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Plausible Obedience: Female Strategies of Deception in Shakespeare's Problem Comedies

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ABSTRACT

In *Measure for Measure* (*MM*), Isabella is taught to trick her male tormentor by feigning "a plausible obedience", this instruction offers a useful lens through which to examine female characters' negotiation/evasion of, conversational and societal norms of truthfulness both in *MM* and *All's Well That Ends Well* (*AW*). From Lakoff (1973) to more recent studies gender has been considered an important variable in linguistics. There are observable, gender-specific differences in female-talk and male-talk in early modern texts. Quantitative data from the pragma-stylistic analysis of deception in *MM* and *AW* indicates that women prefer ORVD (off-record verbal deception) strategies while their male counterparts privilege blatant (on-record) lying. The present study aims to reveal and account for Shakespeare's female characters' divergent pragmatic strategies in the selected problem comedies, in the light of genre and gender conventions, in order to understand how Shakespeare's women perform pseudo-cooperation within the comedies.

KEYWORDS: pragma-stylistics; linguistic deception; gender variation; Shakespeare; off-recordness.

Go you to Angelo, answer his requiring with
a plausible obedience, agree with his demands to the
point; only refer
yourself to this advantage […].

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (3.1.226-28)[1]

1.Introduction

1.1 Literature Review

Since Lakoff (1973) gender has been considered an important variable in linguistics. While not all of the ensuing data is consistent (Crawford 1995), nonetheless it has been shown extensively that there are gender-specific differences in female-talk and male-talk in early modern texts (Erman 1992; Nevalainen 2000; 2002; Culpeper and Kytö 2010).

Recent studies have explored how these differences are determined not only by the on-going, linguistically mediated construction of gender identity, but also by factors such as social status, social distance between interlocutors and the context of the interaction (Culpeper and Kytö 2010).

Gender variation has been a fruitful area of research within historical pragmatics; particularly interesting findings have emerged over the past two decades. Biber and Burges (2000) explore the question of how much men and women talk in plays from the late modern period, taking into account the gender of the authors, speakers and hearers in the exchange in order to show variation in perceived talkativeness as represented in drama over time. Nevalainen (2000; 2002) provides data-driven responses to stereotypes about gender divisions in language use over time, drawing on data from early modern English corpora. Romaine collates various findings in a meta-study on the topic of gender variation in linguistics, demonstrating how the field has moved on from "simplistic correlations between language use and sex to focus on the symbolic and ideological dimensions of a language" (2003, 116). These layered

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[1] All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from Shakespeare 2016.

complexities are also evidenced in Pakkala-Weckström's research (2003; 2010). She notes that:

> Genre creates a background against which the characters are depicted in a convincing manner. Gender provides its own rules and restrictions, which govern the behaviour of the characters, but ultimately it is the dynamic, ever changing balance of power between the characters that seems to most affect their linguistic choices. (2003, 136)

Thus, gender can be seen as one of the arenas in which such socio-cultural negotiations of power are linguistically embodied. Processes of patriarchal marginalisation of women in early modern England were, as they are today, linguistically constructed and enforced and are, therefore, "reflected in both the ways women [were] expected to speak, and the ways in which women [were] spoken of" (Lakoff 1973, 45).

Gender variation, therefore, is an important phenomenon in the history of English, particularly relevant to historical pragmatics (see Nevalainen 2002; 2000). The data set which emerged from the analysis of *All's Well That Ends Well* (henceforth *AW*) and *Measure for Measure* (henceforth *MM*) reveals a significant gender variation in the use of deceptive language (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, below).

1.2 Methodological coordinates

The present paper offers a pragma-stylistic analysis of strategies of linguistic deception in *AW* and *MM*. Pragma-stylistics (or pragmatic literary stylistics) applies pragmatic models in the stylistic analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

Pragmatics is the area of linguistic inquiry concerned with language in use – how speakers produce meanings and how hearers interpret them. Stylistics uses linguistic models in order to understand how (often literary) texts function; it aims to account for how texts are understood and evaluated. Recent pragmatic, stylistic and pragma-stylistic approaches to literature (Chapman and Clark 2014; Kizelbach 2023), and, more specifically, to early modern plays (Rudanko 1993; Kizelbach 2014; Del Villano 2018) have established a model for the linguistic exploration of interpersonal communicative strategies in literary texts.

