

“A Speechless Dialect”: Gender and Self-Recognition in *Measure for Measure*

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In his essay of 1913 “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” Sigmund Freud discusses two Shakespearean scenes in the light of their relevance to the constitution of a male subject of desire. The scene of the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* (1597), and the love confessions of Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia in *King Lear* (1605), allow Freud to undertake an analysis of myths and fairy tales that ends up in the following conclusion: the three caskets and the three daughters stand for three essential aspects of man’s individual history as it is influenced by woman. Freud’s final remarks centre on *King Lear*:

We might argue that what is represented here are the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman —the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are three forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of a man’s life —the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. But it is in vain that an old man yearns for the love of woman as he had it first from his mother; the third of the Fates alone, the silent Goddess of Death, will take him into her arms. (301)

In Freud’s analysis, the three caskets become three daughters. These daughters undergo a further symbolic transformation whereby they become three aspects of the Mother in a man’s life. With dying Lear as paradigm, Freud recounts man’s individual history as one that moves from pre-Oedipal enjoyment through the resolution of the Oedipus complex to a final, agonising mourning of the Mother. Freud’s reading of Shakespeare’s plots stage a drama of male subjects as they are affected, haunted, and shaped by different representations of maternal females.¹

At first sight, *Measure for Measure* (1604) looks like a reversal of this Freudian narrative. One may think of its main plot as the story of one woman —Isabella— whose life is influenced and changed by three men —Claudio, Angelo and the Duke. Furthermore, this woman appears to have, in Janet Adelman’s phrase, “fantasies of her own” (*Suffocating Mothers* 94). In the attempt to shun these fantasies, she has resolved to seek “a more strict restraint/Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Claire” (*Measure* 1.4.4-5). Isabella’s ordeal to save Claudio from death sketches a woman’s individual history as it is affected by three males: she progresses from innocent siblinghood with Claudio to the threat of sexuality in Angelo, to end up in Vincentio, in whom, as if he were a male version of Freud’s Cordelia, three dimensions of maleness converge: in disguise as a Friar, he is a Brother —the innocent brother that Claudio the sinner has ceased to be; as the mature man that undertakes agency in order to protect Isabella from Angelo’s sexual threat, he becomes a father-figure; finally, he imposes upon her as a husband made in the image and after the likeness of a Father that does not let her choose. In fact, Isabella never responds to the Duke’s marriage proposal. He speaks—

¹ For a detailed study of this issue in various Shakespearean plays, *Measure for Measure* included, see Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 76-103. See also Jacqueline Rose, “Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*” (Drakakis ed. *Alternative Shakespeares*. London: Methuen, 1985).

Dear Isabel,
 I have a motion much imports you good,
 Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,
 What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.
 So bring us to our palace, where we'll show
 What's yet behind, that's meet you all should know. (5.1.537-42)

—and so ends the play with no expectations of an answer. This dumbness is probably not so striking if viewed as the imposition of an all-demanding Father: Isabella remains silent because she is not even allowed to consent. A silent presence on stage is almost all she remains in the play, her agency in Claudio's release being just a mirage. As a matter of fact, the play's connections with the Freudian plot of the caskets is not one of reversal but allegiance: in *Measure for Measure* three aspects of the masculine subject, split into the three characters of Claudio, Angelo and the Duke, are tested against the object woman. Hence, far from conveying an inversion of the archetypal plot, the play is but a peculiar rendering of it. In a first stage, Isabella is to Claudio a kin who is not of necessity conceived of as object of desire; later, she acquires significance as a sexual object for another man —Angelo— in behalf of her brother; and finally, she becomes someone else's wife —the Duke's. Contrary to *Lear*, whose dependence upon the maternal female dooms him to a tragic *telos*, the tragicomic life of man in *Measure for Measure* stages woman first as his kin, then as his whore, and finally as his wife. In being all these at different moments along the play, Isabella remains there, herself being the three silent caskets, only to be opened, read, and interpreted in turns by each man.

