

Measure for Measure

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Context

Likely the most influential writer in all of English literature and certainly the most important playwright of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. The son of a successful middle-class glove-maker, Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582, he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625); he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by endowing them with the status of king's players. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, such luminaries as Ben Jonson hailed him as the apogee of Renaissance theatre.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life; but the paucity of surviving biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays in reality were written by someone else--Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates--but the evidence for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of definitive proof to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the 37 plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

Measure for Measure is considered a comedy, which is sometimes misleading. Some critics consider it a particularly "dark" comedy for its bitterness and cynicism. The play certainly raises important moral issues in its detailed descriptions of Christianity. The structure is based around secret identities and a lot of manipulation. First, the Duke disguises himself as a friar, and many problems are resolved when he discloses his identity. Second, the Duke advises other characters to carry out two other secret plans involving mistaken identity: Mariana takes Isabella's place, and the head of a dead pirate is sent in place

of Claudio's. The plot is therefore complexly woven, and the resolution of the play comes with the unraveling of the layers of intrigue created by the Duke.

The Duke, then, functions as a kind of master of ceremonies in the play. Although he has placed another man in his position during his absence, he is still manipulating all the occurrences in town. He is unfailingly wise in a way that most Shakespearean characters are not. He is a good, kind, devoted leader, but his one fault lies in his inability to maintain order. For this he calls in Angelo, and through this he pardons him.

Measure for Measure can also be called a problem play, because it brings up a difficulty and then seeks to solve it. However, the difficulty lies in misunderstandings and hidden identities, not in the real moral questions of the play. No character comes to reconsider his or her beliefs about freedom, justice, sexual relationships, or morality. A very intriguing question--whether or not Isabella should commit a sin in order to save her brother--is never discussed in any great detail. Isabella thinks she should not and never really considers the option. Claudio thinks she should, and so he begs her to save him. The Duke tells her that she is virtuous and that the option is not really open to her anyway, and closes off the discussion by giving her a new plan. The Duke is correct in thinking that Angelo's proposal is not entirely honest, and Isabella emerges faultless; the audience, even if it considers Isabella too cold in not saving her brother, must come to the conclusion that she would have sacrificed her virginity for nothing.

Overall Summary

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* centers around the fate of [Claudio](#), who is arrested by [Lord Angelo](#), the temporary leader of Vienna. Angelo is left in charge by the Duke, who pretends to leave town but instead dresses as a friar to observe the goings-on in his absence. Angelo is strict, moralistic, and unwavering in his decision-making; he decides that there is too much freedom in Vienna and takes it upon himself to rid the city of brothels and unlawful sexual activity. Laws against these behaviors and institutions already exist, and Angelo simply decides to enforce them more strictly. Claudio is arrested for impregnating [Juliet](#), his lover, before they were married. Although they were engaged and their sexual intercourse was consensual, Claudio is sentenced to death in order to serve as an example to the other Viennese citizens.

[Isabella](#), Claudio's sister, is about to enter a nunnery when her brother is arrested. She is unfailingly virtuous, religious, and chaste. When she hears of her brother's arrest, she goes to Angelo to beg him for mercy. He refuses, but suggests that there might be some way to change his mind. When he propositions her, saying that he will let Claudio live if she agrees to have sexual intercourse with him, she is shocked and immediately refuses. Her brother agrees at first but then changes his mind. Isabella is left to contemplate a very important decision.

Isabella is, in a way, let off the hook when the Duke, dressed as a friar, intervenes. He tells her that Angelo's former lover, [Mariana](#), was engaged to be married to him, but he abandoned her when she lost her dowry in a shipwreck. [The Duke](#) forms a plan by which Isabella will agree to have sex with the Angelo,

but then Mariana will go in her place. The next morning, Angelo will pardon Claudio and be forced to marry Mariana according to the law.

Everything goes according to plan, except that Angelo does not pardon Claudio, fearing revenge. The provost and the Duke send him the head of a dead pirate, claiming that it belonged to Claudio, and Angelo believes that his orders were carried out. Isabella is told that her brother is dead, and that she should submit a complaint to the Duke, who is due to arrive shortly, accusing Angelo of immoral acts.

The Duke returns in his usual clothes, saying that he will hear all grievances immediately. Isabella tells her story, and the Duke pretends not to believe her. Eventually, the Duke reveals his dual identity, and everyone is forced to be honest. Angelo confesses to his misdeeds, Claudio is pardoned, and the Duke asks Isabella to marry him.

Characters

Isabella - The main character, Isabella, is a very virtuous and chaste young woman who faces a difficult decision when her brother is sentenced to death for fornication (unlawful sex). Isabella does not approve of her brother's actions at all, but she pleads for his life out of loyalty and sisterly devotion. Isabella is a spiritual person who starts off wanting to become a nun.