The choice to lie has to do with the construction of meaning – it is an inherently pragmatic matter. However the foundational studies in pragmatics do not present a clear model for the categorisation and analysis of interpersonal deception. Grice was concerned with the gap between "what is said" and "what is implicated" (or what is meant). He proposed the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the notion of implicature[2] as a means of understanding the interactional nature of meaning.

The CP states: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1989, 26). The maxims of conversation, which result from the CP, are as follows:

> Quantity:
> > i. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
> > ii. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
> Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
> > i. Do not say what you believe to be false.
> > ii. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
> Relation: Be relevant.
> Manner: Be perspicuous.
> > i. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> > ii. Avoid ambiguity.
> > iii. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> > iv. Be orderly. (ibid., 26-27)

According to Grice, violations of the maxims give rise to conversational implicatures. Grice does not deal directly with lying, but does state that the speaker by "quietly and unostentatiously violating a maxim [may] be liable to mislead" (1989, 30). Deception, therefore, within the neo-Gricean[3] framework, is seen as a covert violation of the maxim of quality. Dynel (2018) makes the

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[2] Implicature is Grice's term for the non-literal meaning ("implied, suggested, meant") beyond the literal meaning of what is said (1989, 24-40). For further explanation of the term and its role within the pragmatic framework see Davis (2019).

[3] Neo-Gricean pragmatics (in contrast to post-Gricean pragmatics) arises from the refinement and expansion of Grice's theories. Within this framework the CP and its maxims remain key reference points. For a comprehensive overview of neo-Gricean pragmatics see Huang (2017, 48-78).

helpful distinction between overt violations of the maxim (metaphor, irony, etc.) and covert violations (giving rise to deception). However, an interpretation of lying as a violation of the maxim of quality does not account for violations of the other maxims which may give rise to deceptive implicatures. In terms of Speech Act Theory (SAT)[4] (Austin 2018 [1962]; Searle 1969; 1975) lying can be seen as a failure to respect the sincerity condition (the speaker's commitment to a belief in the truth of the utterance). However such a definition gives rise to a paradox within SAT, namely "if the perlocutionary act of lying is successful then the illocutionary act of assertion is not successful" (Reboul 1994, 297).

Lying, therefore, has been a much debated topic among linguists. Meibauer (2014) introduces a broad definition of lying which includes "false implicatures". Other theorists (Saul 2012a; 2012b; Dynel 2018) exclude non-prototypical forms of deception (non-assertions used to deceive, false implicatures, etc.) from their frameworks.

This study makes use of the lexicon of pragmatic theories of politeness in order to better account for mendacious conversational strategies. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978; 1987) introduces the on/off-record[5] distinction. This taxonomy is proposed here in order to allow for a pragmatic distinction between two forms of covert untruthfulness.

This innovative pragmatic model will be shown to be a fruitful framework for distinguishing between mendacious strategies: on-record (blatant, direct)

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[4] Speech Act Theory, as first proposed by Austin (2018 [1962]) presents the concept of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts performed by the speaker. The locutionary act is the act of uttering a locution. The illocutionary act is the act made in producing the utterance (asking a question, describing, commanding, etc). The perlocutionary act refers to the effect produced by the utterance (persuasion, annoyance, etc). Searle (1969; 1975) expanded on the classification of speech acts and codified the felicity conditions that Austin had referenced). Searle briefly summarises the "five general categories of illocutionary acts" as follows: "we tell people how things are (Assertives [Representatives]), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations)" (1979, viii).

[5] Brown and Levinson developed this terminology to deal with the complexities of interactional politeness. Their definition specifies that "If an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 69). This is further explained by Culpeper: "in a suitable context the hearer may be able to infer that the speaker [is saying X] but, if challenged, the speaker could always deny this" (2001, 244-45).

lying and off-record verbal deception (ORVD), whereby the speaker retains a level of deniability. A speaker who goes on-record about the truth of a false proposition is taking a risk. One can mitigate that risk through an assortment of off-record strategies (insinuation, half-truths, deliberate obfuscation, etc.). On-record (On-R), or prototypical lying, therefore involves making a believed-false assertion, with the intent that the hearer believe it to be true. ORVD involves the production of a deceptive conversational implicature.

