Studies examining the relationship between Shakespeare's and Marlowe's plays often discuss Judaism in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Jew of Malta*. Most recently, Michelle Ephraim’s *Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage* and Robert Logan’s *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry* have entered the conversation, continuing a long tradition of utilizing these two works as a lens for investigating early modern views on Judaism.\(^1\) Despite the immense critical interest generated by these works and their relationship, it is interesting to note that little scholarship exists comparing other plays by Marlowe and Shakespeare. Indeed, a notable void in early modern scholarship is the lack of comparative studies on *Measure for Measure* and *The Jew of Malta*. Such a pairing might not seem obvious at first; however, looking at these texts in tandem presents a unique opportunity to consider how Renaissance dramatists exposed the societal ramifications of convent closures in a culture that increasingly assigned fiscal worth to virginal bodies that had once held spiritual capital.\(^2\)

This essay examines *The Jew of Malta* and *Measure for Measure* to provide insight into this significant early modern cultural phenomenon—the displacement of the lifelong virgin from the convent, her cultural niche and protective space, and the simultaneous commodification of the female body on the marriage market. In these works, Abigail and Isabella give audiences a glimpse of female life in the secular city and nunnery, but as the maidens move between the openness of the city and the gated cloister, tensions heighten, and the incompatibility of these worlds becomes evident. Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s plays suggest that a society moving toward increasing mercantilism poses too many dangers
for virgins; the convent remains, despite its legal extinction in England, the safest place for women who wish to remain single or celibate. Set against this religious and cultural backdrop, the convent represents a locus of resistance, a space where Abigail and Isabella find that the protection and bodily control afforded to them through the veil are more advantageous than the dangerous freedoms they encounter beyond the confines of the cloister.

Early modern audiences would have viewed *The Jew of Malta* and *Measure for Measure* with at least some knowledge of convents and the virgin's role in Catholicism. In pre-Reformation England, the Catholic Church lauded virginity as the highest state of being for women and provided young maidens the opportunity to remain virgins (and single) by taking the veil, thereby establishing a privileged role for the virgin within Christianity. But changing tides in religious philosophy brought about by the Reformation resulted in significant alterations in the practice of lifelong virginity: with the dissolution of the convents and monasteries, virgins found themselves physically, religiously, and socially displaced. Adding to the deracination of the virgin was the Reformed Church's move away from the medieval idealized hierarchy of female worth—maiden, widow, and spouse—to a privileging of marriage over virginity. This new hierarchy prescribed a trajectory in which all women should progress from maiden to wife and in turn relegated virginity to a temporary state along the trajectory; as John Rogers explains, “marriage and conjugal affection became increasingly idealized and encouraged, while the sustained life of celibacy was devalued and dismissed as sinful popery.” This is not to say that virginity lost its value altogether. Rather, the value of the virginal body shifted from its seat within the Church to the marriage market, where its worth became predicated on the knowledge that marriage and motherhood were the ultimate goals for all women.

An illustrative example of the privileging of marriage over singlehood is found in *Christian Oeconomie*, a popular early modern English guidebook for households written by Puritan reformer William Perkins. Perkins asserts that marriage “is a state in it selfe, farre more excellent, then the condition of single life,” and he gives four rationales from the Bible to support his claim. Perkins’s argument culminates with his use of
the Adam and Eve story as a model of marriage and procreation set forth by God. Obedience to God, based on God's desire for men and women to “go forth and multiply,” according to Perkins, can only be achieved by marriage. As Perkins's guidebook exemplifies, the emphasis on marriage in early modern culture increased exponentially.

The accepted role of woman became limited to that of subservient “helpe m[ate],” a shift in thought which can also be seen in Perkins’s text: “The wife is the other married person, who being subject to her husband, yeeldeth obedience vnto him.” Wives, clearly subordinate in this passage, function as obedient subjects to their husbands. As Theodora A. Jankowski notes, “[I]t is the wife’s position as ‘subject’ to her ‘ruler’ (husband) that determines her position within marriage, rather than her activity as companion [or “helpe mate”] to her husband.” Just as man is subject to the crown, woman is subject to her husband, and a good subject is an obedient one. According to this logic, a good Protestant subject is an obedient wife—no alternative to marriage is addressed—while a woman who rejects the ruler’s reign, whether that refers to king or husband, is condemned as a heretical, treasonous villain. Views such as Perkins’s were the cultural norm. Women who postponed or refused marriage entirely by remaining virgins, within a culture that now valued the female body in regard more to its sexual potential than its spiritual worth, were vilified, as Margaret W. Ferguson has pointed out. This cultural shift from valuing female celibacy as an honorable lifelong spiritual choice to prizing female virginity as a profitable asset on the marriage market established the female body as a commodity whose value was based upon her sexual use potential.