However, and unlike *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure* resists a reading in the manner of mythical narratives or fairy tales. Claudio, Angelo and the Duke are not like Arragon, Morocco and Bassanio, who find their lots written inside, awaiting a passive recognition. The fates of Portia's suitors have abided there for long; and they, like Oedipus, must simply come across the occasion that brings their destinies to light. This is why *The Merchant of Venice* becomes a suitable play for Freud's analysis. He can proceed in the same terms as he did with *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*: by analysing the *mythos* or narrative structure, the psychoanalyst recounts the history of an individual's desire. This narrative belongs within the symbolic order, and in it the characters' fates are ordained beforehand.² The moral fable in each casket tells them who they are. As opposed to this, *Measure for Measure* compels their male characters first to invent and then to cope with their own subjectivities. Only after they have taken a course of action shall they discover their own desires and individual histories in Isabella. They learn to read their own character —*ethos*— in her. And whatever that *ethos* consists of, it comes forth as a surprise. *Anagnorisis* is not in this play the emergence of a passive truth already inscribed in a mythical narrative but an unexpected discovery of self which derives from a specific course of action. That discovery makes Claudio and Angelo *equal*. What remains of this paper intends to trace the sexual nature of Claudio's and Angelo's self-recognitions as laid open by a passive —and ignorant— Isabella.

1

The first in opening the casket is Claudio. He has been sentenced to death by Angelo's strict usage of the law. As his own moral fable makes clear, his sin is lechery:

² I use the concept of *mythos* or plot as Aristotle employs it in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, *mythos* is the major constituent of drama, as it prevails over *ethos* or character, and *opsis* or spectacle. Marc Shell has studied the relevance of plot analysis in his account of sexuality and incest in *Measure for Measure*. See *The End of Kinship: Incest, Measure for Measure and the Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). The relevance of the Aristotelian concepts to the psychoanalytic criticism of Shakespeare was first sketched by Lupton and Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). A review and an extension of their findings, as well as an application to dramatic reception and the problem of incest in Renaissance drama, are undertaken in the first two chapters of my unpublished doctoral dissertation *Deseo y parentesco: Discursos del incesto en el drama inglés del Renacimiento* (Universidad de Sevilla: 1997).

On that sweet countenance: but *in that look*,
There speaketh so divine a continence
 As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope.

(*The Duchess of Malfi* 1.1.189-200; emphasis added)

Be it desire or be it chaste thoughts what man wants to discover in woman, the symbolic order of discourse is dissolved in a silent presence that speaks. Herod's exclamation in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1602-3) comprises a similar thought: "Can humane eyes be dazed by womans wit?" (4.7.140). Wit does not construct woman as subject of discourse but as an object of the male gaze. Woman can unwittingly "move," "persuade," "raise," "cut off," or "daze" man's desire; and only man can get to know such powers. Isabella's "speechless dialect" does not belong in the symbolic order of language, since that quality in her does not construct her as a subject of discourse either. On the contrary, it prepares the male characters and spectators to perceive her as spectacle, as the object of the gaze, in the Aristotelian dimension of *opsis*.⁴

2

Isabella remains ignorant of the reasons why her brother assigns such mission to her. She is reluctant to acknowledge her qualities as they are perceived by others. "Assay the power you have," demands Lucio, to which she retorts: "My power, alas, I doubt" (1.4.76-7). With such reluctance she attends her first interview with Angelo. There she must deploy her rhetorical weapons to plead for her brother's life. The deputy is alert though, and manages to defend the rightfulness of the law against Isabella's arguments. And when she discovers that mercy and emotions are not to prevail against ordinance, she appeals to Angelo's individual history:

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. (2.2.138-43)

Isabella exhorts Angelo to ask his heart about its knowledge of "natural guiltiness." And her words obtain a first triumph over the deputy. Whatever Angelo finds there that resembles Claudio's crime, it urges in him a first aside of recognition: "She speaks, and 'tis/Such sense that my sense breeds with it" (2.2.144-45). What he apparently finds is an effect of Isabella's words, and the "sense" in them. However, there are two "senses" at stake here: "such sense" is the "sense" in Isabella's words, whereas Angelo's "sense" *breeds* —produces, conceives, procreates— as an effect of its coupling with Isabella's.

For, whatever that "sense" may be, it affects and alters Angelo's. "Such sense" may refer to what Angelo finds in himself that is similar to Claudio's crime —the result of his reflection upon Isabella's request. Or it may be Isabella's powers to change Angelo's attitude — that is, her "prone and speechless dialect," which moves men but is not to be found in her discourse. Angelo's discovery of such power —and his being affected by them— identifies him with Claudio, who, as we must remember, entrusted to them the solution to his problem. In that respect, man's "natural guiltiness" is nothing but his disposition to be moved, altered and affected by woman, who appears as the ultimate source of corruption. As a result, his "sense" breeds —conceives— with Isabella's.

