Measure for Measure

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Playhouses in Shakespeare's time were often close to brothels, both in terms of their physical locations in the suburbs and the way they were viewed by some of polite society. Thus, Shakespeare's relatively sympathetic portrayal of sexual deviance in *Measure for Measure* may also constitute a defense of other suburban entertainment—his plays—and a way to humanize lower classes who patronized them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because of its just, satisfying ending and marriage plot, *Measure for Measure* fits in sensibly with other Shakespearean comedies. In addition, however, it can also be seen as a "problem play" aimed at addressing problems of sexual, religious, and civic morality. Other Shakespearean problem plays include *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well that Ends Well*. The play's plot was adapted from Giambattista Giraldi's *Epitia* and George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra* .

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Measure for Measure*
- **When Written:** 1603-1604
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623 (First Folio)
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Comedy, Problem Play
- **Setting:** Vienna
- **Climax:** The main characters' confrontation at the city gates during the play's last act, in which the injustices of the play are reversed and proper punishments are distributed.
- **Antagonist:** Angelo

EXTRA CREDIT

Poets Take Note. Among other works, *Measure for Measure* inspired Alfred Tennyson's 1830 poem "Mariana," as well as Alexander Pushkin's 1833 piece, "Angelo."

PLOT SUMMARY

The Duke of Vienna asks a nobleman, Angelo, to assume leadership of the city and uphold the law while he—the Duke—is away traveling. He commands Angelo to uphold the law, and reveals that he plans to remain in the city in secret, disguised as a friar, to see how the city responds to what he expects will be Angelo's more strict upholding of the law.

Some time after the Duke's departure, Angelo imposes a death sentence on Claudio, who has impregnated his wife-to-be, Juliet, before their marriage. Lucio, a friend of Claudio's, relays this news to Isabella, Claudio's sister who has begun training to be a nun. Isabella's religious beliefs cause her to disapprove of Claudio's transgression, but Lucio persuades her to beg Angelo for clemency. She pleads her case in front of Angelo, who appears to grow gradually more sympathetic. He tells her to return tomorrow to hear his decision.

Afterwards, Angelo, who prides himself on his ice-cold demeanor and uncompromising restraint, is distressed to realize that he is enamored of Isabella. The next day, he offers her a bargain: if she will sleep with him, he will release her brother. Isabella is initially too naïve to understand Angelo's insinuations; when Angelo asks her outright, she refuses, scandalized by the indecent proposition.

She visits Claudio in jail and reports this interaction to him, and he initially supports her decision to remain pure. However, Claudio changes his mind and begs his sister to take up Angelo's offer. Isabella is offended by her brother's request. However, the disguised Duke arrives and convinces her to orchestrate a liaison with Angelo: when the time comes to seduce Angelo, a woman named Mariana—a former fiancée of Angelo's whom he abandoned after she lost her brother and her dowry in a shipwreck—will take Isabella's place.

However, even after this encounter takes place, Angelo reneges on his word and orders Claudio's beheading. At the Duke's urging, the Provost who runs the jail deceives Angelo by sending him the head of a dead pirate, claiming it belonged to Claudio. The Duke sends a letter to Angelo announcing that he will soon return to Vienna. On his arrival, the Duke requests a public hearing before the city gates, where citizens can go to seek redress for injustices. When he reads this letter, Angelo nervously wonders whether Isabella will denounce him publicly,

and regrets ordering Claudio's execution out of a fear of retribution.

At the hearing, Isabella speaks out against Angelo, but the now-undisguised Duke pretends not to believe her. Mariana, too, tells her story, but the Duke remains unconvinced. The Duke then reappears in his friar costume, and Lucio accuses him of disrespecting the Duke. In an ensuing scuffle, the Duke's disguise is removed. His masquerade revealed, the Duke carries out long-overdue justice. He forces Angelo to marry Mariana, and though he wishes to sentence him to death, Mariana and Isabella convince the Duke to spare Angelo. Claudio is permitted to marry Juliet, and Lucio is reprimanded and compelled to marry a prostitute who has borne him a child (and who he had refused to wed). Finally, the Duke asks Isabella to reconsider her monastic vows and marry him instead.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Isabella – One of the play's central characters, Isabella is a principled young woman in the process of becoming a nun. When her brother, Claudio, receives a death sentence from Angelo for engaging in premarital sex, she is forced to choose between her religious commitment and her familial love—she chooses religious commitment, a testament to her purity. Ultimately, she conspires with the Duke, while the latter is disguised as a friar, to rescue her brother from his unjust punishment by tricking Angelo.

Claudio – Isabella's brother. He is good-hearted and insightful, but his inability to resist his sexual impulses causes him to receive a death sentence for impregnating his soon-to-be wife, Juliet, before the wedding. He escapes this punishment with the help of Isabella, the Duke, and others, who trick Angelo into believing his execution was completed.

The Duke – The benevolent ruler of Vienna who has asked Angelo to govern in his stead to impose law and order. Though his subjects believe he has left town, the Duke disguises himself as a friar and observes the workings of his state while incognito. He uses this deception to counteract the injustices he discovers Angelo has committed.

Angelo – Angelo is the clear antagonist of the play. As regent of Vienna, he imposes a draconian regime in the name of restoring morality. However, he ends up being as duplicitous and immoral as his discipline is uncompromising. While he plans to execute Claudio for having sex out of wedlock, he himself attempts to force Isabella to have sex with him—an action he later lies about in an attempt to conceal it. At the play's end, he is justly punished for his hypocrisy. The Duke initially offers him a death sentence, but decides simply to sentence him to marry the woman he had once scorned when her dowry fell through, Mariana. However, in spite of his reprehensible behavior, Angelo is one of the play's more complex characters. He is aware of, and deeply conflicted by, his wrongdoings. While his conduct may ultimately deserve condemnation, it is hard not to pity him at the beginning of the play, as he self-consciously struggles to reconcile his morals with his desires before succumbing to villainous hypocrisy.

Elbow – A police officer, often charged with enforcing sex laws. Dull and prone to speaking in malapropisms (i.e. saying words that don't mean what he thinks they do), Elbow is a humorous character and serves as a sharp contrast to Pompey, depicting the law as somewhat less clever than those who break it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lucio – A friend of Claudio's whose over-the-top behavior symbolizes the more indulgent aspects of Viennese society. He works to convince Isabella that aiding her brother is the right choice.

Mariana – A one-time fiancée of Angelo's, whom he abandoned after her dowry was lost in a shipwreck. Mariana helps Isabella and the Duke's plot to free Claudio by seducing Angelo while pretending to be Isabella.

Escalus – A virtuous nobleman who repeatedly counsels Angelo against acting unjustly or too harshly, and to think of one's own sins when meting out justice.

Juliet – The woman whom Claudio impregnates.

Mistress Overdone – The madame of a Viennese brothel.

Pompey – A quick-witted "bawd" employed by Mistress Overdone, who is skeptical of any attempt to enact laws that will eliminate prostitution.

The Provost – The warden of the prison who, at the disguised Duke's behest, disobeys Angelo's orders to behead Claudio and instead presents the head of a dead pirate.

Barnadine – An irritable, lazy, drunken prisoner, sentenced to die the same day as Claudio. His laziness is so great that he refuses even to appear for his own execution, and as such the authorities give up on trying to execute him.

Friar Lodowick – The alter ego the Duke adopts by disguising himself as a friar.

Friar Thomas and Friar Peter – Two friars who help the Duke craft his disguise.

Abhorson – The prison executioner. He looks down on Pompey for being a pimp, thinking his own profession is better.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in

black and white.

VIRTUE

The core tensions of *Measure for Measure* derive from different characters' differing attempts to attain virtue. The most prominent example is Isabella's desire to maintain her virtue while navigating the conflict between her religious devotion and her love for her brother Claudio. However, the play depicts a range of approaches to virtue: at one end is Isabella, who initially seeks to isolate herself from the sins of society and live as a nun, but eventually ends up reaching a compromise that saves Claudio while still preserving her purity. In the middle lies Claudio, who does not patronize brothels and seeks to wed Juliet legitimately; however, he lacks the willpower to abstain from consensual, premarital sex. On the more liberal end are characters like Mistress Overdone and Pompey, who perpetuate and profit from Vienna's prostitution problem. Finally, there is Angelo, who on one hand embodies fervent uprightness through his draconian enforcement of moral codes, but on the other hand willingly indulges in the same sorts of sexual misconduct that he punishes in others. Worst still, he, unlike most other characters, is actively dishonest about his behavior. While Mistress Overdone and Pompey readily admit to their professions, Angelo tries to mask his deviance by enforcing moral codes with an iron fist.

These characters' respective fates illustrate that virtue is not achieved through inflexible orthodoxy, but rather through sincerity. Angelo's unyielding compulsion to impose virtue on himself and others turns him into a hypocritical despot and precipitates his downfall. By marrying the Duke, Isabella ultimately ends up straying from her monastic intentions, but her choice was clearly the just course of action, compared with her initial impulse to consider Claudio's execution an acceptable consequence of his transgression. The Duke, too, is willing to make some moral compromises by using trickery to mislead his subjects, but he prevails because he makes these compromises in the pursuit of greater virtue. And less-than-pure characters like Claudio and Mistress Overdone escape the worst consequences because they, unlike Angelo, are sincere and upfront about their misbehavior. Thus, Shakespeare demonstrates that a genuine moral compass is a far more virtuous attribute than the unyielding adherence to and enforcement of a given moral code.

APPEARANCE VERSUS REALITY

On a superficial level, there are numerous instances throughout the play in which appearances belie the truth of a situation. This is encapsulated in the concept of dramatic irony, a term that refers to situations in which the audience knows essential information that on-stage characters do not. Ironic cases of mistaken identity appear throughout the work, such as the Duke's disguise (and Lucio's unintentional denoucement of him to his face), Isabella's switch with Mariana to seduce Angelo, and Angelo's mistaking the pirate's head for Claudio's. In each case, characters misconstrue a situation based on its appearances.

In addition, however, there are deeper disjunctions between appearance and reality. One example is the hypocritical do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do morality that Angelo exhibits. This is the ugly side of dissimulation, which allows the least virtuous characters to seem the most upstanding, at least for a time. The opposite scenario, however, is found in Isabella's personal dilemma: in order to rescue her brother Claudio, she must appear to disregard her religious vows. In other words, in order to behave justly, she must appear to behave unjustly—an exact inversion of Angelo's deceitful behavior. Similarly, the provost must ostensibly disobey his oath to Angelo and the Duke by sending the head of a pirate to convince Angelo that Claudio has been executed—but yet again, it turns out that his apparent misbehavior was in fact the correct, virtuous course of action. Even the Duke himself must deceive others in order to restore order to his state. This disconnect between appearance and reality is what propels the play's plot. It is important to observe, then, that the play's denouement ensures that each case of deceiving appearances is rectified, particularly through the comeuppance Angelo receives.

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE

Given the way that appearances and realities are reconciled at the play's conclusion, it is appropriate that justice is a main theme of the work. "Measure for measure" itself refers to the inevitable carrying out of justice: people get what they deserve. The play's conclusion is so satisfying because it rectifies the rampant injustice that preceded and rewards or punishes each character according to his or her moral worth.

This typical poetic justice, however, is complicated by the way Shakespeare manipulates the concept of liberty. Liberty is, of course, an indispensable component of justice, but the play emphasizes that excessive freedom can often foster injustice. The duke observes that in his debauched territory, "liberty plucks justice by the nose." When Lucio asks Claudio what has caused his arrest, Claudio replies that his lack of restraint stems "From too much liberty...as surfeit is the father of much fast, so every scope by the immoderate use turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue, like rats that ravin down their proper bane, a thirsty evil; and when we drink we die." There is no better illustration than Angelo of the corrupting power of excessive liberty. When his position of power allows him to pursue the "thirsty evil" that he desires, he, despite his misgivings, proceeds to pursue Isabella while running roughshod over the rights of others. And because justice is

inevitable, his drink of this evil is what causes him to be brought to justice and punished at the play's end.