In a previous study (Beville 2022) the texts were examined according to these categories in order to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse characters' use of mendacious strategies within the plays. The plays were analysed by close-reading in order to observe instances of possible verbal deception. Then, the observable instances of mendacious behaviour were manually annotated[6] according to participants (speakers, hearers, etc.), speech acts (assertives, commissives, etc.) and strategies (ORVD, On-R lying, etc.). The data presented here, therefore, results from the aforementioned study (Beville 2022) which includes a more exhaustive explanation of the methodological framework and its primary findings.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The present paper seeks to explore and explain a notable trend revealed in the quantitative analysis from the abovementioned study: female characters within these plays tend to significantly prefer ORVD strategies, while the male characters either tend to favour on-record strategies or have a more even distribution of On-R and ORVD strategies (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4, below). Male characters either show a significant preference for on-record lying (Duke, Paroles) or a more balanced use of both on- and off-record strategies (Lucio, Angelo, Bertram).

The texts under examination, *AW* and *MM*, are both comedies from the Shakespearean canon. Recent studies have increasingly revealed Middleton's compositional contribution to both plays (Taylor and Egan 2017; Braunmuller and Watson 2020).

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[6] The analysis did not make use of corpus tools but was undertaken manually, in what has been termed as practical stylistics or "steam stylistics" (Carter 2010).

The present study is not an attempt to add to the rich area of attribution studies and further investigation of such considerations must be excluded. However, whether the dialogue excerpts analysed were composed primarily by Shakespeare or by Middleton, what is evident is that they were originally both written and performed by men. This is the nature of the study of early modern plays, and the study of early modern spoken English as a whole[7]. What evidence they contain of female speech is, therefore, not intended as strictly documentary, rather, it has an aesthetic and representational purpose. It is helpful to bear in mind that such cultural texts are shaped by the society around them and, in turn, they shape the cultural landscape.

I argue that the female characters presented here make strategic linguistic choices in order to convincingly perform their gender, social, economic and political identities according to societal expectations, while subtly negotiating a better position in the balance of power. They "fashion themselves", to borrow a suitable term from Greenblatt (1980), according to social norms while engaging in risky linguistic behaviour.

Closely related categories of deception were also analysed. "Non-verbal" deception essentially accounts for disguise – it has been counted when disguises are linguistically marked in the text (i.e., when the Duke refers directly to his friar's habit).

The designation of "embedded" (or reported) verbal deception refers to the acts of verbal deception that are not represented directly in the dialogue but are recounted (by the liar himself or another character)[8]. The strategies labelled as "instructing others to deceive" consist of directives which, if followed, would result in mendacity (e.g. when Helen instructs the Widow and her daughter Diana how to successfully/deceptively accomplish the bed-trick *AW*, 4.2.12-45).

The principal research questions posited here are: What differences are there between male and female strategies of deception within the chosen texts?

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[7] With regard to the scarcity and bias of available primary source data see Mendelson and Crawford (1998, 212-18). On the relevance of the available data: Biber and Burges (2000); Nevalainen (2000; 2002); Culpeper and Kytö (2010); Jucker and Taavitsainen (2013).

[8] The acts of verbal deception that are both "shown" and "told" are counted only once. This allows the data collection to account for reported deception while distinguishing it as a separate strategy.

How can the tools of pragmatic literary stylistics account for these interactions? What can these examples tell us about the literary representation of female speakers in the light of historical pragmatics? The qualitative analysis provided here focuses on salient examples of the plays' primary female speakers' linguistic strategies (those of Isabella in *MM* and Helen in *AW*). These excerpts will be analysed in order to account for the form and function of female characters' strategies of verbal deception within the plays.

2. Isabella – "All Shadow and Silence"

Measure for Measure (*MM*) is a "dialectical drama" (Melchiori 1994, 404-63)[9] dated to 1603-4; it is generally agreed that the version present in the 1623 *First Folio* includes significant modifications made by Middleton[10].

The play begins with Duke Vincentio of Vienna feigning his departure from the city and ostensibly entrusting viceregency to Angelo, a puritanical hyper-moralist who is enthusiastic about the opportunity to purge the city of its licentious vices.