⁴ In this sense, Aristotle's attempts to privilege the order of *mythos* over *opsis* would be reversed here. It is Isabella's mere presence on stage that conveys a meaningful revelation to Claudio —and consequently, to a male spectator's gaze— regardless of the inexpressibility of his response to that "speechless" presence. Therefore, *opsis* belongs in the realm of the Real as this is described in the previous footnote.

The play, however, portrays an Isabella who is incapable of knowing her own powers. After her first encounter, she thinks she has “bribed” Angelo “with such gifts that heaven shall share with” him (2.2.149). In her views, her powers arise from “prayers from preserved souls,/From fasting maids whose minds are dedicate/To nothing temporal” (2.2.155-158). Isabella is ignorant and therefore innocent, as opposed to two men that seem to know too much of her. Angelo’s new affection to Isabella is acknowledged by the deputy as the effect of such innocence:

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? (2.2.164-173)

Man’s “sense” is again at stake in Angelo’s soliloquy. “Sense” is his sensuality, but also his knowledge. After this speech, which closes their first encounter, Angelo *knows* his guilt by learning that he wants Isabella, and by realising that she remains ignorant. The position allowed to woman in this soliloquy is interesting, since it does not match received expectations: the fallen Eve is not to be identified with Isabella. She is not the temptress, because she is even deprived of a desire of her own. It is Angelo who corrupts her modesty. The male subject bears the corruption. But even though he is to blame, corruption is only understood as long as it has its source in what he has seen in a woman.

Angelo asks Isabella to return the following day so that she will be acquainted with his decision about Claudio. This second encounter (2.4) places Angelo where we left him in the previous one: he is still discoursing with himself, still trying to come to terms with his newly-discovered knowledge of himself in woman. And he is still as confused as he was. He appears as a divided man, a self split in two:

When I would *pray and think*, I think and pray
 To several *subjects*. Heaven hath my empty words,
 Whilst my *invention*, hearing not my tongue,
 Anchors on *Isabel*. Heaven in *my mouth*,
 As if I did but only chew his name,
 And in *my heart* the strong and swelling evil
 Of *my conception*. (2.4.1-7; emphasis added)

When Angelo desires to pray and think, he thinks and prays—the inversion being a way of showing disorder by means of mental split. Besides, he discourses to “several”—namely separate, divided—subjects. In fact there are two subjects—the subject of his thought and the subject of his prayer. He discourses not only to two separate subjects, but also severally, incoherently. That incoherence can be explained by a rhetorical split, because his “empty words” do not accord with his “invention.” “Invention” must be understood here in its rhetorical meaning, that is, as the first part of the rhetorical art, the capacity of choosing the right *loci communes* or commonplaces in a speech. “Invention” is the sense, the subject-matter. On the other hand, his “empty words” correspond to rhetorical “elocution” or the art of finding the right words to express one’s sense or invention. Angelo’s mental disorder is explained by a radical rupture of invention from elocution: Angelo’s elocution is void—his empty words on the side of heaven—, whereas the invention is “swelling,” too full of woman. So Angelo’s discovery is of a linguistic sort. Evil invention appears behind a false disguise of elocution to which even Angelo fails to give credit. Angelo maps his own self in order to conceptualise that split: there is his *mouth*, the external organ through which the elocution finds its representability; and there is his *heart*. The polysemy of this last term allows the ongoing play with words: the heart is the seat of the inmost thoughts and feelings; it is the realm of emotion and sensuality; it is also the mind, the seat of

the intellectual faculties: the understanding. This polysemy is strengthened by the next word: “conception” —which means his being conceived in the physical sense, his faculty to bear in the physical sense as well, but also his ability to conceive in the mind, his intellect. The connection of the two levels at which this discourse functions is in fact a matter of gender: Angelo has a conception of Isabella in the intellectual sense, but this conception *of* woman reminds him of his conception *in* woman —the site of his imperfection, his corruption and his evil. This is the result of man’s perception of feminine “speechless dialect,” namely, the understanding that all men are made equal —as Claudio and Angelo are— in their discovery of the source of all corruption. The “speechless dialect” arouses his sinful desire, triggers his evil thoughts, and shatters the “sense” of his discourse by reminding him of his origins: his being conceived *by* and *in* woman.

