

The Constraints of Desire

DAVID HOLT

a contribution to the Sesame Celebration for Marian Lindkvist

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[The Sesame Institute UK is a registered charity. It researches and promotes the use of movement and drama as therapy, and trains therapists in a non-confrontational method which stresses the importance of image and symbol in story. Sesame full time training is held at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London NW3.]

The Constraints of Desire - Artifice and Sacrifice

To help celebrate the publication of Marion Lindkvist's book here are some thoughts that have been germinating for twelve years and more, since a Sesame led weekend of work on *Measure for Measure* in 1985, at Hawkwood College in Gloucestershire. (I take the words "the constraints of desire" from a wonderful book with that title, by John Winkler, on the anthropology of sex and gender in ancient Greece.)

First let me remind you of the plot of Shakespeare's play.

1. The Duke of Vienna has handed over his authority to his deputy Angelo, on the pretence of going on a long journey. In fact, he remains in hiding and in disguise in the city to observe events.

2. Angelo is intent on strict enforcement of the city laws against sexual licence, and to this end sentences young Claudio to death for having got his betrothed pregnant before they were married.

3. Isabella, the sister of Claudio, is about to enter a holy order as a nun, but agrees to leave her nunnery (she has not yet taken her vows) to plead with Angelo for her brother's life. She does so, and the strict and apparently asexual Angelo is fiercely and consumingly attracted to her. In the second of two interviews he tells her he will reprieve her brother if she goes to bed with him. Horrified, Isabella refuses. When she explains Angelo's offer to her brother, Claudio pleads with her to accede to Angelo's wish, to sacrifice her virginity to save his life.

4. As brother and sister fall apart in mutual recrimination, the Duke emerges, in disguise, to begin to straighten things out.

5. The plan he proposes is that Mariana, who was once betrothed to Angelo, then rejected by him when she appeared to have lost her dowry, but who nevertheless still continues to love him and want him as her husband, should substitute herself for Isabella in the darkness of the night, so that Angelo makes love (if that is the right word) to her, thinking that she is Claudio's sister, the nun-to-be for whom he has conceived so sharp a desire.

6. This plan is agreed to by both Isabella and Mariana, and it is out of the subsequent sightless sexual encounter between Mariana and Angelo that the play reaches its denouement.

Why has our weekend kept recurring to me over nearly thirteen years?

Inheritance, and now over thirty years of professional psychological practice, have given me a life long interest in sexual discipline. Why is it that sexual discipline can be so exciting, so compelling, a revelation of ourselves and of our being in the world? Our weekend with *Measure for Measure* got me thinking about that question in new ways.

The part I was given in our enactment was that of Mariana. I had to have sex with Angelo in the nighttime darkness of his garden, pretending to be another woman. Which meant that in the scene which I was to enact sexual desire was playfully, ludicrously, perhaps maliciously but perhaps also forgivingly, confused as to its object. Of the two bodies involved, one knew who the other was, one did not. And this particular scene was driven forward by all that had gone before, a developing plot energised by sexual desire: desire as free and fruitful outside the law, desire as worthy of sacrifice, desire as something to be tightly and if necessarily cruelly disciplined, desire as able to penetrate and turn round even its most dedicated enemy.

What did we make of it?

In terms of production the two important decisions were to cast a woman as Angelo and a man, myself, as Mariana, and to represent the darkness by having Angelo blindfold. The effect was to make the scene both comic and deadly serious. The obviousness of the gender reversal emphasised sexual ambiguity of a kind we associate with the circus or the burlesque theatre. The blindfolded groping, the intensity of the hidden gaze, brought something terrible into the performance, responding to its setting within the wider plot of the play in which sexual desire and death are crossed in sado-masochistic imagery; for instance, when Isabella whose part Mariana has taken in bed can reject Angelo's proposal in his office with

...were I under the terms of death
Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That long I have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame.

The memory of that performance has stayed with me ever since, both as comfort and as incitement. As long as I can remember, sexual desire has involved for me more or less insistent intimations of gender reversal. The extraordinary effect of that blindfold as my predatory lover took my body mistakenly as the body of another is now always with me as a reminder that sexual desire is easily deceived as to its object. To have acted all that, to have *shown* it to an audience, has made me more bold in owning to experiences for which I had previously had no name. Perhaps it is possible to be confused as to the object of desire without necessarily being as peculiar as I used to fear. More: perhaps such confusion defines the constraints of desire more accurately than society likes to admit.

So how do the constraints of desire *work* ?

The answer I have come up with owes much to anthropology and psychoanalysis. It can be put in two words: artifice (artificial) and sacrifice (sacrificial).