In The Jew of Malta and Measure for Measure, tensions created by the transmission of power from the veil to the commodification of the virginal body emerge through the presence of the convent, portrayed as a young maiden’s only safe haven. Although Abigail and Isabella follow opposite trajectories—Abigail enters the convent to escape the outside world while Isabella is coerced to re-enter the outside world—the plays are strikingly similar in their depictions of the contrasts between city and convent life. Life in the city is portrayed as highly sexualized; there are threats to Abigail’s and Isabella’s virginity at every turn, and their bodies
are appraised based upon their potential for sexual use. In contrast to the corruption of Malta and Vienna, the convent is shown as a protective space where both women are able to retreat safely from the dangers of city life, for only within its confines can Abigail and Isabella escape from corrupt male authorities. The male authorities responsible for protecting Abigail and Isabella, a father and brother respectively, are the very people who attempt to market them, attempts that are thwarted by the convent in both cases. *The Jew of Malta* and *Measure for Measure* depict the nunnery as a locus of resistance, a place where women can retain autonomy over their bodies and find authority in their words, a sharp contrast to the mores of city life.

The valuation and commodification of the virginal body associated with city life are conveyed in *The Jew of Malta* by the interactions between Abigail and her father. Barabas is certainly an avatar for evil, and his open exploitation of his daughter’s virginity works to highlight her use potential in a variety of ways. Additionally, Barabas is clearly aware of the market value of Abigail’s virginity; her virginity allows her entrance to the convent and later becomes a good offered for sale to the highest bidder during marriage negotiations. In the city, Abigail is portrayed as chattel, with inherent market value based on her use potential, rather than a beloved daughter.

Abigail’s virginity is first commodified when the familial home is taken by the Maltese government and transformed into a convent. Barabas must use Abigail to reclaim jewels left within their previous abode, his “[i]nfinite riches in a little room.”\(^\text{10}\) Emily C. Bartels observes that when Barabas asks his daughter to complete this task for him, he turns Abigail and her Judaism into an “exploitable commodity, sending her as a convert into a convent to retrieve his hidden gold.”\(^\text{11}\) Bartels is quite right in her assertion that Abigail is commodified at this moment. However, it is not only Abigail’s Judaism that makes her a piece of merchandise. Barabas also turns Abigail’s virginity into an exploitable vendible, for it enables her to enter the convent and rescue Barabas’s treasures. Abigail, in disguise as a petitioner in training for the sisterhood, finds the family jewels and throws the bags of wealth down to her father as he yells, “O girl, O gold, O beauty, O my bliss” (2.1.54). Barabas’s words point to a conflation of his wealth and daughter—the girl is equated with his gold; both are beauties
and bring him bliss. The correlation between virginal bodies and monetary worth is particularly poignant at this moment, as the audience is left with the impression that Barabas considers his daughter simply another type of gold.

Ironically, an early modern Christian audience would also have recognized Barabas’s earlier reference to “[i]nfinite riches in a little room” as an allegorical allusion to Christ enclosed in Mary’s womb.\(^{12}\) G. K. Hunter further explains that “[t]he virgin’s womb was not only ‘litel space’ but also infinitely rich in a monetary sense. The comparison of Christ to jewels, gold, silver, coinage, is too obvious to require illustration.”\(^{13}\) Seeing Abigail rescue her father’s infinite riches brings the allegory to life. Abigail becomes both the Virgin Mary and Christ—Mary, with her valuable virginal womb, when she extracts Barabas’s wealth from its secret hiding place within the convent, and Christ when she is sacrificed later. Abigail’s virginity is instrumental in making sense of this allegory, as well as the fulfillment of Barabas’s request, since her task of recovery relies upon a pure body full of sexual use potential rather than a tainted one. In rescuing the treasures hidden beneath the convent floor, Abigail also exhibits a form of agency from within the convent’s walls by taking an active role in securing her family’s fortune.

