

Depiction of Chastity and Power Politics through Isabella and Miranda

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Abstract

A theologically prescribed virtue, chastity is appropriated as the standard upon which the economy of secular power is based. The plays 'The Tempest' and 'Measure for Measure', eponymous titles by William Shakespeare, through the faculty of Miranda and Isabella, appropriates the power of female chastity. The paper 'Depiction of Chastity and Power Politics through Isabella and Miranda' attempts to read female chastity and the proof of it as mean of alliance and tension cumulating in the pursuit of power and position as elaborated in these plays. The Tempest, a romance, uses chastity as being just as vital to a father Prospero's interests, highlighting the political status of a chaste woman. In, Measure for Measure, Isabella, the young, beautiful, and zealously chaste nun-in-training, is the embodiment of female chastity and virginity. Through pursuit of her chastity Isabella finds the strength to resist and ultimately overturn the corrupt Angelo and to tentatively re-establish chastity as an essential part of Vienna's political rule.

KEYWORDS: Chastity, Revenge, Politics of power, Patriarchy.

In the traditions of Christianity, men and women are supposed to 'save themselves' until marriage and lose their virginity on their wedding night. But over the time the norm became applicable or attributed to the female counterparts alone. A woman to be considered 'marriage material' so to say, in Shakespeare's time; she ought to be chaste up until her wedding. The importance of female virginity is engraved upon by culture and essentially the politics of the system. It is essentially to ensure 'proper' bloodlines. All the worth that is embodied in the concept of "virginity" losses all its appeal on marriage. Queen Elizabeth was one who knew the political status of her virginity, who quiet flaunted her status as a "Virgin Queen" and held her reign as the sole monarch, a status that she would have lost had she married.

In a patriarchal society, men are privileged with authority, yet, somewhat paradoxically, that authority depends upon the chastity of women. Thus chastity becomes for woman a form of power as well though it something which helps in the validation of the patriarchal structure. Over centuries, cultures have traded women and their chastity for securing political alliances and favours. After all, marriage is considered the greatest form of negotiation. In this context, the chastity in a female becomes both powerful and political.

Isabella, from Shakespeare's Measure for Measure (1623) is a character often curtailed, over the time since its publication to the frame work of being selfish and wrong or virtuous and right, but never on any other front. But these simple characterizations rather limit the complexity in Isabella which is not of the struggle between virtue and downright selfishness but the one in which she struggles to take control of her own body and thereby a struggle of power in her own life. Labelling of Isabella over centuries have been one that restricts her as an "angel" or the contrasting image of a "vixen", as if the analysis of her morale is the only defining faculty worth bestowing upon her. The conflict, in Measure for Measure is not whether Isabella's decision to remain a virgin at the time of familial crisis was right or wrong; instead, her demonstration of chastity should have been an instance of her attempt at regaining power for herself in a society where women were rendered essentially 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. Isabella’s position in the text deliberates how the authority of the state, embodied in Antonio and the authority of religion, embodied in the Duke in disguise of a friar, Lodovick, manipulate ‘virginity’ to suit their politics of power.

In *Measure for Measure*, there are many scenes in which Isabella can be viewed as virtuous; there are also many that demonstrate a tendency toward self-preservation. In Act II 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. She defies the authority that wanted to manipulate her for her chastity. 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 reprove thee from thy fate, it should proceed. I’ll pray a thousand prayers for thy death.” (4.3.135-139). This statement, again exemplifies her attempt at redefining her place in the politics of power. Since Angelo’s demand of Isabella is Claudio’s only chance to live, Claudio must at least try to convince her, bringing her chastity to the forefront, to a political conditioning. From Angelo’s demand of Isabella to Claudio’s request to concur to Angelo’s demand, the play exemplifies the power exercised by Isabella’s Chastity.

It may be said that, Isabella is just another pawn trying to remain in control while the Duke pulls the strings. Marcia Riefer in her essay ‘Instruments of Some More Mightier Member: The Constriction of Female Power in *Measure for Measure*’ comments that

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,’... 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 idea does permeate in Isabella’s staunch obsession to take charge of her chastity and her body. In a situation where her actions and the actions of the state is controlled by a system of patriarchy and corrupt hypocrisy of Angelo and manipulations of the Duke, controlling her sexuality and there by her own body is a kind of resistance that Isabella offers to the system that is adept in manipulating women’s chastity and women in general. In the prospect of politics women are in general bartered off like objects without a say, their chastity sold off to the highest bidder or to gain a political upper hand, virginity of the female hence is important in the matter of political favouring. By taking claim of hers, Isabella is reinstating her power or may be resisting the lack of it.

