

Marina, Isabella, and Shakespeare's Sex Workers

Byron Nelson

Critics have frequently commented on the bad timing of Sir Philip Sidney making his famous complaint about the English plays which are “neither right tragedies, nor right comedies” because of their habit of “mingling kings and clowns” (Sidney 244) just a few years before Shakespeare made such mingling the defining characteristic of his dramatic art. Certainly the contrast between the kings and the clowns is central to Shakespeare's dramatic strategy, from the incorporation of the humble servant Launce and his dog Crab in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the beginning of his career, to the antics of Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest* at the end. Sidney may never have approved of the sympathetic portrayal of all the levels and classes of society in Shakespeare, but he would have had to give credit to the playwright for his ability to depict a huge range of occupations, from kings to gravediggers. As a godly Puritan, however, Sidney would no doubt have been horrified by Shakespeare's sympathetic depiction of sex workers, whether in the classical past, as in *Pericles*, or in contemporary Europe, as in *Measure for Measure*. Less interested in classical prostitutes or Renaissance courtesans, Shakespeare depicts his sex workers as English and contemporary, regardless of the time period of his plays. Doll Tearsheet, Mistress Overdone and Pompey, and the comic trio of Pander, Bawd and Bolt in *Pericles* all resemble the sex workers in Shakespeare's London and indeed could well have been modeled on actual figures from the playwright's own experience with the Bankside brothels. Far from providing them with historical authenticity, Shakespeare keeps his sex workers in the present tense, with no attempt to distance them in the past or far away.

How do Shakespeare's numerous sex workers fit into his conception of occupations? Whether located in Eastcheap, Renaissance Vienna, or classical Mytilene, the brothel workers are shown to be an inescapable part of urban life. Because they are unavoidable and inevitable, prostitutes and procurers are neither censured nor criticized in Shakespeare's plays. By being treated comically, the sex workers are seen as natural and routine, as ultimately impervious to the censure of society or prosecution by the

authorities. Although King Lear might grumble that “the fitchew nor the soiled horse go to it/With a more riotous appetite” (*KL* 4.6.122), he has no illusions about the irresistible urge of human sexuality.

Shakespeare's own inclination to tolerance and forgiveness is modified by his interaction with his collaborators. Recent studies have emphasized the significance of Shakespeare's collaborative efforts with such colleagues as John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton, and George Wilkins. Stanley Wells has recently observed, “With the passing of years Shakespeare has too often been isolated from his fellows. He is the greatest of them, but he would not have been what he is without them” (231). If Gary Taylor is correct, Middleton's role in revising *Measure for Measure* is significant, and indeed the unusual tone of that play may have been heightened by the satiric gift Middleton had shown in such acerbic city comedies as *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Michaelmas Term*, and it may have been Middleton who provided the play, in his revision, with its distinctly un-Shakespearean setting in Vienna rather than the expected Italy. And if critics like Brian Vickers, MacDonald Jackson and Roger Warren are correct, Shakespeare was deeply indebted to George Wilkins, not only for his expertise in the sex trade and his key collaborative role in the composition of *Pericles* but for the remarkable flowering of the romance genre as the final phase of Shakespeare's career.

In addition to his collaborations with the other playwrights, Shakespeare may pragmatically have been himself a key player in the flourishing entertainment industry on the Bankside in Elizabethan and Jacobean London. This industry included gambling, animal baiting, dramatic shows, pubs, and the sex trade. In a sense, regardless of his personal moral attitude, Shakespeare may have seen himself as a tolerant individual who, like his heroines Isabella and Marina, learns to accommodate himself to the reality of human sexual rapacity. I want to argue that Shakespeare includes sex workers among the full range of legitimate occupations depicted in his plays. Because even his most virtuous characters are morally compromised, there is no moral basis for criticizing an industry which satisfies the most basic of human needs—and incidentally draws patrons to the neighborhood of the Globe Theatre. Even characters like Isabella and Marina, who valorize the preservation of their virginity, learn to acknowledge the universality of the sexual urge, and their experiences with the sex industry lead them to adopt a more

balanced view of the place of sexuality in human conduct. Both are compromised by their brushes with the sex trade, and Marina, even more than Isabella, is damaged by her brief involvement in the Mytilene brothel. Although both preserve their virginity and exit their plays with promises of marriage, neither faces a particularly happy future. Hence the promised comic relief of the plays' conclusions is muted.