AGENCY AND SOCIETY

Nearly every character in the play lacks the knowledge or power necessary to control his or her actions and their attendant repercussions. Of course, this is due in part to the dramatic irony that drives the plot. Because characters lack essential information about their circumstances, they are not as in command of their actions as they may believe. Examples of this are widespread; essentially any character who deals with the disguised Duke is deprived of some control, simply because the Duke uses his greater knowledge to manipulate his subjects.

However, another force behind this lack of agency is characters' inabilities to balance their impulsive desires with their overall self-interest. Oftentimes, initial lapses in self-control cascade into larger predicaments that strip characters of still more individual liberty. Claudio and Juliet, for example, lack the willpower to refrain from premarital sex. This, when discovered, robs them of more freedom still, as they must suffer legal and social penalties. Similarly, Angelo is unable to reconcile his desire for moral rectitude with his sexual desire for Isabella. Because he does not have the fortitude to behave consistently, this disconnect forces him into a cruel and morally reprehensible position--one that leads to his downfall at the play's conclusion.

The most notable—and singular—exception to this trend is the Duke himself. He uses subterfuge to manipulate other characters into fulfilling his—admittedly benign—intentions. It seems like more than a coincidence, then, that the character who wields the most official authority also wields the most individual agency as the plot unfolds. While the Duke's aims may be noble enough, his unique ability to freely act with full information suggests that the deck may be stacked in his favor. This may be intended as a commentary on the coercive power that social hierarchies can exert on those who occupy subordinate roles.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Although the play's characters are almost all plagued by a general lack of agency, the female characters are disproportionately constrained. While some men, like Claudio and Angelo, are able to flout social mores—albeit with varying degrees of success—it is difficult to find a woman who defies social proscriptions. Mariana, for example, appears to be coerced into complying with the Duke's ruse to seduce Angelo simply because she lacks any acceptable alternative. Betrothed but unmarried, she occupies a social gray area. Her most plausible motivation for sleeping with Angelo is to legitimize the relationship that he abandoned. After her would-be marriage to Angelo is consummated, Mariana is restored to a conventional role in society, instead of the uncertain and precarious position she occupied before.

Isabella, too, is constrained by societal expectations. She is paralyzed when her two roles—sister and nun—entail conflicting obligations. Tension mounts as it begins to seem increasingly inevitable that Isabel will subvert one of these sets of obligations, but Mariana's convenient cooperation neatly resolves the dilemma. In this way, Isabella, too, is unable to defy the station society has given to her. Even the play's ending suggests that she has little choice but to marry the Duke and continue operating very much within the strictures of society.

While the constraints faced by other female characters are not described in much detail, other characters' conduct makes it clear that Viennese women are similarly lacking in agency. Lucio's contemptuous attitude towards prostitutes, for example, indicates there is little, if any, room for women to deviate from the roles assigned to them by male-dominated society.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BROTHEL INDUSTRY

The prevalence of brothels in Vienna, as well as the appearances of characters who run them, like Mistress Overdone and Pompey, illustrates the moral decline that the city has seen during the Duke's rule. The dull-witted police officer Elbow, whom Pompey easily outwits, symbolizes the ineptitude of the law. When Angelo takes power, the suburban brothels are ordered torn down in a demonstration of righteousness. However, along with this transition, Pompey segues from working as a pimp to working as an executioner—perhaps a hint that the eradication of one sort of vice will lead to the rise of another, more sinister kind.

"MEASURE FOR MEASURE"

The play's title derives from one of Jesus's biblical sayings: "*Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with that judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure you meet, it shall be measured unto you again.*" (Matthew 7:1-2). The sense of this quote—and the moral of the play—boil down to a warning that everyone should, when judging others, be mindful of his or her own sins. After all, the fates of Lucio and Angelo illustrate that those who try to obscure personal faults by judging others harshly end up paying full "measure" for their misconduct.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Measure for Measure* published in 2005.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

Now, good my lord,
Let there be some more test made of my metal,
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamp'd upon it.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), The Duke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.51-53

Explanation and Analysis

Duke Vicentio begins the play by describing how he will leave, and he urges his deputy Angelo to "Take thy commission." The Duke specifically commands Angelo to act in his stead, by letting "Mortality and mercy in Vienna / Live in thy tongue and heart." The Duke places Angelo in charge of the city's justice (by giving him the ability to command executions) and virtue (by leaving him in charge of doling out mercy).

This is a heavy task, and Angelo might be responding honestly (as well as politely) when he asks the Duke to not give him such a lofty duty until he is more worthy of it. In this response, Angelo's response also alludes to notions which will resurface throughout the play, such as appearance versus reality. After the Duke gives Angelo this responsibility, Angelo will act as the duke without being the duke; the "figure" of authority will only be "stamp'd upon" him. Yet, this pretense is a public one; everyone will see and know that Angelo is not the duke himself. When describing this, Angelo uses an analogy in which his body is a kind of "metal," much like a coin; this early foray into notions of money, circulation, and capital reminds us that this play's title, "Measure for Measure" will have multiple layers of meaning as the acts continue.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

Thus can the demigod, Authority,
Make us pay down for our offense by weight
The words of heaven: on whom it will, it will;
On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just.

Related Characters: Claudio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.116-117

Explanation and Analysis

As Claudio enters the stage, he is being taken to prison slowly and publicly. This is supposedly happening under Angelo's specific commands, as the provost tells Claudio when Claudio begins to (perhaps rightly) complain about this. Therefore, Claudio is being thoroughly and publicly punished for having sexual intercourse with his betrothed Juliet because of Angelo's whim and decision.

Claudio protests the societal structures which bestow "Authority" on such individuals and allow capricious human actors to (try their best to) enforce the "the words of heaven" and heaven's infallible decrees. When human figures such as Angelo make the determinations, only some guilty individuals receive punishment; the decisions of heaven are only ever partially fulfilled. According to much of the world, though, "still 'tis just" -- this partial form of heavenly justice, which is mediated by the "demigod Authority" and lower human characters, largely seems to be a fair system, rooted in justice. Claudio can see its flaws, though, from his current position outside of the system. Claudio is being forced to "pay" for his sins, and here we again see this blending of justice and monetary circulation.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

We have strict statutes and most biting laws
(The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds),
Which for this fourteen years we have let slip,
Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave,
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threat'ning twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
Becomes more mock'd than fear'd; so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum.

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.20-32

Explanation and Analysis

It turns out that Duke Vicentio has not left the play at all; after he is absent for one scene, the audience sees him again, as he converses with a friar. Fittingly, it is in this monastery that the audience may begin to understand why the Duke has left Vienna, spurring the action of the play. The Duke at least claims that he left not for love, but rather for the good of his people. For fourteen years, he has supposedly allowed the virtue of his city to slip; in the Duke's colorful description, even fathers and children become figures of sinfulness, as "quite athwart / Goes all decorum," and liberty takes control over justice.The Duke seems to believe that Angelo is better suited to restoring this virtue, as an individual not as entrenched in the political customs of the last few years.

But perhaps we cannot believe the Duke's description completely. He only describes his city in these flawed terms after the friar questions the Duke's intentions, making the Duke defensively claim that he has "a purpose / More grave and wrinkled than the aims and ends / Of burning youth." In the Duke's depiction of Vienna, we do, however, have a portrait of a city which plays out of many of the play's overall concerns: sin versus vice, romantic and familial bonds versus isolation, and collective versus individual action.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

❝ The Duke is very strangely gone from hence;
Bore many gentlemen (myself being one)
In hand, and hope of action; but we do learn
By those that know the very nerves of state,
His givings-out were of an infinite distance
From his true-meant design. Upon his place,
And with full line of his authority,
Governs Lord Angelo, a man whose blood
Is very snow-broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense;
But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge
With profits of the mind: study and fast.
He (to give fear to use and liberty,
Which have for long run by the hideous law,
As mice by lions) hath pick'd out an act,
Under whose heavy sense your brother's life
Falls into forfeit; he arrests him on it,
And follows close the rigor of the statute,
To make him an example.

Related Characters: Lucio (speaker), The Duke, Angelo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.54-72

Explanation and Analysis

After we see the Duke disguise himself as a friar, Lucio goes to Claudio's sister Isabella, another individual who is only partially a member of the clergy. Isabella is in the process of becoming an authentic nun, however, so she acts as a model of piety and goodness. To Isabella, Lucio summarizes the situation so far: the Duke has left "very strangely" and mysteriously (disguising his "true-meant design") and his replacement, Angelo, has already sentenced Claudio to death for his generally minor offense of impregnating his betrothed Julia.

Lucio echoes Claudio's conviction that human actors in command arbitrarily and unfairly use their own liberty to pick (or "pluck") sinful individuals. Then, these authoritative actors punish their chosen sinners, removing their sinners' liberty to "make" their sinners "an example" for the broader community. He also further characterizes Angelo, the figure who represents this flawed form of justice, as a man without spontaneous human feelings. Angelo seems to be a man driven only by law and reason, instead of the variations and ambiguities of human passion.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ We must not make a scarecrow of the law,
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it
Their perch and not their terror.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.1-4

Explanation and Analysis

As the play's second act opens, Angelo closely echoes the Duke's supposedreason for placing him in charge of Vienna. He describes the difficulties of enforcing laws and decrees; these rules become a mere empty framework, an impotent "scarecrow," unless human individuals are able to actively enforce them. Angelo seems willing to carry out this enforcing and ensure that "custom" does not continue to stray far from legalistic action. Angelo suggests that he will place law over mercy and reason over spontaneous human passion. This declaration is unsurprising given the prior events of the play, yet it will itself become a "scarecrow" in

the upcoming act.

Ay, but yet
Let us be keen, and rather cut a little,
Than fall, and bruise to death.

Related Characters: Escalus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.5-7

Explanation and Analysis

After Angelo declares that he will enforce justice, striving against sinful "custom" and ensuring that the very letter of the law is carried out, Escalus takes an antagonistic approach to this idea. Escalus advocates for mercy, suggesting that law enforcement must be balanced with forgiveness and care paid to each individual case. There is more to consider than an individual's actions; intention and internal development are significant as well.

This exchange between Angelo and Escalus reminds us that *Measure for Measure* deals with intellectual tensions and philosophical issues as well as the struggles and successes of individual characters. As a "problem play," it is a comedy with intellectual force in addition to its romantic conventions and devices (which have not yet appeared in the play). As such, it does not let Escalus's comment rest without a response. Angelo immediately replies.

'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall. I not deny
The jury, passing on the prisoner's life,
May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two
Guiltier than him they try. What's open made to justice,
That justice seizes. What knows the laws
That thieves do pass on thieves? 'Tis very pregnant,
The jewel that we find, we stoop and take't,
Because we see it; but what we do not see
We tread upon, and never think of it.
You may not so extenuate his offense
For I have had such faults; but rather tell me,
When I, that censure him, do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death,
And nothing come in partial.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Escalus, Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.18-2.1.33

Explanation and Analysis

Angelo's reply to Escalus's suggestion for greater mercy and forgiveness becomes a detailed unpacking of many tensions. We are introduced to the notion that temptation and sin are two separate phenomena; again the inconsistencies between the internal and the external figure prominently. Angelo also directly addresses the prevailing concern that justice can only be partial and humans cannot punish all sinners, in order to fully act out heaven's rulings. To Angelo, this is certainly reality. Yet, he suggests that individuals who enforce justice are duty-bound to punish all sins which *are* revealed. Although a human society cannot fully act out heaven's justice, it can fully act out its own to the best of its abilities. It can fully enforce all wrongdoings it sees, undiluted by merciful tendencies, so that it completely acts out its own justice and "nothing" will "come in partial."

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

Because authority, though it err like others,
Hath yet a kind of medicine in itself,
That skins the vice o' th' top. Go to your bosom,
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That's like my brother's fault. If it confess
A natural guiltiness such as is his,
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
Against my brother's life.

