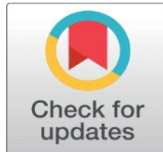
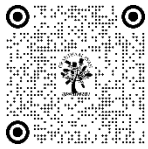


# READING CLAUDIO FROM MEASURE FOR MEASURE THROUGH FEMINISM

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to examine the character of Shakespeare's Claudio from *Measure for Measure* in the light of feminism. Though a number of studies have been conducted on the character of Claudio, his character from the feminist perspective still seems to have scope for further investigation. This paper undertakes to revisit the character of Claudio and expose his patriarchal character that looks at women only as secondary to men.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Claudio, Isabella, Feminism, Patriarchy

When it comes to the critical responses to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, one finds a number of critical articles and essays written on the play. A number of critics, finding fault with the play on one ground or the other, have vehemently criticised the play. Eileen MacKay sees the play as "difficult" and "unsatisfactory" (MacKay 109). Mario Digangi maintains that "*Measure for Measure* delivers what many readers have felt to be a skewed and dismal account of sexual desire" (Digangi 589). Coleridge "is as unable as Johnson to see what the basic theme of *Measure for Measure* is" (Geckle 72); for him the play "is a hateful work, although Shakspearian throughout" (72). This is interesting to observe that there exist some soft voices as well in critiquing the play. Maurice Hunt says that "*Measure for Measure* reveals Shakespeare's understanding... of the complex relationship between love and the ability to give and receive comfort" (Hunt 213). Declaring the play as "full of discussion and argument" Hereward T. Price says that "the play as written is excellent theatre" (Price 22). Arguably we observe that "If critics like Eileen Mackay have found the play 'unsatisfactory' and 'un-Shakespearean,' critics like John Masefield have gone to the extent of identifying the play as 'one of the greatest works of the greatest English mind'" (Dubey 268).

While focusing our attention on the characters of *Measure for Measure* we find that the character of Claudio is studied not less than the same of Angelo, Duke and Isabella. Critics have brought him under the spotlight of their examinations. Louis Burkhardt finds Claudio's fault in his "lechery" (243) and "hypocrisy" (255). Robert M. Smith observes him as

"wavering Claudio" (210). For Coleridge "Claudio is detestable" (Geckle 72). Quite differently Carolyn Brown identifies Claudio as Isabella's victim (Burkhardt 255). Thus, we see that different critics have rendered their criticism of Claudio's character differently. The present paper attempts to add to the already existing study on Claudio's character by means of employing the tool of feminism. A study of Claudio's character through the perspective of feminism still seems relevant. Taking feminism as a tool of investigation the present paper attempts to examine Claudio's character under two headings - (i) Claudio with Juliet and (ii) Claudio with Isabella. Under the first heading we can focus attention on the sexual relationship between Claudio and Juliet, under the second heading we can examine Claudio's attitude towards his sister Isabella.

## 1. CLAUDIO WITH JULIET

Claudio's sexual relationship with Juliet has always been a point of debate among the critics of *Measure for Measure*. The critics who see Angelo's condemnation of Claudio as illegal seem to maintain that Claudio is justified in having sexual intercourse with Juliet because she is to be his wife. On the other hand, the critics who justify Angelo's condemnation of Claudio seem to hold that Claudio has done something wrong in having sexual union with Juliet. Arthur Underhill is one of those critics who declare that Angelo's condemnation of Claudio is illegal (Schanzer 83). Thus he emerges as one who does not find fault with Claudio in having sexual relationship with Juliet. "Most of the later critics, including Harding (1950) and Schanzer (1960) believe the death sentence to be unmercifully severe but just, since Claudio, in their view, is guilty of violating the moral code by consummating his private betrothal before the public nuptials" (Wentersdorf 129). Nagrajan is also of the view that "Claudio is legally guilty because his was only a *de futuro* betrothal and that this did not confer the right of sexual union on the partners" (Wentersdorf 130). Derryl J. Gless is another critic who sees Claudio's possession of Juliet's bed as an error (Gless 238). Thus we see a number of critics focusing their attention on the sexual relationship between Claudio and Juliet. Some critics justify Claudio's possession of Juliet's bed while some others do not. But none of the above-mentioned critics have analysed Claudio's sexual relationship with Juliet through feminism. Let us examine how Claudio's sexual union with Juliet emerges in the light of feminism.