The Duke - The other central figure is the Duke, who spends most of his time dressed as a friar in order to observe what is happening in his absence. The Duke is unfailingly virtuous, good, and kind-hearted. He tends to rule a little softly, which is why he enlists Angelo's help.

Claudio - Isabella's brother Claudio is a young man sentenced to death for impregnating an unmarried woman. He was engaged to her by a common-law agreement, but they had sexual intercourse before the legal marriage took place. Claudio depends less on the guidance of laws and religious practices than on his sister.

Lord Angelo - Angelo is the villain of the play, a man who rules strictly and without mercy. He has his own weaknesses, however, and he is loathsome more for his hypocrisy than for anything else. He presents Isabella with a difficult proposition and then does not even hold up his end of the bargain.

Escalus - Escalus is a wise lord who advises Angelo to be more merciful. He is loyal to the Duke and seeks to carry out his orders justly, but cannot go against Angelo's will.

Lucio - Lucio, described by Shakespeare as a "fantastic," is a flamboyant bachelor who provides much of the play's comedic content. He is a friend of Claudio's and tries to help him.

Mariana - Mariana was supposed to marry Angelo, but he called the wedding off when she lost her dowry in a shipwreck that killed her brother.

Mistress Overdone - Mistress Overdone runs a brothel in Vienna.

Pompey - Pompey is a clown who also works for Mistress Overdone.

Provost - The provost runs the prison and is responsible for carrying out all of Angelo's orders.

Elbow - Elbow is a dim-witted constable who arrests people for misconduct, particularly of the sexual variety. He speaks in malapropisms and provides comic-relief throughout the play.

Barnadine - A long-term prisoner in the jail, Barnadine is sentenced to be executed together with Claudio. The Duke originally considers him hopeless and therefore dispensable but later changes his mind.

Juliet - Claudio's lover, she is pregnant with his baby.

Act I, Scenes i-iii

Summary

The Duke calls Lord Angelo to grant him the temporary leadership of Vienna. Angelo modestly refuses, asking the Duke to test his skill in some smaller way first. The Duke tells him that his mind is already made up, and that he must leave right away.

Meanwhile, on a street, Lucio talks with two other gentlemen about recent events. They joke about the Duke's trip to meet with the King of Hungary and the war being carried out between Hungary and the Viennese city-state. The gentlemen, as soldiers, do not approve of the peace accord being proposed. Lucio compares them to a pirate going "out to sea with the Ten Commandments" having "scraped one out of the table" (I.ii.8-10): "Thou Shalt not Steal." The First Gentleman responds that it is against the pirates' nature to obey such a rule, and likewise it against the soldiers' nature to wish for peace.

The three men are still joking about venereal disease when, quite appropriately, Mistress Overdone approaches. She tells them that Claudio has been carried off to prison for impregnating Juliet. Lucio and the Gentlemen go off to find out more, and Pompey the clown enters.

Pompey tells Mistress Overdone that Claudio has been taken to prison for sexual involvement outside of marriage. Pompey also tells her that a proclamation shutting down all brothels in Vienna's equivalent to a "red-light district" has been issued. Brothels in the city proper are to remain operational, thanks to the political influence of a wealthy investor. Mistress Overdone worries about her business, but Pompey tells her that she will always have customers. They decide to leave just as Claudio approaches, led by the provost.

Claudio asks the provost why he is being taken to prison, and the provost replies that he is only following the orders of Lord Angelo. Lucio asks Claudio what he has done; Claudio replies that he has taken too many liberties and is being punished. Lucio asks for the specific offense, and Claudio hesitates.

Lucio guesses the crime, starting with murder and then moving to lechery. When Claudio replies that he is correct, Lucio asks, "Is lechery so looked after?" (I.ii.147), surprised that the penalty should be so high.

Claudio responds that his intentions were honorable, and that he hoped to marry Juliet, but they were waiting for a better time to announce their engagement, because Juliet's family did not approve. However, their "most mutual entertainment," (I.ii.157) or consensual sexual intercourse, has led to Juliet's pregnancy, clueing the city authorities in to the now-illegal premarital sexual activity between the two lovers.

Claudio ponders the reasons for these new strict laws, guessing that Angelo may be governing brutally in order to declare his rule. Lucio encourages him to appeal to the Duke, but Claudio tells him that the Duke's whereabouts are unknown. Claudio asks Lucio to find his sister, [Isabella](#), who has just joined a convent, in order to ask her to appeal to Angelo on his behalf.

