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Tactics of Power in Measure for Measure

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ABSTRACT

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, sexuality is of primary concern, which predicts characters' behaviors, and drives the narrative progression. The play seems to be inquiring into the central question as to whether power, in particular, state power, can keep a tight rein of sexuality. This article explores into the functions of sexuality in the narrative, and the play's self-contradictory conclusions about female and male sexuality. It argues that the play's self-contradictory conclusion about male sexuality and female sexuality manifests the operation of different discourses on sexuality, with the first one predominantly a quasi-scientific discourse, and the latter one, still a medieval conception of sexuality grounded on religious discourse. The difference, however, manifests the transition from a medieval ideology to a nascent capitalism ideology in the discourse of sexuality.

Keywords: *Measure for Measure*, Power, Sexuality, Ideology.

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Recent interpretations of *Measure for Measure* usually centers around the power tactics in relation to female's economic status and identity. Lyndal Roper has argued that "as the Reformation was domesticated—as it closed convents and encouraged nuns to marry, as it lauded the married state...and as it execrated the prostitute—so it was accomplished through a politics of reinscribing women within the family." Natasha Korda in "Single Women and the Properties of Poverty", the Duke's program of reform consolidates secular and religious power in the person of the prince, and seeks to prove the scope and efficacy of that power through its stealthy repositioning of the play's propertyless singlewomen as propertied brides (245).² She further points out that "we may read Isabella's silence at the end of *Measure for Measure* as registering this rift between political theory and material practice, and thereby the failure of the early modern state, through its domestic policies, to solve the problem posed by a growing population of placeless singlewomen."³ All the above discussions focus on the operation of power, in relation to the economic as well as the social space of

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² Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 3.

³ Korda, Natasha. "Singlewomen and the Properties of Poverty" in *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism*, Linda Woodbridge ed., (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p.245

⁴ *Ibid.* p.245

women. It is true that “not only is the early modern theater located in one of Europe’s great commercial centers, the language of the plays themselves is infused, often in baffling ways, with the language of economic pursuit.”⁴ It is also true that economic language is often infused with human desire, what Ivo Kamps calls “the blunt yoking of human desire and financial considerations, of the sexual and the economic.”⁵ This article, therefore, is an attempt to bring economic and sexual to the analysis of the Measure for Measure in relation to the power politics.

Foucault argues that Western culture has long been fixated on sexuality. A discourse is created around it, thereby making sexuality ubiquitous.⁶ He further connects the regulation of sexuality with power exercising control on biological existence.

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; [...] Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.⁷

In Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, sexuality is of primary concern, which not only predicts characters’ behaviors, but also drives the narrative progression. The play seems to be inquiring into the central question as to whether power, in particular, state power, can keep a tight rein of sexuality. This article explores into the functions of sexuality in the narrative, and the play’s conclusions about female and male sexuality respectively in relation to Foucault’s theory about power’s access to the body. It argues that the play’s self-contradictory conclusions about male sexuality and female sexuality manifests the operation of different discourses around male and female sexuality, with the first one predominantly a quasi-scientific discourse, and the latter one, still a medieval conception of sexuality grounded on religious discourse. The difference, however, marks the transition from a medieval ideology to a nascent capitalism ideology in the discourse of sexuality.

In Measure for Measure, Duke Vincintio temporarily entrusts his power to Angelo, “a man of stricture and abstinence”⁸. Duke Vincintio chooses Angelo, for he is a man of virtue, and seems to be incorruptible.

Upon his place,
And with full line of his authority,
Governs Lord Angelo; a man whose blood
Is very snow-broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense,
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge
With profits of the mind, study and fast.”

Besides, Angelo enjoys high acclaim among the public. For instance, Escalus thinks that Angelo is the only virtuous man in Vienna to be entrusted with the management of the Dukedom during Duke Vincintio’s absence.

If any in Vienna be of worth
To undergo such ample grace and honour,
It is Lord Angelo.

Despite the general acclaim of Angelo, Duke Vincintio is very dubious about Angelo’s surviving the test on the ground that natural desires are as irrepressible as blood flow. Even more, power sways and changes the most virtuous man, Angelo is only being pretentious, and mere test would disclose this hypocrisy.

