above, in a property-owning family the male eldest son would usually be the heir and younger sons and daughters would be debarred from marriage, while the father decided to put his daughters into nunnery, to follow the ideal of virginity. In such a situation, a father, who had a control over the family property, had a decisive power over the marriage of his children and would map out their future courses. Isabella's father, however, is now dead, and she seems to have evaded her father's order to enter into a nunnery. In practice, however, the situation is almost the same, and in Isabella's case preservation of the family lineage has priority over the happiness of an individual: That is, Isabella is in a situation whereby she has to go into a nunnery, or at least that is the most desirable choice. The textual assertion that she is entering the convent voluntarily and that she seeks for a saintly religious life as an ideal might be but an excuse, in her own situation, to persuade herself to take such a course.

Isabella's situation has a connection with the final scene, in which the Duke makes a proposal of marriage to her. He says:

Dear Isabel,

I have a motion much imports your good;

Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,

What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine. (5. 1. 531-34)

To accept the Duke's marriage proposal is one possible solution to Isabella's situation as it concerns monetary issues and family property, because that will free Isabella from the necessity of entering the convent. To his proposal, however, Isabella gives no answer. Although Cook admits the openness of the ending, she offers a tentative answer:

He [the Duke] has shed his guise as trickster-friar, and if she sheds hers as overstrict nun, they may both become responsible citizens in Vienna, observing the laws, setting a moral example, embracing legal marriage, and producing legitimate children — precisely what is demanded of the other couples.<sup>15</sup>

This interpretation does not contradict the idea that this play is a comedy, with its progression from disorder to order, ending with the marriages of several couples.<sup>16</sup> But this comedic interpretation is only possible when the play is considered under its monetary aspect. It is an unchangeable fact that Isabella does not give an answer to the Duke's marriage proposal, and the fact must be accepted. I shall return to this question concerning the ending of the play in the conclusion to this essay.

In this section I have considered Isabella's supposed saintliness from a historical point of view. Examination of the dowry system and moral premises of the time has revealed that the matrimonial situation in which Claudio and Julietta find themselves has considerable influence on Isabella's fortune: I suggested the possibility that circumstances might have forced Isabella to enter a convent, or at least that it would have been a desirable choice to preserve the family property and lineage of her family. That gives rise to a doubt as to whether Isabella was entering a convent voluntarily and at the same time raises questions about her sanctity.

It is important in this respect that Isabella is still only a novice in a convent. She has not yet sworn her full vows to be a votarist of Saint

Clare, and Lever says that this is “a point of importance in connection with the ending of the play,” that is, the Duke is not debarred from proposing to her.<sup>17</sup> But her uncertain state as a novice is still the more important when we consider her sanctity and sexuality in the next section. When the provost introduces Isabella to Angelo, he speaks of Isabella as “a very virtuous maid; / And *to be shortly of a sisterhood, / If not already.*” (italics mine, 2. 2. 20-22) This is the scene in which Angelo and Isabella meet for the first time, and Angelo is immediately attracted to her sexually. Her uncertain state as a novice seems to give room to suppositions of sanctity, on the one hand, while not denying her sexuality, on the other, which attracts Angelo.

### 3. Coexistence of Sanctity and Sexuality: A Textual Approach

In the previous section, by considering from the dowry system of the time, I have discussed a possibility that Isabella's entering a convent was perhaps inevitable, thus raising some doubt about her perfect sanctity. In this section I shall discuss how the two contradicting elements, sanctity and sexuality, are presented in and regarding Isabella from a *textual* point of view. This will reveal what kind of figure Shakespeare intends to depict in his portrayal of Isabella.

At the beginning of the play, when Lucio first meets Isabella, who is at the moment of entering a convent, Lucio says:

I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted  
By your renouncement, and immortal spirit,  
And to be talk'd with in sincerity,  
As with a saint. (1. 4. 34-37)

At a first glance, Lucio recognizes a saintly aspect in Isabella. From this point on, Isabella embodies her saintly aspect in the action of the play,

which she claims for herself, and is, as such, accepted by the people who surround her.

