“Ignorant or Seem so Craftily:” Isabella and Angelo’s Rhetoric in Measure for Measure

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The victimization scene of Isabella in Measure for Measure is one of the most famous scenes in the problem play. Scholars often analyze this scene for theatrical context as it is the catalyst for the remainder of action in the play. However, it is not only the action points in the scene that make this moment memorable. The rhetoric stylistically illuminates the story as well. By analyzing the use of repetition in Angelo’s persistent threats and Isabella’s fight by using “ecphonesis” and “erotema,” the rhetorical qualities of the scene prove just as telling as the theatrical beats themselves. The rhetorical choices also parallel the fight, flight, or freeze that many victims battle when enduring sexual attacks or rape. The innocence is in the question and bold answers, while the repeated verbal harassment shows skill in the threatening seductive attack. In essence, the rhetoric speaks to Isabella’s plea to “speak the former language” on a deeper level showing the oral sexual harassment to be just as telling as the physical choices directors make (Shakespeare, 2.4.152). The threat is in the words and the rhetoric shows innocence face its ultimate threat.

Keywords: rhetoric, trauma theory, Shakespeare, Victimization, Isabella, Measure for Measure

Introduction

Act two, scene four of Measure for Measure is one of the most notable scenes from Shakespeare’s canon of problem plays. This scene involves the victimization for an aspiring votaress who is told that the only way to save her brother’s life is to yield her chastity to the lustful Angelo who is currently serving in place of the Duke. Losing her virginity in this way is devastating as one who hopes to devote her life to the church. Moreover, the forceful nature of the rhetoric Angelo uses shows the true horror in the rape threat as he plans to take what he desires without consent. Many scholars have previously analyzed this work due to this scene sparking the action for the remainder of the play, but what is most intriguing about the attack is the rhetoric. The horror exists in the threat of forced sexual activity. While this scene is often staged with physical violence accompanying this threatening text, the fighting words prove that the battle begins with rhetorical attacks. The “ecphonesis” and “erotema” of Isabella are challenged with a similar level of rhetorical fervor from Angelo. The scene thrives on the fear induced by the rhetorical battle that verbally occurs between Isabella and Angelo. The rape threat occurs through verbal communication before contact and the skill both parties show at matching each other rhetorically makes the scene intense and the dramatized scenario utterly frightening. In essence, the rhetoric speaks through Isabella’s pleas showing the oral sexual harassment to be just as telling as the physical choices directors make. The threat is in the words and the rhetoric shows innocence face its ultimate threat.

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The Rhetorical Basis for Angelo’s Rape Threat

Most modern directors will have this scene involve physical contact among actors. It has become a common practice in rehearsal rooms today to have Angelo press Isabella against a wall or trap her in a corner once Angelo “gives his sensual race the rein” (Shakespeare, 2.4.173). However, it is important to note that there are five and a half pages of dialogue before this physical choice is often made. This opens the question for the reader, actor, director, theatre maker, and audience about when the attack actually starts. Since Angelo and Isabella are two sides of the same coin, their rhetorical word play often repeats, flips, and tops the other person’s point. Isabella initially views this as a way to convince someone in a seat of power to release her brother from his deadly punishment. However, their back-and-forth word play is fairly evenly matched, similar to the witty reporte of Beatrice and Benedick in Much Ado About Nothing. But the darker sensibility, shared between Isabella and Angelo, creates a sense of sensual fervor for Angelo’s character; answering his, “What’s this? What’s this?” soliloquy with a lustful and selfish plan (Shakespeare, 2.2.196). This plan illuminates the central battle before the physical threat—rhetorical word play and its significance. In the pages preceding where the physical choices are usually made, Angelo often takes Isabella’s words and twists their meaning to create a point of “antithesis” that emphasizes his side of the argument or completely changes the word ordering she uses to suit his desires. For instance, the exchange begins with a stream of religious metaphors evoking Heaven’s image. Angelo inherits this from his encounter with her in the first scene in which he meets Isabella, the aspiring nun, and allows her passion for Christ it to penetrate his rhetorical choices throughout the scene.

The consistent “epanalepsis,” repeating words with other thoughts or lines without interrupting in between, is a major recurrent entity throughout this scene. “Restrained means” goes from being an inescapable lawful comment to a trapped, non-consensual situation when the “restraint” is removed (Shakespeare, 2.4.52). Similarly, the trade off of body for brother goes from being an offer of release to a rape threat by the conclusion of the scene. Whether or not a director intends to stage gendered violence at the conclusion of this scene is a personal choice for that particular show, but the wording is always identical. Rarely is act two, scene four—often referred to as the victimization sequence—cut as removing part of the argument is a tricky feat with the way the scene builds. A lot of the comments come in pairings and despite several rant-like, “pleonas"-based lines from each character, most are primary lines of thought. Unlike Pompey’s secondary and tertiary commentary, the rhetoric in the scene exists in the uncut back-and-forth dialogue. The “stichomythia” in these moments aptly articulates this choice to the audience. The one word exchanges like when Angelo articulates “I’ll speak more gross/Your brother cannot live;” which Isabella responds to with “so” followed immediately by Angelo’s retort, “And his offense is so” to use Isabella’s choice of using “so” for his dismissal against her (Shakespeare, 2.4.65-95). Notice the repetition of wording and ideas in these exchanges shows Angelo stealing Isabella’s rhetorical phrasing and using that same verbal skill against her.

