Marriage - Janet Adelman (essay date 1989)

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[*In the following essay, Adelman centers on Shakespeare's handling of the bed tricks in* All's Well That Ends Well *and* Measure for Measure *and examines the plays' depictions of marriage as a socialized legitimation of sexuality.*]

In the midst of Hamlet's attack on deceptive female sexuality, he cries out to Ophelia, "I say we will have no moe marriage" (3.1.147). *Hamlet* begins with the disrupted marriage of Hamlet's mother and father; by the end of the play both the potential marriage of Hamlet and Ophelia and the actual marriage of Claudius and Gertrude have been destroyed. This disruption of marriage is enacted again in the tragedies that follow immediately after *Hamlet;* the author of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Othello* seems to proclaim with Hamlet, "we will have no moe marriage." But the comedies written during this period—*All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*—end conventionally in marriage; in them Shakespeare was, I think, experimenting to discover by what means he might make marriage possible again.

Marriage rests on the legitimization of sexual desire within society; insofar as sexuality is felt to be illicit, marriage itself will be equivocal at best. As Hamlet proclaims the abolition of marriage, he repeatedly orders Ophelia to a nunnery (3.1.120-49). Here the double sense of nunnery as religious institution and bawdyhouse explicates perfectly the sexual alternatives left when marriage is abolished; or rather, it explicates the sexual alternatives—absolute chastity or absolute sexual degradation—that make the middle ground of marriage impossible. These are the sexual alternatives for the male protagonists of both problem comedies, where the middle is absent and sexual desire is felt only for the illicit. Bertram and Angelo are both presented as psychological virgins about to undergo their first sexual experience. In the course of their plays, we find that both can desire only when they imagine their sexuality as an illegitimate contamination of a pure woman, the conversion in effect of one kind of nun into the other. Both plays exploit this fantasy of contamination. The drama of the last scene in each play depends heavily on the sexual shaming of the supposedly violated virgins. The public naming of Diana as a "common gamester to the camp" (*All's Well That Ends Well,* 5.3.188); Lucio's comment that Mariana, who is "neither maid, widow, nor wife," may be a punk (*Measure for Measure,* 5.1.179-80) and his extended joke about who has handled, or could handle, Isabella privately (5.1.72-77); even Escalus's claim that he will "go darkly to work" with Isabella, a claim that Lucio promptly and predictably sexualizes (5.1.278-80)—all assume the instantaneous transformation of the virgin into the whore, the transformation implicit in Hamlet's double use of "nunnery." Though the contamination is apparently undone in these scenes insofar as the continuing status of Diana and Isabella as virgins is eventually revealed, these revelations do not undo the deeper fantasies of sexual contamination on which the plots rest; at the end, as at the beginning, male sexual desire is understood as desire for the illicit, desire to contaminate.

Since the impediment to the conventional festive ending in marriage in both comedies is thus the construction of male sexual desire itself, the ending turns on the attempt to legitimize sexual desire in marriage—an attempt

epitomized in both plays by the bed trick, in which the illicit desires of men are coercively directed back toward their socially sanctioned mates. (See Neely 1985, Kirsch 1981, and Wheeler 1981 for very similar accounts of the problem and the solution in both plays; of these, Neely and Kirsch tend to be more sanguine than I am about the effectiveness of the cure.) In the bed tricks in both plays the act imagined to have been deeply illicit is magically revealed as having been licit all along—but only at the expense of the male protagonists' sexual autonomy. Through a kind of homeopathic cure both Bertram and Angelo are allowed to enact fantasies of the sexual soiling of a virgin and are appropriately shamed for these fantasies, only to find out that their sexual acts have in fact been legitimate and that the soiling has taken place only in fantasy. Bertram and Angelo are thus saved from their own imaginations; presented with legitimate sexuality as a fait accompli, they can—or so we might hope—go on to accept the possibility that they have been tricked into: the possibility of sexuality within marriage. But given the status of the bed tricks as tricks and the characters' failure to provide much evidence that they have been transformed by them, our hope seems frail indeed and the marriages at the end of both plays remain equivocal. Moreover, because they so clearly betray the desires of the male protagonists, the bed tricks in both plays tend to become, not a vehicle for the working out of sexual impediments, but a forced and conspicuous metaphor for what needs working out.

Comparison with Shakespeare's source for *All's Well*—there is no bed trick in the sources for *Measure for Measure*—can help us to gauge the tonality of the bed trick in both plays. In *The Palace of Pleasure,* William Painter's translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (day 3, story 9), the bed trick is a rather well-mannered and genial affair, repeated often and with affection. We are specifically told that the count (equivalent to Bertram) "at his uprising in the morning … used many courteous and amiable words and gave divers fair and precious jewels" (Bullough 1958, 2:395). In both *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* the bed tricks are portrayed as one-night stands that the male protagonists have no desire to repeat—and not only, I think, for reasons of dramatic economy and credibility. Both Bertram and Angelo lose desire for their virgins as soon as they have ravished them; for both, apparently, the imagined act of spoiling virginity is the only source of sexual desire. In both plays the prohibition against speaking (*AWW,* 4.2.58; *MM,* 3.1.247) and the male recoil from the object of desire utterly transform the encounter reported in Painter, so that it becomes the epitome not only of the dark waywardness of desire but also of its depersonalization, the interchangeability of the bodies with which lust plays (*AWW,* 4.4.24-25). The potentially curative affectionate mutuality of the source is utterly absent: these bed tricks demonstrate the extent to which sexuality is a matter of deception on the one side and hit-and-run contamination on the other. They do not bode well as cures.

