

Humanities Institute.
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Measure for Measure. 1604 Shakespeare.

Overview.

Society. *Measure for Measure* is often considered one of Shakespeare's problem plays, as distinct from a 'comedy,' although in its first performance it was announced as a comedy. As a problem play—a play which makes you think, which raises questions instead of solving issues, or wrapping un conundrums like mistaken identity or misunderstood intentions—it is customary to class *Measure for Measure* with *As you like it*, or *Troilus and Cressida*. All three of these plays raise questions about moral, social, or behavioral issues which are not easily resolved; we might say they are like philosophical questions, which open up fields of inquiry, without closing them; we might think, for parallels to this Shakespeare work, of the dramas of Henrik Ibsen, two and a half centuries later, which provoked keen argumentation about the values of what was at the time considered the 'beginning of modern society.'

Mercy. In the present play, the central issues are justice mercy. corruption and purity, topics about which literature at its deepest often turns—say in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, the *Philoktetes* of Sophocles, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Shakespeare too is a believer in the beauty of mercy, to which he devotes his finest thought in the present play and in *The Merchant of Venice*, to which we owe fine perorations—'the quality of mercy is not strained'—paying that kind of beautiful tribute to graciousness, which Dickens paid to simplicity and generosity in *A Christmas Carol*. As a realist, however, Shakespeare is never an innocent believer in the power of mercy to prevail. In a play like *Timon of Athens*, written almost in the same year as the present play, Shakespeare shows how keenly he understands bitterness and *revanchisme*.

Characters

Isabella; a novice and sister of Claudio

Mariana; betrothed to Angelo

Juliet, beloved by Claudio, pregnant with his child

Francisca, a nun

Mistress Overdone; manager of a Vienna brothel

Vincentio; the Duke, who also appears as Friar Lodowick

Angelo; the Deputy, who rules in the Duke's absence

Escalus, an ancient lord

Claudio, a young gentleman, brother of Isabella

Pompey Bum, a pimp who pulls in customers for Mistress

Overdone

Lucio; a foppish young nobleman

Two gentlemen, friends of Lucio

The Provost, who runs the prison

Thomas and Peter, two friars

Elbow, a constable

Froth, a foolish gentleman

Abhorson, an executioner

Barnardine, a dissolute prisoner

A justice; friend of Escalus

Story

Disguise. The play opens with a universal scenario: a Duke of Vienna, in this case, wants an occasion to check up on the behavior patterns of his subjects, and chooses a classic ploy. He announces that he is going abroad on diplomatic mission, he leaves the managing of his city to a functionary of exemplary reputation and the strictest respect for the law, and he disappears. What he does in fact is to enter the monastic life, disguise himself accordingly, and give himself free rein to wander in Vienna, on the streets and in the royal palace. He discovers that his confidence in his deputy, Angelo, is far from justified.

Claudio. At this point the scenario shifts to the streets of Vienna, where we meet Mistress Overdone, the proprietress of a well known city brothel, and, through her, learn the unfortunate case of Claudio, a young gentleman, who has run into deep trouble at the brothel. He has impregnated his brothel-girl, and although he is on the verge of marrying her, he has not yet done so, therefore putting himself in the position of a fornicator, a criminal role which Angelo, the new deputy, has declared punishable by death. From this point on the imprisonment, life danger, and relation of Claudio to Angelo becomes a core issue of the play, carrying with it, as the play advances, a sequence of moral issues, temptations to fraud, and interventions of mercy.

Isabella. Claudio's sister, Isabella, is just entering a nunnery when this calamitous development concerning her brother takes place. Her immediate reaction is to do all she can to help him, and since Angelo is the deputy in charge of the Viennese legal system, she turns to him. His reputation is for strict probity and she expects a hearing, especially as her own religious position qualifies her for respect.

Angelo. Angelo, however, startles Isabella by falling immediately in love with her, and expostulating over her beauty. Instead of winning an act of grace from the judge, Isabella gets a proposition: *sleep with me and Claudio will be freed*. When she falls back on the threat that she will expose him, he assures her that his reputation is faultless, and that no one would believe her rather than him. Her dilemma tightens around her; when she confers with her brother, about her daring moves on his behalf, he simply begs for his life, at first leaving the ball in her court.

The Duke. To simplify matters, we return here to the Duke, who has in fact not gone on mission, but who has remained in Vienna, as Friar Lodovick, and who has insinuated himself into the prison system, after a little negotiation with the prison deputy. The deputy, fully aware of the Duke's identity, permits 'Friar Lodovick' admittance to the discussion, between Claudio and Isabella, over the dilemma presented by Angelo's proposition. Then, to make more complex the strategy the Duke proposes, to save the present situation, we need to look further into the darkness of the conditions that Angelo has set, for the freeing of Claudio.

Conditions. Angelo has foremost demanded to sleep with Isabella. He has also, however, provided for covering his own ass, when it comes out that Claudio has been freed, not executed. The Duke arranges to cover both of those conditions. It appears that Angelo has been engaged to marry Mariana, though the consummation of the marriage has never taken place. With the Duke's planning, arrangements are put in place for a night time assignation in which Angelo is convinced that he has spent the night in the arms of Isabella, although in fact the sacred lover was his fiancée, Mariana. Strictly speaking, that night of love should have totally satisfied Angelo's condition for freeing Claudio. But Angelo has been doing some more thinking, and concludes that, even though Isabella has (ostensibly) fulfilled her part of the bargain, Angelo's own constituency will be unsatisfied unless he goes ahead with the execution of Claudio. You see the depths of Angelo's treachery, both to his own oath of office, and of Isabella!