Repetition and Rape Risks Verbally Expressing the Three Stages of Trauma

Now, while Angelo primarily employs “epanalepsis” in his retorts and responses, Isabella tends to pose questions and provides matter-of-fact replies to Angelo’s commentary, rather than giving into Angelo’s rhetorical tactics. It is only after the explicit assault threat happens that Isabella understands how trapped she really is, because of the given power-dynamic and external issues surrounding the recent change to power. The author would even go so far as to argue that less than a page into the scene, when Angelo begins throwing around
terms of virginity—the attack has begun. However, we have our first level of parallels to the psychological response to trauma after Angelo articulates: “plainly conceive, I love you” (Shakespeare, 2.4.152). Some might argue this “hyperbaton” is not threatening in itself. However, it is from that moment on that Isabella’s incessant “erotema” comes to an immediate halt. In this way, she flees from her tactical choice which pairs nicely with the footing pattern of actually running from him in the physical “flight” that usually occurs onstage. Suddenly, Isabella no longer has the agency to ask questions, but merely is defending herself in the given scenario out of protection, since Angelo employs a coercive emotional strategy to try to coax her into sleeping with him. It is also at this point that Isabella stops trying to convince him that his argument about sleeping with her in exchange will even out in the long-run. She stops the cardinal sin discussion and begins trying to flee away from him and threaten him in return claiming, “I will proclaim thee Angelo, look for it […] I’ll tell the world aloud what man thou art” (Shakespeare, 2.4.169-171). In this way, as in many other scenes that involve this type of domestic intimacy, we have two of the three stages of trauma induced by the assault occurring.

Here, we have rhetoric that tries to address the issue with a “fight.” Isabella tries to match him, question him, and put pressure on his rape plan. This provides a nice parallel for when she physically fights him off later in the scene and also illuminates that stage of trauma resulting in the threat of assault and sexual harassment. The change in the rhetoric shifts from fighting words to words of protection after this moment. The innocent pleas change to fear-based rhetorical fighting. Therefore, the text is actually paralleling the psychological events that are happening as a result of the scene.

**Fight, Flight, or Freeze in Isabella’s Phrasing Choices**

The rhetoric illuminates this “fight” stage in the threatening cycle and changes any room for ambiguity from questions into a room for no tolerance for such word play. Angelo ultimately tops her with the ultimate blow to her hope when he says, “Who would believe thee, Isabel?” (Shakespeare, 2.4. 172). Here, we have the moment that prevents her from responding as she totally freezes up with the realization of how the “he-said/she-said” argument goes when women try to take down a man of power who has solid stance within the community. This is a rhetorical entrapment that usually leads into a physical entrapment. The “auxesis” or list of reasons Angelo provides for why no one will believe Isabella’s proclamation about the rape brings Isabella to a point of not being able to respond anymore. While physically, depending on the director, she may need to fight him off, if that is the chosen staging selection, verbally Isabella does not have any more rhetorical agency. That is until after Angelo has left when she turns to the audience and literally explains why she froze, asking who she should speak to regarding this incident exclaiming, “to whom should I complain? […] Who would believe me?” (Shakespeare, 2.4.184-186). This is an example of soliloquy “anthypophora,” in which she comes up with the solution herself by making the audience help her with working through of the traumatic oral abuse and the intense threat for rape.

In essence, rhetoric shapes the entirety of act two, scene four in *Measure for Measure*, the scene would be far less impactful from a traumatic sense if it were merely just a physical attack. (This is not to in any way minimize the impact of physical abuse, but rather emphasize that Shakespeare wrote a layered attack both emotional and physical in the scene). The physical staging has greater impact on the mental state and health of Isabella’s character, because the dispute and emotional impact of those moments is a cyclical representation of what would happen to Isabella if Angelo rapes her. By foreshadowing even further strife in the future, Shakespeare’s drama nicely articulates the layered nature of domestic violence and sexual assault as well as the difficulties one endures when coping with them.
Triggering Rhetoric as a Form of Vocalized Victimization