I.

Readers of the plays have been known to ask: what are the best jobs among all the occupations depicted by Shakespeare? Certainly kingship can be quickly ruled out, since the stresses of that office simply overwhelm the honors—as Macbeth, Richard II, and Henry V would be eager to affirm. A quick survey of the occupations in the plays might suggest a few obvious candidates for holders of ideal jobs, based on their own vocational descriptions. In terms of job satisfaction, Corin in *As You Like It* would seem to win the top prize. In a more complicated profession than shepherd, Cerimon the healer in *Pericles* might rate highly in job satisfaction, while the First Clown in *Hamlet* seems to have gained philosophical insight from the hard task of digging graves. But prostitution and procuring seem to offer limited rewards in terms of job safety and satisfaction, and such work is routinely threatened by punishments according to the laws and the dangers of violence and sexually transmitted diseases.

The huge population increase in early modern London certainly would have facilitated the growth the sex industry. By 1600 the population had increased to 200,000 from 55,000 just fifty years earlier; in Europe, only Naples and Paris had larger populations (Howard 1). Also remarkable was the pronounced emphasis on gender and youth; half of the inhabitants of London were 25 or under. Because of its spectacular job opportunities, London was a magnet for apprentices and “masterless men,” and it has been estimated that there were 115 men for every 1000 women (Taylor 47). If the average age for marriage for London men was indeed 28, the demand for premarital sexual services was obvious (Taylor 47). Because of the population growth and the imbalance in youth and gender, London was, in the words of one observer, “a place where both status and gender relations were constantly being renegotiated” (Howard 27).

Not surprisingly, London was also known for its criminal activity. Indeed, as one historian notes, “The capital was notorious for its criminality” (Archer 204). It is well

known that even the threat of capital punishment did not deter thieves and pickpockets from practicing their trades at the foot of the gallows. Women engaged in prostitution on a wide scale. As Antonia Fraser explains it, "Prostitutes in an infinite variety of forms were omnipresent in seventeenth-century England" (413), and women from all social ranks seem to have participated in the oldest trade, although the profession had greater appeal to women who fell below the poverty line. As two feminist historians have argued, "Prostitution was work performed by some women at all social levels and was an important part of the livelihood of poor women at certain stages of their lives" (Mendelson and Crawford 294-95). Customers from all ranks of society could make choices according to their tastes and the depth of their pockets. It is often hard to judge from the legal records whether women were engaging in fulltime prostitution, occasional tricks for money, or those forms of sexual activity that were simply pleasurable but proscribed (Mendelson and Crawford 295).

Ian Archer has shown that the brothels of early modern London were spread throughout the city and not, as is sometimes assumed, confined to the entertainment areas or seedier neighborhoods (Archer 212). Jean Howard has observed that bawdy houses are as ubiquitous in early modern city comedies as they were in Shakespeare's London (Howard 115). In these comedies, the brothel denizens amount to "families," or surrogates for parents or guardians (Nevo 56). Archer's study has revealed that the most sophisticated of the brothels housed as many as nine prostitutes, whose high fees are explainable in that they had to turn over high rents to their keepers (Archer 213). On the low-rent side of the business were the women who rented rooms in alehouses or simply turned tricks in the alleys (Archer 212). Peter Clark defends alehouses from their bad contemporary reputations as fronts for brothels but admits that there were alehouses that doubled as brothels in London (Clark 148). It is difficult, as with all monetary values in Shakespeare, to judge the relative value of the fees exchanged among customers, prostitutes and their pimps. Mendelson and Crawford estimate that the women in the brothels paid 4 to 6 shillings per week in rent but also paid over three-quarters of their earnings to the brothel-keepers. The financial rewards for keeping a bawdy house were high, but of course it is not clear that the women themselves were making great profits (Mendelson and Crawford 335-36).