Before focusing our attention on the question whether Claudio is justified in having sexual relationship with Juliet or not, it may be a better idea to probe into whether he was in fact betrothed to Juliet. It cannot be ignored that it is only Claudio who talks of the marriage contract between himself and Juliet. Nowhere does Juliet speak of any such contract. Karl P. Wentersdorf's suspicion about the truthfulness of the marriage contract seems to be quite logical when he says that:

A question might be raised as to whether Claudio is speaking the truth when he alleges the existence of a matrimonial contract. In his desperate plight, it would seem all too natural for him to make such a claim, even if it was quite unwarranted, in the vain hope of persuading Angelo that he was not a case of ordinary fornication, and hence not deserving of the death penalty. It is certainly true that Juliet does not mention a contract when she is questioned by "Friar Lodowick" about her relation with Claudio. (Wentersdorf 140)

"The climate of the play is lust, not snigger lust, nor knicker-and garter lust, nor even we're-no-longer-squeamish-about-this-sort-of-thing lust; but a lust accepted as all pervading, in an age much rougher, rawer, cruder, more violent, natural and more loose than in our late day we can easily imagine" (Smith 217). Since the society reflected through the play is a licentious and corrupt one, it seems most possible that Claudio has had an illegal sexual relationship with Juliet and it is only with the intention of saving his life from capital punishment that he claims Juliet to be his wife. Claudio's willingness to escape capital punishment even at the cost of his sister's chastity, makes us surmise that it is for the same objective that he has falsely claimed that Juliet is his wife.

On the grounds that Juliet makes no reference to any marriage contract between herself and Claudio, it appears possible that Claudio has coaxed her, persuading her emotionally to have sexual intercourse with him without any real marriage. He has probably persuaded Juliet to feel like a cultural woman who considers herself one whose "sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male" (Mackinnon 73). Claudio, actually, seems to have entrapped Juliet into his love, and after having enjoyed a sexual relationship with her, he makes her - either by threatening her not to oppose him or by giving her a false assurance of marriage in future, whatever the case might have been - agreed with him.

Considering Claudio's report about his engagement with Juliet to be a false one, his sexual union with Juliet projects him as a patriarchal man who sees the fair sex only as an object of men's sexual gratification.

Let us now examine the case in the light of the information as provided by Claudio himself about his secret engagement with Juliet and the reason which drove him to keep his marriage contract a secret. Claudio says that he is betrothed to Juliet but in the hope of getting dowry he has kept his engagement secret. To quote his own words:

This we came not to  
Only for propagation of a dower  
Remaining in the coffer of her friends, (I.ii.130-132)

Claudio keeps his marriage contract secret for the sake of dowry. A few questions arise such as, what is more important for Claudio? Is it Juliet's honour or dowry, which counts for him? Is it not likely that he would desert Juliet in case she fails to bring his wished dowry as happens in the case of Mariana? Can he not break his marriage contract in case another woman with more dowry appears suitable for becoming his wife

The society reflected through the play is a corrupt, licentious and pro-dowry one. Women, like Mariana, are easily deserted by their would-be husbands in case they fail to pay the demanded dowry. Moreover, they are falsely charged with unchastity, as happens in the case of Mariana. Mariana is not only deserted by Angelo because she fails to pay him dowry but is also falsely accused of unchastity. As is said by the Duke to Isabella:

Left her in her tears, and dried not one of them with his comfort; swallowed his vows whole, pretending in  
her discoveries of dishonour: .... (III.i.214-216)

The pro-dowry attitude of the society suggests that Claudio may go back on his marriage contract in case he does not get his wished dowry.

Moreover, it seems possible that had the law not been revived, Claudio would have remained silent about his marriage contract with Juliet, and only Juliet would have suffered the shame of fornication. He makes her pregnant without thinking of her honour. For him dowry seems to be more important than the honour of the woman whom he claims to be his would-be wife.

Thus, Claudio's prioritizing of dowry over his wife's honour proves him to be a typical patriarchal man who sees his wife as a source of dowry and sexual gratification. He is not sincere in his relationship with the woman whom he claims to be betrothed with.