The Duke disguises himself as a friar in order to roam the city and observe the results of his absence. Angelo, in violent piety, has begun to enforce the death penalty for fornication, causing the arrest and imprisonment of the young Claudio and his betrothed, expectant, Juliet. Lucio, the witty and morally dubious friend of Claudio, rushes to the convent in order to catch Isabella, Claudio's sister, before she takes her vows. He begs her to intercede on behalf

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[9] Melchiori's (1994, 404-63) insightful classification (of both *MM* and *AW*) expands on the critical category of "problem plays" which first emerged in the late 1880s and has seen a remarkable longevity (Boas 1910 [1896]; Tillyard 1950; Cunneen 1963; Lawrence 1969; Toole 1996; Barker 2005), for further discussion of the grouping see Beville 2022, 32–35. Melchiori's recategorization endeavours to investigate the dialectical nature of the plays asserting that: "la loro vitalità è invece tutta nel dibattito interno al dramma, indipendentemente dagli esiti, sta in un continuo confronto dialettico che acquista valore assoluto di ricerca di una verità che, proprio per essere vera, non può essere unica e univoca" [their vitality is all in the internal debate in the drama, independent of the outcome, it lies in a continuous dialectical debate which acquires the absolute value of a quest for the truth, a truth which, in order to be true, cannot be unique and univocal] (Melchiori 1994, 406 – translation my own). The dialectical nature of the plays is to be understood both in the classical sense of an exchange of contrasting opinions without the necessity of a final resolution and as a linguistic notion of discursivity.

[10] On date and authorship: Taylor and Egan (2017) and Braunmuller and Watson (2020).

of her brother. Isabella's supplications produce an unexpected effect on the zealous Angelo. He becomes infatuated with her, vowing to release her brother if she will assent to his solicitation.

The Duke-as-Friar learns of Isabella's plight and offers a solution. They must persuade Angelo's jilted ex-betrothed, Mariana, to take Isabella's place, thus consummating their sworn marriage. Despite the success of the bed-trick, Angelo still orders Claudio's swift execution.

The Duke fakes Claudio's execution using a look-alike severed head and 'returns' to Vienna to stage a final trial scene.

Table 1. Principal character's deceptive acts (all kinds) per 100 lines in *MM*.

CHARACTER	NO. LINES SPOKEN	DECEPTIVE ACTS	LIES PER 100 LINES
DUKE	847	45	5.3
ISABELLA	424	8	1.9
ANGELO	320	9	2.8
LUCIO	296	11	3.7

Table 2. Strategies of deception employed by the principal characters in *MM*.

CHARACTER	ON-R	ORVD	NON-VERBAL	EMBEDDED	INSTRUCTING	TOT.
DUKE	22	10	4	4	5	45
ISABELLA	1	4	-	2	1	8
ANGELO	4	4	-	1	-	9
LUCIO	5	4	-	2	-	11

Isabella is, quantitatively, one of the least mendacious characters in the play (see Table 1) yet the lies she does tell are of great import to the play's comic resolution.

Her initial attempts at using truthfulness in her defence ("I will proclaim thee Angelo"; "with an outstretched throat I'll tell the world aloud | what man thou art", *MM*, 2.4.151, 153-54) ultimately fail. She endeavours to appeal to the early modern model of public condemnation and complaint, as outlined by Mendelson and Crawford:

[Violence] and male sexual immorality were secretly accepted among the fraternity of men but condemned by the public standards of the community at large, and punished through loss of repute when perpetrators were exposed. One way women modified male behaviour was by broadcasting men's covert acts. In so doing, they also established a context of excessive male violence or immorality which might persuade the judiciary to act. Thus, female discourse constructed a collective view whereby accusations became a 'public' concern of which formal authorities were compelled to take notice. (1998, 216)

Isabella, therefore, threatens to appeal to the court of public opinion in order to save both her brother and her reputation. Yet her threats are ineffective; Angelo's position of political power emboldens his counterthreats:

ANGELO:
    Who will believe thee, Isabel?
    My unsoiled name, th'austereness of my life,
    My vouch against you, and my place i'th' state,
    Will so your accusation overweigh
    That you shall stifle in your own report,
    And smell of calumny. […]
    As for you,
    Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.
(*MM*, 2.4.154-59, 169-70)

Thus, due to Angelo's astute counterthreats and his position of institutional power, Isabella cannot adopt the aforementioned model of public outcry. She is, instead, forced to ally herself with the "Duke of dark corners" and his subterfuges of disguise and trickery in order to protect herself from sexual exploitation and save her brother's life. Notably, the only observable instance of Isabella going on-record about the truth of a false claim (outrightly lying) is found in the final act, where she publicly and spuriously denounces Angelo's alleged sexual misconduct:

ISABELLA:
    He would not, but by gift of my chaste body
    To his concupiscible intemperate lust,
    Release my brother; and after much
    debatement,
    My sisterly remorse confutes mine honour,

And <u>I did yield to him</u>.
(*MM*, 5.1.97-101)

[on-record; false assertion]

However, despite being guilty of libel (she had not yielded to Angelo but sent Mariana in her place) she does not "smell of calumny". Rather through complex strategies of feigned compliance she has inverted her position with Angelo such that her "false o'erweighs [his] true".