When we act we realise that the space between stage and audience is not empty. It is full of artifice. It pulses with energy plotted by an author who is absent. Actor and audience are brought together by an art which is not their own.

Think for a moment of the two words making up. Pause between them. Allow yourself to hear them as it were for the first time. Making. Up. Now, together: making up. As actors we use make up. As audience we make up our mind to go to the play, or as the French say, to assist at the play. But the play is made up too. In the theatre different kinds of making up have to negotiate with each other. Theatre is a sharing in the artificiality of human society, in what anthropologists call 'the social construction of reality'. Making up is how we negotiate that construction.

Measure for Measure is artificial. In enacting the play without words there is no escape from this. Muscular and nervous energy is committed to representing sex as artifice. Brothels, the condemned cell, law courts as necessary but both stupid and cruel, the comforts and demands of religion, the joy and fear of pregnancy, marriage as an exchange of property, they are all about the social construction of sexuality.

At the heart of the play, the moment when it pivots between tragedy and resolution, a moment which is off stage and usually preceded in the theatre by the interval for drinks, refreshment and fresh air, is the scene in which the social construction of sexuality is celebrated as artifice. As Angelo mistakenly fucks Mariana lust and betrothal, property and marriage, are brought together by an artifice that is both comic and deadly serious. The constraints of desire are presented as both cruel and comic.

I don't think we can feel the cruelty and the comedy together without allowing for the artificiality of what is being enacted, which is probably why it used to be called one of Shakespeare's problem plays. But the artificiality ceases to be problematic if we can admit that it has a purpose. Could it be that its purpose is sacrificial?

The idea of our bodies as sacrificial is a strange one for most people today. But working with the Sesame tradition it has come to seem very familiar. Let me try and introduce it with some thoughts about exposure and about pain.

We are rightly afraid of sexual exposure if it allows of no sharing, no reflection, no communion, the kind of exposure we associate with the tabloid press, with certain TV

programmes, and with investigation of the sort which intends conviction before a court of law. But theatrical exposure is of a different kind. It celebrates. It not only allows for, *it depends on*, sharing, reflection, communion. How can we move from fear of exposure to celebration of exposure?

I think we have to learn a new confidence in the connections between sexual constraint and mockery.

The constraints of desire always have to negotiate with mockery. We have to allow for vulgarity as well as for taste. The clothes we wear, the language we use, the behaviour we insist on. For a man, the state of his penis, even the choice of a name for it, is an opening into mockery. For both sexes, the bottom, and again, between Americans and British, the variation between arse and ass in both spelling and pronunciation (as in that unforgettable confrontation in the *Fawlty Towers* "Waldorf Salad"), can lead into wider fields of mockery, as the translation of Bottom in another of Shakespeare's plays reminds us. However we use it in private places, mockery has to be negotiated.

Measure for Measure shows sexual mockery at work in more public places. We realise that it can do more for us than we had thought. Mockery can mediate between law court and brothel, nunnery and marriage, property and flesh. Mockery can be used by society as an attack on its sexual minorities. But it can also be used to expose the pretension in all social construction of sexuality, in the constantly changing social definition of what is allowable and what is not.

But mockery is also cruel, which makes us afraid of it. The constraints of desire use mockery to rubbish, to depreciate, to dismiss. Mockery can be used to make people ashamed so that they have nowhere to go and have to hide themselves away. But if we can allow for its sacrificial function mockery can do something else. It can turn shame into something that can be shared, the recognition that our bodies involve us necessarily in sacrifice, that they invite us to make sense of sacrifice.

What do I mean by the sacrificial function of mockery? Let me turn for an answer to pain.

All scenarios about sexual discipline, about the constraints of desire, involve some negotiation as to the pain to be born. Pain is exalted. Pain is feared. Giving and taking are played against and across each other. Constraint defines itself in the giving and taking of pain.

I think a play like *Measure for Measure* shows what is happening when the giving and taking of pain are staked against each other like this. Private and public management of pain are dramatically compared and contrasted. Actors and audience together explore a bewildering

range of alternatives, political, sacred, personal, that all come together in the sexuality of our bodies. The bewilderment, the sheer range of alternatives, is too much for any one person to carry on their own. The self sufficiency of our bodies has to be sacrificed.

“The self sufficiency of our bodies has to be sacrificed.” It is a difficult thought for some. Let me try and sharpen its focus a bit.