For most of the women, their careers as successful sex workers would be quite short. The occupational hazards for prostitutes were severe, including syphilis and gonorrhoea as the most familiar STDs (Mendelson and Crawford 296). Venereal disease had spread so widely since the late Fifteenth Century that, as Fraser speculates, the “pox” had earned a form of social tolerance (Fraser 411). While the customers were largely ignored by the authorities, the women were often whipped and imprisoned and earned the one-size-fits-all sobriquet of “whore” (Mendelson and Crawford 296). For a happy few, prostitution was an agent of upward social mobility, as in the spectacular case of Nell Gwynn, the orange-seller, actress, royal mistress of Charles II and duchess (Fraser 411); but for every Nell Gwynn there were doubtless dozens or perhaps hundreds of Doll Tearsheets.

The enemies of the prostitutes included the civic authorities and the Puritans, both of whom conceded the impossibility of closing down the trade. The London authorities undertook a major crackdown on the sex industry in the late 1570s (Archer 211), and the attempt to control the brothels early in James' reign is dramatized in *Measure for Measure*. As with attempts to herd cats, the control of bawdy houses proved an impossible task, and of course the brothels that were patronized and protected by the powerful were much less likely to be disrupted by official action (Taylor 67). Unlike Angelo, who is only tempted by Isabella's severe virtue, most authorities might at least be tempted by the offer of sexual favors or kickbacks. More typical than Angelo would be Lysimachus, the governor of Mytilene in *Pericles*, who claims to be monitoring activity at the brothel to which Marina is sold but who behaves suspiciously like a regular customer. The ambiguity of Lysimachus' involvement with the brothel is a key unresolved issue in *Pericles*. To the end, as Nevo admits, “He remains a split character, indeterminately ravisher and protector” (Nevo 59).

II

The link between the theatres and the bawdy houses of early modern London was not a relationship that needed to be explained to Shakespeare's audience. The King's Men at the Globe Theatre shared their space in the entertainment sector of Southwark with the brothels, alehouses and animal-baiting venues. That actors and theatrical people were routinely lumped with vagabonds and masterless men in the eyes of the London

authorities could not have boosted Shakespeare's professional pride, although he may have viewed this linkage with rueful amusement.

The authorities, who viewed the public theatres with great suspicion for a number of reasons, may not have appreciated the safety-valve aspect of the theatrical enterprise. Jean Howard has argued that "the theater, in turn, was important in shaping how people of the period conceptualized or made sense of this fast-changing urban milieu" (2). For her, the plays, like the sermons, helped to identify the limits of permissible behavior, and hence attendance at the plays would have great normative value for the young men and strangers who flocked into early modern London. Howard explains, "in invoking the places of the city and filling them with action, the plays also *construct* the city and make it intelligible for those *unfamiliar* with its places of the uses to which they can be put, and they parse the permissible and impermissible actions attendant on those places" (23).

Such a statement, of course, takes a far more generous view of the function of Shakespeare's theatre than most of the authorities would have taken. Howard neglects to consider the dangers implicit in the promiscuous mingling of the classes, ranks, and genders in a semi-enclosed space like the Globe. As the Puritans who closed the theatres in the 1640s understood, any crowd of three thousand people is implicitly a political group which potentially poses a threat to the ruling order.

In addition to the prostitutes working the audience at the Globe, the female characters in Shakespeare's plays showed an enterprise and social mobility that was dangerously at odds with the heavily proscribed social role of women in early modern England. Would Rosalind's freedom and impertinent cross-dressing have frightened the authorities even more than the commercial audacity of the prostitutes who trolled for customers amid the audience for *As You Like It*? Even more alarming than the virtuous women on the Globe stage were the sex workers in Shakespeare's plays and the city comedies of playwrights like Middleton. Viewing the sex workers in the plays would be another way in which the theatre could instruct the largely male, youthful audience on the dangers and delights of illicit sexuality in the city. As Howard contends, "whorehouse narratives become a chief site for negotiating the changing nature of women's place within urban culture" (25). Or, as she concludes, the brothel and its fictional depiction on the early modern stage played

important roles in the audience's comprehension of "the entrepreneurial and multinational place that London was fast becoming" (Howard 161).