Lord Angelo is precise;
Stands at a guard with envy; scarce confesses
That his blood flows, or that his appetite
Is more to bread than stone: hence shall we see,
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.⁹

4 Linda Woodbridge ed. Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), p.vii

5 Ibid., p.vii.

6 Foucault, M., The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction, (London: Allen Lane, 1979) p.142

7 Foucault, M., The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction, (London: Allen Lane, 1979) p.143

8 Lever, J.W., (ed.), Measure for Measure, (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p.19

This introduces the global instability of the narrative—whether power can keep tight rein of natural desires. As the narrative moves along, Angelo's strict observance of law against unruly desires, acts out the rift between law and desire. The first proclamation made by Angelo is to close all the (prostitute) house in the suburbs of Vienna, and put into prison those who committed premarital sexual "sins". The proclamations meet ironic resistance.

ESCALUS

There are pretty orders beginning, I can tell you:
it is but heading and hanging.

POMPEY

If you head and hang all that offend that way but
for ten year together, you'll be glad to give out a
commission for more heads: if this law hold in
Vienna ten year, I'll rent the fairest house in it
after three-pence a bay: if you live to see this
come to pass, say Pompey told you so.¹⁰

Pompey warns Escalus that if the law is to be strictly observed, soon there shall be no heads available to be chopped off. Like the Duke, Pompey does not believe it is possible to completely rein sexual desire. This is also manifested in his attitude towards Mistress Overdone, who upon hearing the news that all prostitute houses will be closed down, starts worrying about her livelihood. Yet, Pompey comforts her by saying that she should be free of worries for they will remember her services and her future will be considered.

MISTRESS OVERDONE

Why, here's a change indeed in the commonwealth!
What shall become of me?

POMPEY

Come; fear you not: good counsellors lack no
clients: though you change your place, you need not
change your trade; I'll be your tapster still.
Courage! there will be pity taken on you: you that
have worn your eyes almost out in the service, you
will be considered.

In Mistress Overdone, the sexual and the economic become conjoining -- the closing of the prostitute house strips her off livelihood and economic independence, which is power's operation on the material level. The ending of the play, however, seems to suggest the failure of this power politics. Yet, it is to be recognized that power politics work in a much subtler way in terms of female regulation. The closing of the prostitute, harms Mistress Overdone for sure, yet it hurts male interest even more, and therefore is not in the interest of Patrilineal power. Escalus, for instance, begs mercy on the ground that it is the sin that even Angelo would be prone to when time and place suit, and it is only natural and universal, and that Angelo should consider for his own sake in case that he will be forced to pull the law upon himself.

Escalus's defense is purely from the rift between law and desire. Prostitution, in other words, purchased sex, is where financial and sexuality entangle. "Money best serves, both objectively and symbolically, that purchasable satisfaction which rejects any relationship that continues beyond the momentary sexual impulse, because it is absolutely detached from the person and completely cuts off from the outset any further consequences".¹¹ For this, Simmel concludes that prostitution has a close historical relationship to the money economy, the economy of means' in the strictest sense.¹² The closure of the prostitute house, therefore, is implausible for two aspects, for one thing, it is against the quasi-scientific discourse on male sexuality; for another, it is against the nascent capitalism, an

9 Ibid., p.22

10 Ibid., p.37

11 Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money* (3rd edition), David Frisby ed., Tom Bottomore and David Frisby tr. (London & New York, Routledge), 2005, p. 378

12 Ibid., p.379

economy of means, in which exchange value is to take over use value. The failure of this act, to a certain extent, facilitate both discourses.

To complicate things, Angelo himself is found to have his passion fueled by the chastity of Isabella, a chaste lady coming over to beg mercy for her brother Claudio, who committed pre-marital “sins” and have his fiancée Julietta pregnant.

ANGELO

From thee, even from thy virtue!
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
[...]
What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?
Dost thou desire her foully for those things
That make her good?¹³

The play suggests that power and female chastity provokes male desire. Angelo is in a dilemma as he desires Isabella foully for her chastity. Angelo’s falling for Isabella provokes him to sin, which further renders the undertaking to regulate male sexual desire in vain. His falling is a symbolic one, as he is the incarnation of virtue and honor in Vienna. However, Angelo’s abuse of power is only slightly punished, if to marry Mariana be a punishment for him. (It is more a punishment for Mariana, perhaps.) The irrepressible ‘nature’ of male sexuality is tactfully utilized to alleviate his sin, or even to absolve him of the sin.

I am sorry, one so learned and so wise
As you, Lord Angelo, have still appear'd,
Should slip so grossly, both in the heat of blood.
And lack of temper'd judgment afterward.¹⁴

Even the Duke, after everything being resolved, proclaims his intention on Isabella, which further justifies that male sexuality is as irrepressible as the flow of blood. Consequently, it commands tactful handling by law and authority. By now, the global instability initiated is resolved, and the conclusion is self-evident, exactly as the Duke had anticipated. The rift between law and desire is not torn open, but requires the amendment of law to tailor itself for male desire.