There is, however, a contradictory element to her saintly aspect expressed in one of Claudio's speeches early in the play. When he is arrested and is being drawn along to appear before the deputy, he begs Lucio to be a messenger to Isabella, explaining her persuasive power:

Acquaint her with the danger of my state:  
Implore her, in my voice, that she make friends  
To the strict deputy: bid herself assay him.  
I have great hope in that. For in her youth  
There is a prone and speechless dialect  
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art  
When she will play with reason and discourse,  
And well she can persuade. (1. 2. 169-76)

The apparent purport of this speech is that Claudio wants his sister Isabella to plead with Angelo to spare his life, and that his sister's persuasive power is very great even when she is dumb, yet much more when she speaks; but it is an accepted idea that words in this speech bear sexual connotations. Lever shows that the words "prone," "move," and "play," have equivocal meanings, which may suggest Isabella's (unconscious) sexual provocativeness.<sup>18</sup> Bawcutt, though he does not read a sexual nuance in "prone," also admits Isabella's sexual appeal to men. He explains the meaning of the word "assay" as "attack with words," but he points out that it can also mean "make amorous advances to," and says, "in the next few lines it is hard to tell how far Claudio, consciously or unconsciously, wants Isabella to exploit her sexuality in dealing with Angelo."<sup>19</sup> Claudio's speech may, therefore, imply that he wants Isabella to exploit her sexual persuasiveness in order to save his life; yet at this point it is significant that, if this is Claudio's intention, he does not speak

of Isabella's sexuality on the literal level, and that the sexual meaning is superimposed at the level of lexical connotations: This means that, in order to demonstrate Claudio's unawareness, the poet employs this technique of sending different messages on different levels by using a word's equivocal connotations. Isabella has a tremendous power to provoke sexual feelings, but this is outside Claudio's understanding, or is only perceived by him subconsciously at least.<sup>20</sup>

This would seem to connect closely with Isabella's unconsciousness of her own sexuality, who aspires for a perfect saintly life. When, later, Lucio is attempting to persuade Isabella to go to Angelo in order to plead for Claudio's life, she doubts if she has such a power:

*Isab.* Alas, what poor ability's in me  
To do him good!

*Lucio.* Assay the power you have.

*Isab.* My power? Alas, I doubt. (1. 4. 75-77)

In this speech, too, the overt meaning does not include any notion of Isabella's sexuality, but her power to provoke sexual feeling is implied through connotations given us by the context of the Claudio's earlier speech. And this also signifies Isabella's unconsciousness about her own sexuality and sexual power.

Isabella's persuasive power and sexually attractive power is to be tested in the first meeting scene of Isabella and Angelo, that is 2. 2. In this scene Isabella tries to persuade Angelo, by constant and consistent argumentation following the Christian doctrine, and there is neither reference to nor any implication of sexually-stimulating elements in Isabella's performance.<sup>21</sup> In this scene, Lucio's intermittent asides indicate the process by which Angelo becomes gradually attracted by Isabella in the course of the action, but there is no hint as to what moves Angelo at all. Therefore Angelo's aside, which is considered to be vomited from

his heart and seems trustworthy, is significant in this respect:

She speaks, and 'tis such sense

That my sense breeds with it. (2. 2. 142-43)

The meanings of "sense," 1) import or rationality and 2) sensuality, affect both uses of the word, and Lever explains the irony of this ambiguous usage of the word as, "her coldness, even her rationality, is what has excited him."<sup>22</sup> Isabella's argument following the Christian doctrine is utterly rational, but Angelo also feels something sensual there, and that excites his sensuality. It could, therefore, be deduced that Angelo feels sensuality in her religious argument, and his dismay that the two contradicting features provoke him against his will is expressed succinctly in the ambiguous and equivocal use of the word "sense."