Insofar as the bed tricks represent sexuality in these plays, it is portrayed as deeply incompatible with the continuing relationship of marriage; the very trick that imports sexuality back into marriage reveals the incompatibility. In "Upon Some Verses of Virgil," an essay that some have found a source both for *Othello* and for *All's Well,* Montaigne registers a similar sense of incompatibility. (See Cavell 1979, 474, for *Othello* and Kirsch 1981, 122-27, for *All's Well;* I am particularly indebted to Kirsch's account.) Montaigne says, "Nor is it other then a kinde of incest, in this reverent alliance and sacred bond, to employ the effects and extravagant humor of an amorous licentiousness" (1928, 72). Here Montaigne seems to me to come very close to the psychological core of the "problem" that I find definitive of the problem comedies. When Montaigne registers his sense of the incompatibility between the sexual and the sacred by calling that incompatibility incest, he associates the soiling potentiality of sexuality with the prohibitions surrounding the male child's first fantasies of soiling a sacred space; insofar as marriage is felt as sacred, sexuality within it will replay those ancient fantasies and their attendant anxieties. Angelo's anguished self-questioning upon the discovery of his own desire reiterates powerfully the core of Montaigne's concern: "Having waste ground enough, / Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?" (*MM,* 2.2.169-71). For the male sexual imagination represented in both Bertram and Angelo, sexuality within marriage is, I think, an ultimately incestuous pollution of a sanctuary; they can desire only when they can imagine themselves safely enacting this pollution outside the familial context of marriage. In both plays, however, the very fact of sexuality binds one incestuously to family, so that all sexuality is ultimately felt as incestuous. I want to look at this incestuous potential within both plays and then to suggest the ways in which they finally seem to me to

undercut the accommodations to sexuality apparently achieved by their bed tricks.

The recoil from a sexuality felt as the soiling of a sacred space is split in two in *All's Well* and analyzed in two separate movements. Bertram's flight from, and slander of, Diana analyze his recoil from the woman felt as whore once his own sexuality has soiled her; even at the end of the play the deep shaming that Diana undergoes makes her the repository for his sense of taint. But the flight from Diana curiously echoes Bertram's earlier flight from Helena. This initial flight analyzes his aversion toward sexual union with a woman who is terrifying to him partly insofar as she is identified with a maternal figure and thus with the incestuous potential of sexuality. In the end, I shall argue, the splitting of the sexual object into the legitimate but abhorred Helena and the illegitimate but desired Diana will be undone as Helena and Diana begin to fuse; their fusion will serve the deepest of the play's sexual paradoxes. But before the end Diana seems the solution to the problem created by Helena: the problem of sexuality within a familial context.

Bertram's initial flight from Helena is phrased in terms that suggest a flight from this familial context. Here, too, Shakespeare's management of his source emphasizes issues central to the play: the figure of the Countess and the crucial association of her with Helena are his additions to Boccaccio/Painter. *All's Well* begins with the image of a son separating from his mother, seeking a new father (1.1.5-7) and new possibilities for manhood elsewhere. The formation of a new sexual relationship in marriage is ideally the emblem of this separation from the family of origin and hence of independent manhood. But marriage with Helena cannot serve this function, both because of the association of her with Bertram's mother—an association so close that Bertram's only words to her before their enforced marriage are a parenthesis within his farewell to his mother (“Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, / And make much of her” [1.1.77-78])—and because she becomes the choice of his surrogate father. Marriage to her would thus be a sign of his bondage to the older generation rather than of his growing independence. In Richard Wheeler's brilliant account of the play—an account to which this discussion is much indebted—Bertram's flight from Helena and his attraction to a woman decidedly outside the family structure become intelligible as attempts to escape the dominion of the infantile family (Wheeler 1981, especially 40-45; see also Kirsch 1981, 141, and Neely 1985, 70-71).

Bertram's exchange with the king suggests the extent to which marriage with Helena threatens to obliterate necessary distinctions between father and son, mother and wife:

KING:

Thou know'st she has rais'd me from my sickly bed.

BERTRAM:

But follows it, my lord, to bring me down

Must answer for your raising? I know her well;

She had her breeding at my father's charge—

A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain

Rather corrupt me ever!

(2.3.111-16)

Bred by his father, Helena is virtually his sister. Moreover, she becomes in the king's words virtually a surrogate mother. Lafew's reference to himself as a pander (“I am Cressid's uncle, / That dare leave two together” [2.1.97-98]) and the earlier sexualization of “araise” (2.1.76) combine to make the sexualization of

the king's “she has raised me from my sickly bed” almost inevitable here (see Wheeler 1981, 75-76, and Kirsch 1981, 135). Bertram imagines himself sexually brought down by the woman who has raised up his surrogate father (see Neely 1985, 70). Beneath his social snobbery, I think we can hear a hint of the ruin threatened should Bertram become sexually allied with his surrogate father's imagined sexual partner. The escape from the parents' choice thus becomes in part an escape from the incestuous potential involved in marriage to a woman who is allied to his mother not only by their loving association but also by her position as fantasied sexual partner of his surrogate father. Bertram's response to the king suggests his terror at losing the social and familial distinctions that guarantee identity, distinctions protected by the incest taboo. His terror is unlikely to be assuaged when the king answers him by denying the distinction between Helena's blood and his: “Strange is it that our bloods, / Of color, weight, and heat, pour'd all together, / Would quite confound distinction” (2.3.118-20). Bertram's fear is, I think, exactly that the mingling of bloods (see *The Winter's Tale,* 1.2.109) in his sexual union with Helena would confound distinction.

Bertram faces an impossible dilemma: he must leave his family to become a man, and yet he can take his full place as a man in this society only insofar as he can be reconciled with his mother and the king, hence with the woman they have chosen for him. Moreover, the play insists on the full impossibility of the task facing Bertram by emphasizing at once the distance between him and his father and the social expectation that he will turn out to be like his father. From the first, Bertram's manhood is the subject of anxious speculation on the part of his mother and the king, speculation expressed in the desire that he be like his father in moral parts as well as in shape (1.1.61-62; 1.2.21-22). For them—hence for the ruling society of the play—manhood is defined as living up to one's father, in effect becoming him. Bertram himself unwittingly plays into this definition: he will accept the validity of the marriage only when Helena can show him “a child begotten of thy body that I am father to” (3.2.58-59). This stipulation in effect makes his own achievement of paternity the condition of his resumption of adult status in France: he can become a man only by becoming his father, and he becomes his father only by assuming his role *as father*—by becoming a father himself. But if paternity is imagined as becoming one's own father, then one's sexual partner again takes on the resonance of one's mother. The social world of the play and his own fantasy of himself as father finally allow Bertram his place as a man only insofar as he can form a sexual alliance with the woman he and the play identify with his mother. The route toward manhood takes Bertram simultaneously away from the mother and toward her; hence the incestuous double bind in which Bertram finds himself.