Related Characters: Isabella (speaker), Claudio, Angelo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.164-171

Explanation and Analysis

As Isabella pleads her brother's case to Angelo, she begs Angelo to be merciful, but not always using wholly religious words such as mercy and forgiveness. Fittingly, she is the figure which reminds Angelo of his heart; she will again unintentionally do this when she unwittingly inspires Angelo to fall in love (or at least lust) with her. Though she is the individual with the most virtue, Isabella claims that Angelo also has a kind of virtue, a "kind of medicine" within himself. He can choose to refrain from making harsh choices.

Isabella asks Angelo to recall his own "natural guiltiness" and past transgressions. She introduces the notions of human experience and emotion -- passion, frailty, and reality -- as she virtuously pleads for mercy in her brother's case.

> O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint,
> With saints dost bait thy hook! Most dangerous
> Is that temptation that doth goad us on
> To sin in loving virtue. Never could the strumpet,
> With all her double vigor, art and nature,
> Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid
> Subdues me quite.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Isabella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.217-223

Explanation and Analysis

After Isabella begs him to reconsider, and spare her brother's life, Angelo confronts his sudden passionate attraction to her. The tensions of the play begin to unravel; Angelo contemplates his lust "to sin in loving virtue" and claims that the "cunning enemy" uses "saints" to fulfill his aims. Sin and virtue become hopelessly entangled, as the "virtuous maid" incites him to the very acts which Claudio committed, and for which Angelo condemned him.

Another contrast, that between reason and human impulse, becomes a flawed binary as well. Angelo has been our character of the law, our strict dictator who seems to wholly lack human passion. Yet he is the character who becomes infatuated so immediately, in an event which any reasonable individual would think could "never" occur.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

> Look, here comes one; a gentlewoman of mine,
> Who, falling in the flaws of her own youth,
> Hath blister'd her report. She is with child,
> And he that got it, sentenc'd; a young man
> More fit to do another such offense
> Than die for this.

Related Characters: The Provost (speaker), Juliet, Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.3.10-15

Explanation and Analysis

When the Duke comes to visit the prisoners in his friar disguise, the Provost introduces him to Juliet, revealing his personal sympathy for her plight. When he mentions how Juliet is pregnant, the Provost also shares the fate of her lover Claudio. These two lovers tend to be defined in relation to one another -- one of their crimes is easily explained by the other's crime -- and this suggests the way that one person's actions never exist in a vacuum, and thus one can never be completely culpable. It also suggests, however, that Claudio is more responsible than Juliet; he is to be killed immediately, and she is not.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

> Heaven hath my empty words,
> Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
> Anchors on Isabel; heaven in my mouth,
> As if I did but only chew his name,
> And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
> Of my conception. The state, whereon I studied,
> Is like a good thing, being often read,
> Grown sere and tedious; yea, my gravity,
> Wherein (let no man hear me) I take pride,
> Could I, with boot, change for an idle plume,
> Which the air beats for vain. O place, O form,
> How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
> Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls
> To thy false seeming!

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Isabella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.2-15

Explanation and Analysis

Struck by Isabel, Angelo's distracted, guilty prayers do not fulfill their function and connect him to heaven. In this soliloquy, which Angelo utters as he is alone on the stage, Angelo becomes curiously close to Claudius in *Hamlet*, whose prayers did not reach heaven as well. Angelo only *intends* to experience sexual intercourse with Isabel, and only *intends* to kill Claudio, yet Angelo's speech here links him to Claudius -- the character in Hamlet who *did* have sexual intercourse with Gertrude and *did* kill the former King of Denmark, all while lamenting his own guilt as Angelo does here. This alludes to the darker nature of *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's final and darkest comedy.

Angelo is now painfully aware of his heart -- but he is only aware of his impending vices, instead of his former transgressions (the acts which Isabella suggested that he should remember). He now must confront the central dualities of the play and decide whether he will act out his own impulses or act in service of his society's justice. He must decide whether he will maintain the pretense of a wholly reasonable and just individual or allow himself to reveal his newly emotional internal experiences.

Might there not be a charity in sin
To save this brother's life?

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Isabella, Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.67-68

Explanation and Analysis

As Angelo attempts to convince Isabella to commit herself to sexual intercourse with him, he suggests that he would spare her brother if Isabella offers herself to him in this way. Before, Angelo expressed in speech the new entanglements between good and evil, virtue and vice, and appearance and reality; now, his actions (in his attempts to convince Isabella to engage in sexual actions with him) attest to these as well.

Angelo suggests that, as a virtuous woman, Isabella has much to offer. She could choose to selfishly preserve it, until she fully commits to the nunnery and offers it to God, or she could use it to save her brother. Isabella could condemn her own soul through intercourse outside of wedlock, or she could condemn herself in order to un-condemn her brother. This suggestion does not merely use female virginity as a bartering tool; it suggests that moral depravity and consequence is transferable between individuals more broadly. Virtue and vice is entrenched in social networks and exchanges, as well as custom and law. The significance of the title "Measure for Measure" begins to become clearer, even as the moral compass of the play grows more confused.

Better it were a brother died at once,
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,
Should die forever.

Related Characters: Isabella (speaker), Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.114-116

Explanation and Analysis

To Isabella, moral consequences are not easily transferred among individuals, as Angelo now suggests they are. She is not merely entrenched in systems of circulation and exchange; she is also dedicated to particular religious tenants. According to her Christian beliefs, the life of one's soul is far more important than the life of one's physical body. Thus it would be better for her brother to physically die than for her to spiritually die, thus condemning herself to an eternity in Hell.

Isabella is repulsed to the suggestion that saving her brother's life would justify losing her virginity. Her sexual purity is an intrinsic aspect of herself which, lost, would alter her beyond measure.

Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Isabella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.184

Explanation and Analysis

Angelo ends his conversation with Isabella by refusing to be intimidated by her threat to share his offer to her with the rest of society. Angels knows that, in this social context, appearance would trump reality; Angelo has built up a solid reputation as an honest and moral character over time, and after so long, this reputation for goodness would be enough evidence to disprove any charges Isabella might place against him. Character can accrue over time, and individual circumstances are always compared and measured against past histories and records. Furthermore, as a woman in this society, Isabella's word is automatically considered less important and reliable than the word of a man, particularly a well-known nobleman like Angelo.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

What's yet in this
That bears the name of life? Yet in this life
Lie hid more thousand deaths; yet death we fear
That makes these odds all even.

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.40-43

Explanation and Analysis

The Duke, disguised as a friar, appears to Claudio in prison to provide him with counsel. After asking Claudio whether he hopes for pardon, and hearing that Claudio does indeed remain in hope to some extent, the Duke advocates that Claudio should lose all hope and "be absolute for death." The Duke labels life as a gift that "none but fools would keep" and details life's unpleasant contradictions (that young men desire riches and old men cannot derive pleasure from the riches that they have). Again we see the darker nature of this comedy.

The Duke's description of life's many hidden deaths also recalls this play's tension between appearance and reality. The Duke does not suggest what exactly constitutes the "more thousand deaths" of life. Yet we might believe that these deaths-in-miniature are the consequences of pretense; they slowly accrue over one's life, as one adopts different identifies, leaving each personality and experience behind, and fails to see one's internal desires and motivations gain external representation.

> O, were it but my life,
> I'd throw it down for your deliverance
> As frankly as a pin.

Related Characters: Isabella (speaker), Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.117-119

Explanation and Analysis

As Isabella speaks to Claudio in prison, she reveals that Angelo has offered to spare Claudio's life if Isabella will have sex with him. Claudio's immediate response is to state that Isabella will not "do't" -- she will not sacrifice her virginity for her brother's life. Isabella feelingly agrees, claiming that she would "throw it [life] down" "as frankly as a pin" in order to save her brother. Once again she values the soul far more than the body. Further, she only implies that she will not even consider saving her brother through having sex. This hesitancy to even speak directly about this topic suggests the layers of privacy and secrecy which surround female sexuality and religious chastity.

> Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
> To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
> This sensible warm motion to become
> A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
> To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
> In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
> To be imprison'd in the viewless winds
> And blown with restless violence round about
> The pendant world; or to be worse than worst
> Of those that lawless and incertain thought
> Imagine howling—'tis too horrible!
> The weariest and most loathed worldly life
> That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
> Can lay on nature is a paradise
> To what we fear of death.

Related Characters: Claudio (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.1.133-147

Explanation and Analysis

As Claudio speaks with his sister in his jail, he seems somewhat more than willing to die, when he claims "If I must die, / I will encounter darkness as a bride, / And hug it in mine arms." Similarly, he initially does not oppose Isabella's desire to stay pure instead of sacrificing her virginity for his life.

Yet his resolve then becomes plagued by fear. "Death is a fearful thing," he first says, briefly, before continuing in this more fervent speech. Although we might associate the tragedy Hamlet more with death, here we briefly escape the worldly nature of this play, which focuses on the competing interests of human passions and reasons, and dwell upon the landscape of death. There is no one analogy that Claudio can use to describe it; Claudio cannot know death, and this mystery leads to his fear. His fear projects through the words, making this speech a passionate plea for his life. Through these attempts to describe death, Claudio attempts to reach through his sister's convictions.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

> Why, what a ruthless thing is this in him, for the rebellion of a codpiece to take away the life of a man!

Related Characters: Lucio (speaker), Angelo, Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.115-117

Explanation and Analysis

Lucio asks the Duke (who is disguised as a friar) for news about the Duke, and the "friar" declines to provide any, claiming that he knows nothing of the Duke's recent affairs. Lucio then details how Angelo had been acting in the Duke's absence -- that is, ruthlessly-- and indulges in the common speculation that Angelo is not an ordinary mortal and thus not susceptible to the lusts common to flesh-and-blood humans. Lucio exclaims that there is a "ruthless thing" in Angelo ("in him") which inspires this lack of mercy, this hardness towards the baser impulses and actions that are spurred by female sexuality (or innocence, in the case of Isabella). The "rebellion of a codpiece" here jokingly refers to male genitalia and its tendency to lead men into trouble -- something usually knowingly winked at and pardoned in a patriarchal society, but here inexplicably punished. Thus Angelo's judgment against Claudio is not just seen as a harsh punishment, but as an attack upon the worldview that allows sexuality (particularly male sexuality) to exist in a vague no-man's-land, universally known to all but outside of society's direct acknowledgement and condemnation.

Twice treble shame on Angelo,
To weed my vice, and let his grow!
O, what may man within him hide,
Though angel on the outward side!
How may likeness made in crimes,
Making practice on the times,
To draw with idle spiders' strings
Most ponderous and substantial things!
Craft against vice I must apply.
With Angelo tonight shall lie
His old betrothed (but despised);
So disguise shall by th' disguised
Pay with falsehood false exacting,
And perform an old contracting.

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker), Angelo, Mariana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.269-282

Explanation and Analysis

After craftily conversing with characters through his disguise a friar, the Duke utters this soliloquy on false virtue. He focuses on Angelo's crimes, without considering the hypocrisy of his own deception and the way he is hiding his own truth underneath his priestly appearance.

Here, the Duke also attempts to offer a solution to this play's problem of false appearances. He suggests that "craft against vice I must apply" -- supposedly, wit and intelligent plans might be enough to conquer the sin which grows when men use false "angel" appearances to hide their inner vice. The Duke's plans noticeably use their own form of false appearances, though; he will disguise Mariana, Angelo's own abandoned betrothed, so Angelo believes she is Isabella. Here, the Duke is harnessing female sexuality for his own uses.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

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

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker), Mariana

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4.1.78-83

Explanation and Analysis

As the Duke encourages Mariana to follow his plan, he uses the language of sin and virtue to appease any doubts or concern she might have. He tells Mariana to "fear ... not" because sexual intercourse with Angelo is supposedly not sinful; Angelo "is" Mariana's husband, at least "on a pre-contrast." This social relationship is, however, remarkably similar to that between Isabella and Claudio, who were also betrothed to marry. This underscores the ways that laws, and rules become altered and rewritten in the changeable social sphere of *Measure for Measure*.The Duke appeals to the "justice" of this social relationship and social contract as a reason that Mariana could have intercourse with Angelo without being sinful. Then, he closes the scene with a typical rhyming couplet, again alluding to the idea of "measure for measure," and seemingly unconcerned by the moral ambiguity his comment is creating.

Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

The tongue of Isabel. She's come to know
If yet her brother's pardon be come hither.
But I will keep her ignorant of her good,
To make her heavenly comforts of despair,
When it is least expected.

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker), Isabella, Claudio

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.3.115-119

Explanation and Analysis

The Duke makes this comment as his plan is rapidly developing. Although a fellow prisoner Barnadine is refusing to die in Claudio's stead, a pirateRagozine, who has recently died, looked similar enough to Claudio that his head can be sent to Angelo instead of Claudio's. The Duke is relieved by this lucky event, but decides that he will allow Isabel to believe that her brother has truly died, keeping her "ignorant of her good," as God might keep an individual briefly unaware of a lucky turn of fate. This situation reveals the Duke's power; it emphasizes his omnipresence and ability to choose how he shares his knowledge with others.

Yet, his decision seems to derive more from a calculating will than from a beneficent spirit. He is intentionally allowing Isabella to suffer for the sake of his own whims. She might certainly draw closer to God from this situation, making "heavenly comforts of despair," but the Duke is also being duplicitous and manipulative. Yet again, his plan involves controlling a virtuous woman. It is left ambiguous whether the Duke is here acting more as a friar or as a friar-in-disguise -- he acts concerned with Isabella's spiritual life, but also seems to want to draw out the suspense of her ignorance in order to create more drama for his own enjoyment.

Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

But that her tender shame
Will not proclaim against her maiden loss,
How might she tongue me! Yet reason dares her no,
For my authority bears of a credent bulk,
That no particular scandal once can touch
But it confounds the breather. He should have liv'd,
Save that his riotous youth with dangerous sense
Might in the times to come have ta'en revenge,
By so receiving a dishonor'd life
With ransom of such shame. Would yet he had liv'd!
Alack, when once our grace we have forgot,
Nothing goes right—we would, and we would not.

Related Characters: Angelo (speaker), Isabella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.4.25-36

Explanation and Analysis

Angelo and Escalus discuss the Duke's letter, which, written as the Duke, asks them to meet him at the gates of Vienna and to order citizens with complaints to present petitions on the street of the city. At the street, the common crossing-place of nuns, dukes, prostitutes -- all individuals -- the play's events promise to reveal themselves.

After Escalus leaves, though, Angelo stops describing his confusion over the Duke's orders and instead provides this soliloquy about his own actions. His (supposed) sexual experience with Isabella weighs heavily on him; in his guilt, Angelo fears that Isabella might speak out against him (although he even thinks about this in a sexual way). Yet he placates himself convincingly, arguing that the solidity of his own reputation, gender, and social rank will protect him from any possible accusations she could present. He still has the appearance of a sinless man, although he believes he is merely another sinner -- like Claudio, the man he believes he condemned to death (and now regrets). Angelo is entrenched in misconceptions; he believes he has killed Claudio and taken Isabella's virginity, which gives deeper meaning to his statement "we would, and we would not."

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

By mine honesty,
If she be mad, as I believe no other,
Her madness hath the oddest frame of sense,
Such a dependancy of thing on thing,
As e'er I heard in madness.

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker), Isabella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.68-72

Explanation and Analysis

The play's final scene opens by the city gates, with Isabella accusing Angelo to the Duke Vicentio, as the Duke himself (disguised in friar form) earlier bid her. Angelo attempts to suggest that Isabella is mad, but Isabella relies upon this play's tension between appearance and reality to make clear her sanity (and Angelo's guilt): "even so may Angelo, / In all

his dressings, characters, titles, forms, / Be an arch-villain." This explanation seems to satisfy the Duke, who is no stranger to deception, as he himself was in costume throughout the play (except for the very first and very last scenes).

Of course, the Duke does not actually need this explanation, as he has manufactured Isabella's petition and earlier told her what to say. In this scene, the Dukeis engaging in a deception of his own once again here; his vow "by mine honesty" does not signify much.

For this new-married man approaching here,
Whose salt imagination yet hath wrong'd
Your well-defended honor, you must pardon
For Mariana's sake; but as he adjudg'd your brother—
Being criminal, in double violation
Of sacred chastity and of promise-breach,
Thereon dependant, for your brother's life—
The very mercy of the law cries out
Most audible, even from his proper tongue,
"An Angelo for Claudio, death for death!"
Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.
Then, Angelo, thy fault's thus manifested;
Which though thou wouldst deny, denies thee vantage.
We do condemn thee to the very block
Where Claudio stoop'd to death, and with like haste.
Away with him!

Related Characters: The Duke (speaker), Angelo, Mariana, Isabella, Claudio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.1.455-475

Explanation and Analysis

The irony of the play is fully revealed on stage, by the city gates; the Duke openly states that Angelo has indeed committed the same crime for which he sentenced Claudio to death. And so, according to the "eye for an eye" (or, "Measure still for Measure") notion of retributive justice, Angelo should be condemned to death as well, receiving the same judgment that he doled out to others. It is no accident that the Duke, who has manufactured the play's entire plot, here reveals its fundamental irony. The Duke also seems to advocate for its "Measure for Measure" brand of justice. According to the Duke, it is "the very mercy of the law" which cries of "Measure for Measure"; he even curiously associates the term mercy with retributive justice. As we know well, however, the Duke's words are not always what they may seem to be. He is not actually planning to kill Angelo for this "fault," but he can exercise his power and momentarily pretend that he will carry out this threat.

Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging.

Related Characters: Lucio (speaker), The Duke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.596-597

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before the play ends, the Duke orders Lucio to marry the prostitute ("punk") whom he impregnated. This is how the Duke chooses to punish Lucio for speaking so slanderously about the Duke while the Duke was absent -- or so Lucio thought. (Of course, the prostitute herself never appears, and her feelings on the matter aren't considered.) Thus we end the play with sex and the law entwined, just as we began the play with Claudio being punished according the law because of his sexual "deviance." Here, a character is also being forced to confront a consequence for associating with prostitutes. Prostitution, a continuous undercurrent of the play, is now brought into contact with the Duke's public and authoritative proclamations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

The Duke of Vienna speaks with a nobleman, Escalus, about his plan to leave another nobleman, Lord Angelo, in charge of the city while the Duke travels. Angelo is summoned and informed of this plan, and he requests that the Duke test him first with a smaller responsibility. The Duke ignores Angelo's request—the executive decision has already been made, and the Duke will leave town shortly.

Angelo's hesitance to accept the role of interim leader suggests he doesn't trust himself. Perhaps Angelo is conscious of his shortcomings, and doesn't want the power—or liberty—to be able to cause harm. This responsible attitude does not excuse Angelo's egregious hypocrisy later in the play, but it does cast him as a relatively sympathetic villain. Just as important, the Duke's refusal to listen makes him in part responsible for what happens under Angelo's rule.

The Duke leaves, saying he does not enjoy the formal, public aspects of his authority. Afterwards, Escalus requests that Angelo listen to his input while he oversees the city.

The Duke's remarks characterize him as a humble and well-intentioned leader, more concerned with the welfare of his state than with his symbolic public stature. In other words, he is less preoccupied with the appearance of being a ruler, but rather with the substance of ruling well.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Lucio, a flashy bachelor, and two other gentlemen discuss an international political development: the Duke appears to be in peace talks with the King of Hungary. The two gentlemen disapprove, because they are soldiers and war is their livelihood. Lucio compares the men to pirates who set sail toting the Ten Commandments and remove "Thou Shalt not Steal." One of the men replies that, just as pirates disregard the Bible's prohibition against theft, soldiers disregard the portion of grace that prays for peace.

This exchange sets the scene for one of the play's central themes: the tension between virtue and obligation. In doing their job, pirates and soldiers are caught between conflicting systems of morality and obligation. As the play goes on, many of its characters will find themselves entangled in precisely these sorts of incompatibilities. Angelo, for example, will be unable to reconcile his lustfulness with his desire to serve as a moral leader; and Isabella, the play's main character, will be torn between her sisterly obligations and her religious commitment.

The men's conversation turns to sexual innuendos, and they lob jokes about sexually transmitted diseases at one another. Lucio spots a "bawd," or brothel proprietor, named Mistress Overdone approaching, and muses about how he has patronized her establishment.

The men's bawdy banter underscores their conversation about the difficulties of behaving in a morally consistent way, and emphasizes the decay of sexual morality that has taken place in Vienna

Mistress Overdone tells the men that Claudio, a young man who is friends with Lucio, has been arrested and is condemned to be beheaded in three days' time for the crime of impregnating his wife-to-be, Juliet. Concerned, Lucio and the gentlemen leave to investigate. Mistress Overdone reflects that war, poverty, sickness, and punishment are diminishing her business.

This moment marks the introduction of the main dramatic conflict of the play: Claudio's death sentence. Since Claudio's plight is revealed in the context of a conversation focused on social ills such as war and disease, his sexual misbehavior is made to seem like a relatively minor transgression.

Pompey, a clown and an assistant to Mistress Overdone, arrives. He speaks briefly and comically about Claudio's arrest. Pompey then relays to Mistress Overdone that a municipal proclamation has been issued, calling for the destruction of brothels in the suburbs of Vienna. An affluent patron has ensured, however, that brothels within the city limits will stay open. Mistress Overdone, whose brothel is in the suburbs, laments that her business will be lost, but Pompey reassures her that he will remain her assistant and she will remain financially solvent, thanks to her long experience in the industry. The two bawds then exit the scene.

The new order to destroy suburban brothels indicates that Angelo is trying to effect meaningful moral change during his regency (just as the Duke hoped he would). However, the two bawds' relative optimism in the face of this suggests that Vienna's sexual vices will prove too entrenched to eradicate, that it's not possible to just rule away people's baser instincts. And soon it will be clear that Angelo can't even control his own baser instincts.

Claudio is escorted on stage by the Provost, who is in charge of the prison. Claudio asks why he is being arrested, and the Provost informs him that he acts not in "evil disposition," but rather on Angelo's special orders. Claudio ruminates somewhat cynically that earthly authority is a sort of "demigod:" it enforces the law in the name of heavenly will, but it lacks the diving power necessary to distribute justice in a perfectly fair way.

Claudio's outlook shows him to be a thoughtful and overall well-intentioned man who refuses to place too much stock in either worldly or heavenly minutiae. He is being disciplined for violating a religious formality, despite acting in the spirit of loving monogamy, and his understanding of the vagaries of earthly justice is surprisingly level-headed and wise, given his current predicament.

Lucio and the two gentlemen reappear; Lucio asks Claudio the reason for his arrest. Claudio explains that "too much liberty" and immoderation has led to his downfall. Lucio is struck by the poignancy of Claudio's words, but shrewdly remarks that he would still prefer the "foppery of freedom" to the "morality of imprisonment."

Claudio's remarks highlight the tension between liberty and justice: too much individual freedom undermines justice and order. Lucio articulates a hedonistic take on this dilemma by favoring comfortable, if immoral, behavior, over the limits of justice.

Lucio guesses first that Claudio has committed murder, and is surprised when Claudio reveals that he is, rather, being so harshly punished for "lechery." Claudio explains that he and Juliet were monogamously devoted to one another, but had not yet finalized their engagement because Juliet had not yet been granted a dowry. They engaged in consensual sex, and this transgression was exposed when Juliet became noticeably pregnant.

As will become a recurring motif in the play, Claudio's crime is characterized as relatively benign and certainly not serious enough to warrant a death sentence. By having consensual sex with his common-law wife, the only thing that made Claudio's actions criminal or immoral was that he failed to satisfy the institutional formality of an official marriage.

According to Claudio, Angelo is likely handing down a steep and rarely-used punishment in this case so that he can demonstrate his unyielding authority and set an example to others who might have sex out of wedlock. Lucio agrees and recommends that Claudio seek the Duke's reprieve. However, Claudio responds that he has tried, but the Duke is nowhere to be found. Claudio then asks Lucio to alert Claudio's sister, Isabella, in the hopes she may help him. Isabella has just joined a nunnery, and Claudio is optimistic that she may be able to persuade the authorities to free him. Lucio vows to find Isabella swiftly.