This view is supported by Angelo's subsequent soliloquy. Soon after this meeting, when all are gone and Angelo is left alone, he says:

What's this? What's this? Is this her fault, or mine?

The tempter, or the tempted, who sins most, ha?

Not she; nor doth she tempt; but it is I

That, lying by the violet in the sun,

Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,

Corrupt with virtuous season. Can it be

That modesty may more betray our sense

Than woman's lightness? Having waste ground enough,

Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary

And pitch our evils there? (2. 2. 163-72)

It is clear that Angelo is aware that Isabella has no intention to tempt him, and that he rather thinks of Isabella as a chaste and virtuous maid. The images of a fragrant violet in the bright sunlight (Isabella), and a putrefying dead body in the same sunlight (Angelo), are intense. "Violet," which symbolizes "chastity and true virtue," and "carrion," which

implies “the fleshly nature of man,” are put side by side and ruled together by the sun.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore the pleasing fragrance of the violet and the sickeningly bad smell of the putrefying dead body, both of which are intensified by the self same sunlight, are also paralleled. The putrefying dead body, together with its bad smell, signifies Angelo’s disgust at his own situation. Much more sharp and shocking is the sentence, “Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?”. Scholars have argued over the interpretation of “evils” in this sentence. According to *OED* sb2, Lever, and Schmidt, “evil” is an obsolete word, meaning “a privy,” having no other usage of this meaning except in *Henry VIII*, 2. 1. 67.<sup>24</sup> Onions glosses the word as “offensive building or structure; (hence) brothel.”<sup>25</sup> By either interpretation of the word, the surface meaning of the sentence would be “to destroy a holy building and to erect a building which satisfies sexual desire or bodily needs instead.” But “evils” could obviously mean “something wicked or harmful,” and it would be possible to infer “phallus” in this sexual context. Then “pitch our evils there [the sanctuary]” could also be interpreted as “thrust or erect a phallus into a woman’s body, the sacred body of Isabella’s.” This direct image of a phallus also includes Angelo’s sexual violence. Seen grammatically, interrogative forms of a sentence are conspicuous in this passage. These signify Angelo’s dismay and helplessness, overwhelmed by Isabella’s unconscious power to provoke him. He has been quite sure that he was invulnerable to sexual allure, and he resists the attraction with all his might but cannot help the inner growth of sexual desire. These images altogether show the characteristics of Isabella’s sanctity and sexuality: Isabella, who has decided to live a pure Christian life, emanates sexual attraction unconsciously, and Angelo ironically recognizes a sexual aspect in Isabella’s sanctity as an irresistible power.

So far I have argued that, though Isabella exhibits sexually pro-

vocative power, she is not conscious of it at all. During the next meeting between Isabella and Angelo (2. 4), however, she is shown to be increasingly aware of her own sexual aspect, and the conflict between sanctity and sexuality is manifested in a dynamic form. Throughout the scene Angelo makes advances to Isabella, urging her to accept his demand through many different ways of speaking, but the purport of his speech is almost one and the same, that is, "to save your brother's life, how about sleeping with me?" This intention is expressed indirectly at first, but becomes more direct and obvious in the course of the scene. This process is closely connected with Isabella's gradual understanding of her own sexuality and her sexual power.

Early in the scene, Isabella is still unconscious of her own sexual power, and she is not able to understand Angelo's intention:

*Ang.* Then I shall pose you quickly.

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 stain'd?

*Isab.* Sir, believe this:

I had rather give my body than my soul.

*Ang.* I talk not of your soul: our compell'd sins

Stand more for number than for accompt. (2. 4. 51-58)

In this passage there can be seen a discrepancy between the intentions of the two protagonists. Bawcutt glosses "uncleanness" as "moral impurity, especially sexual," and explains that the term "was much used by severer Elizabethan moralists;" it is clear that Angelo means Isabella's sexual surrender to him in "Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness / As she that he hath stain'd."<sup>26</sup> But Isabella's answer to his question shows that she still does not catch this sexual meaning at all.