Commentary

The major characters and situations are laid out. The plot revolves around the new leader's treatment of sexual offenses, particularly fornication, which is considered a sin. The characters also fit into groups depending on their opinions about sexual behavior. Claudio is the middle-of-the-road thinker, not involved in prostitution and possessing only noble beliefs about his relationship with Juliet, but unable to prevent himself from desiring her sexually and therefore culpable. His sister Isabella presents one extreme, abstaining from sexual activity entirely in order to become a nun. Mistress Overdone is at the other end of the spectrum, managing the prostitution business in Vienna.

The only mobile character on the spectrum is Angelo, who is here presented as a strict but virtuous leader who is given free reign in the Duke's absence. Angelo begins to enforce laws that have been dormant for some time. He hopes to clean up the city, shutting down brothels and requiring abstinence before marriage. This will make illegitimate births a thing of the past and protect the city's women, so it is not harmful in itself. He oversteps the framework of justice, however, when he sentences Claudio to death for having sexual intercourse with his lover before marriage. This is, of course, a very strict punishment considering the crime, and Angelo appears as an unwavering, unmerciful leader at this point.

The general atmosphere in Vienna seems to be one of merriment and disregard for the law. Claudio is to serve as an example in order to change this. It is perhaps this environment which prompts Isabella to join the nunnery, since she does not approve of fornication or prostitution and wants to be close to God and safe from male attention. The major conflict of the play already emerges at this point; it lies between Isabella and the other characters, religion and hedonism.

Act I, Scenes iii-iv

Summary

The Duke is at a monastery, asking Friar Thomas to hide him there. He tells the friar that he has good reasons for hiding, and that he has lied to Angelo about his destination. The Duke explains that for the past fourteen years the laws have been flagrantly disobeyed, with little reproach from the government. As the Duke explains it, when the law only serves to threaten, because the lawmakers do not carry out the punishments dictated, the government loses its authority and "the baby beats the nurse" (I.iii.30). Since he gave the people liberties, he does not feel comfortable punishing them for them now, yet he worries about the state of affairs in Vienna. He asked Angelo to take over in order to act more strictly without reproach or hypocrisy. He wants to observe Angelo at work, and so he asks the Friar to provide him with a disguise which will make him look like a visiting Friar himself.

Meanwhile, Isabella is being introduced to the ways of the nunnery which she has decided to join. A man approaches, and the sister asks Isabella to answer the door, since she is not sworn in yet and therefore still allowed to speak to men. Isabella obeys and finds Lucio at the door, asking for her by name. Isabella asks him to explain what has happened, and he tells her that Claudio has impregnated his "friend." Isabella does not believe it at first and tells Lucio not to mock her. Lucio says that he is indeed telling the truth, and Isabella asks if the woman is her friend Juliet. When Lucio says yes, Isabella asks why they cannot simply marry. Lucio explains that the Duke is gone, and that the very logical and unemotional Angelo is serving as leader in his place. He also says that Angelo wants to make Claudio an example by executing him. Isabella asks how she can help, and Lucio says she should test whatever influence she has and visit Angelo, using her feminine charms and submissiveness to convince him to have mercy on her brother. Isabella says she will leave right away.

Commentary

The Duke and Isabella are both described in more detail. They are both shown to be good-intentioned, sometimes confused characters who seek to improve the situation around them. The Duke wants to bring more law and order to Vienna but does not know how to do it himself, so he has allowed Angelo to take his place. However, he does not wish Angelo to have free reign, knowing him to be very strict and possibly heartless, so he asks Friar Thomas to disguise him so that he might roam the city in secret.

Isabella, similarly, seeks to retire from daily affairs. She joins a convent, thinking that she will find a safe, religious, pure environment in which she can worship. Her introduction to the life of a nun is interrupted by a plea from Lucio, and this is the first moment at which she must consider her choice. She is asked to leave the nunnery physically at this point; later she will be asked to give up her vow of chastity, and eventually she will be asked to marry instead of returning to the nunnery. Her physical departure is all the more important because she is asked to plead, on her brother's behalf, for forgiveness of what she and her religion consider to be a sin: fornication. At this point, she acts on familial loyalty rather than religious devotion, saying that she thinks the punishment for her brother's crime is warranted but too severe.

This first introduction to Isabella's beliefs about sexual behavior is particularly important. She will be asked to make major decisions and question her beliefs about acceptability and propriety, and her brother's life hangs in the balance. At this point, we see only that Isabella is innocent, chaste, and devoted to her religion. She is looking for protection from the sins of the common people of Vienna; Lucio brings her away from this safe haven into a situation in which she is vulnerable to the sins of others.