Given Bertram's association of Helena both with his mother and with his surrogate father's sexuality, we can begin to make sense of both the impossible conditions Bertram sets for Helena: the act by which Helena simultaneously makes Bertram a father and gets his father's ring is, I think, a fantasized replication of the act of parental intercourse by which Bertram himself was bred. Hence the complex logic governing the exchange of rings in the dark: Bertram's father's ring is given unawares to Helena, the mother's choice, and the ring taken from Helena turns out to have been the father king's. Even here, when poor Bertram thinks that he has escaped his family, the exchange of rings is in effect between father and mother; in the last scene the ring play turns out to have been a symbolic sexual exchange between surrogate parental figures. (On the sexualization of the rings see Adams 1961, 268-69.) In attempting to define his manhood by locating it elsewhere, Bertram thus finds himself returned to his mother's choice; flee as he might, there is no escaping Helena. Indeed, in its portrayal of Helena the play seems to me to embody a deep ambivalence of response toward the mother who simultaneously looks after us and threatens our independence. Astonishing both for her willfulness and her self-abnegation, simultaneously far below Bertram's sphere and far above it, apparently all-powerful in her weakness, present even when Bertram thinks most that he has escaped her, triumphantly proclaiming her maternity at the end, Helena becomes the epitome of the invisible maternal power that binds the child, especially the male child, who here discovers that she is always the woman in his bed.

Insofar as *All's Well* splits the sexually desired woman from the maternally taboo one, the project it sets for itself in reinstituting marriage is to legitimize desire, to import it back into the sacred family bonds. The bed trick is, as I have suggested, an attempt at such importation. But the bed trick as Shakespeare presents it here

fails to detoxify or legitimize sexuality; instead it tends to make even legitimate sexuality illicit in fantasy, a "wicked meaning in a lawful deed" (3.7.45-47). Despite Shakespeare's apparent attempt to rescue sexuality here, he seems incapable in this play of imagining any sexual consummation—legitimate or illegitimate—that is not mutually defiling. Musing on the bed trick that technically legitimizes sexuality, Helena makes this sense of mutual defilement nearly explicit:

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                    But, O, strange men,
That can such sweet use make of what they hate,
When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts
Defiles the pitchy night.
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(4.4.21-24)

It's very hard to say just what is defiling what here. The sexual interchange itself is replaced in Helena's words by a defiling interchange between "saucy trusting" and "pitchy night," in which "saucy trusting" seems to stand in for Bertram's part and "pitchy night" for Helena's. We might imagine that the defilement here is the consequence of Bertram's belief that he is committing an illicit act; but in fact Helena suggests that the very trusting to deception that legitimizes the sexual act is the agent of defilement. The defilement thus seems to be the consequence of the act itself, not of its status as legitimate or illegitimate. Moreover, in her odd condensation of night, the bed, and her own apparently defiled body, Helena seems to assume the mutual defilement attendant on this act. In the interchange, Bertram/trust defiles Helena/night. But the night itself is "pitchy"; and as Shakespeare's frequent use reminds us, pitch defiles (see, for example, *Much Ado About Nothing,* 3.3.57, *Love's Labor's Lost,* 4.3.3, and *1 Henry IV,* 2.4.413). Bertram thus defiles that which is already defiled and that which defiles him in turn; that is, in the process of trying to sort out legitimacy and defilement, the play here reveals its sense of the marriage bed as both defiled and defiling. The bed trick thus works against itself by locating the toxic ingredient in sexuality and then replicating rather than removing its toxicity.

It is, moreover, revealing that both the sexual act and the bed tend to disappear in Helena's account, the one replaced by the mental process of trusting to deception, the other by the pitchy night. The sexual act at the center of *All's Well* is absent; its place in our imagination is taken by the process of working out the deception. One consequence of this exchange is the suggestion that mistrust and deception are at the very root of the sexual act, as though the man is always tricked, defiled, and shamed there, as though to engage in sexual union is always to put oneself into the manipulative power of women. At the same time, the disappearance of the sexual act in Helena's musing on the bed trick points toward the larger disappearance of the sexual act enabled by the bed trick. Ultimately, that is, the bed trick in *All's Well* seems to me as much a part of a deep fantasy of escape from sexuality as it is an attempt to bring the married couple together; as its consequences are unraveled in the last scene, it allows for a renewed fantasy of the flight from sexuality even while it seems to be a means of enabling and legitimizing sexual union.

Just before Helena appears in the last scene, Diana says, "He knows himself my bed he hath defil'd, / And at that time he got his wife with child" (5.3.300-301). In effect she separates the mental from the physical components of the sexual act, Bertram's intentions from his actual deed, ascribing the shame and soil to herself and the pregnancy to Helena. This split in part explains the insistence on Diana's shame in the last scene; her words here identify her role as substitute strumpet, the figure onto whom Bertram and the play can displace the sense of sexuality as defilement, thus protecting Helena from taint. The structure of the last scene is calculated to replicate the magical legitimization of sexuality in the bed trick insofar as it substitutes the pure Helena for the shamed Diana in our imaginations; we are put through the process of imagining a defiling sexual contact with Diana and then released from that image by the magical reappearance of Helena. (Hence, I think, the lengthy insistence on the mutual shame of Diana and Bertram, which is not strictly necessary for the plot.) But in the process of repudiating the taint attaching to sexuality, the last scene enables a fantasy

repudiating sexuality itself. As Diana begins the process of repudiating her shame, the sexual act is done and then undone in our imaginations as the ring—emblematic of the sexual encounter—is given ("this was it I gave him, being a-bed" [5.3.228]) and ungiven ("I never gave it him" [5.3.276]). The business of the ring makes this portion of the last scene into a ritual of doing and undoing, from which the soiled Diana emerges purified, not a "strumpet" but a "maid" (5.3.290-93). Diana's last words—the riddle to which the appearance of Helena is the solution—again hint at this ritual of doing and undoing: in substituting the pregnant wife for the defiled bed—"he knows himself my bed he hath defil'd, / And at that time he got his wife with child"—Diana comes close to making the bed itself disappear, as though the act of impregnating did not take place in that bed at all. Her words suggest the almost magical quality of the act by which Bertram impregnates Helena: defiling one woman, he impregnates another. The pregnancy is thus presented as the result of Bertram's copulation with Diana, as though the child were Helena's by a magical transference through which Diana gets the taint and Helena gets the child.

