

## ABSTRACT

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Title: CORRUPTING THE SACRED: AN ANALYSIS OF MALE DESIRE AND FEMALE DISSENT IN *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

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Year: 2018

William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is a play that revolves around sexual desire; at the center is Isabella, the young novice who paradoxically finds herself the object of male erotic fascination. This project looks to answer the question: what factors enable Shakespeare to feature a nun in the obligatory role of female sex object? Looking through the lens of feminist theory, as well as consulting previous analyses of the play and historical documents reveals an interesting phenomenon: from the early church's conception, ascetic women were awarded a number of privileges that, in a traditional patriarchal society, are reserved for men. Thus, nuns are often seen as dissenters, refusing to adhere to gender roles and forsaking feminine duties (such as marriage and childbirth) in favor of scholarly work, business endeavors and uninterrupted piety in the convent. In light of this information, Isabella emerges as a direct threat to the patriarchal rule of her society; as she is an aspiring nun, the only way to re-integrate her into the patriarchal sphere is to have sex with her. If Isabella is deprived of her virginity, she will no longer have access to the privileges of the convent that would offer her partial autonomy, and thus bring her closer to usurping even a facet of male power; as a result, eroticizing Isabella functions as vehicle of patriarchal control, for through sleeping with Isabella, a man will be able to stifle his sexual anxiety. This interpretation allows for an in-depth exploration of Isabella's motives, the play's interpretation of male morality, and most importantly, imparts a profound message: the dangers of patriarchy are found not only in its overt oppression, but in its blurred lines of morality as well.