Act II, Scene i

Summary

Angelo tells Escalus that they "must not make a scarecrow of the law" (II.i.1), meaning that they must not waver in their decisions. Escalus argues that they should "cut a little" rather than "fall, and bruise to death," comparing law enforcement to pruning a tree; it is better to trim the tree than to cut it down. He also brings up Claudio's specific case, asking Angelo to consider whether he could have erred in the same way at some point in his life.

Angelo responds, "Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall" (II.i.17). He argues that, despite the ever-changing line between lawmaker and criminal, the law must still stand firm. He admits that he himself is capable of transgression, but adds that he hopes to be treated with the same strictness should he do wrong. Angelo calls in the provost and tells him to ensure that Claudio is executed before nine o'clock the next morning.

Elbow enters, bringing Pompey and Froth with him. Angelo asks him what he is doing, and he replies that he is the Duke's constable, and that he has brought two "notorious benefactors" to Angelo. Angelo asks if they are not "malefactors" instead, and the constable replies that he does not know. Angelo asks Pompey what he is, and Elbow calls him a "parcel-bawd," or a partial bawd. It becomes clear that Elbow confuses words a lot, and so Angelo has difficulty questioning him. He does say that he found Pompey and Froth at a brothel. Froth confesses to working for Mistress Overdone, and Escalus tells him that prostitution is an illegal and punishable occupation, warning him not to be seen at the brothel again.

Escalus questions Elbow about other constables, telling him to bring the names of other worthy people. He then mourns the fate of Claudio, but says that there is no remedy for it.

Commentary

This scene exists primarily for comic relief, distracting the audience momentarily from the issues at stake, particularly Claudio's imminent execution. Escalus is a noble character who acts as a straight-man to the dim-witted constable and the foolish clown. Elbow is a frivolous addition to the cast of characters, amusing because of his use of malapropisms, or misspoken phrases and words. He is sent to retrieve the criminals of Vienna, and he appears at various intervals performing this task and providing more pure comedy.

At the end of the scene, the tone shifts back to seriousness, as Escalus expresses his pity for Claudio. It is important that Escalus, as well as the provost, does not approve of the punishment to be administered to Claudio, and yet sees no way to convince Angelo to be more merciful. Angelo appears to be narrow-minded and stern; the other characters seem to fear him. There is a sense of apathy among the characters generally; it takes the Duke's intervention to promote movement, discussion, and action in them.

Act II, Scenes ii-iv

Summary

The provost goes to see [Angelo](#), hoping to convince him to change his mind about [Claudio](#). He mentions [Juliet](#), saying that she is going to give birth soon.

A servant announces that [Isabella](#) has arrived. She tells Angelo that she abhors Claudio's vice, fornication, and that she is sorry to have to beg for his pardon. Yet she asks that Angelo condemn his fault instead of him. Angelo argues that the person who commits a crime must be punished for the crime. Isabella exclaims, "O just but severe law!" (II.ii.42), showing that she approves of the law and is already mourning her brother's death. [Lucio](#) whispers to her that she should not give up so easily and tells her to kneel before Angelo and act more warmly towards him. Isabella asks again if Claudio must die, and he says yes.

She continues to plead with him, and Lucio again tells her that she is too cold. She argues that Claudio would have mercy on Angelo if the roles were reversed. Angelo tells Isabella to leave. Lucio tells Isabella to touch Angelo more, and Angelo tells her that she is wasting her time. Angelo also argues that he would condemn even his own relative in the same way. Isabella continues to argue, speaking more readily, and Lucio tells her that Angelo is wavering. Angelo finally tells her that he will think about it, and that she should return tomorrow.

Isabella calls out, "Hark how I'll bribe you. . ." (II.ii.144), and Angelo grows interested, replying, "How?" (II.ii.147). Isabella responds that she will pray for him, and Angelo again tells her to come back tomorrow. Lucio tells her to obey, and Isabella agrees to return before noon.

The scene ends with a soliloquy in which Angelo realizes that he desires Isabella in a sexual way and ponders why. He says, "Dost thou desire her foully for those things that make her good? Oh, let her brother live. . ." (II.ii.173-174).

[The Duke](#), disguised as a friar, visits the prison, saying that he wants to visit the prisoners. Juliet enters, and the Duke asks her if she repents her sin. She replies yes, and the Duke says he will help absolve her. He asks if she loves the man that impregnated her, and she replies that she loves him as much as she loves herself. The Duke figures out that their sexual encounter was consensual, and Juliet agrees. The Duke then tells her that she sinned more than her lover, and she says that she repents it. The Duke tells her that he is going to visit Claudio, who must die tomorrow, and Juliet expresses her sorrow.