However, because this scene takes place on convent grounds (Barabas stands outside the convent while Abigail is within) the spiritual worth associated with virginity in the Catholic Church collides with the materiality exhibited by Barabas’s exploitation of his daughter’s maidenhood. Abigail extracts Barabas’s wealth from its hiding place within the convent, an action that both requires and underscores her virginity and its association with potential future riches through the birth of an heir to the family fortune. The play compels audiences to dismiss Barabas’s literal conflation of riches and sexual use potential in favor of the Christian metaphor of the Virgin Mary’s womb as a storehouse of spiritual wealth (Christ), a line of reasoning that leads back to the spiritual value of celibacy as well as the walls of the Catholic convent as safe haven for virgins.

Throughout the remainder of the play, Abigail’s body continues to be referred to in economic terms, but her market value is most overtly shown in the marriage negotiations that take place between Barabas and
Lodowick during a slave auction. The dialogue turns quickly to Abigail’s use value, and she is referred to as a “diamond.” As Lodowick and Barabas discuss the terms of their “diamond” transaction, the quality (potential) of the “diamond” comes to the forefront of their deal:

*Lodowick:* What sparkle does it give without a foil?
*Barabas:* The diamond that I talk of ne’er was foiled.

*Lodowick:* Is it square or pointed? Pray let me know.
*Barabas:* Pointed it is, good sir...

*Lodowick:* And what’s the price? (2.3.56–57, 60–61, 65)

Barabas describes his daughter in this scene in terms of a “diamond,” as a virgin who is beautiful and ready for sex. Barabas assures Lodowick that she has “ne’er [been] foiled”; her use potential remains untapped, an important factor in establishing her worth. Much like a diamond’s value is dependent on its purity, Abigail’s value is predicated on her virginity as a guarantee of her potential. The conversation quickly turns to the monetary terms of the exchange: “What’s the price?” During the entire encounter, Abigail is discussed in terms of her body and its market value: beauty, virginity, sexuality, and price.14 Price, however, is tied to worth, and worth for women is contingent on virginity, as Lodowick’s questions demonstrate. It is evident that when Abigail is outside the confines of the convent, her virginity is a commodity and marker of marital worth, measured by her sexual use potential.

In a manner similar to that of Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, Isabella’s brother Claudio attempts to capitalize on the market value of his sister’s virginity in *Measure for Measure*. Though the correlation of a virginal body with wealth or gems is not as overt in *Measure for Measure*—the exchange is Isabella’s virginity for Claudio’s freedom—Isabella’s body is discussed in purely economic terms, and she is viewed as a commodity that can be exchanged outside the convent. While Isabella petitions for her brother’s freedom in act 2, scene 4, Angelo hints at the price of Claudio’s freedom (Isabella’s virginity) many times, but only when he places the exchange in economic terms does Isabella understand his meaning: “You
must lay down the treasures of your body / To this supposed, or else to let him [Claudio] suffer.” Isabella is a literal “treasure” in the sense that her body is untainted and untapped; her high market value as a virgin, a value overtly conveyed by her status as a novice, is precisely, and ironically, what makes her attractive to Angelo.

That Isabella immediately grasps the innuendo of Angelo’s request when he couches it in terms of commodity and exchange demonstrates her awareness of her virgin body’s worth, both inside and outside the convent. Rather than submitting and relinquishing her “treasures” willingly, Isabella reworks Angelo’s metaphor to turn his words against him:

That is, were I under the terms of death,  
Th’ impression of keen whips I’ld wear as rubies,  
And strip myself to death, as to a bed  
That longing have been sick for, ere I’ld yield  
My body up to shame. (2.4.100–4)

Although these lines are frequently read as referring to some underlying sexual deviance on Isabella’s part, her language is not primarily depraved or sexual, but demonstrates Isabella’s privileging of spirituality and commitment to God over physical lust. Her words indicate a “resistance [that] derives not simply from her refusal to acquiesce to [Angelo’s] wishes, but from the knowledge that she herself is responsible...for the preservation of her virginity.” Isabella’s use of gems (rubies) in this speech highlights her knowledge of the ways in which virginal bodies are commodified in Vienna, where Isabella’s virginity is not a marker of her spiritual dedication but a marker of her sexual potential. The ruby impressions created by whips become a symbol of self-inflicted torture in Isabella’s verbal image. As Abby Jane Dubman Hansen documents, Shakespeare had an immense knowledge of gemstones based on lapidaries, so his use of rubies within this climactic speech bears further examination.