III

How did Shakespeare depict brothels in his plays? In addition to the Boar's Head Tavern in the second cycle of Henry plays, the two most prominent brothels in Shakespeare's plays are those in *Measure for Measure* and *Pericles*. The heroine of each play is forced to confront the vivid urban reality of prostitution. Although she does not engage in prostitution, Isabella does agree to *give* her body in order to preserve her brother's life, by means of the morally dubious "bed trick"; and while she does not actually have sex with the lustful Angelo, she is disturbingly willing to let another woman take her place. Marina, who is the most endangered of all the heroines of the late romances, escapes an act of attempted murder, is sold into sexual slavery by pirates, and has to learn spontaneously how to bargain her way out of sexual assault. In the tradition of comedy, each heroine preserves her virginity and prepares, at the conclusion of each play, to enter into marriage; but in each case the marriage is arranged, without the heroine's explicitly consent, to a morally dubious wooer. Both marriages are more politically convenient than emotionally compelling, and the marriages leave a negative impact on the audience. The disturbing implication in each case is that the heroine has been compromised—but also she has learned the harlot's skill at survival.

The choice of Vienna as the setting for *Measure for Measure* is an odd one for Shakespeare, since he nowhere else opts for a middle European locale. But as with the Mytilene brothel in *Pericles*, the brothel of Mistress Overdone clearly belongs in Shakespeare's London. As one recent editor notes, "the low-life section, with bawd, pimp, and comic constable, could easily have formed part of a play set in the London" (Bawcutt 2). In his edition of *The Collected Works* of Middleton, Gary Taylor speculates that Middleton revised the play's text after Shakespeare's death and changed what probably had been a more predictable Italian setting; the Duke, after all, remains named "Vincenzio." With the lament common to sex workers in Shakespeare, Mistress Overdone complains that business is bad: "Thus what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with poverty, I am custom-shrunk" (1.2.80-82). As Pompey the bawd complains, "All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down" (1.2.94-

95), presumably making a reference to James' draconian proclamation of 16 September 1603 (Bawcutt 2-3).

As any audience for this play will attest, the low humor of the brothel puts the sexual innocence and religious idealism of Isabella in stark relief. As the director Peter Brook has explained, "In *Measure for Measure* we have a base world. . . This is the disgusting, stinking world of medieval Vienna. . . Also, when so much of the play is religious in thought, the loud humour of the brothel is important as a device, because it is alienating and amusing" (Brook, cited by Bawcutt 35). One unifying element for these disparate halves of the play is the theme of vocation. Just as Isabella seeks a severe religious vocation and Angelo struggles to rise to his newly-imposed political duties, Pompey the bawd tries to see his job as a mystery. Escalus challenges him: "How would you live, Pompey? By being a bawd? What do you think of the trade, Pompey? Is it a lawful trade?" (2.1.213-15). When Pompey is recruited by the Provost as a prison assistant, Abhorson the jailer expresses his moral repugnance in taking on a bawd: "A bawd, sir? Fie upon him, he will discredit our mystery" (4.2.25-26). The incredulous Pompey innocently inquires if the role of hangman qualifies as a craft: "do you call, sir, your occupation a mystery?" (4.2.31). The play persistently interrogates the Pauline notion of vocation by contrasting the roles of religious novice, magistrate, executioner, and bawd.

Measure for Measure is arguably a play about sexual excess—or about the inability of Christian society to lay out a coherent sexual ethic. N. W. Bawcutt is right to argue that "*Measure for Measure* is inescapably about sexuality" (31), and the play seems to depict all forms of sexual expression as excessive and disorienting—virginity, pre-marital sex, prostitution and the bed-trick alike. None of the play's major characters escapes Shakespeare's scrutiny. Angelo is an appalling sexual hypocrite; Isabella's valorization of virginity is as chilly and harsh as Angelo's conception of the law; and the Duke, who inexplicably abandons his political duty at the play's opening, abuses his authority by leaving his post and then by toying inexcusably with the life of Claudio. At the conclusion, he abuses his authority by putting Isabella into an impossible position, and it is possible that Lucio's satiric description of the Duke may have more than a hint of accuracy. I suspect the Duke's twice-stated proposal of marriage at the conclusion is not merely a tasteless comic convention, as is often argued, but is the chilling climax of a

dark comedy of impossible sexual alternatives. The Duke's proposal amounts to a monstrous abuse of the Duke's authority, and it seems to confirm Lucio's accusations of the Duke: that "he had a feeling for the sport" (3.1.381) and that he "would eat mutton on Fridays" (3.1.440).