The head. Angelo's second demand is for the head of the decapitated Claudio! There too the Duke proves up to the challenge, arranging behind scenes for the head of a recently decapitated prisoner to be sent directly to Angelo, as evidence for the execution of Claudio, Angelo's proof to his constituency that he had done his job. From Angelo's view point, now, the job has been done, the beautiful girl laid, and life can proceed. Except for the Duke, whose turn it is now. In other words, it is time for him to 'return from his mission,' now fully clad as leader, which he does to appropriate fanfare. And to a visit from Isabella, who lays before him her complaints about Angelo, little realizing that the Duke knows in advance all that she is talking about.

Finale. The Duke's response, to Isabella's complaints, forms the end of the tale, and gives the tale its somewhat inscrutable title. The implication of the title is that Angelo should now pay the penalty, execution, which he so remorselessly pressed against Claudio. Angelo himself, in fact, invites that resolution, and expects the worst for himself—once he has been exposed. He is aware of his total depravity. It is the role of the Duke, however, to be the mature voice of mercy. He takes from Angelo the dowry which was owed to Mariana for her upcoming wedding, gives it to Mariana, and urges her to find herself a better husband. To the general surprise, she begs that Angelo, who will be a good man in the future, be spared, and become her husband. Finally she prevails, against the judgement of all except the Duke, who has throughout the play been the one person who understands Angelo inside and out. For the Duke's understanding, Angelo has paid his measure of return, for the (never carried out) execution of Claudio; he has paid by having to look his corruption straight in the face, in public, and by marrying (and making a life with) the fiancée who has decided to stand up for him despite his perfidy.

Themes

Corruption. Angelo seems a perfect example of corruption, although we are not aware of any past history of that vice, in this seemingly austere man of law. Corruption appears suddenly in this figure of true evil, who is willing to play with the sisterly emotions of a young woman courageously dedicating her life to purity.

Purity. Isabella is about to begin her life as a nun when she receives the devastating news that her brother is soon to be executed. Her only thought is about him. What can I do to save him? The solution suggested to her by Angelo is the last perspective that could have occurred to her.

Good Judgment. The Duke is the model of good judgment in the present play. To have proceeded with the whipping and then execution of Angelo, at the end of the drama, would have been weak theater and poor morals. The Duke's decision is complex and accurate: to make certain that Angelo has caused no tangible harm, then to make the man pay for his corruption by penance, faithful marriage, and public humbling.

Deception. It might be said that both Angelo—in feigning strict legal morality—and the Duke—in feigning his mission abroad—deceive many around them. In the former case, deception is carried out to harm, and for selfish reasons; in the latter, deception is carried out to learn, and to administer a society more effectively.

Duke

Character. The Duke, despite being absent from much of the play, is arguably the central figure, ultimately driving the plot and establishing the perspective from which we should view events. Were it not for the Duke's reputation for wisdom and judgment, Isabella would never have followed this man's advice about the resolution of Angelo's scheme to make out with her, and to acquire the actual head of Claudio. It was the Duke who figured out the bed trick and the head trick, which truly tricked Angelo. It was the Duke who, at the end of the play, pronounced a judgement of mercy on Angelo, which was designed to reintroduce him into both the pleasures and the stringencies of society, having first assured that society that Angelo would not be able to harm it, that is take the life of Claudio.

Parallels. Two nineteenth century Russian fictions parallel the imagination of Shakespeare in the present play. Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* portray the life of ordered society as perceived by marginal guy who barely reaches the level of the conventions and assumptions of society. No one in society knows the true identity of this observer. Gogol's *The Inspector General* puts us in the place of mistaken identity, by which a visitor to a provincial hotel is mistaken for a government inspector, and for several weeks enjoys the privileges of being courted by the local elite.

The excellent television show, *Underground Boss*, creates a parallel to the plan laid out by the Duke, in *Measure for Measure*. On this show, the boss leaves CEO headquarters for a vacation, but in fact disguises himself as an ordinary floor worker in one of his plants, and wanders the aisles interviewing his employees, and assessing their job performance.

Illustrative moments

Farewell. The duke bids a solemn farewell to his deputy Angelo, whom he has left in charge of the city of Vienna. The deputy has no ideas that his boss is remaining in Vienna, in disguise, to observe the behavior of the citizens.

Monastery. Before leaving on his 'mission' the Duke passes by the monastery, where he can explain his 'mission,' and acquire monks' robes to disguise himself in.

Prison. The Duke visits the provost, in charge of the prison, to discuss the strategy for overhearing meaningful conversations like those of Isabella and her brother.

Specs. The Duke is careful to explain, to the provost of the Prison, the particular head that he wants to have sent to Angelo, to make sure the deception of the corrupt guy is perfect.

Conclusion. It is the concluding wisdom, from the Duke, that Angelo had best be required to marry Mariana and live an honorable life with her. The Duke mixes mercy with justice.

Discussion questions

How does the meaning of the title of this play unfold as you work through it. To whom is the 'measure' In question applied? Is the title intended to establish a balance between Angelo's corrupt values and the finesse of Isabelle?

Has Angelo undergone any serious change of heart, by the end of the play? Does he seem to be a deeply corrupt individual, or impulsively corrupt, driven into corrupt behaviors on the spur of the moment?

Do you accept the idea that this play is a problem play rather than a comedy—as it was called during its first stage performance? If this is a problem play, what has it in common with, say, *Troilus and Cressida*?