Diana's riddle reinterprets the bed trick in effect as an act split into a defiling contact and a miraculous conception. As the defiled bed disappears, the sexual act itself seems to vanish, to become as imaginary as Bertram's knowledge of defilement. The stress throughout the scene has been on the undoing of the sexual act rather than on conception. In the logic of fantasy here, I think that the sexual act has not happened at all, not with Diana and not with Helena. The prestidigitation expressed in Diana's riddle brings the promised birth of Helena's child as close to a virgin birth as the facts of the case will allow. The sense of miracle that greets Helena's return is not wholly a consequence of her apparent return from the dead; it also derives partly from the apparently miraculous conception that Diana's riddle points toward. At the end Helena can thus assume her new status as wife and mother without giving up her status as miraculous virgin; she can simultaneously cure through her sexuality and remain absolutely pure. This simultaneity should seem familiar to us: it in fact rules the presentation of Helena's cure of the king, where her miraculous power depends equally on her status as heavenly maid and on the sexuality that could "araise King Pippen" (2.1.76). (See Neely's fine discussion of Helena's various roles, 1985, especially 65-70.) The play asks us nearly from the beginning to see Helena both as a miraculous virgin and as a deeply sexual woman seeking her will: thus the early dialogue with Parolles, in which we see her meditating both on how to defend her virginity and on how to lose it to her liking (1.1.110-51). Helena's two roles are ultimately the reflection of the impossible desire for a woman who can have the powers simultaneously of Venus and of Diana—who can in effect be both Venus and Diana, both generative sexual partner and sacred virgin. (Adams [1961, 262-64] finds the desire possible insofar as procreation legitimizes sexuality.) This is the fantasy articulated in Helena's re-creation of the Countess's youth, when "your Dian / Was both herself and Love" (1.3.212-13). The role of the character Diana should ultimately be understood in this context. As Helena chooses Bertram at court, she imagines herself shifting allegiance from Diana to Venus (2.3.74-76). The emergence of the character Diana shortly after Helena renounces her allegiance to the goddess Diana suggests the complexity of the role that Diana plays: if Bertram can vest his sense of sexuality as soiling in her, Helena can also vest her virginity in her. Both as the repository of soil and as the preserver of virginity, she functions as a split-off portion of Helena herself: hence, I think, the ease with which her status as both maid and no maid transfers to Helena in the end. Both in the bed trick and in the larger psychic structures that it serves, Helena can thus become Venus and reincorporate Diana into herself.

The buried fantasy of Helena as Venus/Diana, as secular virgin mother, is the play's pyrrhic solution to the problem of legitimizing sexuality, relocating it within a sacred familial context. The solution is pyrrhic insofar as it legitimizes sexuality partly by wishing it away; it enables the creation of familial bonds without the fully imagined experience of sexuality. But this is exactly what Bertram has told us he wants. The impossible condition that Helena must meet stipulates that she can be his wife only when she can prove herself a virgin mother, that is, prove that she is with child by him without his participation in the sexual act. This condition suggests that she can be safely his only when she can remove sexuality from the establishment of the family and hence sanctify and purify the family itself. The slippery riddle of the bed trick satisfies this condition both for Bertram and for the audience: he knows he has not had sexual relations with Helena; and we have watched

the sexual act be defined out of existence in the last scene. Here sexuality can be allowed back into the family only through a fantasy that enables its denial: the potentially incestuous contact with Helena is muted not by denying her association with his mother but by denying the sexual nature of the contact. The fantasy of Helena as virgin mother thus allows Bertram to return to his mother and surrogate father; he can now accept his mother's choice and achieve paternity safely, in effect becoming his father without having had to be husband to his wife/mother.

In the multiple fantasies of *All's Well* the marriage can be consummated only insofar as Bertram can imagine himself as defiling a virgin or insofar as the act itself is nearly defined out of existence, so that it becomes a fact without act as it becomes a sin without sin, a “wicked meaning in a lawful deed, / And lawful meaning in a lawful act, / Where both not sin and yet a sinful fact” (3.7.45-47). Despite the overt attempt to make sexuality curative, suspicion of sexuality remains the dominant emotional fact of the play. Even here, where Shakespeare attempts Pandarus-like to bring two together, we are left with a sense of failure about the sexual act itself and with a final queasiness about the getting of children.

It is no accident that the unborn child of *All's Well,* who epitomizes the attempt to bring sexual desire back into the bonds of the family, reappears at the start of *Measure for Measure* as the product of an illicit union, the sign of sin that condemns its parents by proclaiming their sexuality publicly. The transformation of the pregnant Helena into the pregnant Juliet is diagnostic of the relation between the two plays: the sexual queasiness that lies behind Bertram's flight from both Helena and Diana is given much fuller expression in *Measure for Measure,* with the consequence that the getting of children is the problem, not the purported solution. Here the bed trick cures nothing: it is technically necessary to the plot but carries no emotional weight because no curative power is vested in sexuality. The sexuality presented queasily as a forced cure in *All's Well* has here become a death sentence, whether by Angelo's restitution of the law or by the disease that seems its inevitable attendant. In this play's curious literalization of the Elizabethan pun on “die” that identifies death and orgasm, sexuality is the original sin that brings death into this world (see Skura's brilliant discussion of the pun and the association of sexual intercourse and death in *Measure for Measure,* 1981, especially 260-66). Here Claudio, Angelo, and Lucio are all condemned to die for their participation in sexuality; and they are saved, not by the machinations of a curatively sexual woman, but by those of a sternly asexual man.