Lucio's suggestion that Claudio appeal to the Duke implies that the Duke has shown himself to be an understanding and forgiving—if perhaps too lenient—leader. Angelo, on the other hand, lacks these qualities and instead seems to be ruling harshly out of a kind of rigid insecurity.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

The Duke speaks with Friar Thomas at a monastery to request "secret harbour." He explains that he has pretended to leave for Poland and granted Angelo absolute governing power under these pretenses. The goal of this ruse, the Duke elaborates, is to allow law and order to be enforced after 19 years of neglect: "liberty plucks justice by the nose." In order to avoid seeming like a tyrant by enforcing laws harshly after years of gentle rule, the Duke has bid Angelo to act as the enforcer. This way, people will not feel as unfairly deprived of the liberties they enjoyed under the Duke. In order to watch the situation develop, the Duke requests that Friar Thomas disguise him as a friar so that he can observe incognito.

This scene complicates the Duke's character. On one hand, he undoubtedly has the best interests of his duchy at heart by seeking to improve Vienna's civic morality. On the other hand, however, he seems to be using Angelo as a means of saving face before his subjects and not seeming like a wishy-washy ruler. What's more, the Duke is deceiving the very subjects he seeks to assist. As the play has already illustrated, too much liberty can be a bad thing. While the Duke may seek to remedy his subjects' excess of liberty, he himself could be seen to be abusing the complete liberty he enjoys as a powerful ruler.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

At the convent, Isabella learns the rules of her order and expresses her desire to live under "strict restraint." Lucio arrives at the convent and Isabella is sent to speak with him, because she has not yet taken her vows, which prohibit the sisters from speaking with men. Lucio reveals that he is seeking Isabella on behalf of her "unhappy brother," Claudio. When Isabella asks him what the problem is, Lucio tells her forthrightly that her brother is in prison for impregnating a woman.

Here, Isabella is introduced as a character so pure that she actively exiles herself from the immorality of Viennese society. Her desire for "strict restraint" reflects a devotion to orthodoxy that will clash with her devotion to Claudio, who is being disciplined for violating precisely the doctrine that Isabella venerates.

Initially, Isabella tells Lucio to stop making fun of her with false stories. Lucio responds that while it's true that he is partial to deceiving maidens, Isabella's innocence and purity compels him to speak to her sincerely, as he would to a saint. He then reveals that Juliet, Isabella's friend, is the woman Claudio has impregnated. When Isabella asks why the couple does not marry, Lucio tells her that they would, however Duke has been temporarily replaced by cold, cerebral Angelo. Claudio is to be made into an example and executed, and Lucio asks Isabella to endeavor to "soften" Angelo in the hopes he may pardon her brother. Isabella promises she will do so straightaway.

Even the mischievous and licentious Lucio is deferential towards Isabella's innocence and purity. At this point, Isabella's religious devotion does not seriously conflict with her love for Claudio—she is quick to leave her nunnery and reenter the unsheltered world in order to help her brother.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

In a room of Angelo's house, Angelo confers with Escalus while the Provost, a Justice, and other officers of the law listen. Angelo says adamantly that they cannot make a "scarecrow" of the law: the law must not be a static, empty threat that people may grow to ignore. In response, Escalus uses a metaphor to suggest a more moderate and less aggressive approach: instead of felling the tree of civic justice, they might merely trim its branches instead, "and rather cut a little, than fall, and bruise to death."

In this scene, the deep differences between Angelo's and Escalus' philosophies of rule are made clear. Angelo is loyal to rules and doctrine above all else, while Escalus subscribes to a more human-oriented philosophy of civic morality, which values the overall spirit of the law more than the letter of the law.

.Escalus then laments Claudio's fate, as Escalus knew Claudio's father to be very noble. While he emphasizes that he respects Angelo's judgment, Escalus also suggests that the regent consider whether he might at some point transgress as Claudio has.

Escalus's fair, empathetic view leads him to issue Angelo a prescient warning. The danger with issuing unforgiving moral judgments is that the judger's faults will be examined equally harshly. By setting such a high bar for virtue, Angelo has committed himself to maintaining flawless behavior—or at least appearing to do so.

Angelo replies that being tempted to sin is completely different from actually sinning. The law is designed to give the correct punishments to whomever is caught violating it, and though it is impossible to guarantee that every guilty person is punished, this does not render the institution of punishment unjust as a whole. Furthermore, even if Angelo is a sinful man, it does not exonerate Claudio of his misdeeds. Last of all, Angelo says that if he ever transgresses in this way, he hopes he would receive the same punishment. He punctuates this statement by telling the Provost to execute Claudio by nine the following morning.

Angelo's view of justice here is strikingly similar to the view that Claudio espouses in Act 1, Scene 2. In both men's opinions, earthly justice is an imperfect institution that hands out punishments somewhat arbitrarily. And despite this fact, both men also seem to have enough faith in the system to resign themselves to its often haphazard operation. Angelo trusts that any serving of justice is a good thing, despite the impossibility of ensuring just treatment for all, and Claudio has more or less accepted that he has fallen victim to one of worldly justice's less-than-fair imperfections.

In an aside, Escalus laments Angelo's decision to execute Claudio. "Well, heaven forgive him! and forgive us all!" he says; "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." Elbow, the constable, enters, escorting Pompey and another man affiliated with the brothel, Froth. Angelo asks Elbow to explain himself, to which Elbow answers that he has brought these two "notorious benefactors" to justice. Confused, Angelo suggests they may in fact be "malefactors;" Elbow answers that he does not know what they are. When Angelo asks who Pompey is, Elbow explains in a slew of humorously misused words that Pompey is a bawd who works for Mistress Overdone.

Escalus's lament reflects the all-too-frequent difference between appearances and realities and illustrates that earthly rewards and punishments often reward those who fake virtue, rather than those who truly embody it. Important, too, is the ambiguity of his remark, "heaven forgive him." "Him" could refer to either Claudio—who Escalus hopes may gain a heavenly reprieve despite suffering a harsh punishment on earth—or to Angelo, who he hopes will be forgiven for his inhumane strictness in enforcement of morality.

Pompey takes advantage of Elbow's dull wits and confuses the constable to steer the interrogation off course. Angelo remarks that this interrogation will take a long time, and exits, leaving Escalus in charge. The conversation becomes so convoluted, and Elbow so bewildered, that Escalus asks "Which is the wiser here? Justice or Iniquity?" Finally, Escalus questions Pompey and Froth, and when Froth reveals that he works for Mistress Overdone, Escalus tells him to avoid prostitution. Escalus bids Froth farewell, and Froth leaves.

The interaction between Pompey and dull-witted Elbow illustrates the ineptitude of the law, which contrasts strikingly with Pompey's razor-sharp wit and verbal dexterity. In a fitting illustration of Escalus's comment about appearances belying reality, the immoral Pompey uses dazzling words to confuse others about his guilt. Escalus himself is so confused that he is unable to sort out appearances from realities to ascertain whether justice is wiser than iniquity.

Escalus and Pompey then have a tense, but comical, exchange about the prostitution business in Vienna. Escalus warns of stern enforcement to come, and Pompey openly doubts that this harsh morality will last. Though Escalus counsels him to change his ways, Pompey ignores these suggestions and says in an aside that "the valiant heart is not whipt out of his trade."

Pompey's arrogance illustrates how entrenched sexual licentiousness is in Vienna. Still, there is something to be said for Pompey's straightforwardness. Unlike characters that reveal themselves to be hypocrites as the play develops, Pompey makes no attempt to disguise his faults. In this narrow sense, then, the bawd is indeed "valiant."

Pompey leaves, and Escalus asks Elbow to give him the names of other policemen who might be capable of enforcing the law. Elbow then leaves, and Escalus commiserates with a Justice about Claudio's tragic fate. However, Escalus remarks that Angelo's severity is warranted, as oftentimes what seems like mercy can in fact be a crueler action--pardoning Claudio might itself result in "second woe."

Escalus is just and reasonable, but he respects the judgment of his superiors. He even manages to find a more compassionate rationale for Angelo's strictness: that it may be more morally merciful to execute Claudio than to pardon him. This is undoubtedly not *Angelo's reasoning for executing Claudio, and Escalus's thought process illustrates that he is one of the play's most upright and empathetic characters.*

ACT 2, SCENE 2

In another room of Angelo's house, the Provost appeals to Angelo that he might stay Claudio's execution. Angelo is unmoved, even when the Provost mentions that Juliet is soon due to give birth. A servant brings word that Claudio's sister, a "virtuous maid," has come to see Angelo. Isabella then enters with Lucio. She pleads before Angelo to spare her brother, though she confesses that she is disgusted by Claudio's behavior. A just compromise, Isabella suggests, is to condemn Claudio's fault but not the man himself.

Essentially every character except Angelo is on Claudio's side, but because Angelo is in the position of power, Claudio's sentence is unchanged. This is yet another illustration of the dangers of unchecked freedom—in this case, Angelo's unchecked freedom to discipline others. Isabella is placed in an uncomfortable position by her brother's actions, and she seeks to carve out a position similar to the one Escalus espouses earlier: to condemn Claudio's actions as wrong but avoid making an irreversible judgment about him as a human being.

Angelo replies that every fault is condemned before it is committed. However, the actor must be punished. Isabella is distraught, but Lucio quietly counsels her to implore Angelo with more passion. Isabella and Angelo go back and forth several more times, and Lucio again tells Isabella that she is too "cold."

Here, Angelo again displays his faith in the rule of law, which he earlier espoused in Act 2, Scene 1. He shows conviction that justice requires not fair treatment for everyone, but rather that as many people as possible receive punishment for their actions.

Isabella tells Angelo that if Claudio were the one in the position of power, he would take mercy upon an imprisoned Angelo. Angelo continues to dismiss her, but Lucio eggs her on, encouraging her to touch Angelo. She speaks with more passion and implores Angelo more aggressively. Lucio remarks that he is pleased with Isabella's new tack. Finally, Isabella suggests that ignorant, arrogant humans often try to mete out punishments that are better left to divine forces. Both Lucio and the Provost appear heartened that Angelo may be swayed. She tells Angelo that if he senses any guilt in his own heart, he should not carry out Claudio's sentence.

Clearly, Isabella's point about the fallibility of human justice touches a nerve with Angelo. He seems to be a firm believer that divine commandments can be effectively enforced with earthly laws, but Isabella's argument to the contrary may be enough to shake his disciplinarian resolve.

This supplication seems to break through to Angelo, and he tells Isabella he will think about her request and bids her to come see him the next day. Isabella agrees to return the next morning, and she leaves with Lucio and the Provost. Once alone, Angelo delivers a soliloquy about his immoral lust for Isabella. He wonders whether it is her virtue that makes him so sexually interested in her, and remarks that "Most dangerous is that temptation that doth goad us on to sin in loving virtue."

After meeting Isabella, Angelo is caught in the paradoxical position of trying to punish a sort of immorality to which he now feels himself succumbing. In this speech, he tries to shift the blame onto Isabella, while maintaining himself as a virtuous figure. According to his dubious reasoning, it is his love of virtue that makes him lust for Isabella. Thus, she and her virtuousness are to blame for his inordinate desires, rather than his own lack of self-discipline.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

The Duke, disguised in his friar costume, goes to the jail. There, he asks the Provost for permission to meet with the condemned and help them atone for their sins. Juliet arrives, and the Duke asks her about her wrongdoing. She tells him that her unlawful sex act was mutually consensual, and expresses deep repentance. Juliet explains that she loves Claudio as much as she loves herself. The Duke then tells her that her sin is greater than Claudio's, presumably because she consented to the sex. The Duke informs Juliet that Claudio is scheduled to be executed the following day, and she is distraught. The Duke then leaves to attend to Claudio.