The following passage shows the Duke-as-Friar directing Isabella in how to feign "a plausible obedience" to Angelo's despotic demands and to "give him promise of satisfaction".

DUKE:
It is a rupture that you may easily heal, and the cure of it not only saves your brother, but keeps you from dishonour in doing it.
ISABELLA:
Show me how, good father.
DUKE:
[…] Go you to Angelo, <u>answer his requiring with a plausible obedience</u>, agree with his demands to the point; only refer yourself to this advantage: first, that your stay with him may not be long; that the time may have all shadow and silence in it; and the place answer to convenience. This being granted in course, and now follows all. We shall advise this wronged maid to stead up your appointment, go in your place. If the encounter acknowledge itself hereafter, it may compel him to her recompense; and hear, by this is your brother saved, your honour untainted, the poor Mariana advantaged, and the corrupt deputy scaled. The maid will I frame and make fit for his attempt. If you think well to carry this, as you may, the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof. What think you of it?

[directive instructing others to lie]

ISABELLA:
The image of it gives me content already, and I trust it will grow to a most prosperous

perfection.
DUKE:
It lies much in your holding up. Haste you
speedily to Angelo.
If for this night he entreat you to his bed, give
him promise of satisfaction.
(*MM*, 3.1. 220-22, 226-41)

The text therefore, makes Isabella's misleading performance of obedience explicit. The audience is shown how the Duke teaches Isabella to outwardly perform pseudo-obedience in her interactions with Angelo, in order to convince him that she has acquiesced to his request. This advice is key to understanding Isabella's pretence of compliancy within the text. The Duke-as-Friar also offers a moral justification for the necessary duplicity: "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof".

Notably, the audience does not directly witness such deception on Isabella's part, rather she merely reports her duplicitous interactions with Angelo to the Duke:

ISABELLA:
There have I made my promise
Upon the heavy middle of the night
To call upon him.
[…]
And that <u>I have possessed him my most stay</u>
<u>Can be but brief, for I have made him know</u>   [embedded deception]
<u>I have a servant comes with me along</u>
That stays upon me, whose persuasion is
I come about my brother.
(*MM*, 4.1.31-33, 41-45)

This embedded mendacity serves to remove Isabella some degree from the Duke's trickery – she is not actually seen lying to Angelo on stage. She has followed the Duke's orders to feign her acquiescence in a believable manner and recounts her successful deceit to her instructor. She reports having made an infelicitous commissive (false promise) in promising to visit Angelo. She further describes her deceptive discourse, explaining that she has convinced

Angelo that she cannot delay because a servant will be waiting for her – Angelo believes that she has deceived her servant about the matter of the visit, in actual fact Isabella will not be present and therefore there is no servant to deceive. Thus, her active role in the deception of Angelo is implied through her narrative account of the exchange, rather than being explicitly shown on stage. This is in line with her overall preferred strategy of ORVD (see Table 2), she mitigates her deceptive behaviour by maintaining a level of deniability. She prefers not to lie outright, unlike her male counterparts. Instead, her "plausible obedience" is a strategic linguistic device which avails of deceptive means in order to appear to succumb to the despot's perverted will. This is a form of linguistic self-fashioning by which Isabella contrives to bring about the comic ends of the play – the usurping of the tyrannical puritan Angelo in order to restore the "rightful" order of the Duke's reign.