The very distinction between licit and illicit sexuality on which *All's Well* seems to depend has broken down here, at least until Mariana appears halfway through the play; as this world is initially presented to us, all sexuality is illicit. After we have met Mariana, the play works hard to reinforce the distinction that has been obliterated, in effect to clear a space for legitimate sexuality. Hence the Duke's assurance that the sexual union of Angelo and Mariana is legal and no sin, despite its resemblance to the sin of Claudio and Juliet. But the very insistence of his assurance—an assurance that he feels compelled to give although Mariana shows no signs of needing it—should remind us that this apparently crucial distinction would be apt to disappear, and not just in the minds of modern audiences, were it not insisted on. The degree to which modern scholars differ in assigning degrees of legitimacy to the two relationships suggests the flimsiness of the distinction (see, for example, Ranald 1979, 77-79, and Nagarajan 1963, 116-18; Nuttall wisely dissolves the distinction [1975, 52-53]). When the Duke condemns the means by which Pompey supports himself, for example, legality or illegality does not seem to be the chief issue:

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                                        say to thyself,
From their abominable and beastly touches
I drink, I eat, [array] myself and live.
Canst thou believe thy living is a life,
So stinkingly dependent?
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(3.2.23-27)

Richard Wheeler has pointed out that the hatred of the body here is very close to the hatred the Duke expresses in his advice to Claudio (1981, 122); this hatred is prior to, and independent of, the degree of legality of either of their actions. For both men “all th' accommodations that thou bear'st / Are nurs'd by baseness” (3.1.14-15). The Duke's question to Pompey—“Can thou believe thy living is a life, / So stinkingly dependent”—reiterates his question to Claudio, “What's yet in this / That bears the name of life?” (3.1.38-39). For all life is nursed by baseness, stinkingly dependent on the fact of our conception. No wonder the baby Juliet carries is not a hope for the future but “the sin you carry” (2.3.19), the emblem of a life so stinkingly dependent; no wonder the bed trick in *Measure for Measure* is written, as it were, from the point of view of Diana, designed to preserve virginity, not to consummate sexual union.

The identification of the baby as “the sin you carry” confounds the act with the product of the act; like the Duke's speech to Pompey, it reveals a fundamental discomfort with the facts of human conception. I have argued that Bertram's return to Helena in *All's Well* is empowered partly by the fantasy that she is a secular virgin mother who enables the formation of family without sexual bonds. The desire to escape from sexuality expressed covertly in this fantasy is much more overtly the subject of *Measure for Measure,* where the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella all proclaim their exemption from ordinary sexual processes and where the attempt to establish a nonsexual family of spiritual fathers, brothers, and sisters is transparent in the plot. But this desire—permitted in fantasy in *All's Well*—is punished in *Measure for Measure.* Angelo and Isabella are brought face to face with their own sexuality and in effect made to acknowledge their place in the human family; the extremity of their self-exposure—both to themselves and to us as witnesses—seems in fact their punishment for the fantasies they embody. *All's Well* urges Bertram toward sexuality within the family and ultimately allows for a fantasy of escape from that sexuality; *Measure for Measure* enables the fantasy of escape from sexuality into a nonsexual family and then punishes the bearers of that fantasy.

The fantasy of escape from sexuality is most violently expressed and punished in the person of Angelo; the explosive rigidities of his sexual imagination are at the center of the play. These rigidities are embodied in the very geography of the city (see Berry 1976/77, 147-48): the battle within him between fierce repression of sexual desire and equally fierce outbursts of degrading and degraded desire is given a local habitation and a name in the geography that separates nunnery and brothel. The play begins with the order to raze the brothels (the spatial equivalent of beheading Claudio), but the central action imagined in it is instead the razing of the nunnery, the violation of sacred space in the person of Isabella. And this violation is the spur to Angelo's desire: “Having waste ground enough, / Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?” (2.2.169-71). The “strumpet, / With all her double vigor, art and nature” (2.2.182-83) could not tempt him because for him desire is necessarily the ravishing of a saint—a ravishing that collapses the distinction between brothel and nunnery as it transforms the sanctuary itself into a brothel/privy polluted by the evil of his own bodily wastes. The attempt to escape from sexuality by isolating the sanctuary from the brothel thus ends by bringing the two violently together. The violence of this conjunction is, I think, the consequence of the violence with which Angelo's imagination had initially split nunnery and brothel apart; it allows for no middle ground, no moated grange, no place for legitimate sexuality within marriage. This violence is translated into Angelo's violence toward the person of Isabella (see Wheeler 1981, 100). His words to her—“Be that you are, / That is a woman; if you be more, you're none” (2.4.134-35)—suggest a punitive need on his part to prove all women the same, all equally subject to soil, and so to undo the psychic geography of brothel and nunnery that governs him so rigidly. For if she agrees to his demand, she demonstrates in effect that there was never a sanctuary, that the place he imagined polluting was already polluted. The terms of Angelo's desire—his fantasy of polluting the sanctuary—thus virtually dictate the creation of Isabella as a nun to be violated.

Measure for Measure implies that Angelo will be fully human only when he can accept his own bodily condition. The fantasy of a life without human sexual ties is from the first vested in Angelo; the play sets out to test the claim that Angelo does not have an ordinary human body with ordinary human needs, that his “blood / Is very snow-broth” (1.4.57-58), his urine “congeal'd ice” (3.2.110-11). The figure of Angelo is the locus classicus in Shakespeare for the fantasy of escape from the consequences of original sin, escape from

the act of parental sexuality by which one was engendered. Near the center of the play Lucio specifically associates Angelo's apparent exemption from human passion with an exemption from “this downright way of creation”:

LUCIO:

They say this Angelo was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation. Is it tr

DUKE:

How should he be made then?

LUCIO:

Some report a sea-maid spawn'd him; some, that he was begot between two stock-fishes.

(3.2.104-9)

In Lucio's fantasy, Angelo's life is not nursed by baseness, not stinkingly dependent; the Duke's unusual willingness to participate in Lucio's joke, even to entertain for a moment the possibility of an alternative means of creation, marks the centrality of this fantasy in the creation of Angelo.


Robert Glenister as Duke Vincentio, Clare Holman as Isabella, Cathryn Bradshaw as Mariana, and Stephen Boxer as Angelo in Act V, scene i of Measure for Measure.