The play is, of course, filled with examples of bad sexual behavior. Angelo deserves the greatest obloquy for his demand that Isabella exchange her sexual favors for her brother's life (2.4.54-55, 2.4.95-98), and his crass proposal is made even more repugnant when he threatens to torture Claudio if she hesitates in complying. Angelo's crude sexual proposals have a comic analogue in Lucio's scurrilous accusations about the sexual habits of the absent Duke (3.1.381, 440), and he is the representative of Vienna's seamy underworld who confronts Isabella with her brother's desperate legal dilemma. Lucio is a crude, cruel, mocking sensualist; Angelo is a frank hypocrite; and the irresponsible Duke may actually be guilty, for all the audience knows, of the sexual excesses of which Lucio accuses him. But Isabella's willingness to allow Mariana as her substitute in Angelo's bed is possibly the most cynical action in the entire play, since by agreeing to the bed trick Isabella abandons the absolute separation between body and soul upon which her value system has been built. No longer enskied and sainted, Isabella is now as guilty as most of the play's other tainted characters, excepting only the sadistic hypocrite Angelo. She is more guilty of ethical failure than Marina, because she allows someone else to suffer sexual violation in her place. By contrast, Marina remains a victim, right to the end of her play.

IV

At the most dramatically compelling moment in *Pericles*, Marina bargains with the pimp Bolt for her freedom from the Mytilene brothel. In exchange for the cash she received from Lysimachus, Bolt is to help Marina get established in her proposed academy for the young women of Mytilene, where she will teach dancing, singing and sewing:

Here's gold for thee.

If that thy master would make gain by me,
Proclaim that I can sing, weave, sew, and dance,
With other virtues which I'll keep from boast,

And I will undertake all these to teach. (Sc. 19, 227-31)

The list of skills is provocative; Marina no doubt learned some of them at the court of the poisonous Dionyza in Tarsus, and presumably much of her talent derives from her innate dignity as a princess; but the list disturbingly resembles the skills that a Renaissance Venetian courtesan, like the famous Veronica Franco, could boast. “It was not enough for the *corigiana onesta* simply to be fashionably dressed,” as Franco’s biographer has noted. “She had to offer herself, in the manner of the Japanese geisha, as an educated and skilful conversationalist and entertainer of men” (Rosenthal 72-73). The combination of skills which strikes a modern reader as unusual—dancing, sewing, weaving, and singing—was actually a common group of skills for courtesans and even occasional prostitutes well into the Nineteenth Century, as for example Henri Mürger’s Mimi and Francine (the prototypes of the operatic Mimi in Giacomo Puccini’s *La Bohème* in 1896) in his mid-Nineteenth Century novel of the Bohemian lifestyle in Paris, *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème*. I am not proposing this as proof that Marina has been sexually violated—rather, that she has adopted the prostitute’s lifestyle as a consequence of having been placed in the brothel. Marina has, in fact, been tainted by her entire unhappy experience with Cleon and Dionyza, the assassin Leonine, the pirates, and the brothel denizens in Mytilene. For all her transparent virtue, Marina is not able to escape from the brothel by her own merits. Rather, she makes a financial transaction with Bolt, by giving him the money she had been given by Lysimachus as reward for her virtue:

I came here meaning but to pay the price,

A piece of gold for thy virginity;

Here’s twenty to relieve thine honesty. (Sc. 19, 154-57)

Marina ultimately escapes by means of her wits and her bank account, and not simply by her virtue. When she is brought to Helicanus’ ship in the harbor of Mytilene to minister to the speechless and nearly catatonic Pericles, she presents herself as a sort of music therapist; unaware of her therapeutic motive, Pericles clearly imagines her to be a sort of courtesan who begins her program of services with a musical performance. His striking of his own, unknown daughter is surely this character’s moral low point. The blow to Marina’s cheek, which in the Quarto’s stage direction is not specified, is explicitly violent in George Wilkins’ novelized version of the play, *The Painfull Adventures of*

