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Brother-Sister Relationships in Early Modern Drama

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the commodified brother-sister relationship in Early Modern drama. It examines three different samples from three major playwrights of this time period: Isabella and Claudio in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1603), Charles and Susan in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603), and Giovanni and Annabella in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1632). The three aforementioned cases are closely evaluated through a Marxist-feminist lens. The study finds out that the brothers in the three examined plays are not very different since they all encourage their sisters to sacrifice their chastity to achieve some sort of personal interest. Interestingly enough, the sisters vary in their responses to their brothers' requests of offering their bodies to help their brothers. Obviously, Shakespeare offers the ideal version of a sister who does everything in her power to save a brother. Yet, she refuses to offer her body in return to his freedom in spite of her brother's desperate calls to offer her virginity to Angelo to save the former's life. Susan of Heywood is also similar to Isabella of Shakespeare since she refuses to sell herself in return to the money needed to save her brother. However, Ford offers the ugliest version of a brother-sister relationship. The brother wants to have a love affair with his sister who yields to his sexual advances and eventually gets pregnant.

INTRODUCTION

England's Early Modern Age came at a time of immense transition. As history shifted from the medieval age to the Renaissance, so, too, was there a change of centuries, monarchs, and social norms. Many authors took notice of these shifts and incorporated social commentaries into their works, particularly dramas. A popular conversation that manifests in many Early Modern plays is the relationship between men and women, particularly in regard to women's autonomy. In these narratives, women seek ways to manipulate the social and legal systems to gain what they want, as many characters are in a similar context to that of Early Modern England: A patriarchal society that demands women to perform certain societal expectations, depending upon their class. Many of the conversations address unmarried women from the burgeoning middle class and the agency they had over their bodies and sexuality, particularly in response to the men in their lives. However, some of the more interesting and analytically fruitful perspectives on these issues stem from brother-sister relationships. Three dramas stand out as featuring key examples of these sibling relations: Isabella and Claudio in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Susan and Charles in Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and Giovanni and Annabella in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Each brother-sister relationship in these plays demonstrates the Early Modern phenomenon of the female body as a marketplace and familial property. Each sister's chastity is offered as capital to help her brother in some capacity. That is, the sister's sexuality is dictated and controlled by her brother. These three plays provide glimpses of the commodified and incestuous treatment of virginity and the patriarchal ownership of women's bodies in the Early Modern Age, particularly within brother-sister relationships.

It is important to first establish how this premise is even plausible. After all, sibling relationships during the Early Modern Age were not inherently incestuous, nor were they necessarily defined by the capitalistic treatment of women's bodies. Women during this time period existed in a liminal space between personhood and property. Christine Churches begins her case study on women and property explaining:

> The operation of the English Common Law governing the ownership and inheritance of property seems to offer compelling proof of the utter subjection of women: a woman inherited property only if she had no brothers, on marriage she surrendered all personal estate and control of her real estate, while married she could not sure,

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> obtain credit or sign a contract in her own name, or write a will without express permission from her husband, and if he died before her she was entitled to only so much of his estate as had been reserved to her by jointure…or was voluntarily devised to her in his will. (165)

If only examining the explicit direction of English Common Law during the Early Modern Era, it would be simple to conclude that women were under complete and utter control of their male family members and had no claim to any aspect of capital. However, Churches goes on to discuss Amy Louise Erickson's book *Women and Property in Early Modern England*, which examines the rights of inheritance and ownership women had in England during this era. Widows could inherit from their husbands, and daughters "inherited on a remarkably equitable basis with their brothers, although girls usually inherited personal property and boys more often real property" (Churches 165). Despite this glimmer of progress for women's right to inheritance, Erickson explains that both the laws and individual men maintained women's subordination, and the "reality of women's receiving large amounts of property and exerting power over it in a distinctive way does not change the fact of oppression but it does highlight the disjunctive between theory and practice. It also exhibits the ingenuity of many ordinary women in working within a massively restrictive system" (19-20). Thus, although women were capable of participating in property ownership, it was not the intent of the laws or male family members to allow women the ability to be independently wealthy or have complete authority over their property.