The autonomy and self esteem that Isabella has about her is considerably eclipsed by her trust and confidence in Duke, is essentially an argument that holds much integrity. Riefer explains, “as soon as the ‘Friar’ takes over, Isabella becomes an actress whose words are no longer her own.” (140). But in her obedience and suspension of reason, when acting in tune with the Duke’s plan, is Isabella’s act of self-preservation. Even at the expense of Mariana’s chastity she is willing to safeguard her own. Her concurrence to the duke is in a way, an account of subservience as opposed to her independency. But in another, is her staunch

protectiveness of her chastity which she realizes is of not much consequence to anybody else but for her own preservation in a State where virginity is traded for power.

Isabella in her conversation with Nun of the Saint Clares in Act I expresses her wish to follow a much stricter restraint, emphasizing on her need to move away from this system of oppression altogether. Critics analyse her standing as her understanding of the fact that in Vienna, her self esteem and sexuality are mutually exclusive. She is a woman who has made strong decisions to preserve her chastity, an act of self-preservation, even before she came into the action of the play. This further elucidates the standing of her virginity in the aspect of power politics. Madeleine Doran points out that “Measure for Measure is primarily about the “exercise of power” not, necessarily, morality” (115). Hence it may be said that Isabella is exercising a resistance, by joining the convent to protect herself, thereby exerting the power of her chastity. Marcia Rieffer 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)

Somewhat similar is the construction of the character of Miranda in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. Miranda is typically viewed as having completely internalized the patriarchal order of things, thinking of herself as subordinate to her father. From her interactions with Caliban and her ultimate decision to marry the Prince of Naples, Ferdinand, she has been a complacent vehicle groomed by Prospero to meet out his political career in Milan. Her chastity, innocence and vulnerability are seen as the things that allow her to be readily manipulated first by her father and then by Ferdinand. Her virginity is central to her father’s revenge, enabling Prospero to gain his usurped political prestige through her marriage to, Ferdinand. The political dominance of the parties in the play is essentially rooted in the chastity of Miranda. Miranda’s chastity, hence become the focal point of the order of power and authority in the text, one which is safely guarded by Prospero to the point of utter obsession from his part. This is again an instance of the power that virginity of an unessential pawn, the female in Miranda, in the general spectrum of the power politics comes to the apex of the structure usurping the patriarchal authority. It may be rightly concluded that, Prospero educated her for the twelve years that they spent in the island in an attempt of bargaining her virginity, at the right time, to the highest bidder that may aid him in taking control of his political power. This in turn brings the otherwise subservient persona in Miranda to the action of power and political dominance.

Miranda is the only woman present in the action of the play, though there is a passing mentioning of her mother who is unnamed, Claribel, Ferdinand’s sister and Sycorax, Caliban’s mother. Prospero makes a fleeting comment on his wife in Act 1 scene 2 as “Thy mother was a piece of virtue” (1.2.56-57), the idea that permeate is that though most women are not, Miranda’s mother was virtuous, emphasizing his stereotypical patriarchal temperament, that did not even seem it necessary to mention her name. She becomes a nothing more than a mere specter conjured from the past with no face and no name, just an idea of virtuousness. Claribel is mentioned by Alonso as a Queen of Tunis, removed from Naples. Her virginity probably was sold in matrimony, as an object, for political alliance to the highest “suitable” bidder. And Sycorax is painted by Prospero in his all white glory, as a non-white, from Argier, witch and with

the illegitimacy of Caliban's birth, painted as probably amoral and lustful. Ania Loomba suggests that between the present Miranda and absent Sycorax they split "the patriarchal stereotype of woman as the white devil-virgin and whore goddess." (151). It can be rightly concluded that Prospero's narrative disposes him not only as a white imperialist who subjugates, but also as a patriarch who even manipulates his own daughter for his own purposes.