Pericles Prince of Tyre (1608): there, Pericles scolds and then strikes her: “presumptuous bewty in a childe, how darest thou urge so much? And therewithal, in this rash distemperature, strucke her on the face” (Bullough 6:543). Having recovered the power of speech, Pericles quickly recognizes his lost daughter, despite the sheer improbability of her survival and, in his ecstatic mood, claims to hear to the music of the spheres. But the audience should not forget or forgive his use of physical violence against Marina, regardless of her identity or her motive in appearing before him.

Pericles, like *Measure of Measure*, opens in an atmosphere of monstrous sexual excess, at the incestuous court of King Antiochus of Antioch. Although not specifically guilty of incest, so far as we know, Isabella in *Measure for Measure* had bizarrely accused Claudio of a “sort of incest” (3.1.142) for his willingness to keep his own life at the price of her virginity. Whether the audience of *Pericles* in 1608-09 recalled that anticipation of one great theme of this play, it is clear that the threats of incest and cannibalism (the riddle of Antiochus’ daughter, after all, says “I am no viper, yet I feed/ On mother’s flesh. . .,” Sc.1, 107-08) haunt the play. Like Overdone’s Viennese brothel, the Mytilene brothel has fallen on hard times, with the few surviving sex workers diseased and with the customers suffering the ravages of the diseases they incurred there. As the Bawd briskly says of the “poor Transylvanian” who “lay with the little baggage”: “she quickly pooped him, she made him roast meat for worms” (Sc. 16, 20-24). As the First Clown implies of the “pocky corses” who are buried in his graveyard in *Hamlet*, the living are scarcely distinguishable from the dead. The nightmare underworld of this play, as in *Measure for Measure*, reveals a kind of frenzied style of greed and sexual rapacity that leads directly, as in a painting of Hieronymus Bosch, to death.

Just as Isabella is tainted by the unsavory means of the preservation of her virginity, so Marina escapes violation and death but is tainted by her entrance into the cash economy of the classical Mediterranean. And just as Isabella had preserved her virginity successfully, only to be trapped into marriage by the “old fantastical duke of dark corners” (*MM* 4.3.157), who is an even greater manipulator than Angelo, so Marina—who is once again inexplicably abandoned by her feckless father—is left to marry a corrupt civic official who has been the best customer of the very brothel from which she had purchased her freedom. Isabella and Marina are permanently tarnished by their

encounters with the sex trade, and the pessimism of these two dark plays is stark, unmistakable, and deeply unsettling. For *Pericles*, George Wilkins brought his terrible expertise as a brothel keeper and abuser of women; by contrast, Shakespeare brought his compassion and his belief in human fallibility, resilience and redemption.

West Virginia University

Works Cited

- Archer, Ian W. *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London*.
Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1991.
- Bullough, Geoffrey, ed. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. 6.
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; NY: Columbia U P, 1966.
- Clark, Peter. *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830*. London and NY:
Longman, 1983.
- Fraser, Antonia. *The Weaker Vessel*. NY: Random House, 1984.
- Howard, Jean C. *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598-1642*.
Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007.
- Mendelson, Sara and Patricia Crawford. *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720*.
Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998.
- Middleton, Thomas. *The Collected Works*. Ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino. Oxford:
Clarendon P, 2007.
- Mürger, Henri. *Scenes de la Vie de Bohème*. Tr. Elizabeth Ward Hugus. Salt Lake City:
Peregrine Smith, 1988 (o. p. 1930).
- Nevo, Ruth. *Shakespeare's Other Language*. NY: Methuen, 1987.
- Rosenthal, Margaret F. *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in
Sixteenth-Century Venice*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. Ed. N. W. Bawcutt. Oxford: Oxford U P,
1991.
- _____ and George Wilkins. *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Ed. Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford
U P, 2003.
- Sidney, Philip. *Sir Philip Sidney*. (Oxford Authors.) Ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones.
Oxford: Oxford U P, 1989.