Indeed, it is important to understand the complexities that existed during this time period in England in regard to women's agency and treatment as object. According to Martha Howell, there are many complexities when discussing female "agency" that are born from the contradictions that existed within patriarchal social structures. She explains that "female agency is more a sign of discursive instability than a signal that the gender system is being fundamentally undermined… patriarchy is an unstable construct rooted in the larger social system it both enables and on which it depends. As these structures shift, collide, and morph, agency is produced" (Howell 31). Women were able to take advantage of certain inconsistencies within the patriarchal establishment in order to gain authority over their own assets. This manifestation of agency is all the more evident – particularly within Early Modern drama – when considering female social roles and sexuality. As Susan Hull reveals, the "ideal woman" was a construct invented by men and, even more so, Biblical scripture. The social expectations of women were dictated by St Paul's edict and "many men cautioned women to accept their inferiority; to be chaste, silent, obedient, and "shame-fast" (bashful); and to remember that they were created after the man for his use and as his helper" (Hull 16-17). For women to demonstrate any form of agency – sexual or otherwise – involved delicately navigating these norms. Within these expectations, though, the contradictions become evident: A woman must be chaste, but what if she is asked to give her virginity for her patriarch's benefit? A woman must be obedient, but to which male family member? A woman should be of use to man, but to what ends? The sibling relationships present in the three aforementioned plays address these rhetorical questions and bring attention to the issues that arise within social expectations of women.

Measure for Measure, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and *Tis Pity She's a Whore* also address the problematic issue of a brother's claim to his sister's body. If a father or husband was not present, the eldest son would be the next in line as head of the household. According to Lawrence Stone, children of the noble estate "were at the economic mercy of their father or elder brother, who could allocate to them as much or as little as he chose of the personal estate…The current head thus wielded great power over daughters and younger children" (87). Despite the presence of such power, Stone explains that the brother-sister relationship was likely the closest in the family unit, especially since, in the eyes of a father-figure, "[y]ounger sons, and particularly daughters, were often unwanted and might be regarded as no more than a tiresome drain on the economic resources of the family" (112). However, between brothers and sisters, an

> Embittered sense of envy did not exist and there is evidence of the frequent development of very close ties indeed. Since upper-class boys were often kept at home with a private tutor until they went off to university at sixteen or seventeen, there was time for these relationships to mature and deepen…there can be little doubt that there was something very special about brother-sister relationships among the landed classes at this period. (Stone 115-116)[1]

While the sibling relationship was not overtly incestuous, the parameters that existed socially and legally could be interpreted as such. There were strong, loving relationships, yet sisters were still subordinate and inferior to their brothers. If the brother was the head of household, he was in charge of his sister's well-being and economic viability (i.e. virginity) until a husband could be found. Thus, the brother was a stand-in husband for his sister until marriage could be arranged. Taking into consideration the emotional strength of brother-sister relationships, particularly in regard to other familial connections, these relationships could often be seen as incestuous, a phenomenon that Shakespeare, Heywood, and Ford recognized and critiqued within their plays.

Shakespeare's Isabella

It is overt that Isabella is introduced as an outstanding example of the chaste woman in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*; she is a nun. But incest is a central theme in this play, which "is about chastity and an activity opposed to it [incest]" (Simmons 372). Marc Shell contemplates that the bed trick in which Angelo sleeps with his ex fiancé in ignorance "reminds us that no one—not we, not our ancestors—can know for sure who slept with whom the night we were conceived. By this logic, we are … bastards or changelings" (Shell 148). Of course Shell leans not only on the bed trick to make this assumption, but he also refers to the famous response of Isabella when she flies into rage after Claudio asks her to save him by offering herself to Angelo when says "Is't not a kind of incest, to take life / From thine own sister's

shame?/… Heaven shield my mother play'd my father fair," as she takes offense to what is being asked of her from her "brother" (3.1. 138-139,141). Shell also thinks many readers and critics have attempted to ignore Isabella's potentially tongue-tied question about "a kind of incest," because they focus on "the sexual violation" of a brother to his sister in order to save his own life (166).