It is difficult to tell whether the Duke adopts different views on morality to suit his friar costume, or simply voices his sincere opinions. Certainly, the moral counsel he gives to Juliet seems fairly strict, in contrast to his reputation as having ruled quite leniently. Moreover, there seems to be little reason for Juliet's sin to be more severe than Claudio's, except that she as a woman may be subject to stricter moral expectations. This double standard provides a small but useful indication of the various restrictions that the women of Measure for Measure *must face.*

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Angelo reflects on the discrepancies between his words and his desires: "Heaven hath my empty words; Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue, Anchors on Isabel." He lusts after Isabella, but concludes that he must appear to uphold his own moral laws in spite of the immoral acts he would commit if given the chance.

It is clear that Angelo, now in the grip of his lust, places the appearance of morality higher than the actual embodiment of morality. He is aware that he speaks "empty words," and while this duplicitousness distresses him, he certainly seems to think it is more important for him to maintain his façade of morality than to work on reforming his lustfulness.

A servant tells Angelo that Isabella has come to speak with him. Angelo summons her. Before she enters, he remarks to himself that his baser impulses—his "blood"—are so coarse that they threaten to overpower the noble intentions of his regal heart.

Angelo's self-aware struggle to contain his impulses illustrates that he may simply lack the willpower to behave correctly, even though he knows what is right. Coupled with his initial protests against being granted so much freedom by the Duke, this view into his consciousness casts Angelo as a weak and unfortunate man given more liberty than he can handle.

Isabella enters, and Angelo tells her that Claudio still must die. However, he sounds less adamant than before. He reflects that it is as easy to release a guilty man as it is for an innocent person to become a guilty one. Following up on this statement, he asks Isabella if she would rather see the just law execute her brother, or redeem him by "[giving] up your body to such sweet uncleanness / As she that he hath stain'd." Naively, Isabella answers that "I had rather give my body than my soul." Angelo restates his proposition, asking Isabella if it might not be charitable for someone to sin in order to save Claudio's life. Isabella, believing Angelo to be referring to the "sin" of pardoning Claudio, tells him that such a sin is certainly worth saving Claudio, and that she would accept responsibility for it.

The exchange between Angelo and Isabella is an exasperating one: to the audience, Angelo's lecherous intentions are clear from the start, but Isabella's purity and naiveté prevent her from picking up Angelo's innuendos. The dramatic irony of this scene complements the play's overall theme of appearances versus reality. In this case, appearances constitute the reality.

Frustrated that Isabella misinterprets his innuendos, Angelo remarks to her, "either you are ignorant, Or seem so craftily; and that's not good." He speaks bluntly: Claudio will die unless Isabella will "lay down the treasures of [her] body" to someone with the power to control Claudio's fate. Isabella answers that she would sooner die than give herself over to shameful conduct. Angelo responds that Claudio, then, must die; Isabella retorts that it is better for him to die a single earthly death than for her to "die forever" by sinning in order to redeem him.

It is ironic that Angelo is so perturbed by the idea that Isabella may be feigning ignorance out of craftiness. After all, he himself is utterly committed to maintaining an appearance of virtuousness while in fact being a crafty and immoral phony. Yet he can't stand the idea of the woman he is trying to force into bed being anything but innocent.

Angelo then accuses Isabella, with her strict refusal to save her brother on religious grounds, of being just as cruel as she claims he is for demanding such exacting enforcement of the law. She answers that "To have what we would have, we speak not what we mean: / I something do excuse the thing I hate, / For his advantage that I dearly love." Angelo and Isabella then agree that women are "frail," and Angelo tells her that in order for her to behave in a womanly way, she must not exceed her station. He implores her to put on her "destined livery:" that is, to act in the role she is obliged to fulfill.

This exchange clearly exposes the misogynistic views that inform Angelo and Isabella's outlooks. Though their two perspectives suggest different courses of action for Isabella, neither view allows her much agency of her own. Essentially, Angelo insists that it is Isabella's womanly duty to yield to him, as it would be unbecoming for her to stand up to his authority. Isabella, on the other hand, will soon show herself to be bound by another—perhaps equally oppressive—sort of womanly duty: the obligation to remain chaste under all circumstances.

Finally, Angelo tells Isabella outright that he loves her. She is indignant that Claudio is facing execution for the exact same crime Angelo proposes she indulge in with him. She condemns the façade of virtue that Angelo displays and vows to tell the world about his reprehensible hypocrisy. Angelo replies that his pristine reputation and high status would ensure that nobody believed her claims. He promises that if Isabella does not sleep with him, he will make Claudio's death prolonged and painful, and tells her she has until tomorrow to respond. Angelo leaves her with a disturbing reiteration of his power: "As for you, / Say what you can, my false o'erweighs your true."

Isabella's reaction demonstrates an admirable devotion to her religious obligations, but this strict religious idealism also threatens to cause real-world harm to her brother. Angelo has placed her in a nearly impossible situation, highlighting her essential powerlessness in the face of his privileges as both a man and regent. Notably, Angelo's arrogant response to Isabella, "my false outweighs your true," illustrates that he has complete faith in appearances' ability to trump reality.

Now alone, Isabella wonders what she can do. She resolves to go to Claudio and explain her predicament. She holds conviction that Claudio will respect her decision to preserve her purity rather than save him—in fact, she is convinced he would rather die twenty times over than let her be polluted by Angelo's lust. Isabella promises to care for him to help him prepare his mind for impending death.

Isabella's reasoning here may seem selfish to some. Her faith that Claudio will gladly die to preserve her purity seems naïve and idealistic at best, and self-serving at worst. Though Isabella's search for virtue doesn't leave her in an unethical position like Angelo, it is worth noting that Isabella's inflexible devotion to her faith may obscure her ability to see the situation from Claudio's perspective.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

At the prison, the Duke, still disguised as a friar, asks Claudio if he hopes for a pardon from Angelo. Claudio replies that hope is all he has left, though he is prepared to die. The Duke entreats Claudio to come to peace with death, to treat life as a mere thing. Life, the Duke argues, is a transient source of worry and uncertainty. Claudio seems reassured by the Duke's lengthy speech, and tells him that he now feels more at peace with death.

Here, the Duke shows himself to be both wise and genuinely concerned for the welfare of his subjects. In the context of the theme of agency, however, it's notable that it's the Duke who counsels Claudio to resign himself to fate. After all, the Duke is the character in the play who goes to the greatest lengths to subvert conventional order and control his surroundings. This suggests that the disguised Duke's advice, wise as it may be, might not be entirely genuine.

Isabella arrives to speak with Claudio. The Duke asks the Provost to take him to a spot where he can eavesdrop on the siblings' conversation. Isabella tells Claudio that the only remedy for his death sentence is "to cleave a heart"—hers—"in twain." This solution would free Claudio, but leave him fettered for life, she says. Claudio presses his sister to tell him exactly how he might be freed. Isabella evades answering directly, and instead tells him that this alternative would destroy his honor. Fed up, Claudio tells her to that her "flowery tenderness" is of no practical use to him. Isabella then tells Claudio of Angelo's dastardly scheme to have her forfeit her virginity in order to save her brother.

Isabella's indirectness in this chat with Claudio recalls Angelo's similar indirectness when he implored Isabella to violate her chastity for him. This hesitance also indicates that Isabella is afraid her brother may not agree with her decision to preserve her honor over his life. It is difficult, then, to judge whether Isabella herself believes her own rationale. If she does not, in fact, believe this rationale, then her situation is quite similar to Angelo's approach to ruling the city. She has tried to convince herself that she is acting in the name of virtue, when her actions may in fact be less than virtuous, just as Angelo tries to justify his unreasonable punishment of Claudio as a necessary enforcement of morals.

Claudio is scandalized to learn of Angelo's designs, and tells Isabella that she should not sacrifice her virginity. She tells him that she would give up her life, but not her purity. Claudio gives his thanks, and his sister tells him to prepare to be executed.

Angelo's behavior, so far out of line with his chaste public persona, is likely such a shock to Claudio that he initially cannot react with anything but condemnation—even if this stance blocks his only route to freedom.

Claudio then begins to consider how Angelo could manage to act so hypocritically by possessing desires counter to the law he enforces so strictly. As he continues to think, his opinion on Isabella's choice reverses itself completely. Claudio first muses that lechery is no sin—or at least the most inconsequential of the seven deadly sins. Claudio then remarks that "death is a fearful thing." His sister is quick to respond: "and shamed life a hateful." But Claudio refutes her position byimagining a frightful afterlife, concluding that what "age, ache, penury and imprisonment can lay on nature is a paradise to what we fear of death." Isabella, distraught, can only respond with "alas." Claudio's chain of reasoning leads him to renounce his initial support of Isabella's choice: he asks his sister to save him, arguing that sex is so natural as to be a virtue. Isabella responds vehemently, calling him a "beast" and a "coward," and asserting that it is a form of incest for him to derive life from his own sister's shame. She condemns him to death and says that she will pray for his death.

Claudio's change of heart affirms that his brand of virtue falls somewhere in between the strict religious devotion of Isabella and the utter hedonism of characters like Pompey, Lucio, and Mistress Overdone. Isabella, of course, is motivated entirely by spiritual concerns rather than issues of bodily pleasure, and the bawds are the complete opposite. Claudio, however, may perhaps be the most pragmatic of all. He chooses to sleep with Juliet before marriage because he understands that consensual, monogamous sex likely does not violate the spirit of the moral standards, though it may not follow the law to the letter. Similarly, his fear of death is reasonably grounded in his lack of information, rather than an arrogant confidence in either worldly pleasures or divine rewards.

As Claudio pleads with his sister, the Duke emerges from his hiding spot, still in disguise as a friar. He tells Isabella that he would like to speak with her. First, the Duke confers with Claudio and tells him that he has overheard the conversation with Isabella. He advises that Claudio should prepare for death instead of clinging to hope; Angelo, he says, only tried to seduce Isabella to test her virtue. Claudio simply responds by wishing he had an opportunity to ask for Isabella's forgiveness for what he had just asked her to do, as he is fed up with living.

It seems unlikely that the Duke actually thinks Angelo was testing Isabella, so his further deception of Claudio is an interesting issue. The misdirection could easily be a way to pacify Claudio and prevent him from losing faith in the system that imprisons him. It is also possible, though, that the Duke simply wants to maintain his ability to manipulate his subjects as completely as possible, and filling Claudio in on the reality of the situation might make him more difficult to manage.

Claudio leaves, and the disguised Duke asks the Provost to leave also so that he can speak with Isabella in private. When the two are alone, the Duke condemns Angelo's misconduct and asks Isabella what she plans to do. She answers that she would sooner see Claudio executed than forfeit her purity, and remarks—not knowing, of course, that she is speaking to the Duke—that the Duke is greatly deceived by Angelo's feigned rectitude.

At this point, Claudio's predicament seems unsolvable. Isabella is uncompromising, even stern, in her commitment to remain pure, and she begins to seem steadily more like a cold, selfish character than an altruistic, virtuous maiden.

The Duke tells Isabella that she will not succeed by denouncing Angelo publicly; instead, he proposes a solution that will save Claudio, please the absent Duke, preserve her purity, and help out another woman who has been wronged by Angelo: Mariana, his ex-fiancée. Mariana, the Duke explains, was engaged to Angelo, but after she lost her brother and her dowry in a shipwreck, Angelo callously called off the engagement. However, Mariana still loves Angelo. For this reason, the Duke suggests that Isabella could arrange a rendezvous with Angelo, and then Mariana could go in her place and consummate her aborted marriage. Isabella agrees to this plan. The Duke tells her to go to Angelo and promise to meet with him, while he contacts Mariana.