The violent extremity with which Angelo is portrayed, as well as the violence of the shame to which he is reduced, is evidence of his status as scapegoat—evidence, that is, of Shakespeare's vindictiveness toward the bearer of this impossible fantasy. For the play sets out to demonstrate ruthlessly the observe of the fantasy expressed here: insofar as Angelo proves himself sexual, he demonstrates that he has inherited the sin of his origins; he becomes in effect the sin his mother carried. This conjunction dictates the terms in which Angelo expresses his awareness of his own violent sexuality: “In my heart the strong and swelling evil / Of my conception” (2.4.6-7). Through his pun on “conception” his desire to raze the sanctuary becomes linked with his pressing acknowledgement of the downright way he was conceived: in feeling sexual desire for the first time, he feels the damning presence of the act of parental sexuality that conceived him. The pun moreover suggests that his sexuality feels to him like the reduplication of maternal as well as paternal sexuality. “Strong and swelling” initially seems to carry the weight of his new-felt phallic potency. But the pun on “conception” reinterprets this phrase, making it into an implicit reference to pregnancy, as though he feels himself identified with his mother, female and soiled, pregnant with his own sexuality (see Sundelson 1983, 71-72, on Angelo's fear of becoming female). The sanctuary razed is thus associated with the maternal body; Angelo's sexual conception reiterates the soiling of that body by reduplicating its pregnancy in himself.

For Angelo sexuality is the inherited sin of conception; the curative attempt of the play is thus to reconcile Angelo literally to the necessities of original sin. Hence the logic by which Angelo is brought to face his own sexuality in a garden—a garden, moreover, anatomically linked with the female genitalia (see Desai 1977, 490;

Berry 1976/77, 151). In his reliving of the fall, he imaginatively reenters the female body, the origin from which he had seemed to claim exemption; he is thus brought to face the sin of origin. The death sentence that is the consequence of this fall is the outward sign of Angelo's subjection to mortality and the appropriate punishment for his original sin.

As Angelo articulates his sexual conception, he places it in apposition to the figure of the strong and distant father whom that conception betrays:

> 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.

(2.4.2-7)

This apposition suggests another of the splits that rule Angelo: the spiritual father is here removed from the female realm of sexuality, the heart in which the swelling conceptions take place. This father is realized for Angelo in the figure of the Duke; hence the ease with which he identifies his unseen observation with that of "pow'r divine" (5.1.369). The Duke is in effect the distant heavenly father who returns to judge; like all mankind, Angelo is rescued from the consequences of his original sin only by the mercy of that father. But that mercy is dependent on the key figure of Mariana, who alone of the play's characters can experience desire without a sense of contamination (see Neely's fine discussion, 1985, 96-98). Mariana's hope that Angelo's confrontation with his own sexuality will have cured him—her wonderfully wistful "Best men are moulded out of faults" (5.1.439)—is at the heart of the play's curative attempt. The play on *fault/foutre* throughout (see, for example, 2.1.40 and 2.2.138) should enable us to hear the fullness of the hope expressed here: not only that Angelo may be improved by the confrontation with his specifically sexual faults, not only that he will be able to tolerate his own sexuality as the legacy of the *fault/foutre* that molded him, but that the sin of origin is the common ground of human goodness. (See Hyman's view that life can come only out of shame and vice, 1975, especially 12.) "Best men are moulded out of faults," Mariana finally implies, because in the downright way of creation, that is the only way men are molded at all.

Despite the play's drive toward cure, the hope embodied in Mariana is frail. She herself is introduced into the plot only when the bed trick needs her; she never becomes a fully realized figure. Moreover, the bed trick itself remains imaginatively unrealized for the audience and of dubious value for Angelo himself. Even after Angelo finds that he has bedded his virtual wife, even after their marriage ceremony is performed, he is so filled with self-loathing and shame that he craves "death more willingly than mercy" (5.1.476), a condition from which the mere fact that Claudio is alive seems unlikely to rescue him. Nothing in the end of the play has the imaginative force of Angelo's confrontation with Isabella; that confrontation, rather than the hope vested in Mariana, is likely to remain definitive of sexuality for Angelo and, through him, for the audience.

I have suggested that the vision of sexuality expressed through Angelo virtually creates Isabella as a sanctuary to be violated. But we respond to Isabella not simply as an icon in a male fantasy about sexuality but also as a vividly and independently alive character with fantasies of her own. In fact the encounter of Angelo and Isabella is so explosive in part because the fantasies each embodies mesh so well. Isabella's initial flight to the nunnery and her desire for more restrictions there tell us that she, like Angelo, wishes to be exempt from ordinary human sexuality and from the ordinary bonds so engendered. When Angelo asks her to embrace female frailty by "putting on the destin'd livery" (2.4.138), he allows us to understand that this is precisely the livery Isabella had hoped to escape by putting on the livery of the nun. In effect the religious community frees her both from sexuality and from the bonds of the sexual family, working to establish a new family for her, remaking the original family relationships in a spiritual family in which *sister, brother, father* are free

from the taint of sexuality. The play tests her commitment to her two kinds of sisterhood (see, for example, 2.2.19-21 and 2.4.18) and ultimately stresses the primacy of the natural, rather than the religious, bond. But at the same time it provides her with a spiritual and purified father in the form of the Duke and resolves the crisis of sexuality only in his presence. In the figure of Isabella the play thus simultaneously tests and enables the fantasy of the asexual family.

Like Angelo, Isabella seems to understand her own frailty by reference to the act of parental conception. She responds to Angelo's assertion that women are frail with a hysteria that voices an underground fantasy in which hereditary participation in the downright way of creation binds women to their fate as sexual beings:

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ANGELO:

Nay, women are frail too.

ISABELLA:

Ay, as the glasses where they view themselves,

Which are as easy broke as they make forms.