While Simmons and Shell focus on the chastity and incest in *Measure for Measure,* Adams H. Kitzes criticizes the adapted version of the play in what is known as the Bowdler Shakespeare—a version with the removal of passages deemed unfit for reciting in the company of women and children (Murphy 170). Kitzes criticizes the censoring of certain lines and phrases with more proper ones in certain lines from the dialogue between Isabella and Angelo in 2.2 (49). However, he fails to mention the removal of the important lines discussed in the previous paragraph (3.1.138-139,141) in the adopted version of *Measure for Measure* in Bowdler Shakespeare. In other words, he did not comment on the removal of these lines although he should have included a section on these important lines.

On the other hand, Robert Watson approaches Isabella's case from a feminist lens regarding her problem as a gender-based one. He thinks that what Angelo asks her to offer would make her experience a sort of death in life situation if she would have yielded her body to him in return to her brother's life. In fact, Isabella would have not been in such a situation unless she is a beautiful girl. Thus, she "faces genetic extinction through her implied sexual repression" (415). Lois Bueler also takes into consideration Isabella's beauty and gender as a main cause for her dilemma. It is as if she has "to give birth to her own brother through an incestuous relationship" when she is asked to offer her body to Angelo (118). It is a gender-based problem since it is the body of Isabella that Angelo wants. This fact is not a matter of speculation since Angelo says it frankly when Isabella tells him that she would "rather give [her] body than [her] soul," Angelo does not hesitate to tell her that he "talk[s] not of [her] soul" (2.4.56-57). Thus, Isabella's value lies in "treasures of [her] body" rather than anything else in Angelo's eyes (2.4.103). We understand that the aforementioned response of Isabella does not mean that she is willing to approve Angelo's advances. In fact, she refuses his offer few moments, later on, in the very same scene, which ends with Angelo's final offer that unless she gives him her "body," her brother, Claudio, would die.

Audiences understand Isabella's refusal of Angelo's offer since it is the right act in such cases. Her response is unsurprising as she is a pious woman on the verge of becoming a nun. What is strange is Angelo's request in the first place for two main reasons. The first one is the way Shakespeare introduces him as a man of "abstinence" and as a trustworthy person chosen by the Duke to be the latter's deputy on his leave in 1.1. Thus, his sexual demands on Isabella negate his pre-established character, demonstrating Angelo has tricked those around him. The second one is the nature of his offense or intended crime since he condemns her brother and sentences him to death for a milder sexual offense—according to Vienna's law in the play. Claudio's deed is lighter than Angelo's intent since the former does what he does with the woman he loves and the woman to whom he is engaged. On the other hand, if Angelo's request is surprising, Claudio's response to his sister's refusal of Angelo's request is ten times more surprising to Shakespeare's audience and our modern audience as well.

Claudio's response to his sister's refusal of Angelo's offer makes him lose the sympathy and respect of the audience. In fact, it puts him in an equal position to a stranger who would regard Isabella as body rather than a soul. Therefore, Isabella's character is reduced into a sexually tempting body with a marketplace value. For the brother, this value is less than his life while it is more expensive than justice and dignity for Angelo. Claudio's first response is an implied urge to convince his sister to supply Angelo's "sharp appetite," so he lives. Claudio appeals to Isabella that "if [he] must die, / [He] will encounter darkness as a bride / And hung it in [his] arms" (3.1 83-85). Isabella does not believe what she hears from her own brother and protests; "there spake my brother: there my father's grave / Did utter forth a voice. Yes, thou must die" (3.1 85-86). This family tie reminder does not prevent Claudio from urging his sister to do what Angelo asks so he lives later on, in the same scene. He also tries to convince her it is no sin to offer her body to Angelo to save the former's life (3.1 136). This time the sister turns the same set of assumptions against her brother. "Is't not a kind of incest, to take life / From thine own sister's shame?" (3.1 138-39). She also questions Claudio's tie to her and wonders if their mother had been faithful to their father the night Claudio was conceived (3.1 141). Then, she expresses her carelessness if he dies the day after or not[2].