3. Helen – "Whose words all ears took captive"

All's Well That Ends Well (*AW*) is structurally similar to *MM* and is also considered a 'problem play' or 'dialectical drama'. It can be dated to circa 1605 and also contains evidence of Middleton's contribution (Maguire and Smith 2012; Taylor and Egan 2017, 278–384; Taylor and Loughnane 2017, 557–59). The play centres around Helen, the orphaned daughter of a physician, gentlewoman in the household of Roussillon, who secretly loves the young Bertram, heir to his late father's title as Count Roussillon. Bertram departs for court as he has become a ward of the ailing King, he is accompanied by his "equivocal companion" Paroles. At court, Bertram hears news of a war in Italy, but he is forbidden from enlisting due to his youth. Helen follows Bertram, hoping to win the sickly King's favour through her knowledge of medicine. She convinces the King to allow her to treat him and secures his promise that she may choose a husband from his courtiers if she is successful. Her treatment works and she chooses Bertram as her reward. The young Count is offended at the prospective marriage to his inferior, yet he outwardly concedes due to the King's forceful imposition. Bertram escapes to the war in Italy in order to avoid consummating the marriage, swearing that he will not acknowledge Helen as his wife unless she becomes pregnant with his child and wears his signet ring.

Helen, in the guise of a pilgrim, follows her husband and arranges a bed-trick in which she will substitute herself for Diana, with whom her husband is infatuated, in order to fulfil the seemingly impossible demands made. These intrigues culminate in a final trial scene in which Bertram's flimsy tales are unravelled until he swears to love Helen.

Table 3. Principal character's deceptive acts (all kinds) per 100 lines in *AW*.

CHARACTER	NO. LINES SPOKEN	DECEPTIVE ACTS	LIES PER 100 LINES
HELEN	478	22	4.6
PAROLES	373	30	8.0
BERTRAM	277	20	7.2
DIANA	138	10	7.2

Table 4. Strategies of deception employed by the most mendacious characters in *AW*[11].

CHARACTER.	ON-R	ORVD	NON-VERBAL	EMBEDDED	INSTRUCTING	TOT.
HELEN	5	11	2	1	3	22
PAROLES	19	8	-	2	1	30
BERTRAM	11	6	1	2	-	20
DIANA	3	6	-	1	-	10

Helen, in contrast to Isabella, is a much more prolific liar (compare Tables 1 and 3). Throughout the play she is described as eloquent and persuasive ("Methinks in thee some blessèd spirit doth speak / His powerful sound within an organ weak", 2.1.171-72; "whose words all ears took captive", 5.3.17; "vanquished thereto by the fair grace and speech", 5.3.133). Her principal strategy is that of ORVD, yet, as Table 4 shows, she adopts a wide range of strategies. This dexterity in varying her tactics is evident in the following scene:

WIDOW:

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[11] A similar table appeared in a previous publication (Beville 2021, 92) reporting slightly fewer instances of strategic deception for all characters. This minor variation is due to the further refinement of the model and a revision of the categories (further detailed in Beville 2022). However, the trends which emerged in the preliminary stage were, nonetheless, indicative of the final results.

> Here you shall see a countryman of yours
> That has done worthy service.
> HELEN:
> His name, I pray you?
> DIANA:
> The Count Roussillon. Know you such a one?
> HELEN:
> But by the ear, that hears most nobly of him;   [on-record; false assertion]
> His face I know not.
> DIANA:
> Whatsome'er he is
> He's bravely taken here. He stole from France,
> As 'tis reported; for the King had married him
> Against his liking. Think you it is so?
> HELEN:
> Ay, surely, mere the truth. I know his lady.   [off-record; false implicature]
> DIANA:
> There is a gentleman that serves the Count
> Reports but coarsely of her.
> HELEN:
> What's his name?
> DIANA:
> Monsieur Paroles.
> HELEN:
> O, I believe with him.
> In argument of praise, or to the worth
> Of the great Count himself, she is too mean   [off-record; false implicature]
> To have her name repeated. All her deserving
> Is a reservèd honesty, and that
> I have not heard examined.
> (*AW*, 3.5.40-56)

Having approached the Widow and Diana in the guise of a pilgrim, Helen ably acts the part, seeking hospitality and enquiring about local news. She feigns ignorance concerning her husband and his companion. Her response to Diana's enquiry regarding her acquaintance with Bertram is an On-R lie – she claims to have only heard of him and to not know him personally (false assertion). However, as the conversation progresses, she switches to ORVD strategies: implying that she merely knows the Count's wife (a false implicature resulting from the violation of the Gricean maxim of quantity); asking unnecessary and

insincere questions (also in *AW* 3.5.71-79) producing false presuppositions; and insinuating an ill opinion of her husband's wife (herself).