Sacrificial rituals require a victim. Is there a victim when we use constraint with sexual intent? There is widespread public anxiety about sexual abuse, and some of this is certainly directed at reports of disciplinarian rituals. It is not only ‘the victim’ that can feel abused. I have known one woman, who for seven years actively enjoyed herself exercising sexual discipline in the dominant role, say ten years later “I think I allowed myself to be abused”. If I understood her rightly, she meant that she had been abused by her ‘victim’. Abuse there can certainly be. But how does a willing victim abuse? How does abuse relate to the comfort, the indescribable comfort, of submission to the give and take of pain?

I think abuse happens when sacrifice goes wrong. Sacrifice requires that giving and taking add up to more than simple exchange. Only then can we make sense of the willing victim. If it doesn’t ‘add up’ everyone feels cheated. Which is where theatre comes in. Theatre can help us understand this ‘adding up to more’. The exchange that takes place between stage and audience can help us recognise why we feel cheated if a sacrifice goes wrong.

For those who have never acted it is easy to think that in the exchange between stage and audience all the giving is being done by the actors, all the taking by the audience. But any actor who has moved from rehearsal to live performance knows that that is not so. It is perhaps the most important lesson I have learned from Sesame. Stage is energised by audience just as audience is energised by stage. The give and take has to be reciprocal for theatre to work. But it also has to add up to more. There has to be something to wonder at.

Wonder. That’s what we need if the sacrifice of our bodily self sufficiency is to ‘add up’. We have to be *able* to wonder about our bodies. We have to be *allowed* to wonder. More. Wonder about our bodies has to be *encouraged*, *recognised* as socially desirable, as something *shareable* with others.

But wonder includes a sense that something is owing. That’s why it goes with sacrifice. Sacrifice goes wrong when that sense of something owing is not allowed for. Which is where theatre began. In the theatre both actors and audience sacrifice their self sufficiency so that something else can come about: a joint recognition that something is owing to an author that is always more or less present, more or less absent.

Anthropologists make much of the links between theatre and religion. When I was a boy I was shocked to realise the excitement I got from reading about the humiliation and flagellation of Christ. When people got married in church they used to say "With my body I thee worship". We must not be afraid of language and feeling that is religious. We need more of it if we are to engage with the righteous anger of those who are afraid of the body without knowing what it is they are afraid of.

Artifice and sacrifice. Our weekend with *Measure for Measure* has brought these two words together, playing them across each other in new ways. Sexuality constrains us to experiment with artifice and to celebrate with sacrifice. There comes a time in sex when I am beside myself. My body does not know which way to turn. There are so many places it could go. What is it that my body wants to do? There are so many parts it could play. On stage, the voice of discipline says that I must make up my mind whether I am man or woman, victim or perpetrator. In the audience, the voice of mockery reminds me of all that I am missing if I limit myself to only one part. But if we are all actor and audience and author in one, then discipline and mockery are caught up into a larger play, the play of artifice across sacrifice, of sacrifice across artifice.

The human body has the gift always to wonder about its limits. Performance celebrates that gift. Much of our enjoyment of sex, and much of our fear of sex, is enjoyment or fear of performance. In public a wedding can be just lovely, or really rather nasty (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*). In private, a sexual partnership is constantly negotiating performances which are more or less enjoyable, more or less fearful.

We all know that Sesame is about movement. I shall always treasure that moment in preparation when the Sesame leader says: "Now let's move it". I have learned much from this emphasis on movement, and am indeed grateful. What I have learned from our weekend with *Measure for Measure* is something more: how naturally the movement of bodies in relation to each other translates into wonder at the conjunction of artifice and sacrifice.

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David Holt

[Other thoughts on our 1985 enactment of *Measure for Measure* can be found in two papers *Listening for the beat of history in the rhythms of everyday*, and *Making an Appearance: the Hazard of Being a Person and our Stake in the Theatre*. The first is published in the privately published *Theatre and Behaviour* (1987), the second in my collected papers *The Psychology of Carl Jung: essays in application and deconstruction* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992)]



Enter Mariana and Isabella

Welcome, how agreed?

ISABELLA
 She'll take the enterprize upon her, father,
 If you advise it.

DUKE It is not my consent,
 But my entreaty too.

ISABELLA Little have you to say
 When you depart from him but, soft and low,
 'Remember now my brother.'

MARIANA Fear me not.

DUKE
 Nor, gentle daughter, fear you not at all.
 He is your husband on a pre-contract.
 To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
 Sith that the justice of your title to him
 Doth flourish the deceit. Come, let us go;
 Our corn's to reap, for yet our tilth's to sow.



He hath a garden circummured with brick,
 Whose western side is with a vineyard backed
 And to that vineyard is a planced gate,
 That makes his opening with this bigger key.
 This other doth command a little door
 Which from the vineyard to the garden leads
 There have I made my promise,
 In the heavy middle of the night,

FERMENTATIO