Miranda may be considered a secondary figure, but her role is as crucial to the play as Prospero's. Other than the value of her chastity, Prospero often resorts to justify his actions and eclipse his lust for power and revenge by stating that it is for her well being. The slavery of Caliban is depicted as the punishment for his attempt to rape Miranda. But it was simply an action by which Prospero was securing her chastity. Miranda may be considered paradoxical, essentially a dependent subservient woman but still her virtue and virginity for that matter is very essential for the dynamics of power that underline the play. Lorrie Leininger in the essay 'The Miranda Trap: Sexism and Racism in Shakespeare's *Tempest*', states that she is crucial for the action of the play yet she is "deprived of any possibility of human freedom, growth or thought. She need only be chaste –to exist as a walking emblem of chastity" (291).

There are critics who argue that Miranda is an assertive individual and completely independent in choosing Ferdinand. In her essay, Jessica Slights, argues that while Miranda "is certainly influenced by her powerful father and by the expectations imposed upon her as the daughter of a duke, she proves to be strong-willed and independent minded in her dealing with both Prospero and Ferdinand" (365). Miranda challenges Prospero's authority by defying her father's instruction that she refrain from speaking with Ferdinand, which may be stemmed from her new found revelation of the importance of her virginity to her Father's position. For Prospero, Miranda is his property who gives it to Ferdinand "as my gift, and thine own acquisition worthily purchased, take my daughter" (4.1.13-14). Miranda tries to win in the struggle between men and women in the patriarchal world, symbolically through her chess game with Ferdinand, which may be seen as the assertion of her importance in the power struggle that is intermittent in the setting.

Chastity is however what makes her prominent in the dynamics of power and struggle for authority. Prospero is controlling her sexuality and her body at that, like a sacrificial lamb well fed, to be handed over to Ferdinand. He even warns Ferdinand against breaking her "virgin knot before all sanctimonious ceremonies" (4.1.15-16). As Miranda serves as "property to be exchanged between father and husband" (154) states Loomba, her body is most valuable. Her chastity is equally important for Prospero and Ferdinand. Ferdinand admits to the fact that her chastity is in fact the prime condition for their marriage, "O, if a virgin and your affection not gone forth I'll make you the queen of Naples" (1.2.447-449). Though ignorant for most part, Miranda understands that her chastity is the most prized jewel and she states "the jewel in my dower" (3.1.54).

Miranda's primary value, for her father, is her virginity. Ferdinand, on their first meeting enquires, "If you be maid or no?" (1.2.431) is concerned with her chastity. Miranda's virginity qualifies her as a commodity to both her husband and her father. For Prospero, Miranda becomes a bargaining chip and for Ferdinand, another acquisition, on both cases her virginity is of political importance and power of authority. As, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford in their *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* states, at the time when Shakespeare was writing his

plays, women “could be good, proceeding from virginity to marriage and maternity, and after a virtuously spent widowhood. Or they could be wicked: scolds, whores, or witches. What they could not be, in theory, was independent, autonomous, and female-focused” (17).

In Vienna, as in Shakespeare's England, women are defined and placed on the basis of their chastity. According to her chastity or lack of it, a woman occupies the ‘holy’ matrimony, nunnery, or the brothel. The surest protection against the hazards of sexual relations is renunciation and retreat, to the nunnery, as embodied in Isabella of *Measure for Measure*. The alternatives to Isabella's strict renunciation of her sexuality are the shame and harassment of Juliet, the sorrow of Mariana, the tavern jokes at the expense of Mistress Elbow, the exploitation of Kate Keepdown, and the overuse of Mistress Overdone. Thus the chastity that the nunnery protects is thus a form of freedom, the only form of autonomy left for women in a world where sexuality means submission to men and degradation in that submission. In the play, chastity, or the lack it, is at the center of all the political and social issues of the play. However, the tone and plot of the play eclipse the clear sexual undertones. It is essentially a reading of power obtained through female chastity embodied through the character of Isabella who submits herself to a life of celibacy to a nunnery, though her position changes in the play. Her virginity becomes the tension that provides leverage for the further action, thereby giving voice to the power of virginity in the space of authority.

In *The Tempest*, Miranda's chastity is essential for Prospero's plans to regain his power and prestige. She is arguably a pawn in her father and Caliban's and to an extent Ferdinand's political power but her position is essentially one that pursues power. While Miranda does not use her chastity to gain political power, Prospero surely does. Prospero's political prospects is inextricably linked with Miranda's virginity, as it is his bargaining chip, and in fact his only hope for restoring his title and estates.

In these examples the significance of female chastity and virginity for male characters is made explicit. Female chastity is obviously a source of power. Chastity is the definitive virtue precisely because it is a site and mode of secular power.

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