All she grasps is “give up your body;” and all the other parts of his message drop from her perception. She even misinterprets the meaning of these words and, therefore, when she says, “I had rather give my body than my soul,” sexual surrender to Angelo is never in her mind. Furthermore, this expression indicates nothing practical: It is just an abstract idea, and this shows that she herself does not quite grasp the actual meaning of her own expression: She simply thinks that her spirit is much more important than her flesh. On the other hand, Angelo seems to keep to the line of his argument, and means, “even if you give me your body sexually, this will never do harm to your soul, because if you are compelled, your act is not recognized as a sin at all.” In this way it is possible to interpret the passage on two levels of understanding at the same time of Isabella’s and of Angelo’s. The difference in their understandings of sexuality gives rise to the text construction which includes two layers of intentions, that is, Isabella’s and Angelo’s, which results from their mutual misapprehension. There is, as well, one more superior level of interpretation in this passage: That is, the playwright—the reader/the playwright—the audience level of interpretation, which will include the texts of the two protagonists. Because Angelo has already been attracted sexually by Isabella, and that Isabella is not aware of her own sexual attractiveness, it is possible for the audience/the reader to recognize the perceptions of the two protagonists at once and thus to give their words a deeper significance. What we recognize is the conflict between sanctity and sexuality, where it is most conspicuous, in Isabella’s line, “I had rather give my body than my soul”: In this line she intends sanctity and ironically exhibits sexuality without being aware of it.

This discrepancy between the protagonists’ intentions is maintained in the following passage, but with much more clarity:

*Ang.*            Answer to this:

I — now the voice of the recorded law —  
Pronounce a sentence on your brother's life:  
Might there not be a charity in sin  
To save this brother's life?

*Isab.* Please you to do't,  
I'll take it as a peril to my soul;  
It is no sin at all, but charity.

*Ang.* Pleas'd you to do't, at peril of your soul,  
Were equal poise of sin and charity.

*Isab.* That I do beg his life, if it be sin,  
Heaven let me bear it; you granting of my suit,  
If that be sin, I'll make it my morn prayer  
To have it added to the faults of mine,  
And nothing of your answer. (2. 4. 60-73)

Angelo's first speech here shows the same intention as before though with a different expression, as he tries to seduce Isabella into giving up her virginity. But what is overtly expressed is the possibility of saving Claudio's life, while the giving up of her virginity in return is not expressed overtly but implied indirectly in the word "sin." In "a charity in sin," Angelo means that to save Claudio's life is a charity, but in doing so he must commit a sin, that is, he will violate Isabella. Isabella's reply shows, however, that she interprets his remark in a different way. Though Angelo conveys the meaning of a seduction in "sin," she responds, "Please you to do't" showing gratitude and willingness in her polite usage of the words. She interprets the meaning of Angelo's "a charity in sin" just as "to save her brother's life." She thinks that Claudio's offense is not forgivable, and it might be a sinful act if Angelo forgives that offense, but if it were forgiven it would be a charity. Angelo's response shows that he interprets this speech of Isabella's in line with his own way of

thinking, that is, the “it” in the speech of Isabella, which means to violate Isabella, to save Claudio’s life (charity/virtue) and to violate Isabella (sin/vice) is a well balanced ambiguity. Isabella also continues to follow her own way of thinking, and this time she states clearly what she means by “sin,” that is, “That I beg his life” and “you granting of my suit.” In this way, the discrepancy between their interpretations of “sin” and “charity” produces the two layers of meaning in the texts, Isabella’s and Angelo’s. Both texts can be read without contradiction according to each speaker’s own lines of perception, with both people understanding each other’s speech according to their own interpretations.

At this point Angelo realizes that their communication is not proceeding properly, because of the discrepancy of their intentions: They are speaking “at cross purposes:”

*Ang.* Your sense pursues not mine: either you are ignorant,  
Or seem so, crafty; and that’s not good.