Women? Help heaven! men their creation mar

In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail.
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(2.4.124-28)

Her conventional comment on women's vanity merges with her condemnation of the fragility of women in their ordinary reproductive role: both mirrors and women “make forms”; both are frail. Women are broken, she implies, in the process of making forms. This acknowledgment of women's role in making forms seems to call up its opposite, a brief fantasy of an all-male and presumably nonsexual creation; the extent to which Isabella entertains this male fantasy can be gauged by the fact that she goes on to imagine this all-male creation as spoiled by concourse with women. This is the fantasy that Posthumus will articulate more clearly when he asks, “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?” (*Cymbeline,* 2.5.1-2); as Isabella articulates it, the fantasy becomes one more version of the Fall, the spoiling of male creation by women. And in imagining this creation, she conspicuously marks the passage from *them* to *us,* acknowledging herself as one of the polluting women. The pronoun sequence suggests that her implicit meditation on the downright way of creation has brought home to her her own involvement in female frailty, the inescapability of the female sexuality that is an inheritance from mother to daughter. *All's Well That Ends Well* twice invokes such an inheritance (“To speak on the part of virginity is to accuse your mothers” [1.1.136-37]; “now you should be as your mother was / When your sweet self was got” [4.2.9-10]). Isabella's assumption of frailty seems to work by the same logic. The very facts of conception threaten to bind her to her nature as a sexual being; Isabella's participation in sexuality is an extension of her mother's frailty—the frailty that she manifested in conceiving her.

If we follow Isabella through this fantasy, we can begin to understand more clearly the passionate terms in which she responds to Claudio's pleas that she save his life by agreeing to Angelo's proposition:

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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? What should I think?
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(3.1.137-39)

Why incest? I think we first understand her response as invoking the brother-sister incest that figured in *All's Well.* Insofar as Isabella is identified with Juliet, both by her reference to their childhood interchanging of names (1.4.45-48) and by Angelo's explicit attempt to persuade her to do what Juliet has done (“such sweet uncleanness / As she that he hath stain'd” [2.4.54-55]), even the union of Claudio and Juliet may carry incestuous overtones. Moreover, the play persistently promotes the identification of Angelo himself with Claudio insofar as it asks Angelo to find a like guiltiness in himself (see 2.1.8-16 and 2.2.64-66, 136-41). It is in fact in response to Isabella's invocation of this identification that Angelo first feels desire, a desire signaled by his abruptly telling Isabella to leave (2.2.66) or attempting to leave himself (2.2.143). (Many have commented on the dynamics of this encounter. See, for example, Charney; Rosenberg 1972, 54-57; and Levin 1982, 262-63.) If Angelo is in fantasy identified with Claudio, then sexual commerce between Angelo and Isabella would again evoke the threat of brother-sister incest. Nonetheless, Isabella's language suggests that the primary act of incest imagined here is not between brother and sister. Both “Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?” with its pun on *vice* (see Wheeler 1981, 111) and “to take life / From thine own sister's shame” imagine Claudio born from Isabella, born from the shame or vice that is her sexuality. Purchasing Claudio's life at the price of sexual commerce with Angelo would make her into Claudio's mother in the act of engendering him (Wheeler 1981, 111; see also Reid 1970, 279). By replicating this act, the monstrous bargain with Angelo would not only insist that Isabella is the inheritor of her mother's frailty; it would also force Isabella to take her mother's place in a fantasied act of incest with her father, from which her brother Claudio would be made a man.

This fantasy may dictate Isabella's violent dissociation of her father from the act of engendering Claudio; immediately after she has called the act incestuous, she adds:

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                                        What should I think?
Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair!
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issu'd from his blood.
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(3.1.139-42)

Her poignant “What should I think?” suggests the extent to which the saving idea of her mother's infidelity serves a defensive function, removing her father from the act she imagines herself replicating. The removal of the father from sexuality here seems to me central to an understanding of the Duke's relation to Isabella and hence of his place in the play. Like Angelo, Isabella invokes a spiritual father removed from sexuality precisely at the moment that sexuality becomes most troublesome; and again like Angelo, that father eventually is embodied in the person of the Duke. We can follow this process of embodiment more clearly if we follow the fantasy that mediates the Duke's first appearance to Isabella as spiritual father in act 3, scene 1. In act 2, scene 4, Isabella steels herself against Angelo's proposal in part by imagining her brother's “mind of honor” that would gladly prefer his own death to his sister's pollution (2.4.179-83). When he in fact speaks with the voice that she imagines there, he is fully his father's son, speaking with his father's voice: “There spake my brother; there my father's grave / Did utter forth a voice” (3.1.85-86). Insofar as her brother's willingness to die protects her from sexuality, he is her father's son and speaks with his voice. But as soon as his desire for life threatens her exemption from sexuality, he becomes radically his mother's child, the product of her sexual betrayal of his father (see Wheeler 1981, 114). He can be the voice of his father only insofar as he protects Isabella from sexuality. When that protection fails, he ceases to be his father's son: he “ne'er issu'd from his blood.” This act of dissociation frees her father from sexuality just as the protection of Claudio as father-brother fails her—and the Duke appears to her magically as a nonsexual father protector within ten lines. Indeed, when Claudio had proclaimed his willingness to die, he had in fact been speaking with the voice of this father: it is of course the Duke who has just taught him his (temporary) willingness to die. The Duke as friar is, I am suggesting, the embodiment of the fantasied asexual father who will protect Isabella from her own sexuality: it is striking that Isabella calls him “good father” (3.1.238, 269) only after he offers her a way

to save Claudio while maintaining her exemption from sexuality, thus enabling her to avoid the destined livery.

The appearance of the Duke-friar as a protective brother-father thus answers Isabella's need for a safe asexual family: hence the shock and dismay with which many audiences respond to his proposal of marriage. The Duke who has protected Isabella from sexuality now invites, or perhaps coerces, her participation in it; given both the ease with which the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate sexuality breaks down in this play and the suddenness with which the sainted Duke, like the sainted Angelo, announces his desire, his proposal threatens disturbingly to reiterate Angelo's. (Many others note this kinship; see, for example, Levin 1982, 259-60, and Berry 1976/77, 153.) His proposal thus focuses all the ambivalence about sexuality in the play: is it an attempt to escape from the rigidity of nunnery and brothel by carving out an area of legitimate sexuality, or is it one more attempt to invade the sanctuary?