When we examine Claudio's character in the light of the remarks made about him by Mistress Overdone, he seems to be not only insincere in his relationship with Juliet but also faithless to her. Actually, Mistress Overdone's remark - "there's one yonder arrested and carried to prison was worth five thousand of you all" (I. ii. 49-50) - indicates that Mistress Overdone has had an intimate relationship with him. This suggests that he has been visiting her brothel. Later on, her speech - "Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am customshrunken." (I.ii. 67-69) - indicates that because of Claudio's arrest she has lost at least one of her customers and on this ground, it can be believed that Claudio is not faithful to Juliet.

Thus, we find that in both the cases, whether Claudio is betrothed to Juliet or not, he is not faithful in his relationship with Juliet. If he is not her would-be husband, he has exploited her sexually and has treated her only as an object of sexual satisfaction. In case he is betrothed to Juliet, he is guilty at two levels. The first is that he sees his wife as a source of dowry, which means Juliet is incomplete without dowry. His love for dowry shows his patriarchal bent of mind, which tries to make women realise themselves inferior to men. The second guilt of Claudio is that he does not care for Juliet's honour. Without announcing his marriage contract with Juliet, he makes her pregnant which brings her to shame. Besides, his intimacy with Mistress Overdone shows his faithlessness to Juliet. In any case his relationship with Juliet projects him as a man who lacks feminist bearing.

## 2. CLAUDIO WITH ISABELLA

Claudio's patriarchal attitude is reflected not only through his relationship with Juliet but also through his desire to save his life even at the cost of his sister's honour. One can possibly sympathise with Claudio in his fear of death as D.R.C. Marsh notices (Marsh 38), but he cannot escape our contempt for desiring his sister to satisfy Angelo's lust. Seeing his effort to avoid the capital punishment even at the cost of his sister's shame, Bandana Sharma finds fault with him - "Having done a foolish deed, Claudio lacks the manliness to stand up to its consequences" (Sharma 41). She maintains that Claudio "fails in his dharma not only as a brother but even as a human being, in his inability to understand the shame of a young woman" (40). A.P. Rossiter also finds him selfish and unimaginative (Rossiter 61).

Actually, Claudio's desire to live at Isabella's sacrifice reveals not only his selfish nature but also his patriarchal attitude. Like a typical representative man of patriarchy, he seems to maintain that a woman should benefit her male relatives at all costs. He tries to coax Isabella persuading her emotionally to sacrifice her chastity in the interest of his life.

Sweet sister, let me live.  
What sin you do to save a brother's life,  
Nature dispenses with the deed so far  
That it becomes a virtue. (III. i. 133-136)

Claudio's attempt to lead Isabella into self-abnegation for his life reveals that he holds women as beings who should sacrifice themselves in the interest of their male relatives. He seems to reduce women to nothing. Claudio's biased attitude against women and treating them as secondary and inferior to men, gets exposed once again. Such a revelation of Claudio's character may make any feminist feel disgusted with him.

There is another instance available in the play which portrays Claudio as a man deserving our hatred. It is his viewing of Isabella as an object of men's desire. He says to Lucio:

... in her (Isabella's) 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. (I.ii.163-167)

It compels us to think how a brother could think of his sister as having a speechless dialect to move men, unless he himself was moved by it. Claudio is shown thinking of that aspect of his sister which would be the forbidden aspect in most brothers. As an Indian, I feel extremely disgusted that Claudio should look at his own sister as an object of desire for the appeasement of another man's desire. Perhaps Shakespeare wanted to arouse this disgust in his audiences.

It can be surmised that Claudio is a man reinforcing the patrilinear structure of power. He is a man with the patriarchal outlook, who sees women as no better than the objects to be used for men's requirements.

Though Shakespeare has shown Claudio reinforcing the patriarchal structure of society, it should not be thought that Shakespeare is a supporter of the masculine order of society. Actually, the moral weakness in Claudio does not let us accept that Shakespeare has projected Claudio as an ideal man. It is the feminist in Shakespeare that seems to have inspired him to create Claudio in the fashion he has done.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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