Wifely Conversion in *The Comedy of Errors*: Representation of Female Sacredness in Post-Reformation England*

Su-kyung Hwang
(EwhaWomans University)

Be that you are.
That is, a woman; if you be more, you’re none.
If you be one -- as you are well express’d
By all external warrants -- show it now,
By putting on the destined livery.

(*Measure for Measure*, 2.4.134-7)

When Isabella, a nun-to-be in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, stubbornly resists surrendering to Angelo’s indecent proposal to sleep with him in return for her brother’s life, Angelo argues that she should be what she is, which is “a woman.” Angelo asserts that “women are frail” (2.4.133) and that Isabella should take the gender

---

* This essay has been developed from my discussion of the same play in my doctoral dissertation, *Sacred Costume: Circulation and Representation of Catholic Vestments in Early Modern England*.

1 All quotations from the play are taken from *Measure for Measure* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine E. Maus, and Andrew Gurr in 1997.
role she is born with, and show that she is no more than a sexual object for men. The destined livery she needs to put on is the role of woman, not nun’s habit\(^2\), supposedly asexual, but unexpectedly sensual. Her “unnatural” intellectual ability to argue against Angelo’s hypocritical suggestion is useless as it would not elevate her to a spiritual being but makes her “none,” which makes an irreverent pun with “nun” (Fleissner)\(^3\). As noted by Katherine Eisaman Maus, one of the editors of *Norton Shakespeare*, Isabella’s “nun’s habit marks her as taboo” (2024), which sexually arouses Angelo, as Isabella’s sexual attractiveness is often indebted to her religious identity as a nun-novice, a female option manifesting her sexual unavailability, rather than her religious devotion.

The idea that nun’s sexual unavailability ironically provokes even the most austere mind is in the same line with anti-Catholic rhetoric that condemns Catholic monasticism for breeding social corruption rather than contributing to a community’s spiritual welfare. The sexual attraction that Isabella presents for the male protagonists, Angelo and the Duke, involves a homosexual dimension, too, as the officially declared asexuality of nuns conveniently overlaps with in-between sexuality of boy actors on stage. Both Catholic nuns and boy actors were regarded as sexually attractive, but unavailable for marriage and reproduction, which, ironically, contributed to their sexual appeal. Isabella in nun-novice’s habit has

---

\(^2\) The following discussion on Isabella’s role will be based on the assumption that she was staged in nun novice’s habit. There are critics like Andrew Gurr and Jean McIntyre who argue that Isabella wears a gentlewoman’s garments instead of a nun’s habit, but based upon the textual clues, the stage presence of Isabella in religious vestments has been accepted in scholarly criticism.

\(^3\) Robert F. Fleissner argues, while discussing Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, that “none” was homophonic with “nun,” and the none/nun wordplay would have sounded irreverent enough to cause the elimination of the play from the Valladolid Folio by a Jesuit.