The coercion and trickiness in Angelo’s rhetoric sets up a state of control and victimhood from the moment Isabella enters the scene. When Isabella asks about her brother she is told “he cannot live,” this moment sets up that Angelo has total control over the fate of Isabella’s brother from the start and (as Angelo thinks) likewise control of Isabella (Shakespeare, 2.4.34). Due to Isabella’s chastity and desire to remain celibate as an aspiring nun with the votaresses of Saint Claire, losing her virginity through the horrid forced act of rape ruins that dream of paralleling the Virgin Mary, in this way, to serve her God. While this drastically impacts her vocation, it also can have stressful consequences taxing her mind. We know this is Isabella’s mindset as just a moment later when visiting her brother Claudio, she tells him that she would die for him but will not give up her virginity to save his life. This shows the added stakes of Angelo’s rape threat against Isabella. Additionally, the scene also has the traumatic effects that all victims of such brutal violation endure. Even moments after the rape threat once Angelo exits, we see rhetoric to represent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder with the line, “I will tell him yet of Angelo’s request” (Shakespeare, 2.4.199). Rather than vocalizing what just happened she disassociates and uses another term since she cannot get herself to say “rape.” Here, Isabella employs the rhetorical device of “euphemism” where she substitutes “rape threat” with “request.” Moreover, she also is utilizing the rhetorically concept of “understatement” as the word “request” minimizes the impact of a rape threat when articulating it. It is more than a “request,” it is a full out threat. Denial in verbalizing a threat of assault or a rape is part of the process many victims endure after such events transpire.

Finally, the rhetoric sort of circles back in the text during Angelo’s “who would believe thee” speech calling to mind Angelo’s use of “epanalepsis” from before (Shakespeare, 2.4.167). At this point in the scene, the terms used towards Isabella are insulting and comment on her ignorance. Earlier in the scene, Angelo suggests that she is either “ignorant or seems so craftily” and suggests “that is not good” (Shakespeare, 2.4.83-84). Either way Angelo faces a debacle. If she is ignorant of what he is saying, which the text would seem to support, Angelo’s plan to rape a virgin nun is foiled. On the other hand, if she is really this strong with rhetoric to be able to feign the pure virgin shell (which is less textually supported, but is ultimately a plausible reading) Isabella could outsmart his plan and make his pursuit, and the chase, ultimately unsuccessful.

Ignorance is not Always Bliss: The Trauma Invoked on Isabella’s Innocence

Titling this paper with “ignorant or seem so craftily” is telling, because Isabella is ignorant and Angelo is the one who is behaving in a craftily, unpredictable fashion when it comes to the rhetoric. At base value, this scene has an innocent, ignorant virgin come to meet a lustful and rhetorically crafty, selfish rapist. The author likely employs this term, because while Angelo does not in fact sleep with Isabella, he thinks that he does, due to the bed-trick switch with Mariana. The rhetoric in this moment of connection between these two individuals depicts the stages of trauma that can occur as associated with the interactions. The rhetoric is the fight of innocence meeting the ultimate chastity test. While this play addresses other issues of consent with Mariana being coerced into the plan to have sex with her abusive former fiancé, the ultimate forced proposal occurs at the conclusion of this domestic tragedy problem play—which is often misconstrued as a comedy. The moments in act two, scene four with Angelo and Isabella employs rhetoric in such a way that articulates the psychological strife verbally. The clever use of language in these instances is not only useful for proper theatrical storytelling, but also allows us to gain a deeper understanding about the human experience and how we respond to trauma.
Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* serves a story that communicates that lack of sexual understanding is not always bliss. This is not to suggest that Isabella having sex would make the situation easier to swallow, because whether or not the individual who was attacked was a virgin or not; it is utterly terrible to threaten rape. That said, Isabella may have been able to pick up on the signs of threat sooner had she understood Angelo’s “euphemisms” about giving of herself as a “service”, not as a volunteer or aid, but rather as a sexualized object. Due to Isabella’s scenario, she picks up on the threat too late and is already in the stages of trauma. Though Isabella is not physically attacked at this point, causing her to fight, she becomes the ultimate victim trying to flee the scene, but ultimately freezing, and the threat of being raped is communicated in Angelo’s threatening rhetoric. The definitive selection of vocalized fight, flight, or freezing parallels the psychological responses she would experience if he raped her. Shakespeare skillfully framed a rhetorical argument that gets as close to actively showing the threat of sexual force without physically raping her onstage, but still clarifying the various trauma stages. That said, many directors will employ sexual violence to invoke a furthered feeling of threat by staging gendered violence. Overall, the play serves as a crash course in how trauma surrounding a rape threat infects the mind of the victim in a way that is taxing emotionally, and often physically as well. Isabella’s rhetoric shows her true fight, flight, and freeze; it is both the foreshadowing of the non-consensual act actually occurring as well as a sample taste of the bodily stress each victim endures in cases, such as these.

**Conclusion: Speaking for Shakespeare’s Speechless Survivors**

By studying *Measure for Measure*, theatre practitioners, educators, and audience members can learn how to grapple with these difficult themes by addressing the core lack of consent and the consequences to sexual desire being inflicted or forced. This play clarifies the different reactions to verbal abuse and also nicely foreshadows the stages one may go through when experiencing a sexual attack. If actions really speak louder than words than there would be no reason for witty language and textual variance. It is only in the marriage of the physical iteration and rhetorical audacity in Shakespeare’s plays that we can truly breathe truth into the horrific sexual assault situations of these characters. It all begins with the language and we as scholars, teachers, dramaturges, and theatre makers owe it to real victims to not allow Shakespeare’s survivors to remain speechless.

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