These indirect strategies serve not only to heighten the dramatic irony for the audience, duly amused by the half-truths, but also to "soften" Helen's continued deception. She retains a certain level of deniability, which, coupled with the play's internal justification of her mendacious strategies, absolves her of the offense.

Her subterfuge is necessary in restoring order to the play-world. In fact, Helen often rationalises her deceptive strategies within the text. She repeatedly reminds the audience, and her interlocutors, that, in her mendacious plot, the end will justify the means. This is particularly evident in *AW,* 3.7.1-45 in which she and the widow provide moral justification for deceiving Betram, they refer to the trick-driven plot as "lawful" four times.

Helen also instructs Diana in how to perform pseudo-consent in order to undertake the bed-trick:

> HELEN:
> The Count he woos your daughter,
>   Lays down his wanton siege before her beauty
>   Resolved to carry her. <u>Let her in fine consent,</u>   [instructing others to lie]
>   <u>As we'll direct her how 'tis best to bear it</u>.
>   Now his important blood will naught deny,
>   That she'll demand. A ring the County wears,
>   […]
> WIDOW:
>   Now I see the bottom of your purpose.
> HELEN:
>   You see it lawful, <u>then: it is no more</u>
>   <u>But that your daughter, ere she seems as won,</u>   [instructing others to lie]
>   <u>Desires this ring; appoints him an encounter;</u>
>   In fine, delivers me to fill the time,
>   Herself most chastely absent. After,
>   To marry her I'll add three thousand crowns
>   To what is passed already.
> WIDOW:
>   I have yielded.
> Instruct my daughter how she shall persever,
>   That time and place with this deceit so lawful

> May prove coherent […].
> (*AW*, 3.7.17-22, 29-39)

Here, Helen directs Diana's role in the deception, instructing her to "seem as won" and to prepare the appropriate circumstances for a successful bed-trick. These directives are duly followed by Diana in the subsequent scenes, and she succeeds in deceiving Bertram. Diana, heeding Helen's instructions, prefers off-record strategies (half-truths, insinuation, etc.) in her exchange with Bertram. She uses more on-record deception in the final trial scene to secure the case against Bertram. Helen participates in the deception through instances of "instructing others to lie"; she composes the lies which Diana will speak, fashioning her as a false mouthpiece. Helen will substitute Diana in bed with Betram, but in order to orchestrate a successful bed-trick Diana must substitute Helen in the deception of her husband. Much like Isabella's use of embedded deception in *MM*, instructing others to lie is a step removed from directly lying. In Helen's case (*AW*), it is part of her overall strategy of off-record deception (ORVD, non-verbal and embedded strategies).

4. Conclusions

The Duke's instruction to Isabella to "answer [Angelo's] requiring with a plausible obedience" is key to understanding the prevalence of ORVD and similar strategies among these female characters. The off-record mendacious strategies employed by both Helen and Isabella can be viewed as a means of mitigating risk and constructing a semblance of obedience, while underhandedly chipping away at the power structures within the play world and forging a new reality. While it is a contentious point in moral philosophy whether or not off-record strategies can be seen as morally superior to outright lying, they are generally perceived as such (by both the speaker and the audience)[12]. This notion of the presentation-of-self as honest and innocent while secretly plotting a new world order could have strong political

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[12] For more on ethics and lying Bok 1999; Meibauer 2019. On the perception of indirectly (off-record) lying as morally superior Saul 2012a; 2012b.

implications if viewed through the lens of the religious conflict of the time[13]. However, here I will limit my observation to the gender divide evident in the strategies of deception employed within the texts. Elsewhere I have discussed the male characters' on-record, blatant lying strategies (Beville 2021; 2022), which are more risky and tend to work well for those in a position of power (Duke) and less well for subordinates (Bertram, Paroles, Angelo and Lucio) who must face the consequences of their dishonesty[14]. The female characters represented in these plays avoid committing themselves to the truth of mendacious propositions (going on-record) whenever possible. Thus, their observable off-record strategies can be seen as part of an overall linguistic strategy of "plausible obedience" – seeming cooperative in conversation while subtly influencing the situation in order to obtain a more favourable position. This strategy serves to mitigate the conversational risk of being deceitful – they are perceived by fellow characters, and ultimately by the audience, as more truthful than the characters who boldly lie on-record.