The *Sloane Lapidary*, dated to the late sixteenth century, describes rubies as “mervealous stones of beauty...[the] lord and king of stones and of gems....It driueth away all taches & ill conditions. It is sayd yt this stone is in ye flame of paradice.” As Isabella’s words indicate in
the passage above, the red flagellation marks left on her body that act as a badge of her suffering transform into rubies, “[a] marvelous stone of beauty” as well as an outward marker of her resistance. Moreover, this torture, she hopes, will “driueth away” Angelo and the “ill condition” of his fleshly desires. The *Sloane Lapidary* connects rubies to paradise, but earlier lapidaries make a clear connection between rubies and religion. Both the *London Lapidary* from the first half of the fifteenth century and the fifteenth-century *North Midland Lapidary* mention biblical references to the ruby, and rubies are correlated with the redemptive light of Christ in these texts as well. The religious connotations associated with the ruby emphasize not only Isabella’s religious convictions, but the paradox within her dialogue with Angelo. The wounds/rubies Isabella is willing to display will only bring her closer to God, not Angelo; in the course of her suffering she will “beholdeth Þe rubie of Þe lymmes of Ihesu,” an experience that will further elevate her over the “clene living peple of this worlde.” She would prefer to suffer extensively, wearing flagellation scars as badges of her dedication to God, than to submit to Claudio’s sexual desires.

Isabella goes on to vow that she would “strip [herself] to death, as to a bed / That longing have been sick for” rather than have sex with Angelo (2.4.102–3). Isabella uses the word *strip* to refer to the stripping of her skin through the whipping she prefers to endure. But an additional meaning of *strip* in use during the period—“to move or pass swiftly”—is appropriate in this context as well: Isabella wishes to “move or pass swiftly” to death, which she strongly prefers to losing her virginity. The word *bed* often implies a bridal bed or sexual bedding of some sort, and this holds true here. However, Isabella does not desire to be bedded by a mortal man. Isabella has not yet taken her vows, and from her initial appearance in the play, where she “wish[es] a more strict restraint,” the prospect of doing so is her one desire (1.4.4). The bridal bedding she longs for is her union with Christ, not Angelo. Isabella thus replaces the patriarchal metaphor linking jewels, the female body, and sex with an image of a chaste body in service of Christ, effectively turning Angelo’s words against him. As this speech exemplifies, Isabella recognizes that her virginity is viewed as a commodity when she is in the city; however, the convent allows her to remove herself from the marriage and sexual market through her dedication to God.
The Jew of Malta and Measure for Measure depict women’s bodies, specifically virginal bodies, as commodities (quite literally, diamonds and rubies) that are exchanged between men in the city. The worth of the virginal body comes from its untapped sexual potential, and that sexual potential has value that may be commodified on the marriage market. However, the convents within these plays offer Abigail and Isabella an alternative to marriage, a way to maintain their worth by storing their sexual potential within the gates of the nunnery. It is only behind the convent walls that Abigail and Isabella are not thought of as gemstones or traded as commodities. Therefore, virginity becomes a site of powerful contention, and the convent emerges as a space of resistance and agency, a place where female characters are able to elude male ascendancy. Whether it is a matter of a father willing to use his daughter as a pawn in his personal revenge scheme or an immoral brother who places his life above his sister’s honor, the cities in these plays represent danger for virgins, from which the only escape is either death or the convent.

Abigail’s experiences with her father demonstrate that the safest place for a woman is behind the walls of a convent, for in the city, lies are told, she is silenced, and her virginal body is used as a vessel of revenge without her consent. The seclusion and confinement of monastic life are pointed out in the first act, where Abigail informs Barabas that their home has been transformed into a convent:

For there I left the governor placing nuns,
Displacing me; and of thy house they mean
To make a nunnery, where none but their own sect
Must enter in, men generally barred. (1.2.255–58)

The convent, she points out, offers solace from the city since only certain women are admitted there and men are barred from entering. While at first this seems foreign to young Abigail, by the end of the play she seeks an escape, a way to isolate herself from men and society in general, and finds support and agency behind the convent walls.

The isolation of the convent and the women who reside there help draw Abigail to her final, true conversion, and she learns about it even before her initial contact with the abbess. Abigail first encounters the nuns as they make the journey to their new nunnery. Here the abbess comments,
“[W]e love not to be seen” (1.2.307). Abigail and her father are onstage at this point, listening to the friars and nuns converse as they make their way to their new home. Like Abigail and the jewels she rescues from the floorboards of her old home, the sisters keep themselves hidden from the corruption of the city. Abigail’s desire to “as a novice learn to frame / My solitary life to your strait laws” is at first a con (1.2.334–35). Yet Abigail’s education about the safety enclosure provides, and the authority she can retain along with it, begins with her initial exposure to the abbess.