Audiences understand Isabella's position from her brother. She does not only win our sympathy and respect by standing for her chastity and honor, but she wins also the respect of her future husband, the duke. Isabella also manages to maintain her own identity, dignity and chastity, which are questioned by Angelo and her own brother. In refusing Angelo's illegitimate request, despite her brother's appeals and blessing to do what Angelo asks, Isabella keeps her character from being reduced into a merely sexual object. She also wins a superior position to Angelo, as she becomes the duchess toward the end of the play. In fact, she is not only superior to Angelo but also to her own brother who would have sold her to Angelo in return to his own life if she would agree. Thus, she is firmly classified as a positive representation of the sister character in Shakespeare's drama generally and *Measure for Measure* in particular.

Heywood's Susan

Shakespeare is not the only Renaissance playwright who dramatizes negative models of the brother character. For instance, Thomas Heywood adopted a similarly negative model of the brother character as he dramatizes Sir Charles Mountford who tries to use his own sister's body as a means to pay back his debts in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. In this didactic play, Heywood "has achieved immortality" by presenting a moral lesson for his middle-class audience

(Smith 138). However, he uses an unusual method to bring the tragic doom of Anne Acton who betrays her husband with his dearest friend. The husband, Sir Frankford, ultimately and unexpectedly forgives his wife's infidelity. Because Anne is not able to deal with her husband's kindness, she dies soon after he forgives her. We are not interested in Anne's infidelity, which is usually the main topic for most critics. Instead, the relationship of Susan Mountford and her brother Sir Charles in the subplot is worthy of closer examination, particularly the image of the sister as a female-subordinated figure in this play.

Susan in Heywood's domestic tragedy is just like many other female characters in Renaissance drama that lives in a subordinated position to men. Paula McQuade reveals that "Heywood accomplished his critique of female subordination and male domination not in spite of but by virtue of his religious convictions" (250). McQuade reveals this feminist analysis in relationship to Anne's subordinated position in a male dominated continuum. But her criticism applies to Susan as well. Susan's brother, Mountford participates in a falconry competition with Sir Francis Acton. The latter loses the bet and accuses Mountford of breaking the rules of the competition. They both argue and they end up in fight in which two men of Acton are killed (2.3. 45-55). Mountford is arrested and loses almost his entire wealth to get released from jail. Susan tries to help her brother but she could not loan the money needed to free her brother from their uncle, Old Mountford (3.3. 16). Acton suggests giving her the money she needs in return to sex (3.3 41). Susan refuses his offer (3.3 46-55). Trying to gain her love, Acton clears Mountford's debt in spite of Susan's refusal (3.3 74). For Acton, Susan is initially a body that he tries to buy. But when she refuses, she gains his respect along with our respect as a modest girl who rejects money in spite of her desperate need to it. Acton decides to befriend her brother again hoping to be close to Susan "In her I'll burry all my hate of [Mountford]" (3.3 72).

Although Susan genuinely tries to save her brother Mountford, and although he ultimately gains his freedom due to the love Acton bears to her, the brother "places a momentary value on his sister's chastity" (Panek 374). When Susan tells her brother that Acton has offered one thousand pounds to sleep with her, he starts thinking of his sister as a commodity that he might sell so he pays his debt back to Acton; "Grant him your bed; he is paid with interest so"(5.2. 45). Susan is shocked "My honor I esteem, as dear and precious / As my redemption / …Will Charles have me cut off my hands, and send them Acton / Rip up my breast, and with my bleeding heart / Present him as a token?" (5.2 53-54, 56-59). She refuses to give up her chastity and the siblings end up with a plan according to which Mountford deceives Acton, gets the money and to have Susan kill herself before Acton can enjoy his part of the deal (5.2 81-96). Acton unexpectedly refuses Mountford's offer and proposes to Susan instead (5.2 135-146). Susan welcomes Acton's proposal "I will yield to fate / And learn to love where I till now did hate" (5.2 147-48).

Heywood presents Susan as a submissive, sacrificing sister who is willing to pay her life to save her brother from his debts. She also agrees to marry the man he used to hate because she is dependent on the male-authorities in her life and does not have much choice. Mountford, on the other hand, seems to us as a very self-centered person who does not care about his sister's life, happiness, honor or reputation. In so doing, Shell believes that he is "no longer a brother, Charles has no less right to use his sister's body than any other man" (5.2 145). Thus, he does not seem very different from Shakespeare's Claudio in *Measure for Measure*. Susan and Isabella are both designed to be subordinates that are required to take the burden off their brothers' shoulders. However, they both refuse to sell their bodies in one way or another.