Commentary

Measure for Measure reaches its height of tension early, with the encounter between Isabella and Angelo and the issues that their meeting raises. Angelo find himself suddenly vulnerable to the same sinful desires for which he is having Claudio put to death. This changes his position completely; no longer on a moral pedestal, he must instead spend his time avoiding culpability rather than carrying out the law.

Lucio seems to comprehend Angelo's vulnerability from the start, encouraging Isabella to touch him and be less cold. Lucio is encouraging Isabella to exploit her femininity to convince Angelo. In a way, he is even encouraging her to offer herself as his sexual object in order to save her brother's life. Lucio may well know that Angelo would respond by propositioning her, and he may expect her to accept, just as her brother will when she explains the dilemma to him. Only Isabella understands fornication to be a deadly sin, which is why the thought is so repulsive to her.

The Duke enjoys his newfound power to absolve sinners as a friar. He shows natural sympathy towards Juliet, and it is clear that he would be more merciful in Angelo's place, but that he is not against Angelo's actions. Already we see the Duke's desire to operate power from the inside, investigating the various characters in his disguise and determining from the evidence they provide what the best course of action will be. The Duke is the only character who appears in almost every location in the play; his hand is active everywhere, and he is pulling most of the strings.

Act II, Scene iv

Summary

Angelo considers his situation again, confused by the conflicting emotions he is experiencing regarding his laws about fornication and his desire for Isabella. His servant enters to announce Isabella's arrival, and he is concerned about his feelings.

Angelo tells Isabella that her brother will still die, but seems less firm. Isabella asks for clarification, and Angelo poses the question, "Which had you rather: the most just law now took your brother's life; or, to redeem him, give up your body to such sweet uncleanness as she that he hath stained?" (II.iv.52-54). In other words, would she sacrifice her virginity to save her brother?

Isabella replies, "I had rather give my body than my soul" (II.iv.56). Angelo clarifies his question, saying that he has sentenced Claudio to death. He asks, "Might there not be a charity in sin to save this brother's life?"--hypothetically asking whether she would sin to save him (II.iv.63).

She asks him to pardon her brother, saying that it would be worth a sin, but innocently assuming that he is speaking of the sin of forgiving him for his crime. Angelo tries to make her understand what he really means, saying that she is misinterpreting his words and thus either ignorant or crafty. He again tries to

make his proposition, beginning by saying that Claudio will die. Isabella understands this much, and Angelo says that his crime warrants such a punishment. Isabella agrees. Then Angelo states his question more clearly, asking whether she would be willing to have sexual relations with a man in order to save Claudio.

Isabella says that she would rather die than commit such an act, so therefore her brother should die under the same conditions. Angelo replies that he will die. Isabella agrees to this, saying that it is better for him to die than for her soul to be tarnished by the sin. Angelo asks her whether she is not acting as cruelly as he is, and she argues that she cannot redeem her brother through further sin.

Angelo tells Isabella that he loves her, and she replies, "My brother did love Juliet, and you tell me that he shall die for't" (II.iv.143). Angelo replies that Claudio will not die if Isabella agrees to his proposition. Isabel grows irate when she realizes he is sincere, and says that she will blackmail him if he does not pardon her brother, telling everyone what he has asked of her.

Angelo replies, "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" (II.iv.144). He speaks of his reputation and position in the state, suggesting that he has more power than she does. He tells her to be less timid and agree to his proposal, or else her brother will not only die but also suffer a long and painful death. He gives her until the next day to decide and leaves.

Isabella is left to think about the situation by herself. She wonders who would believe her if she were to tell what has happened. She decides to visit her brother, sure that he will agree that she should not give up her chastity for his life. She also hopes to put his mind at rest before he dies.

Commentary

The very structure of this scene is frustrating. The audience is immediately aware of Angelo's intentions, but Isabella is either too naive to understand them or too desperate to avoid the actual proposition. She is obviously offended by the very notion of having sexual intercourse with Angelo, becoming furious at the suggestion. It may be her angry reluctance that makes her so desirable to Angelo. It would not be difficult for him to find a sexual partner, considering the prevalence of prostitution in Vienna, and later we discover that there is a woman readily available to him as a wife. He seeks to abstain from sexual activity, and only Isabella draws him out of this resolution.

Isabella is given apparent power over her brother's situation, and she genuinely believes that she could save her brother's life. She refuses the option instantly. In a way, she is handing this power over to God; her virtue and her soul are, for her, in God's hands, and by refusing to disobey his will she is only following along with his expectations of her. Her power is solely sexual, and so she refuses it. Although Isabella is fast in her determination to refuse, Angelo gives her a day to think about it. Dramatically, this gives Isabella time to discuss the proposal with her brother and the Duke time to formulate a plan. It also shows that Angelo believes she will relent with enough persuasion.