The protective nature of enclosure is a lesson Abigail has learned well from the abbess, for when she does decide to re-enter the convent, she sends Ithamore to the nunnery to get the friar rather than venture out herself. In this way, Marlowe conveys to the audience that Abigail understands the potential dangers she faces in the city. This awareness is further evidenced by Abigail’s response to Friar Jacomo when she petitions him to allow her re-entrance to the convent. Upon hearing Abigail’s revelation regarding the error of her ways, Jacomo asks, “Who taught thee this?” (3.3.66). Abigail responds, “The abbess of the house, / Whose zealous admonition I embrace” (3.3.66–67). Although Friar Jacomo is unsure of Abigail’s sincerity upon her second petition to become a nun, she reassures him that she has learned from her experiences:

Then were my thoughts so frail and unconfirmed,
And I was chained to the follies of the world;
But now experience, purchased with grief,
Has made me see the difference of things. (3.3.59–62)

Abigail’s words demonstrate that she has learned that the city is full of folly, and the only alternative is to flee to the convent for protection. Abigail’s claustration is portrayed as a response to violence and disorder. The seat of that violence is within her home, the threat to her virginity both external (the city) and internal (her home).

Measure for Measure’s Isabella follows a trajectory opposite that of Abigail. Whereas Abigail enters the convent out of despair and a desire to remove herself from the manipulative scheming of her father, Isabella leaves the convent to enter the city of Vienna in order to save her brother. Vienna would have been virtually unknown to an audience watching Measure for Measure in 1604, but its dialogue alludes to the corruption
and illegal sexual practices occurring in the city. The lack of morality and disregard for law and order are established in the first scene when Duke Vincentio goes into hiding. The Duke's abandonment of his leadership role to re-establish order in the city indicates the chaos within Shakespeare's Vienna. The convent is depicted as a place of respite from urban turmoil, and when set against the corrupt authority figures within Measure for Measure, Isabella's choice to join the convent appears a protective move. Given the relationship alternatives—illegal sexuality, unconsummated marriages, and marriages without love—the convent, with its tightly gated borders, offers a way to avoid entering the sexual marketplace in depraved Vienna.

Shakespeare's use of the gate to highlight the border between the convent and the corrupt city points to a familiarity with the Order of St. Clare. For Poor Clares, as the order was nicknamed, the gate was an important barrier from the outside world, so important, in fact, that the order had a “porteresse” or gatekeeper. The St. Clares' constitution states that there should be a “wheele...by which Turne, the Sisters may receive, or send forth, all necessaries for the Monastarie.” Items that could not be received through the wheel would have been brought to the back gate, the only possible entrance into a Clare monastery, “for the greater securities and purite of the Religious and Convent.”

The constitution goes on to outline a detailed and precise procedure that must be followed when the convent receives supplies (or people), all of which must enter through the gate. There was a speaking place for the gate watchers “wel fenced with iron pikes, where the Religious may speak.” Apart from the principal gate, there was another, “soe that the Sisters be wholly debarrad, from accesse unto the outward, or principal gate: in such sort that their persons of voices, may in noe ways be discerned by seculars without.” The gate had not one, but two locks and had to remain locked, by at least one of the locks, at all times. The abbess held one key while the portress kept the other; the Clares took their vows of enclosure very seriously.

This representation of enclosure repeats twice in Measure for Measure, once at the convent gate and again through an enclosed garden space. In act 1, scene 4, Sister Francisca and Isabella hear Lucio yelling outside the gates of the convent. Francisca takes a moment to explain some rules of the order:
It is a man's voice. Gentle Isabella,
Turn you the key, and know his business of him;
You may, I may not; you are yet unsworn.
When you have vow'd, you must not speak with men
But in the presence of the prioress;
Then if you speak, you must not show your face,
Or if you show your face, you must not speak. (1.4.7–13)

Isabella must turn the key and open the gate since she has not yet taken her vows. Once the key is turned, Isabella effectively opens the gate, and herself, to the dangers of the outside world; it is through her conversation with the caller, Lucio, that she finds herself forced by a sense of sisterly duty to leave the safe haven of the convent to plead her brother's case before Angelo.