[...] a purely abstract or formal law, unresponsive to the claims and impulses of the body, becomes detached from desire, including its own, and such desire may consequently run unchecked.¹⁵

For Eagleton, the lesson to be learnt is that “excessive restraint breeds, just as a glut of liberty leads to restraint”.¹⁶ However, he fails to see another side of the story. If sexuality should be allowed as much autonomy as possible under law, which in turn would serve to facilitate state power, the question to be posed is: Is female sexuality allowed equal autonomy in the play? In contrast, the successful establishment of harmony and order, as the play indicates, relies on the successful manipulation and regulation of female sexuality.

Female chastity has always been of much concern to Shakespeare. No matter in *Tempest* or *Hamlet* or various other plays, virginity is much valued as against unruly desire.

PROSPERO

Then, as my gift and thine own acquisition
Worthily purchased take my daughter: but
If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be minister'd,
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall

13 *Ibid.*, p. 49

14 *Ibid.*, p.146

15 Eagleton, Terry, William Shakespeare, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 48

16 Eagleton, Terry, William Shakespeare, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 48

To make this contract grow: but barren hate,
Sour-eyed disdain and discord shall bestrew
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed,
As Hymen's lamps shall light you.¹⁷

The breaking of virginity alone would bring distain and discord. It is upon virginity that order and harmony is sustained. Equally, in *Measure for Measure*, it is the Chastity of Isabella, or to be more exact, female chastity, that guarantees the resolution of contradictions, hence, redeems order and dignity. In refusing to sacrifice her chastity for her brother's life, Isabella incarnates a morality which is the founding block of a society, yet it at the same time provokes unruly male desire. There is no intention to criticize Isabella's defending of morality. The paradox is that Isabella proves with her action that chastity can be achieved, which renders the justification of Angelo's sin, namely sexual desire is uncontrollable, problematic. However, when pledging for her brother, Isabella manifests her embedded ideology, that is, female chastity is desirable and plausible, while male sexuality is irrepressible.

Go to your bosom;
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That's like my brother's fault: if it confess
A natural guiltiness such as is his,
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
Against my brother's life. (II. ii)

She questions Angelo's propensity towards sinning, while is confident in her own chastity to pursue her life in a nunnery. The power that Isabella displays in her rein of sexuality strikes in sharp contrast to the unruly 'nature' of male sexuality.

Then, there is Mrs. Overdone. It is amazingly impressive to see how she manages to be constantly available so as to appease male sexual desires. As to Mariana, who is assigned to marry Angelo as a punishment for his abuse of power in exchange for sexual advantage of Isabella, it is equally amazing to see how her sexuality can be manipulated to fulfill the purposes of law and desire, to help the dukedom resume its order, and the nobles, their dignity. And this manipulation is so justified by the disguised Duke:

DUKE VINCENTIO

Nor, gentle daughter, fear you not at all.
He is your husband on a pre-contract:
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
Sith that the justice 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.¹⁸

Finally, there is Juliet, who by consenting to Claudio's approach, committed 'heavier' crime than her partner Claudio.

DUKE VINCENTIO

Love you the man that wrong'd you?

JULIET

Yes, as I love the woman that wrong'd him.

DUKE VINCENTIO

So then it seems your most offenceful act
Was mutually committed?

JULIET

Mutually.

DUKE VINCENTIO

Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.

¹⁷ Righter, Anne, (ed.), *The Tempest*, (London: Penguin Books, 1968) p.115

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.100

JULIET

I do confess it, and repent it, father.¹⁹

In contrast to the myth created about male sexuality, female sexuality is constructed as at the disposal of celestial and political power. The point here is not to discuss whether sexuality is as natural as blood flow or not, for the answer to this question may command profound research into the realm of biology. Instead, the question to be posed is: Both being human, how come the nature of male sexuality differs so much from that of female sexuality? Is it the biological truth, or merely a socially constructed myth? One can not help thinking about ideological practices in this construction.

By ideology work, this argument takes the idea Ideology as developed by Althusserian Marxists, which refers to

[...] a set of pre-conscious image-concepts in which men and women see and experience, before they think about, their place within a given social formation, with its specific structure of class and gender relations.²⁰ [...] a system of representations that offer the subject an imaginary, compelling, sense of reality in which crucial contradictions of self and social order appear resolved.²¹ Ideology is imaginary not because it is in any sense unreal, but because it gives the subject an image that satisfies an unconscious need for coherence, an image that is in fact the specular means for constructing the subject.²²

To be exact, ideology is preconscious, imaginary preconception in which crucial contradictions of self and social order appear resolved. It satisfies subject's unconscious need for coherence and order.