The Duke's solution offers far too convenient a resolution to Isabella's predicament. Instead of forcing Isabella to grapple with two compelling and fundamentally irreconcilable issues of virtue, Shakespeare introduces an unknown character, Mariana, who is perfectly suited to defusing this crisis in a way that lets Isabella preserve both her sexual purity and the life of her brother. Granted, the issues at stake in Isabella's dilemma are colossal in scope, but the introduction of Mariana is a quick fix to the conflict that is often regarded by critics as a weak point in the play. Also deserving of some scrutiny is the way in which the two women's social roles are used to chart their courses of action. Mariana, abandoned by her fiancée, is unable to fit into a socially-prescribed niche unless she complies with the Duke's plan—and, of course, the only reason Mariana is necessary in the first place is because Isabella's so-called maidenly obligations prevent her from sleeping with Angelo.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

Outside the prison, the Duke, still disguised, speaks with Elbow and other constables who have detained Pompey. He asks Elbow what crime Pompey is guilty of, and Elbow replies that Pompey is a lawbreaker and a thief in the possession of a lock-picking device. The Duke condemns Pompey and questions whether living off of the flesh trade can really constitute living life. Pompey tries to explain himself, but the Duke interrupts and orders him sent to jail.

In considering the appearance versus reality theme in this scene, readers should think about whether the Duke's opinion here is a genuine reflection of his personal sentiments, an overly harsh stance designed to make his pious friar disguise more convincing, or a combination of the two.

Lucio approaches, and he and Pompey greet one another as friends. Lucio teasingly asks about Pompey's current situation and inquires after his mistress at the brothel. Pompey tells Lucio that he is to be imprisoned for being a bawd, and requests that Lucio pay for his bail. Lucio declines, saying prison is the bawd's due.

Lucio reveals himself here to be a contemptible hypocrite. Lucio uses Pompey to facilitate his lawless promiscuity, but fails to assist his friend and even has the audacity to claim that Pompey is simply receiving his comeuppance. Clearly, Lucio's social position gives him a dangerous level of liberty if it allows him to get away with such unfair and hypocritical antics.

When Pompey is escorted away by the officers, Lucio asks the Duke, whom he thinks is merely a friar, if there is any recent news of the Duke. Lucio conjectures that the Duke may be in Russia or Rome. The disguised Duke offers no response other than good wishes. Continuing, Lucio observes that Angelo is a stern ruler, and perhaps punishes lechery too harshly. The Duke responds by saying it is far too widespread a vice and must be remedied through severity. Lucio replies that lechery will not be eradicated until eating and drinking are, as well.

Lucio's hedonistic faith that lechery will persist mirrors the cocky self-assuredness that Pompey shows earlier in the play. By likening this vice to eating and drinking, however, he does add a valuable counterpoint to the play's theme of virtue: sins like lechery are, in Lucio's view, a natural part of life and should not be repressed so severely.

Lucio continues, saying that rumor has it that Angelo was not conceived through sex. He describes other fantastical legends about the man, and laments that Angelo is so uncompromising that he would see Claudio executed merely for sexual deviance. The Duke, Lucio maintains, would not issue such a punishment, because he was said to be familiar with fornication. The Duke, as friar, answers that he had never heard such allegations against the Duke, but Lucio again tells him that he is mistaken. According to Lucio, the Duke was a "superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow," given to drinking.

It is never explained why Lucio chooses to rail against the Duke to the man he believes to be a friar. Lucio's diatribe may perhaps be designed to complicate the Duke's character and make him seem less than honorable, but because these insults against the Duke come from a character as unreliable as Lucio, they are difficult to accept at face value.

The Duke replies indignantly that Lucio is mistaken; he asks for Lucio's name and says that he hopes Lucio would speak the same way before the Duke himself, should the latter ever return. He also threatens to report Lucio to the Duke, but Lucio counters that he is unafraid. He laments Claudio's fate, offers some colorful disparagements of the Duke, and bids the disguised Duke farewell.

The Duke's response to Lucio indicates that the Duke values honesty and transparency in his subjects and disdains false appearances. This, of course, is ironic, given that the Duke delivers this message while he himself is in disguise, and observant readers might wonder whether the Duke applies this same standard of behavior to himself.

After Lucio exits, Escalus and the Provost enter with Mistress Overdone under arrest. The Provost tells Escalus that Mistress Overdone has been a bawd for eleven years, and Escalus bids him to send her to jail. Before being taken away, Mistress Overdone reveals that Lucio has fathered a child with one of her prostitutes.

The punishment of Mistress Overdone, while Lucio gets to live freely after committing an equally immoral action, illustrates that Vienna's moral crackdown has been evaded by some of the most egregious offenders. This outcome supports Claudio and Angelo's opinions on the fallibility of human justice, and suggests that appearances play a far greater role in the penal system's assessment of guilt than do the real moral characters of offenders.

Escalus and the disguised Duke exchange greetings. The Duke asks Escalus about what the Duke was like, and Escalus replies with a flattering account of a temperate, upstanding ruler. Escalus then asks how the Duke (whom he thinks is a friar) found Claudio to be when he visited the prison. The Duke replies that he has prepared Claudio for his death. Escalus comments that Claudio's death sentence seems too severe to him.

Escalus and Lucio's drastically different interactions with the disguised Duke highlight their vast differences in moral uprightness. However, distinct as their characters may be, the two men can both agree that Claudio's punishment is too harsh to fit his crime.

Escalus and the Provost leave. Alone, the Duke delivers a soliloquy condemning Angelo's shameful behavior. The Duke promises to use craftiness and disguise to counter Angelo's duplicity and vice, and ensure that appropriate punishment is administered.

The Duke's admitted willingness to bend the rules of honesty illustrates that the uncompromising and unforgiving approach that Angelo attempts to take towards morality is an incorrect one. It is appropriate, too, that Angelo will be met with "measure for measure:" his duplicitous deceptions will be countered and set right by the Duke's, and Angelo's own insistence on rigid interpretations of the law will be turned back against him (just as Escalus predicted they would earlier in the play).

ACT 4, SCENE 1

The Duke finds Mariana at her home, and Isabella arrives there soon after. Isabella relays that Angelo has given her two keys that she can use to access the garden of his house, where she has promised to meet him that night. Isabella has told Angelo that she will only be able to stay briefly, because she will be escorted by a servant who believes she has come to discuss Claudio.

Note the inversion of the relationship between Angelo and Isabella that's taken place here. Angelo was the one who initially acted disingenuously in an effort to manipulate Isabella's naiveté and ensure his public persona stayed pristine. Now, however, it's Isabella who takes advantage of Angelo's naïve faith that she will stay true to the bargain he has forced upon her.

The Duke introduces Mariana and Isabella and the two outline their plan off-stage. When the two return, Isabella tells the Duke that Mariana has agreed to the scheme. Isabella then gives Mariana one final instruction: when she leaves, she must whisper to Angelo the phrase "Remember now my brother." Once Mariana assents, the Duke reassures her that sleeping with Angelo is, for her, no sin, because he was contracted to be her husband. The justice of their engagement outweighs the deceit of this ruse.

Mariana's unique relationship to Angelo offers a fairly pat way to rationalize the extramarital sex she is to have with Angelo. In nearly every sense, Mariana is committing the same transgression Isabella refused to commit, and the Duke's justification of his scheme seems somewhat legalistic, and maybe even disingenuous.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At the prison, the Provost asks Pompey if he would be willing to help cut off a man's head. Claudio and another prisoner named Barnadine are scheduled to be executed the next day, and if Pompey can assist the executioner his sentence will be commuted. Pompey agrees to the task. Abhorson, the executioner, arrives and is upset to hear that a disreputable bawd will be helping him with his task, but the Provost responds that the two men are equal. After a discussion of the "mystery" of being an executioner, Abhorson agrees to train Pompey, and the two prepare to hold the execution at four o'clock the following day.

Pompey's conversion from bawd to executioner serves as a metaphor for the way that Angelo's draconian attempts to enforce sexual morality have in fact created a shift towards more harmful sins. While Angelo may discourage fornication, he does so by making himself into a hypocritical death-dealing tyrant—he punishes one sin by promoting a greater one. In much the same way, Pompey abandons licentiousness for murderousness.

The Provost summons Claudio, whom he pities, and Barnadine, a murderer he reviles. Claudio appears, but Barnadine remains fast asleep. The Provost shows Claudio the warrant for his execution in the morning and tells the condemned man to prepare. The Duke, in disguise, enters the prison and asks if anyone has visited that evening. The Provost answers that nobody has come, not even Isabella. The Duke replies that a message to pardon Claudio may yet arrive.

At this point in the play, the audience's suspense is at a peak. Will Angelo stay true to his word and pardon Claudio? Moreover, for perhaps the only time in the entire work, the Duke himself is not in control of what is going on—like the audience, he is unsure whether his plan to manipulate Angelo has succeeded.

A messenger appears at the jail carrying word from Angelo. Instead of a pardon, he carries the command that Claudio's execution should proceed as planned, as should Barnadine's; Claudio's head should be sent to Angelo by five o'clock. The Provost promises to fulfill this charge, and the Duke privately laments Angelo's duplicity. The Duke then asks who Barnadine is, and the Provost tells him he is a Bohemian prisoner who has been in jail for nine years. Barnadine is reckless and unrepentant, and he spends most of the day drunk. He is so slothful that he has even refused to rise when summoned for execution.

Angelo proves himself an even more despicable villain than he seemed before. His hypocrisy has been compounded by this deception. However, it is worth comparing Angelo's conduct with the Duke's: is there a firm distinction that makes Angelo's duplicity unethical, while the Duke's deceptions remain acceptable? Finally, also, keep in mind that Barnadine's extraordinarily poor behavior (besides just being funny) serves to emphasize that Claudio, by contrast, is a far more upright and undeserving prisoner.

The Duke tells the Provost that he looks like an honorable man, and asks him to do the favor of delaying Claudio's death. The Provost asks how he could do so while still delivering Claudio's head to Angelo. The Duke suggests executing Barnadine instead, but the Provost responds that Angelo would recognize the substitution. The Duke tells the Provost to cut Barnadine's hair and shave his beard to render his head unrecognizable. When the Provost protests that this deceit would be against his duties, the Duke shows his signet ring and promises that the Provost's cooperation would be appreciated by the absent Duke.

The Provost's devotion to his civic duties, ironically, makes it harder for the Duke to convince the Provost to do his bidding.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

Pompey reflects that he sees as many acquaintances in the prison as he does in Mistress Overdone's brothel. He lists an assortment of humorously-named brothel patrons whom he sees in jail. Then Abhorson appears and asks Pompey to summon Barnadine. Pompey tries to rouse the prisoner for execution, but Barnadine is surly and uncooperative, claiming he is "sleepy." Finally, Barnadine appears before Abhorson, but argues that because he has been drinking all night, he is unfit to be executed. The Duke arrives, still disguised as the friar, and offers to administer his final rites, but Barnadine says he is unwilling to be executed.

Barnadine's refusal to be executed is a comical illustration that even the most powerful civil authorities may not be able to overcome firmly entrenched vices. The authorities cannot impose their punishment on Barnadine because his less-than-virtuous lifestyle is too deeply ingrained in him. This may be meant by Shakespeare as a metaphor for Angelo's foolish and ultimately impossible quest to eradicate sexual vice in Vienna through unforgiving punishments.

The Provost reveals to the Duke that a "notorious pirate," of similar age and appearance to Claudio, has died in the prison that very morning. He suggests postponing Barnadine's execution and instead presenting the pirate's head as Claudio's in order to fool Angelo. The Duke enthusiastically accepts this plan and tells the Provost to send the pirate's head immediately and conceal Claudio and Barnadine for the next two days. He then decides he will write to Angelo—as the Duke, not as a friar—and announce that he plans to return to the city shortly and schedule a meeting.

Yet again, Shakespeare introduces an unrealistically convenient plot twist to propel his story forward. The well-timed death of the "notorious pirate" is implausible at best, and it certainly makes it difficult for an audience to suspend disbelief. However, it's hard to deny that the pirate's introduction is an effective plot point: after all, it prompts the Duke to begin preparations for the play's denouement.

Isabella arrives and asks if Claudio's pardon has been delivered. The Duke answers that Claudio's head has already been sent to Angelo. Isabella rages, and the Duke (whom she thinks is the friar) tells her that the Duke is scheduled to return to town the next day and will meet with Escalus and Angelo at the city gates. Isabella should attend this meeting and make her grievances known. The Duke then gives her a letter and instructs her to take it to Friar Peter.