This scene plays out again later in the play, but the second time, Angelo gives Isabella a key and demands that she come to a gated garden after nightfall. Angelo shows Isabella the way into the garden and through the gate twice, his instructions paralleling Francisca's instructions from the first act. Isabella's need for this repetition highlights her unease with his impending plan and her role as subject and potential sexual partner, especially when set against the readiness with which she accepted and internalized the directions given her by Francisca, a representative of the Catholic Church. In this instance, however, the rule of the state is morally ambiguous and if followed, would break social and moral codes for Catholics and Protestants alike.

Although the tensions between virginity, the marriage market, and the convent are readily observable, the most salient point of comparison between the plays occurs in the confession scenes. Abigail's confession occurs within the convent and yields powerful repercussions. Isabella's confession occurs outside the convent, in a public arena, where it garners an abrupt dismissal. When Abigail and Isabella speak in their respective cities, their words have little authority, and often the words they are forced to utter are not their own, but those of men in authority positions. For Abigail, that man is her father; for Isabella it is the Duke, a representative of the state. Abigail is only allowed a voice by her father when she utters
Kimberly Reigle

his words. She is rarely allowed to voice her own opinions in this play. Barabas teaches his daughter to talk her way into the convent and woo men by using false words. Petitioning for entrance, Abigail courts the abbess by asking for pity: “Pity the state of a distressèd maid!” (1.2.315). She then follows her plea for pity with claims of conversion and remorse for her Judaic beliefs: “I’d pass away my life in penitence / And be a novice in your nunnery / To make atonement for my labouring soul” (1.2.324–26). These, however, are the false words of her father. Fewer than fifty lines before Abigail’s act begins, Barabas directs his daughter to adopt a religious mien to gain entry into the convent since “religion / Hides many mischiefs from suspicion” (1.2.282–83). Abigail, the dutiful daughter, obeys Barabas even though she has reservations about her ability to convince the abbess of her sincerity.

Abigail can only find the autonomy to control her words and speak truthfully away from her father’s house, and she finds her independence during her second admission into the convent. Once Abigail enters the convent, she no longer speaks Barabas’s false words. As Friar Jacomo points out, upon her entry into the nunnery she “has mortified herself” in the sense that she is now dead to the world—she is isolated and engaged in thoughtful introspection (1.2.343). Abigail’s entry into the convent allows her to locate her voice and express herself on paper, as she writes frequently to her father to urge his conversion. The threat of Abigail’s knowledge and damning words, despite her vows, cannot be lost on Barabas who, as Maurice Charney suggests, “understands that the Catholic church is his rival and that his daughter has irretrievably abandoned him.” Abigail’s abandonment of Barabas in favor of the convent reflects her need to maintain control over her body, which her father would commodify.

In the convent Abigail’s virginal body has value only in the way that it serves God, not man. Her voice is heard—not as a diamond, gem, or lover, but as a servant and daughter of God. In short, Abigail’s words have power, as seen in her poignant, pivotal deathbed confession. While Abigail lies dying from her father’s poison, she uses her last moments to explain his role in the deaths of Mathias and Lodowick. Ultimately, it is Abigail’s words that finally doom Barabas, as she confesses on her deathbed:
Abigail: Be you [Friar Jacomo] my ghostly father; and first know
That in this house I lived religiously,
Chaste, and devout, much sorrowing for my sins.
But ere I came—

I did offend high heaven so grievously
As I am almost desperate for my sins,
And one offence torments me more than all.
You knew Mathias and Don Lodowick?
Friar Barnardine: Yes, what of them?
Abigail: My father did contract me to ‘em both:
First to Don Lodowick, him I never loved.
Mathias was the man that I held dear,
And for his sake did I become a nun.
Friar Barnardine: So. Say, how was their end?
Abigail: Both, jealous of my love, envied each other,
And by my father’s practice, which is there
Set down at large, the gallants were both slain.

[She gives him a paper]
Friar Barnardine: O, monstrous villainy!
Abigail: To work my peace, this I confess to thee.
Reveal it not, for then my father dies.