The similarities in dramatizing the brother-sister relationship between Shakespeare and Heywood are not surprising because the admiration of Heywood to Shakespeare is a well-known fact. Additionally, both plays are early Jacobean texts that are written in the very same year. Shakespeare and Heywood adopt similar techniques in dramatizing the brother-sister relationship seen during this time period. In other words, although the brothers—Claudio and Mountford—try to take advantage to achieve some sort of personal interest, the sisters always resist selling their bodies and prefer death to prostitution. The sisters do not hesitate to give their lives to please their brothers. However, Shakespeare and Heywood save the sisters—Shakespeare uses the bed trick while Heywood uses unexpected kindness.

Although Claudio of Shakespeare and Mountford of Heywood are negative representations of the brother image because they have the intention to achieve some personal interests by taking advantage of their sisters, the sisters are saved from their bad intentions. In other words, they are judged for their thoughts, but cannot be exempt from being selfish or being guilty toward their sisters. At the same time, we cannot condemn the two Jacobean brothers in *Measure for Measure* and *A Woman Killed with Kindness* since no real harm happens to these sisters nor is an actual crime committed against them.

The two negative Jacobean brothers analyzed so far are nothing compared to a later Carolinian brother in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore.* While Giovanni is one of the worst brother models presented in Renaissance drama, Annabella does not behave in an appropriate "sisterly" manner, either. The time interval between the two Jacobean plays and Ford's Carolinian play is almost three decades. But the gap in dramatizing the brother-sister relationship is bigger than this short time period. The divide between the dramatization of the brother-sister relationships evident in Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore* and Shakespeare's and Heywood's plays is so huge that no cultural or historical shift could justify the actions that take place between Giovanni and Annabella.

Ford's Annabella

John Ford goes to extremes when dramatizing a negative brother-sister relationship in *Tis Pity She's a Whore.* In this play, Giovanni early declares his love to his own sis-

ter, Annabella. But the love he bears to his sister exceeds all the convictions of love across time, religions and cultures. Ford believes in "the supreme authority of love in the conduct of life" (Sherman ix). He is "concerned with repainting the tortures of heroes and heroines afflicted with heretical love" (Sensabaugh 62). But the unconventional type of love he introduces in this play exposes "Ford to extensive criticism of his moral positions" (Brissenden 95). This criticism is justified because Ford absolved his lovers (siblings) from religious and social convictions and because he "could not brook customs that might judge against beauty, or conceive any crisis of unsatisfied passion, adultery, or incest where love could not conquer" (Sensabaugh 165). But sibling incest, Elizabeth Archibald argues, "seems to have been regarded as considerably less heinous than parent–child incest; it is usually a sub-plot rather than a central theme, and often involves minor characters rather than the protagonists" in literature before Ford's play was performed. Archibald adds that:

> The male protagonists of incest stories are often foundlings ignorant of their true identities who marry their mothers (and in some cases kill their fathers) unintentionally; they are allowed to survive for years to do penance, and to be rewarded for it by sanctity (192).

Ford reproduces a less wicked type of incest in drama. Giovanni is fully aware of his incestuous intent even before it takes place. Yet, despite recognizing the taboo, he pursues his sister romantically. Ford attempts to justify the incestuous love of the siblings by projecting an exceptional passion they bear for one another. Unlike Isabella of Shakespeare and Susan of Heywood, the sister in Ford's play has also a strong passion for her brother that causes her to fluctuate between repentance and sin (Ford 1.2 253-58). Her brother also has a strong passion that makes him declare atheism because his Catholic faith forbids his incestuous desire.