Two larger issues emerge in the exchange between Angelo and Isabella. Angelo brings up the topic of love, claiming to be in love with her. He does not promise to marry her, however, implying that he really

feels solely lust. Isabella mentions that she would rather die than have intercourse with him, which becomes her primary justification for refusing. She formulates the opinion that death is favorable to shame, and decides that her brother's death is better than her own sinful act.

Act III, Scene i

Summary

The Duke asks Claudio if he hopes to be pardoned by Angelo, and Claudio says that he still hopes he will be, but is ready to die. The Duke tries to resign him to death, saying that he should think of it as better than life. He describes how life is more frightening than death, because it has so many complications, and says that it is strange that we fear death more. Claudio thanks him and says that he is prepared to face death.

Isabella enters and says she wants to speak to her brother. The Duke asks the Provost to take him somewhere where he can hear their conversation without being seen. Claudio asks what happened, and Isabella tells him that there is no way for him to avoid death. Claudio asks if there is any way to change the sentence, and Isabella says that the only solution would require heartbreak. Claudio asks for more information, and Isabella tells him that Angelo has given him a way out of death which will imprison him for life. Claudio asks if the new sentence is life imprisonment, and Isabella says yes, only an imprisonment outside of jail.

Claudio asks for an explanation, and Isabella tells him that the punishment would be the loss of his honor. Claudio wants to know exactly what she means. Isabella evades the question, saying that she is afraid he would choose life. She tells him that death is more fearsome than painful, and that he should not think of it as a terrible thing. Claudio says that she thinks too little of him, and that he would embrace death if he had to. Isabella expresses her approval of this, saying that he is acting as their dead father would. She tells him that he must die because he is too noble to accept a shameful alternative.

Claudio curses Angelo, and Isabella agrees, finally telling him about Angelo's request. Claudio expresses his disgust, and then says, "Thou shalt not do't" (III.i.103). Isabella tells him that she would gladly give her life, but not her virginity. Claudio thanks her, and Isabella tells him to be ready to die tomorrow.

Claudio thinks about Angelo, wondering how he can have such desires and still enforce the law against them. He says that lechery is not a sin, or at least the mildest of the seven deadly sins. Isabella is surprised, and Claudio says, "Death is a fearful thing" (III.i.117). Isabella replies, "And shamed life a hateful" (III.i.118). Claudio describes a terrible view of death, and Isabella only says, "Alas, alas" (III.i.133).

Claudio changes his mind and asks his sister to give up her virginity for him, saying that a sin to save her brother's life would become a virtue. Isabella immediately grows angry, calling him a coward. She tells him that it is a kind of incest to require her to have sexual intercourse in order to save his life. Claudio tries to protest, but Isabella says that his sin was no accident, but a reflection of his general nature.

The Duke comes forward and says that he would like to speak with Isabella. First he takes Claudio aside and tells him that he has overheard their conversation, and that he knows Angelo well. He tells him that Angelo was not actually propositioning Isabella, but only testing her virtue. He was pleased with her response, but he would have killed Claudio either way. Claudio asks to forgive his sister, and the Duke sends him to do so.

The Duke asks the Provost if he can be alone with Isabella, saying that he is honorable because of his profession. The Duke tells Isabella that she is good and asks how she plans to convince Angelo to save her brother. She tells him that she would rather her brother die lawfully than give birth to an illegitimate child. The Duke says that Angelo was only testing her, and that he has a plan which will save Claudio without tarnishing her honor.

The Duke asks her if she has heard of [Mariana](#), and Isabella says she knows the name. The Duke claims that Mariana was engaged to Angelo, but that he broke off the engagement when her dowry was lost in a shipwreck. The Duke's plan is for Isabella to tell Angelo she will agree to his request, but to send Mariana in her place. Angelo will be forced to marry Mariana, having had sexual relations with her, and Claudio will be freed.

Commentary

Isabella has no real reason to tell Claudio about Angelo's proposition if she has truly made up her mind. She either seeks approval from him, or she is unsure and wants to be convinced that she is wrong. Considering Claudio's reaction and Isabella's response, it seems that the former is more likely; her mind is set, but she wants his approval for her decision. She is reassured when he seems to agree, but she clearly does not have enough faith in him to think that he would agree with her no matter what. If that were the case, she could simply have stated the proposition immediately, knowing that he would agree with her. However, she sidles around it, first ensuring that they agree on moral grounds and then mentioning the specific circumstance.

Isabella should not be too surprised by his reaction, given that he obviously considers fornication to be less of a sin than she does, having committed it himself. He begins to look upon her as a selfish, naive figure as he tries to convince her to sacrifice virtue for the sake of pragmatism. However, he does realize the repulsiveness of the suggestion and feels ashamed for having tried to convince her otherwise.