*Isab.* Let me be ignorant, and in nothing good,  
But graciously to know I am no better. (2. 4. 74-77)

The “sense” of the first line of Angelo’s speech is ambiguous, as is in 2. 2. 142-43, and its equivocality produces the two layers of meaning in “Your sense pursues not mine,” as Bawcutt explains, “Angelo intends this to mean ‘your argument does not follow logically from mine’, hence ‘you misunderstand me’, but in view of 2.2.144 (in Lever’s text 142-43) there is an inevitable undertone of ‘your sensual desire is not responding to mine.’”<sup>27</sup> Angelo doubts whether Isabella is really ignorant or pretends to be so cunningly. Here Isabella’s answer is significant when we consider her stage of coming to terms with the sexuality of Angelo’s words. She has no intention of deceiving Angelo, but more than that her strong desire to be ignorant of the sexual matters can here be figured out. Moreover the next sentence shows that she believes her resistance as an adult

woman is a divine grace.

At this point Angelo's words are becoming more and more gross and Isabella is gradually becoming aware of his intent:

*Ang.* 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 desir'd of such a person  
Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,  
Could fetch your brother from the manacles  
Of the all-binding law; and that there were  
No earthly mean to save him, but that either  
You must lay down the treasures of your body  
To this suppos'd, or else to let him suffer:  
What would you do?

*Isab.* As much for my poor brother as myself;  
That is, were I under the terms of death,  
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,  
And strip myself to death as to a bed  
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield  
My body up to shame. (2. 4. 88-104)

Though Angelo's words here become more direct than ever, they still include some unobvious expressions. He does not specify *who* wants to sleep with Isabella, by using such expression as "such a person / Whose credit with the judge, or own great place," and moreover he pretends that this may be a hypothetical case, by saying "this suppose'd" meaning "this hypothetical person." And to imply the surrendering of her virginity he uses a metaphorical expression, "lay down the treasures of your body." In spite of this indirect presentation, Isabella at last seems to understand Angelo's intention, as is suggested by her own words "ere I'd yield / My

body up to shame.” But her answer here seems difficult to interpret because of the shortage of her own words of explanation, and it has always been a controversial passage. In this speech Isabella thinks of Claudio’s offense as if she were in his place, and as if like Claudio she had committed an offense of sexual intercourse outside marriage. Therefore lines from “were I under the terms of death” to “That longing have been sick for” must be understood with the change of places between Claudio and Isabella. If, like Claudio, she had received a death sentence because of the offense of a prenuptial sexual relationship, she would willingly receive the punishment which the offense deserves, that is the punishment of a harlot.<sup>28</sup> But at the last part of this speech “ere I’d yield / My body up to shame” she goes back to her own actual situation, and rejects Angelo’s plea that she give up her virginity. Therefore Bawcutt’s explanation “Isabella is perhaps thinking of women saints who endured painful martyrdom rather than lose their virginity” is misleading in neglecting the hypothesis of the change of places between Claudio and Isabella.<sup>29</sup> Lever, who admits sexual meaning here, says, “the image is more obviously suited to . . . Claudio than to the chaste Isabella.”<sup>30</sup> He may be right, but there is a possibility that Isabella, who begins to understand Angelo’s intention and sexual affairs between a man and a woman, says of the sexual “bed” as something longed for, though principally she recognizes it as a detestable thing.

Nonetheless the process by which Isabella grows up into a mature woman does not go smoothly, and the same inducement by Angelo and the same resistance by Isabella as in 2. 4. 74-77 is seen in the following passage:

*Ang.* . . . let me be bold.

I do arrest your words. Be that you are,

That is, a woman; if you be more, you’re none.

If you be one — as you are well express'd  
By all external warrants — show it now,  
By putting on the destin'd livery.