Ideologies address, fascinate, worry and fix social subjects in ways appropriate to the reproduction of a given social order; they present as obvious, simple, and universal – as reality itself – what is peculiar, complex and historically and socially specific. [...] Ideological work is always directly or indirectly affiliated with political work, constructing a realm of experience that seems to universalize and stabilize a social project serving particular class (gender) interests.²³

The exploration into the sexuality ideology manifested in Measure for Measure reveals how sexuality ideology works to sustain order and coherence in Vienna. And the coherence and integrity of Vienna is maintained on a hierarchical sexual order, in which male sexuality enjoys liberty and autonomy while female sexuality is prone to be suppressed and subdued. For the Elizabethans, unity and harmony, being the essential guarantee of order, require the proper functioning of every part in its allotted place.²⁴ First of all, there to be observed is the almighty God which has created the universe, though contentions do arise as to how to duly serve Him. Then, there situates princely power, working on courtly and social level. Finally, family life models on social life, where wives are expected to show due obedience to husbands.

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee.

[...]

Such duty as the subject owes the prince
Even such a woman oweth to her husband;²⁵

The hierarchical order observed by the Elizabethans, on the whole, is in direct connection with the creation myth, in which woman is only an affinity to man, being created out of the ribs of Man, and for the purpose of accompanying man through his loneliness. Therefore, the spectrum of order runs roughly as follows: God, Monarch, Man, Woman. The unconscious need for order and coherence constructs a hierarchy where women are allotted an inferior status to that of men, and this Gender hierarchy, in return, creates biased perception towards female sexuality, which accounts for the gendered conceptions towards sexuality.

M.W. Reese in his book Shakespeare: His World and His Work points out that:

19 Ibid., p. 52

20 Ibid. p.145

21 Ibid. p.145

22 Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p.162

23 Kavanagh, James H., "Shakespeare in Ideology" in *Alternative Shakespeare*, p. 149

24 Reese, M.M., *Shakespeare His World and His Work*, p.325

25 Morris, Brian, (ed.), *The Taming of the Shrew*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p.295-296

[...] the Humanism of the Renaissance was orthodox and conservative. [...] This provided a cosmological system which, although complicated, inconsistent and uncertain in its details, was definite in outline and purpose. Its core was the assurance of the unity and intimate correspondence of the whole of God's creation.²⁶

Despite the eagerness for order, however, it has to be noted that disorder was rampant then, which Greenblatt²⁷ and many others such as Marilyn L. Williamson²⁸ have pointed out. Yet, this is by no means paradoxical, as the lack of order and harmony provokes the craving in effect. Shakespeare's plays, quite obviously, address not only threats to princely power, but also threats to state and family power. However, for New Historicists, the disturbance to power is contained in the end, and order and integrity are sustained through the temporary disruption. To launch disorder, and then have this disorder contained is exactly the tactics of power, which, rather than disrupting power, consolidates power.

To conclude, in *Measure for Measure*, male desire is surrounded and enshrouded in nascent humanitarian discourse, pledging the tolerance of law. The ideological practice here is to establish the conception that male sexuality is biological and unruly in nature, even the noblest fail to bring it under rein. It universally feeds on power and female chastity, with no single exception, as exemplified in the falling of the noblest Lord Angelo. Angelo's failure to put into practice his strict but unrealistic law settles the global instability as launched at the beginning of the play, that is, whether power can keep at tight rein male desires. The self-evident answer is that power not only fails but even feeds on power. The anticipation of the Duke that Angelo is to fail the trial, at the beginning of the narrative renders him a more pragmatic and humanistic leader in sharp contrast to the sexual tyranny of Angelo's rule. Duke Vincentio's rule, therefore, is more likely to bring coherence and integrity for the dukedom. The ideology about male desire, in this play, is that male desires are natural and irrepressible, one that develops along with the nascent capitalism ideology about free trade and an economy of means. Shakespeare's play helps to perpetuate this quasi-scientific ideology and the nascent capitalism established around quasi-biological discourse. Meanwhile, female sexuality is not equally established around the discourse of quasi-science.

26 Reese, M. M., *Shakespeare His World & His Work* (Revised Edition), (London: Edward Arnold, 1980), p.323-324

27 Greenblatt, Stephen, etc (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, (New York: Norton, 1997), p.8

28 Williamson, Marilyn L., "Violence and Gender Ideology in *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*" in Kamps, Ivo ed., *Shakespeare Left and Right*, (New York & London: Routledge, 1991), p.153