Isabella's response to Claudio's willingness to let her accept the proposition is to criticize the act of sexual intercourse itself. She says, "Heaven shield my mother played my father fair" (III.i.141), suggesting that there was some sexual deviance in their own parents' relationship which caused him to become so cowardly and given to sinful behavior. At this point, Isabella wavers between virtue and foolishness. The play is sexually explicit in its plot and language, and Isabella emerges as a frigid, prudish figure for her willingness to sacrifice her brother's life to save her own honor. She will not be a martyr for him, and he does not wish to become a martyr for her.

The Duke's solution is an easy way out, and it ends the great moment of conflict between brother and sister with a pat and unlikely solution. Perhaps Shakespeare thought the question too large to answer in

five acts, and so he discards it as open-ended, replacing it with an unlikely and somewhat illogical scheme instead of examining it in more detail.

Act III, Scene ii

Summary

Outside the prison, the Duke meets [Elbow](#) and [Pompey](#). [The Duke](#) asks what crime Pompey has committed, and Elbow tells him that the clown broke the law and is also a pickpocket. Pompey protests, but the Duke will not listen, telling him to go to jail. [Lucio](#) approaches, and Pompey says he is a friend.

Lucio asks what is going on, and Elbow says that Pompey is going to prison for being a bawd. Pompey asks Lucio to pay his bail, but Lucio refuses. He asks the Duke, who is still disguised as a friar, if he knows the whereabouts of the Duke. Lucio says that [Angelo](#) is strictly upholding the law in the Duke's absence. The Duke approves of this, but Lucio says that Angelo could afford to be more lenient with regard to lechery. The Duke says that lechery is a strong vice which should be cured. Lucio jokes that there are rumors that Angelo was not conceived through sexual intercourse. He also says that the Duke would not be so strict, since he himself enjoyed the pleasures of sexual relations with women.

The Duke contradicts him, and the two argue. Lucio says that he suspects the Duke had a secret reason to be shy, and is told to visit the Duke upon his return. He threatens to report Lucio, but Lucio says he does not fear it. Lucio changes the subject, asking what will happen to [Claudio](#). Lucio leaves, and [Escalus](#) enters with the provost and [Mistress Overdone](#). He tells the provost to send Mistress Overdone to prison for running a brothel. Mistress Overdone argues that the evidence comes from Lucio, who is himself guilty of fornication. Escalus informs the provost that Angelo has not changed his mind about Claudio.

Escalus asks the Duke where he is from, and he replies that he is a foreigner. The Duke asks after Angelo, whom Escalus says is, as always, temperate and unyielding. The Duke says that he will perhaps see the results of his strictness in his own life. The Duke is left alone, and he offers a soliloquy about how Angelo is to be fooled to pay for his sins.

Commentary

Another primarily humorous scene, here we see the Duke interacting with both prisoners and law enforcement agents. Interestingly, all of the prisoners other than Claudio are quite laughable figures. Claudio emerges as the one offender for whom sympathy is felt naturally, as opposed to merely amusement.

The Duke encounters Lucio and shows himself to be mildly vengeful, trying to protect his honor despite his disguise. This, perhaps, suggests an ulterior motive in disguising himself: he wants to see how his

subjects honestly feel about him and his methods of rule, and he can only do so through making himself functionally invisible to them.

Claudio's offense is also revealed to be much smaller than those of the other convicted criminals. He was involved in nothing truly decadent, acting solely out of love and lust. Angelo appears as a merciless figure for condemning him to death, and [Isabella](#) appears even stricter in her beliefs for her suggestion that the sentence is not entirely unjust. Perhaps it is this belief which motivates her to allow him to be killed instead of giving up her chastity.

Act IV, Scenes i-ii

Summary

[The Duke](#) visits [Mariana](#) and is there when [Isabella](#) arrives. Isabella says that [Angelo](#) gave her two keys and instructions to meet him in a garden. Angelo showed her the way twice. She told Angelo that a servant will be accompanying her, thinking that she is coming to speak about her brother, so she cannot stay long.

Duke introduces Mariana to Isabella and tells them to discuss the plans together on their own. They go for a walk, and when they return they have agreed on the plan. Isabella tells her to say very little, but to be sure to tell him, "Remember now my brother," before she leaves. The Duke tells Mariana that she is not committing a sin, since she and Angelo had a contract of marriage.