The Duke's marriage proposal follows from the attempt in the bed trick to legitimize sexuality and hence to work toward the expected comic conclusion of marriage. But the concluding marriage suggest that the attempt fails: for Angelo and Lucio, and perhaps for Claudio, marriage is not a matter of comic festivity but a punishment for a sexual sin. (In the context of these marriages it makes sense to ask what sin in Isabella the Duke proposes to punish by marriage.) Distrust of sexuality remains so great that we are not allowed to see the reunion on stage of the one potentially happy couple, Claudio and Juliet. Even after sexual soil has been shifted from Isabella to Mariana and then removed from her by the revelation of her virtual marriage to Angelo, a sense of sexual disease persists. Our uneasiness with the final marriage proposal reiterates our uneasiness with the Duke's role throughout: though he directs both Isabella's and Angelo's accommodation to sexuality (see Kirsch's excellent discussion, 1981, 80-89), his own relation to sexuality is deeply problematic. (Uneasiness with the Duke, especially with his sexuality, is now a critical commonplace. See, for example, Levin 1982 and Paris 1981 throughout; Berry 1976/77, 152-59; Rosenberg 1972, 61-71; and Sundelson 1983, 98-100.) In the person of the Duke the play pulls in two directions at once: even while Shakespeare apparently uses him to reconcile the others to their own human nature, he reincarnates a fantasy of escape from that nature, becoming fully an “ungenitur'd agent” (3.2.174) just as Angelo is made to give up that status. Even at the beginning he disdains “the dribbling dart of love” (1.3.2) with an intensity that nearly rivals Angelo's, but he is spared the testing that Angelo must undergo. In his brilliant discussion of *Measure for Measure* Richard Wheeler suggests persuasively that Shakespeare preserves Vincentio as an ideal figure by displacing “conflict away from [him] and into the world around him”; “Shakespeare … uses Angelo as a scapegoat who suffers in his person the consequences of a conflict Vincentio is thereby spared” (Wheeler 1981, 133, 138). The Duke tells Angelo, “Be thou at full ourself” (1.1.43); and while Angelo enacts the conflicts of the Duke's sexual self, the Duke escapes into the role of friar, the unproblematically “ghostly father” (4.3.48, 5.1.126). In effect, the Duke splits into two figures, the sexual Angelo and the asexual friar. But this split replicates the very split in Angelo—between sexuality and absolute purity, the brothel and the sanctuary—that the play seems designed to cure (see Wheeler 1981, 139). Insofar as the cure rests on the invisible and all-seeing presence of the Duke as asexual ghostly father, the cure replicates the disease. (See Skura 1981, 252-54, for another account of the way in which the cure replicates the disease.)

The Duke's attempt to undo Angelo's psychic structure through the bed trick is only marginally successful because that psychic structure is too deeply embedded in the emotional geography of the play, as in the Duke himself. The rigidity of the psychic structure that would like to exclude sexuality altogether (or at least place it safely beyond bounds, outside the city walls) is reflected not only in the characters of Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke but also in the rigidity and fixity of all the play's physical locations. Brothel and nunnery, prison, moated grange, Angelo's garden—all are felt as distinct places rigidly separated from each other. The Duke promises to embody cure insofar as he crosses boundaries, moving from monastery to prison and moated grange, apparently psychically in control of nunnery, brothel, and the garden in which they meet in fantasy through the bed trick. In the final open street scene the play attempts through the person of the Duke to bring all these locales—each of them representative of a particular psychic space—together and out into the open. But

instead of enabling genuine transformations in these places or genuine communication between them, the Duke seems only to transgress their boundaries, enforcing entrance rather than allowing change. Despite his efforts, these psychic places remain separate: married or unmarried, Lucio will remain an inhabitant of the brothel, Isabella of the nunnery, and Angelo of the fallen garden that his sexual fantasy has created. For the play has throughout made its meaning through its radical division into separate places, a division that cannot be canceled by ducal (or authorial) fiat any more than the bed trick can cancel the violence of the sexual splittings that haunt Angelo's imagination—violence that has split even the Duke himself. Our imaginations remain possessed not by Mariana and the promise of marriage that she holds forth but by the triad of Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke: Angelo as the image of sexuality conceived both as corrupting and as inescapable; Isabella as the image of the ferocity of the desire to escape from sexuality so conceived; and the Duke as the image of the asexual ghostly father who alone can protect his children from sexuality. Even at the end the play remains dichotomized into a region of sexual soil, below family, and a region of purity, above it. The Duke's proposal to Isabella suggests Shakespeare's desire to end this dichotomy; our shock—and Isabella's silence—suggest his incapacity to do so.

If we take the bed tricks of *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* as diagnostic of the two plays, then the shift in their management can point to the ways in which *Measure for Measure* is an undoing of *All's Well.* (Both Neely 1985, 92-95, and Wheeler 1981, 12-13, 116, compare these bed tricks in terms very similar to mine.) In *All's Well* marriage is a cure, even if an enforced cure; in *Measure for Measure* it is a punishment. Despite its final muted fantasy of Helena as virgin mother, *All's Well* had seemed to promise that legitimate sexuality could be redemptive; in *Measure for Measure* the relationship between legitimate and illegitimate sexuality itself becomes vexed and all sexuality seems corrupting. Characteristically, then, the bed trick in *All's Well* functions dramatically to enforce marriage, while the bed trick in *Measure for Measure* functions to protect virginity. The direction of these differences is summarized in the shift in the agent through whom the bed tricks are realized. The bed trick in *All's Well* is under the management of Helena, a powerfully sexual woman. But exactly this management seems to be the central image that calls forth male fears in the play—fears of being drained or spent (see, for example, 2.3.281 and 3.2.41-42), ultimately fears of being absorbed into a female figure imagined as larger and more powerful than oneself, fears that Lavatch localizes in his “That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done!” (1.3.92-93). *Measure for Measure* responds to the fears released in *All's Well* by redoing the bed trick so that it is under the management of a powerful and asexual man, in whose hands the women are merely cooperative pawns (see Riefer's discussion of the diminution of Isabella's power, 1984). That is, the play takes power back from the hands of the women and consolidates it in the Duke; and it allows him special power insofar as it represents him as a ghostly father, divorced from the bonds of natural family. In effect, then, *Measure for Measure* redoes the sexual act under the aegis of the protectively asexual father rather than of the sexually intrusive mother; in the end it is the pure father rather than the sexual mother who proves to have been everywhere unseen. That the doing and undoing in this pair of plays so closely anticipates that of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* suggests the centrality of these issues in Shakespeare's imagination.