The complexity of female submission is amply discussed in the critical literature (Mendelson and Crawford 1998; Weisner-Hanks 2019). Mendelson and Crawford offer a striking example which reflects upon the negotiation of wifely submission within Mary Rich's marriage to the earl of Warwick; "embracing a regimen of piety, the countess developed a mode of dynamic obedience that transformed the conflict between herself and her husband into a personal campaign for self-mastery"; such strategic obedience is "neither docile nor passive" (ibid, 137). However, the examples of Helen and Isabella must be understood to go beyond this sort of "dynamic obedience" within the domestic space. The necessary *astuzia* (cunning) and dissimulation in their roles is similar to the performativity required of the Machiavellian prince "he who best knows how to play the fox is best off, but this must be kept well hidden,

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[13] Amussen and Underdown note the link between the "prevailing uneasiness about gender relations in early modern England" and the way in which "inversion was intertwined with the religious controversy which followed the Protestant reformation, as each side saw the other as turning the world upside down" (2016, 7-8). For further discussion of dissimulation and religious conflict (Zagorin 1990, 1996; Snyder 2012; Berensmeyer and Hadfield 2015; Hadfield 2017).

[14] Notably, Paroles undergoes a linguistic transformation, he is outed as a braggart and publicly shamed in a sort of comical *chiarivari*, He subsequently changes tack in his approach to mendacity, learning to use ORVD strategies as a means of mitigating risk (see Beville 2021).

and the prince must be a great simulator and dissimulator" (in Snyder 2012, 111). Isabella and Helen bring a similar cunning and calculation to their performance of submission, hiding their true intentions by using covert pragmatic strategies.

Luckyj (1993, 2002) explores the link between reticence and resistance in female characters, positing silence as a multifaceted notion and as a possible means of strategical subversion[15]. In the same way that silence seems, superficially, to be mere passive submission, and yet may prove to be "potentially unruly and chaotic" (Luckyj 2002, 39) so, too, can the performance of subservience, through off-record strategies of deception, be considered a form of resistance. Both Helen and Isabella pragmatically perform particular models of feminine submission while strategically using language to subvert the extant circumstances and power structures within the play worlds. Thus, their performance of compliance serves to re-order the world. It proves to be an effective strategy in both instances. Isabella's threat to publicly proclaim Angelo's attempted sexual misconduct only proves to provoke violent counter-threats. Whereas, her credible compliance, in league with the Duke, undermines Angelo's authority and ultimately brings about her desired "prosperous perfection" (*MM*, 3.1.239), the justice and mercy – problematic as they may be – seen in the final act. So too, Helen performs compliance – pretending to disappear (and die), disguising herself as a pilgrim and successfully training Diana in the art of plausible obedience. Ultimately, these linguistic strategies of pseudo-obedience problematise the unthinking assumption, criticised by Luckyj, that early modern women (and female characters) were "chaste, silent and obedient" (2002, vii).

Thus, the pragma-stylistic analysis of female deception has revealed the female characters' preference for ORVD as a strategic choice which mitigates risk and allows the characters to retain a level of deniability. The representation of such specifically female strategies within the plays can be considered both an expression of cultural anxieties and challenges and as a potentially viable model for inverting the social order. As Amussen and Underdown observe,

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[15] On reticence as a form of resistance/unruliness see Beatrice Righetti's contribution to the present issue, "Better a Shrew than a Sheep?": Disobedience through Reticence in Shakespeare's Contrasting Models of Femininity".

plays were an ideal place to explore the dynamics of an upside-down world because they made room both for the tensions which emerged from the internal contradictions of the gender system and for the ways in which individual behaviour could disrupt it. Each of these added layers of unpredictability to the supposedly ordered world, on stage and off. Theatre is both a product of its culture and helps create that culture. (2016, 78)

In the plays examined here, the purpose of such pragmatic strategies of plausible obedience is the restoration of the right order; Helen wishes to consummate her marriage and Isabella wishes to avoid being sexually exploited and to restore justice to the realm. The generic conventions of the comic structure may be cynically considered the main reason for their respective successes, but it is also possible to view these linguistic strategies as a hitherto unexplored, and likely viable, alternative to the dichotomy of doggedly unquestioning obedience or shrew-like unruliness.

Therefore, further investigation of gender variation within pragmatic strategies is advisable, particularly studies of female mendacious speech patterns in the tragedies and histories.

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