*Isab.* I have no tongue but one; gentle my lord,

Let me entreat you speak the former language. (2. 4. 132-39)

The discrepancy between appearance and reality seen in Isabella is manifested in Angelo's speech. Here, to be a woman sexually and to be a nun are paralleled, compared, and contrasted. Angelo demands that Isabella be a woman, and claims that it is her true nature as a woman to join with a man in sexual congress, and that it is her destiny. The contrary aspect of a nun is implied in a pun "you're none/nun," and supported further by the usage of "livery."<sup>31</sup> The word "livery" collocates much more with "nun" than "woman," and by this interlocation of words he suggests that a nun's livery is less her destined one than are her woman's robes. Angelo, who is knocked out by her sexually provoking power, knows that Isabella's novitiate as a nun is just an appearance. Isabella's speech, however, shows her resistance to the acknowledging of her own sexuality, as I have discussed it in the passage regarding 2. 4. 74-77. Here Isabella's cry that she does not want to be a mature woman, still standing as she does on the border of adolescence and maturity, can be heard: For her "the former language," which belongs to an innocent life, is still more comfortable, and the language spoken now by Angelo sounds harsh to her ear.

So far I have argued that in act two scene four Angelo's seducing speeches follow the development from indirect expression to more a clear and obvious one, and alongside this process goes Isabella's gradual beginning to understand her own sexuality. Her lack of understanding at the beginning of the scene is presented by the two-layered text construction which is valid on Isabella's level of understanding and on that of

Angelo. As Angelo's speech becomes more direct, she gradually begins to understand his intention, but on the rim of adolescence into maturity, she has a fear of becoming a mature woman.

In this section, I have argued the conflict of sanctity and sexuality as it is seen in Isabella and in responses to her from a textual point of view. First I have dealt with Claudio's speech, in which Isabella's sexually provoking power is expressed on a connotation level (1. 2.), then Angelo's aside and soliloquy, in which he felt the sexuality in her sanctity against his will (2. 2.), and Isabella's response to Angelo's seduction (2. 4.). In every case Isabella is trying to follow the Christian doctrine rigidly and stubbornly on the level of her intention. However, some aspects of sexuality are superimposed on her by making explicit the connotations and by making the two-layered text operate outside the bounds of her intention. Moreover, Angelo is strongly attracted by her sexually, and he forces her to face the possibility of a sexual relationship persistently and violently. This response of Angelo's also reinforces our sense of Isabella's power of provoking sexual feelings.

#### 4. Conclusion: Isabella as a Whole Human Being

In section two I have deduced that there might be the possibility that inevitable circumstance had forced Isabella to enter a convent, or at least that it is a desirable choice for the preservation of her family lineage, by considering from the dowry system, a matter-of-course for Shakespeare's contemporary audience. According to the actual conditions of the play, however, Isabella is entering a convent of Saint Clare voluntarily, and is trying to follow Christian doctrine rigidly. This posture of Isabella's seems to be nothing but an excuse, in order to persuade herself that she is not a sacrifice to the preservation of her

family lineage; she aspires to a perfect saintly life stubbornly and coldly, though she may not be conscious of this aspect of her behaviour as an excuse or self-persuasion. This reversed motivation seems to me to be one of the causes of her coldness and abstinence in her saintly guise.<sup>32</sup>

At the outset of the play she has been seeking the ideal of a sacred Christian life, but she must face the realities of life in the course of the action of the play. One of these is the meeting with Angelo. As I have argued in section three from a textual point of view, Isabella is at first unconscious of her own sexuality, and is forced to notice this aspect in herself by Angelo's persistent efforts to seduce her. But this sexual aspect of herself is still a detestable and disgusting thing for her and she wants to remain rooted in an innocent and immature life. But after this scene she is forced to consider what it is to live and what it is to love, by facing such people as Claudio, who speaks of the fear of death (3. 1. 115-131), and as Mariana, who continues to love Angelo in spite of many rebuffs. And after these confrontations with the human realities she becomes the focus of the final lines of the play, where she is offered a proposal of marriage by the Duke. As I have mentioned, she does not give him a decisive answer: Isabella, standing at the threshold of maturity, cannot give a yes or no answer.