Ford devotes the first two scenes of his play to show the two siblings struggling due to the extraordinary love they have for one another before they finally declare their love mutually (1.2 260-68). Before this mutual confession takes place, Giovanni is tempted, and he believes the prayers and fasting recommended by Friar Bonaventura are "but old men tale" (1.2 161). He adds "I must speak, or burst, tis not I know, / My lust; but tis my fate that leads me on" (1.2 163-64). Giovanni attempts to blame destiny "is nothing more than a poor attempt to excuse a passion he could have suppressed" (Homan 273). Annabella also does not suppress the passion to her brother as well; "my captive heart had long ago resolved / I blush to tell thee—but I will tell thee now—/ For each sigh that thou hast pent for me / I have sighed ten…" (Ford 1.2 251-54). Thus, she is equally responsible for initiating this incestuous relationship and subsequent the crimes that will take place throughout the play. Additionally, the audience sympathizes with Soranzo, the man she deceives and marries, as a way to cover up her pregnancy from Giovanni. Not only is Soranzo cuckolded—a social embarrassment during the Early Modern Age—but is occurs through the social taboo of incest.

Toward the end of the play, Annabella realizes her fault after she is exposed by Vasques who tells her husband Soranzo about the incest. Annabella realizes the huge price she is about to pay for the momentary pleasure she gains by incest: "Pleasures farewell, and all ye thriftless minutes / Wherein false joys have spun a weary life" (5.1. 1-2). But she realizes too late that "[her] conscious now stands up against [her] lust/ With dispositions charactered in guilt" (9-10). Similarly, Giovanni realizes the ugliness of his deed with his sister just before he kills Annabella; "Though perhaps / The laws of conscious and of civil use / May justly blame us, yet when they but know / Our loves that love will wipe away that rigor" (5.6. 69-72). The incestuous lovers kiss before Giovanni stabs Annabella to death and kills Soranzo. Giovanni is then killed by Banditti (5.6 111). In showing remorse and admitting guilt, Ford attempts to gain the sympathy needed in a tragic ending. In so doing, audiences sympathize with the characters, especially since they show their remorse and admit their guilt. Poetic justice has been achieved. Still, the gruesome deaths do not excuse the siblings' guilt since the culture and religion of the time forbid incestuous activity. Additionally, Giovanni's atheism demonstrates an overt abandonment of religious morals and, therefore, abdication of redeemable character. Between the incestuous pregnancy and rejection of religion, Ford's siblings are a deformed model of the brother-sister relationship in Renaissance drama.

CONCLUSION

Unlike Isabella of Shakespeare and Susan of Heywood, Annabella follows her passion and commits an unjustified taboo. Isabella and Susan refuse to sell their honor and chastity to strangers. Annabella, on the other hand, gives herself to her own brother. It would be lighter guilt if she offered herself to a stranger. Thus, if Isabella and Susan had a marketplace value as aforementioned, Annabella in our estimation has no value at all. Despite a difference in sisters, the brothers in the three texts do not differ very much. Though the guilt of Claudio of Shakespeare and Mountford of Heywood seems lighter than Ford's Giovanni's, they are all negative models of brothers who try to take advantage of their sisters somehow. Still, Giovanni is the worst among the three because he takes direct advantage of his sister while Claudio and Mountford intend to take advantage of their sisters, but no real harm happens to them. Thus, the negative brother who might sell his sister's body or even think of feeding on it is not a rare image in Renaissance drama. But what makes the difference between Shakespeare, Heywood in one hand and Ford on the other is the way they dramatize the responses of the sisters to their negative brothers' requests in the aforementioned plays.

END NOTES

1. Stone provides several examples of brothers and sisters risking their lives for one another including a sister violating quarantine to keep talking to her smallpox-stricken brother, two siblings dying within days of one another and being buried together, and a brother running away from school to be back home with his sister.
2. The duke in disguise interferes in the action of the play and arranges what is known as the bed-trick in which Angelo sleeps with his ex fiancé, Diana, while he thinks he was supplied by Isabella—a crime and a sin that take place only in his mind. This trick saves the life of everyone and forces Angelo to marry Diana in the final scene of the play. Claudio is saved by the Duke who manages to convince the provost to hide him until the final scene of the play, which ends with additional marriages; Angelo to Isabella, Claudio to Julietta and Lucio to an unspecified prostitute with whom he had a child.

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