The Duke's conduct here again blurs the line between well-intentioned governance and immoral manipulation. No matter how much it furthers his benevolent plans, it is undeniable that lying to Isabella about her brother's execution constitutes a borderline sadistic move. Is this unethical behavior justified by the end result in the same way that, for example, Mariana's fornication is?

Lucio enters and tells Isabella he is grieving for her brother. The Duke, Lucio claims, would not have executed him. The disguised Duke again protests Lucio's mischaracterizations of him, but Lucio goes on to tell a story of how he was once called before the Duke for impregnating a prostitute. Lucio admits to the friar that the allegations were true, but he denied the charges in order to avoid marrying the woman.

In contrast to his deception of Isabella, the Duke's deception of Lucio here seems entirely warranted. After all, Lucio's confession amounts to a fairly egregious offense. And if such deceptions were par for the course during the Duke's rule, as Lucio understood them to be, then perhaps the Duke's ruse is free of ethical problems.

ACT 4, SCENE 4

In Angelo's house, Angelo and Escalus review the letter from the Duke. The Duke's erratic correspondences make Angelo worry that the Duke may have lost his mind. Angelo seems particularly dismayed by the Duke's request to meet at the gates to the city, and the stipulation that Angelo make a public announcement beforehand that anyone who wants redress for injustice can attend this meeting as well.

The audience now has an idea of the full extent of the Duke's plan. A just resolution to the play's events seems attainable. Crucially, righting Angelo's wrongs hinges on the public nature of the scheduled meeting: when social conventions encourage, rather than hinder, citizens to speak out against Angelo's institutional abuses, it seems likely that his misdeeds will finally be brought to justice.

Escalus leaves, and Angelo speaks to himself with concern about what might happen at the meeting. He hopes that Isabella will be too ashamed of having given up her virginity to reveal his misdeeds publicly. Angelo reflects that he should have let Claudio live, but had him executed in the fear that he would later seek vengeance. Still, he concludes that he wishes he had let Claudio live.

Interestingly, Angelo's strategy for self-preservation requires that Isabella submit to social restrictions on propriety. If Isabella feels bound by limits on womanly propriety and unable to speak publicly about sex, Angelo may get away with his plan to violate her.

ACT 4, SCENE 5

Outside town, the undisguised Duke meets with Friar Peter. He gives the friar letters to deliver and asks him to summon several noblemen to the assembly at the gate. After Friar Peter leaves, one of the noblemen arrives, and he and the Duke walk to the city gates.

This brief scene does little more than contribute to the suspense surrounding the impending confrontation at the gates. By ensuring that additional noblemen will be there to witness this event, the Duke both sets an example for them and further guarantees that Angelo will be held publicly accountable.

ACT 4, SCENE 6

Near the city gates, Isabella and Mariana wait. Isabella says she is reluctant to speak her complaint against Angelo, but Mariana urges her to follow the disguised Duke's instructions. Isabella says that the disguised Duke warned her that the Duke might initially side against her, but that this would eventually lead to a just outcome. Friar Peter enters and announces that the Duke has arrived. The three of them go off to the meeting.

This scene, too, works to build the suspense before the meeting. By focusing now on Isabella's and Mariana's perspectives, Shakespeare uses the past several scenes to provide the audience with a personal look at each of the different points of view and individual motivations that will clash in the imminent confrontation.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

A group of lords and townspeople is assembled at the city gates. The Duke enters, greets Angelo and Escalus, and thanks them for their service. Friar Peter brings Isabella forward, and she asks the Duke for justice. He tells her to deliver her complaint to Angelo, but she responds that she needs the Duke's help, for Angelo is the "devil." Angelo tries to interrupt, but she continues, calling him "an adulterous thief, an hypocrite, a virgin-violator." The Duke asks for Isabella to be sent away, as she appears to be insane.

Isabella shows she's not completely deferential to society's restrictions by speaking out publicly about a taboo. Of course, it shouldn't be forgotten that Isabella has been put in this situation by the Duke's machinations, but her self-assertiveness is still impressive. Interestingly, though nearly every piece of the Duke's plan has fallen into place, he does not abandon his play-acting. His rationale for initially dismissing Isabella as insane is unclear, though it may help to get Angelo to further implicate himself.

Isabella continues to protest. The Duke then remarks that Isabella's madness seems strangely reasonable, and asks her to voice her accusation. Isabella announces that she is the sister of Claudio, who has been executed for fornication. Lucio interrupts to corroborate the story, and the Duke curtly tells him to be silent. Isabella continues and says she begged Angelo to free her brother, but he said he would do so only if she had sex with him. She says she eventually yielded to his demands and gave up her virginity, but Angelo ordered Claudio's execution in spite of this. The Duke rejects Isabella's testimony as lies and urges her to confess the truth.

The Duke's condemnation of Isabella as a liar has several layers of meaning. To onlookers utterly unaware of Angelo's actions, the Duke simply appears to be defending his lieutenant against spurious accusations. To those with more information, however, the Duke's words are actually the outright truth: Isabella is lying by claiming to have sacrificed her virginity herself, rather than admitting that Mariana did so for her. This clearly shows that Isabella values the actual state of being chaste more than she values the social appearance of chastity—precisely the opposite of Angelo's priorities.

Isabella sticks to her story, and the Duke orders her sent to prison. Before she is sent away, the Duke asks her if anyone knew of her plan to testify against Angelo. Isabella answers that Friar Lodowick did. The Duke asks if anyone knows this friar; Lucio responds that he knows the friar and finds him distasteful. Lucio claims that he has disciplined the friar for speaking ill of the Duke.

Here, the scene grows even more convoluted and suspenseful. Furthermore, by falsely and gratuitously denouncing Friar Lodowick, Lucio makes himself into a more unsympathetic and duplicitous character—one who deserves a just punishment in this public venue.

Friar Peter comes forward and agrees with the Duke that Isabella is lying. The Duke inquires if he is familiar with Friar Lodowick, and Friar Peter says that he knows Lodowick to be an honorable man, who never impugned the Duke as Lucio alleged. Friar Peter claims that Friar Lodowick has taken sick and asked him to testify on his behalf. He says that this testimony will disprove Isabella's testimony.

Friar Peter's claim that he can disprove Isabella's testimony makes it seem as though he may have the end goal of exonerating Angelo. This shifts the momentum of the scene in Angelo's favor, and leaves the audience in further suspense about whether or not justice will be served.

Isabella is taken away by guards, and Mariana comes forward as a witness. She wears a veil, which the Duke asks her to remove. She replies that she will only show her face when bidden to by her husband. The Duke asks her if she is married, a maid, or a widow, and she denies all three. Mariana clarifies this seeming paradox by saying that she has slept with her husband, though her husband does not know it. Angelo, she says, is this husband, though he believed her to be Isabella when they had sex.

Mariana occupies a gray area: none of her potential identities are clear-cut and condoned by society. The inappropriateness of her situation underscores Angelo's wrongdoing. By callously disregarding his social obligation to his fiancée, Angelo deeply wronged Mariana. And by violating yet another social proscription, this time against premarital sex, Angelo places Mariana in the still less acceptable social limbo that she occupies now. In this way, Mariana's inability to fit into society actually illustrates the way that Angelo's actions completely violate social standards.

Angelo, scandalized, asks Mariana to show her face, and she complies. The Duke asks Angelo if he recognizes her, and Angelo tells the story of their engagement, attesting that he has not seen her in five years. Mariana counters that he had sex with her that Tuesday night. Angelo tells the Duke that Mariana and Isabella must be lying at the will of some unknown third party. The Duke denounces Friar Peter and the women and tells the Provost to bring Friar Lodowick. The Duke then tells Escalus to proceed with the trial while he leaves.

The Duke's denunciation of Friar Peter gives the appearance that he still sides with Angelo. After all, the testimony Friar Peter offered to disprove Isabella only ended up affirming her condemnation of Angelo's character.

Escalus summons Isabella and, at Lucio's suggestion, questions her in private. The Duke, back in his friar's disguise, then reappears with the Provost. Escalus asks the disguised Duke if he conspired to have the women testify against Angelo. Indignant, the disguised Duke asks to see the Duke, but Escalus responds that the Duke has given him authority to oversee the trial. The disguised Duke responds by calling the Duke unjust, and Escalus angrily threatens to have the disguised Duke tortured for saying such things. Lucio attests that the disguised Duke slandered the Duke, but the disguised Duke protest that he loves the Duke and it was in fact Lucio who spoke slanderously. Escalus orders the disguised Duke imprisoned, and the Duke asks the Provost not to cooperate. At Angelo's behest, Lucio hurls insults and removes the disguised Duke's hood, revealing the Duke's true identity.

Finally, the Duke's overarching plan has been revealed. At this point, it is clear that characters will be brought to justice for their misdeeds. The various disconnections between appearance and reality that had been present throughout the play—the Duke's disguise, Lucio's deceptive slander, and Angelo's feigned virtue—are now ready to be rectified.

The Duke asks that Friar Peter, Mariana, and Isabella be released from custody and requests that Lucio be restrained. He then asks whether Angelo can say anything to defend himself. Angelo admits his guilt and requests a death sentence, but the Duke sentences him to marry Mariana. Angelo exits with Mariana. The Duke then apologizes to Isabella that he did not intervene sooner to save Claudio's life, but tells her to take comfort in the peace her brother has found in death.

Angelo's regret and shame are clear in his request for a death sentence, and like his earlier confessions of torment, his quick admission of guilt makes him a slightly more sympathetic character. Even as justice is being served, however, the Duke bizarrely withholds from Isabella the truth about her brother's fate. This misinformation seems rather unnecessary, and a continuation of the somewhat cruel deception he began in Act 4, Scene 3.

Angelo, newly-married, returns, and the Duke proclaims that he shall be executed in Claudio's place, as "measure still for measure." Mariana, not wanting to be widowed, begs the Duke to reconsider and says she does not desire any other husband. Mariana enlists Isabella to help beg the Duke to pardon Angelo. Isabella asks the Duke to let Angelo live, as his bad intentions never came to fruition.

Mariana's willingness to marry Angelo, malevolent as he may be, illustrates just how dependent she is on obtaining an acceptable social station. Isabella's miraculous choice to forgive Angelo illustrates that she has indeed achieved a more compassionate vision of sin than the rather strict outlook she had earlier. Furthermore, her willingness to forgive highlights just how unreasonable Angelo's unwillingness *to forgive Claudio was.*

The Duke does not respond to the women's requests, and instead asks the Provost why Claudio was beheaded at an unusual time of day. The Provost answers that the act was carried out on private commands, and the Duke strips him of his rank for obeying anything other than an official warrant. However, the Provost says he has kept Barnadine alive, against these orders. The Duke summons Barnadine, and the Provost returns with Barnadine, Juliet, and Claudio. Claudio's face is obscured. The Duke asks who the concealed prisoner is, and Claudio is revealed. The Duke pardons Barnadine, Claudio, and Angelo; and then asks for Isabella's hand in marriage. He then tells Lucio that, as punishment for slandering the Duke, he will be forced to marry the prostitute he impregnated. The Duke ends the play with a speech commending the characters' virtue and hoping for a pleasant married life with Isabella.

This conclusion brings a typical "marriage plot" resolution to the play and allows justice to be served. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this ending is the lenient pardon Angelo is granted. However, it is in many ways a perfectly appropriate "measure for measure" penalty for Angelo's misdeeds. After all, as Isabella points out, Angelo's machinations never actually ended up harming anyone, despite his intentions; he has been punished by having to suffer the shame that he has inflicted on others, but no further. Lastly, though Isabella's response to the Duke's proposal is often left to be decided by the director of the play, it should be noted that she seems to have very little room to choose her own fate, as the Duke's proposal is likely a difficult one to refuse. In this sense, Isabella can be said to spend the entirety of the play governed by societal expectations for her conduct, rather than able to act as a free agent and make her own decisions—a discouraging illustration of the lack of freedom for women in this Shakespearean setting.

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