Death seizeth on my heart. Ah, gentle friar,
Convert my father that he may be saved,
And witness that I die a Christian. (3.6.12–15, 17–32, 38–40)

Before her confession can be validated, Abigail must demonstrate her merit as a Christian through her virginity and adherence to her order. James Shapiro explains that as a converted Jew, Abigail’s confession is particularly suspect due to “the popular belief that, with death imminent, Jewish converts repudiated the Christianity they had once willingly embraced.” Her words do convince Friar Jacomo of her sincerity; he listens to her confession and responds to it. As a representative of God, he replaces her biological father and believes her confession so fully that he confronts Barabas about his sins, setting off a chain of events resulting in Barabas’s destruction. In this way, refusing to be silenced, Abigail finds a place where her voice can be heard.

Language and female speech are also important to the plot of *Measure for Measure*, which turns effectively on Isabella’s words. With a compliant “yes” to Angelo’s request for sex, Claudio is pardoned, but with a defiant
“no,” he is doomed. The problem of female speech culminates in the final scene, as Isabella vacillates between keeping her vows of silence and speaking words she knows may implicate her. In the end, Isabella turns to the friar for counsel. He urges her to confess falsely to sleeping with Angelo, even supplying her with the words she should use.

It is no coincidence that Isabella’s fallacious confession occurs outside the convent. However, when the source of Isabella’s instruction is considered, her confession to a sin she did not commit is understandable. Up to the final moments in the play, Isabella believes that Vincentio is really a friar, a man experienced and seasoned in the guidelines and rules of religious life. Thus it is reasonable that Isabella follows the advice of an elder of her faith, even when his suggestion of the bed trick seems unconventional. This is particularly true in terms of early modern English ideas about Catholics, thought to be divided in their allegiance between Pope and sovereign and thus bad political subjects. Isabella, a Catholic nun, is stereotypically depicted as siding with a representative of the church over a representative of the state.

Regardless of Isabella’s Catholicism and allegiance to the friar, her confession to a crime she never committed gives pause to audiences and readers alike, for it appears out of line with the character’s construction as a woman rigid in her beliefs, a woman who wished for an even stricter order than the one into which she was admitted. If Isabella values her virginity as she claims, why would she confess to breaking her religious vow of celibacy? However, Isabella does, indeed, confess: “My sisterly remorse confutes mine honor, / And I did yield to him” (5.1.100–1). Michael D. Friedman contends that Isabella’s reputation, which he describes as both a social and physiological state, is destroyed by her coerced and false confession. According to Friedman, Isabella’s confession, at the direction of the Duke, makes him responsible for her. However, these are not Isabella’s words at all. They are the words of the friar (the Duke in disguise), spoken through Isabella and negated by that same authority, the Duke, yet Isabella makes them her own, much as she turned Angelo’s words against him.

Isabella’s interpolation of the word sister in this context (“My sisterly remorse confutes mine honor”) refers not only to her duties as Claudio’s sister but also to her duties as a novice. The context in which Isabella uses “remorse” aligns with its use in Othello: “Let him command, / And to obey
shall be in me remorse, / What bloody business ever.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides this line from *Othello* to illustrate the definition of *remorse* as “an obligation.”37 Meanwhile “confutes” relates to silence. The *OED*’s first entry for *confute* is “to be wrong; to overcome silence in argument,” but it has another meaning as well: “to silence (in a physical way).”38 Isabella’s “remorse” (obligation) in this passage is the agent enacting silence on the honor Isabella holds so dear. Thus Isabella’s words take on a double meaning. Her sisterly (kinship) obligation has silenced her honor, and, alternately, her sisterly (novice-related) obligation to the friar does so as well, for she feels required to follow his advice and speak the words he has chosen for her.

Isabella’s confession (unlike Abigail’s) is not believed, since it takes place outside the convent walls, and her authority as a Catholic novice is undercut by the Duke as a representative of the state. The Duke responds:

First, his [Angelo’s] integrity
Stands without blemish….

Some one hath set you on;
Confess the truth, and say by whose advice
Thou cam’st here to complain. (5.1.107–8, 112–14)

The Duke reclaims his state authority through this response. He effectively takes the responsibility for Isabella’s words away from her and places them on someone else. Isabella’s only sin is believing the words of the friar and obeying his directions. In turn, Vincentio’s dismissal of her confession places the blame for her false words on the friar. In the city, the rules of the Clares are not law; as the Duke’s words so bluntly illustrate, beyond the convent walls Isabella’s words have no meaning or authority. The Duke benefits from his show of power by reclaiming the word and power of the state as final and overriding the Church, as well as nullifying the spiritual capital of Isabella’s status as a novice, all in the same breath.