The end of Angelo’s soliloquy rounds off this complex process of self-recognition: “Blood, thou art blood./Let’s write ‘good angel’ on the devil’s horn,/’Tis not the devil’s crest” (2.4.11-16). These lines seal Angelo’s recognition by means of an inversion of the emblematic mode.⁵ Angelo writes the inscription “good angel” —with a pun on his own name— on the devil’s horn. Since he depicts himself as a devil, the inscription “angel” only bears a paradoxical relation with the picture. The “crest” is a device placed above the shield of a coat of arms, accompanied by an emblematic motto. However, the emblematic “crest” is replaced with a grotesque “horn” here.⁶ In Angelo’s speech, “conception” —the realm of the female and the Lacanian Real— marks the dissolution of rhetorical unity and emblematic coherence, that is, the discourses that define masculine integrity in the symbolic order. When rhetoric and emblematics can only prove Angelo’s false nature, but not his completeness of self, the symbolic order collapses. At this point, only the Real in Isabella’s “speechless dialect” remains: as the thing that makes Angelo breed, it should be understood as the origin of this collapse.

The new Angelo, who, like Claudio, has read in Isabella’s “speechless dialect” his own guilty nature, is the one that demands atonement by compelling Isabella to yield her virginity as the only means to save Claudio’s life. The identification of these two male characters explains Claudio’s desire that his sister accept the offer. It is now through Isabella’s angry rebuke to her brother that the spectator detects how equal Claudio and Angelo are:

O you beast!
 O faithless coward, O dishonest wretch!
 Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
 Is’t not a kind of incest to take life
 From thine own sister’s shame? (3.1.139-142).

This is not the first time that the question of “man-making” is raised in the play. “Man-making” is Claudio’s sin —he has got Julietta with child. Illegitimate man-making —that is, making bastards— is what is at stake along *Measure for Measure*, as Angelo lets Angelo Isabella know it: “Ha! Fie, this filthy vices! It were as good/To pardon him that hath from nature stolen/A man already made, as to remit/Their saucy sweetness that do coin heaven’s image/In stamps that are forbid” (2.4.42-46). The bastard is a sign of falsehood, of the corrupted nature of conception.⁷ Now, as a

⁵ As a significant combination of *inscriptio*, *pictura*, and *scriptio*, the emblem must always aim at conceptual coherence. The expression “emblematic mode” is Peter Daly’s (*Literature in the Light of the Emblem* 3).

⁶ The term “crest” in its emblematic sense also appears in *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593): KATHERINA: If you strike me, thou are no gentleman, / And if no gentleman, why then no arms. // PETRUCCIO: A herald, Kate? O put me in thy books. // KATHERINA: What is your crest, a coxcomb? // PETRUCCIO: A combless cock, so Kate will be my hen. // KATHERINA: No cock of mine, you crow too like a craven. (2.1.220-25). The pun on “crest” finds its effect on the contrast between its heraldic sense and its identification with the cock’s “comb,” allowing a further sexual connotation as it depicts Petruchio as a gelded male. The deconstruction of the emblematic sense undertaken by the grotesque image of the castrated beast parallels Angelo’s speech, in which the beastly image of the horn turns emblematic coherence upside down.

⁷ See, in this respect, Marc Shell’s reflections on “bastardising” as the end of fornication in the plot of *Measure for Measure*: in the play, making bastards becomes the ultimate symbol of the end of kinship, and consequently, of social organisation (*The End of Kinship* 79).

form of redress, Claudio will “be made a man” out of Isabella’s fornication: as Angelo’s “conception” had an origin in Isabella, so Claudio’s shall. They are made equal in conception, since it provides them with a knowledge of man’s corruption. And what is more, they derive the acknowledgement of corruption from the same source: Isabella’s “speechless dialect.” The knowledge of this quality in her sister led Claudio to entangle her in the plot; its discovery by Angelo makes her the object of his desire.

3

As a conclusion, the idea of being conceived in woman as the main source of man’s corruption becomes the symbolic appropriation that Claudio and Angelo make of their puzzled perception of Isabella’s “speechless dialect.” In order to master something they can see but cannot understand, they narrate their recognition of self as a story that ultimately blames Isabella as an evil mother—the origin of their conception. First they perceive this mysterious feminine quality as spectacle or *opsis*: it is the effect that Isabella’s presence has on them. Second, that non-symbolic quality is presented as a plot or *mythos* that undertakes a symbolic re-elaboration of the three caskets: the virgin Isabella of the first casket becomes the potential whore of the second. This narrative step is re-written as a familial plot that makes incest its main motif: the virgin sister of the first casket becomes the whorish mother of the second, the feminine place of conception, the source of all corruption. Only a further comic step will allow a resolution in the third casket: the Duke shall transform the whorish mother into an obedient daughter and a faithful wife, who again will be represented as a speechless presence. But a matter of space and time constraints will leave that third casket unopened this time, awaiting some other occasion.

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