*Measure for Measure* depicts the process by which Isabella, an adolescent girl deeply soaked in Christian beliefs, grows into a mature woman. And this process in Isabella is symbolically figured out in the conflict between her sanctity and her sexuality.

## Notes

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, the Arden Shakespeare, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Routledge, 1965), lxxviii. All the quotations from *Measure for Measure* are from this text.

- 2 Northrop Frye, *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 146.
- 3 Ann Jennalie Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and his Society* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1991), 133ff.
- 4 Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 87.
- 5 Stone 42.
- 6 Stone 88. But Cook makes a distinction between jointure and dower (122-23).
- 7 Stone 43. This description is about the landed classes in pre-Reformation England. Stone explains that the situation changed with the abolition of nunneries in the mid-sixteenth century, and says, “it became morally obligatory upon the landed classes to marry off their daughters”(43). Cook’s explanation, “Daughters always represented a drain on the family’s disposable assets, and an abundance of daughters could spell disaster, since almost all privileged young women were expected to marry and to bring a portion with them”(121) seems to refer to Stone’s latter period. Although the record of the first performance of *Measure for Measure* is the 26th of December, 1604, Isabella is to enter a convent, and it would be reasonable to set the time of the action in a pre-Reformation period when the nunneries had not yet been abolished.
- 8 Stone 85-86. Cook takes almost the same view (127). Claudio was able to have marital relationship with Isabella, because his father was dead and he was able to give priority to his love rather than to a monetary contract. On this point, see Cook 69.
- 9 Stone 86.
- 10 About Julietta’s birth, Provost says, “a gentlewoman of mine” (2. 3. 10).

- 11 Lever 16n and liii-liv.
- 12 See Lever 16n and William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 99n.
- 13 Stone 88 and Cook 143.
- 14 Lever 16n and Bawcutt 99n.
- 15 Cook 145. She also thinks that Isabella as “overstrict nun” is her “guise” and not her real character.
- 16 *Measure for Measure* appears as the fourth play of the Comedies section in the Folio of 1623. The audience of that time must have felt the comic aspects more strongly than the problematic aspects of the play.
- 17 Lever 23n.
- 18 Lever 18n.
- 19 Bawcutt 101n.
- 20 This type of connotation is not Claudio's intention, but is considered to be manipulated by the playwright. How different messages are conveyed on different levels of interpretation will be discussed later in this section.
- 21 In this respect, the two interview scenes between Isabella and Angelo are essentially different.
- 22 Lever 47n and Bawcutt 130n.
- 23 lever 49n, Bawcutt 132n, and *OED* ‘carrion’ 3b.
- 24 Lever 50n and Alexander Schmidt, *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*, rev. and enl. ed. Gregor Sarrazin, (NewYork: Dover Publications, 1971), 378.
- 25 C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*, rev. and enl. ed. Robert D. Eagleson, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 92.
- 26 Bawcutt 139n.
- 27 Bawcutt 140n.

- 28 As to whipping a harlot, see Kenneth Muir, *London Magazine*, Dec. 1954, 105-06.
- 29 Bawcutt 142n.
- 30 Lever 60n.
- 31 Marc Shell, *The End of Kinship: 'Measure for Measure,' Incest, and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 52.
- 32 Isabella's speech, spoken when she is to enter a convent, seems to be relevant to this view:

*Isab.* And have you nuns no farther privileges?

*Nun.* Are not these large enough?

*Isab.* Yes, truly; I speak not as desiring more,  
But rather wishing a more strict restraint

Upon the sisters stood, the votarists of Saint Clare. (1. 4. 1-5)

This passage is usually interpreted as one piece of the evidence that shows Isabella's strictness. Nevertheless, the overt meaning of Isabella's first utterance is that she wishes more privileges than she has been told of, though she negates this soon in her next speech. The demanding expression of the first line leaves the possibility that Isabella might desire more privileges unconsciously or subconsciously, and this may seem to have some connection with her reversed motivation of entering the convent.