It is perhaps even more confounding that the Duke follows his diminution of Isabella with a marriage proposal. Although Vincentio clearly asks for Isabella’s hand in marriage, her response is unclear, and
sparse stage directions during this scene offer no direction in terms of her answer. Arguments about Isabella’s reaction to the Duke’s proposal fall into one of three categories. Natasha Korda takes a more unconventional stand on this scene and argues that “there is ample evidence…to support both Isabella’s acceptance of the Duke’s offer of marriage and her return to the nunnery.”

However, most critics posit Isabella’s silence as either indicating her acceptance of the Duke’s proposal or resisting it. Unlike Abigail, whose potential marriage partners are eliminated, for Isabella men are still available. Indeed, Isabella has the opportunity here to marry up, yet it is unclear whether she does so. While the question of Isabella’s response is an intriguing one, the more evocative aspect of Shakespeare’s ambiguous ending is that it does, in fact, leave open the possibility of the convent as an alternative to marriage.

Both Measure for Measure and The Jew of Malta invite the question: under what conditions might it be acceptable to enter a convent? When should an alternative to marriage be allowed in drama—when a woman’s father uses her as part of a revenge plot, or when her potential husband is a corrupt leader of a corrupt society who has impersonated a religious figure for the first four acts? Under these extreme circumstances, and perhaps only then, the convent emerges as a space of protection and resistance. Enclosure is the only way to defend oneself from these threats. For Abigail, entering the convent removes her from her father’s abusive grip, and it is where her voice is finally heard and respected; for Isabella, the convent works as a barrier between her and the morally corrupt city of Vienna lying beyond the convent walls. The Jew of Malta and Measure for Measure suggest that the city is no place for lifelong virgins, for in the city, the religious power of the virgin is significantly diminished. Moreover, rather than acting as a strength, virginity, with its use potential, makes virgins vulnerable to multiple threats in the city. The Jew of Malta and Measure for Measure stage an alternative to marriage not readily available to their original audience, and the convent emerges as a place of resistance, the only place where Abigail and Isabella are in control of their own lives, bodies, and choices.


Several other early modern writers held the same views on marriage and female subservience in marriage, including William Gouge, William Whately, John Dod, and Robert Clever. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Jankowski, 96–101.


Ibid., 123, 129.

Jankowski, 99.

Margaret W. Ferguson, forward to *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 7–14 (7).


17 Jankowski, 173.


19 “Sloane 2628,” Joan Evans and Mary S. Serjeantson, eds., *English Medieval Lapidaries*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 123–24. Though Hansen notes that Shakespeare read *Bateman upon Bartholome*, I have chosen to use the Sloane Manuscript because it provides a fuller discussion of rubies than the Bateman manuscript. The London Lapidary, North Midland Lapidary, and Peterborough Lapidary all contain similar information regarding the ruby, save its religious connotations, which are only present in the former two.

20 “London Lapidary” (Douce 291), in Evans and Serjeantson, 22.

21 Ibid.


24 For more information about Jewish conversions to Christianity, see Shapiro.

25 Strict claustration was a way to protect residents of convents from becoming victims of sexual violence and theft, which were not uncommon. See Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, “The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation,” in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 29–72 (42). For specific cases in which nuns suffered violent attacks and rapes within their cloisters, see Schulenburg, 41–62.

For the ease of the reader, quotations from the English Minoress’s Order are taken from a later transcription of the text. This transcription is from the original document, but the words are modernized and spellings less variant. In the fifteenth-century text, *The Rewle of the Sustris Menouresses Enclosid*, the quoted information is found on pages 88–92. See R. W. Chambers and Walter W. Seton, *A Fifteenth-Century Courtesy Book and Two Fifteenth-Century Franciscan Rules* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1914). In the later version of the Poor Clares’ text, *The First Rvle of the Gloriovs Virgin S. Clare* (Audomari [St. Omer]: Typis Thomæ Geubels, 1665), the quoted information is located on pages 234–35.

First Rvle of the Gloriovs Virgin S. Clare, 235.

Ibid.

Ibid., 236.


Shapiro, 158.

McFeely, 208–9, shares this point of view.

Dolan, 34.


Ibid., 461.


Ibid., n. “confute,” www.oed.com (accessed 10 January 2010). The OED dates the second definition of *confute* (to put to silence) to 1614, but given the aptness of this definition, it is reasonable to ponder that Shakespeare might have intended the word in this way.

Korda, 162.