Meanwhile, back at the prison, the Provost asks [Pompey](#) if he will help execute [Claudio](#) and another prisoner. If he does so, the charges against him will be dropped. Pompey agrees, and the Provost introduces him to Abhorson, the executioner. Abhorson says that Pompey will discredit the execution trade. Pompey agrees to be his helper, though, and Abhorson is told to be ready at four o'clock the next day.

The Duke arrives, and the Provost asks if there is any hope of saving Claudio. The Duke says that a pardon may arrive before morning. A messenger arrives, and the Duke says that it is probably the pardon, but it contains instructions to execute Claudio by four o'clock and [Barnadine](#) in the afternoon, and to send Claudio's head to Angelo by five.

The Duke asks who Barnadine is, and the provost tells him that he is a Bohemian who has been in prison for nine years. The Duke asks whether he is repentant, and the Provost says that he is as reckless and carefree as he has always been. [The Provost](#) says that he does not care that he is in prison, and has not been affected by news of his upcoming execution.

The Duke asks for Claudio's execution to be postponed four days. The Provost asks how he could do such a thing, considering the precision of Angelo's instructions. The Duke tells the Provost to send the head of Barnadine in place of Claudio's. The Provost argues that Angelo will notice it is the wrong person, but the Duke tells him to shave the head and beard of Barnadine's head to disguise it.

Commentary

The Duke's schemes are developed more fully, and here we really see him directing his followers according to precise instructions. He tells Isabella and Mariana what to do with assuredness, although the plan could clearly fail, considering the intimacy of the proposed contact between Angelo and Mariana. The issue is not discussed clearly, nor is the question of why it is legal for the act to take place truly explored. After all, Claudio and [Juliet](#) had a similar contract of marriage to Angelo and Mariana's, and in that case both were willing. Here only one party is willing, and yet it is considered lawful. Perhaps it is the thought of tricking Angelo which makes the scheme seem appropriate here.

Mariana, when asked if she approves, answers that she will carry out the scheme if the friar thinks it is all right. The Duke assumed all along that Mariana would be willing to have sexual intercourse with Angelo, despite his hateful behavior towards her. The suggestion is that she can be redeemed only through this sexual act, because otherwise she remains a discarded woman instead of a wife.

The Duke also arranges a scheme involving the provost and the executions which are to take place. He is willing to sacrifice the life of Barnadine but wishes to preserve the life of Angelo. This implies a value judgment on life itself; one life is seen as worthwhile while the other is not. These statements of balance and equality figure largely in the play as a whole, as prospects are weighed against each other. The whole concept of "Measure still for Measure" (IV.i.414) centers around appropriate punishments and retributions

Act IV, Scenes iii-vi

Summary

[Pompey](#) remarks that he is as well acquainted with the prison as with [Mistress Overdone's](#) brothel. He adds that many of the same people frequent both places, and lists them.

[Abhorson](#) enters, telling Pompey to bring [Barnadine](#). Barnadine tells them that he has been drinking all night and does not want to die today. [The Duke](#) comes to offer prayer, and Barnadine holds firm, saying that he will not die.

[The Provost](#) tells the Duke that a notorious pirate, of about [Claudio's](#) age, died in prison the night before, and that they can use his head instead of Barnadine's. The Duke says that it "is an accident that heaven provides" (IV.iii.76). He tells the provost to hide both Barnadine and Claudio and send the head immediately to [Angelo](#).

[Isabella](#) enters, asking if the pardon has arrived. The Duke tells her that her brother has already been executed, his head sent to Angelo. Isabella wants to go to Angelo, but the Duke tells her that she will not

be admitted. Instead, he says, she should wait until the Duke's return and have Angelo punished by his superior. He gives her a letter to take to Friar Peter.

Lucio enters and tells Isabella that he is mourning her brother's death. He also says that if the Duke had been in Vienna, Claudio would not have died. Isabella exits, and Lucio begins to talk about the Duke's relations with women again. The Duke says that he does not want to hear more stories. Lucio tells him that he was once before the Duke for impregnating a woman, but that he denied it because he did not want to marry her.

Angelo and Escalus discuss the Duke's letter. They do not understand why they have to meet him at the gates. The letter also orders them to proclaim that anyone with a complaint should present a petition in the street, ostensibly to ensure that no one lodges a complaint against Angelo later on. Escalus leaves, and Angelo wonders what Isabella might say. He hopes that she will be too modest to tell what has happened. He also says that he would have let Claudio go, but was worried about later revenge.

The Duke arrives outside the town, in his own clothes, with Friar Peter. He tells the friar to deliver some letters, and also to bring Flavius to him. Varrius enters, and they walk together.

Isabella and Mariana are standing by the city gate. Isabella is nervous about accusing Angelo, but Mariana tells her to obey the Duke and the Friar. Friar Peter approaches and tells them that he will find a place for them near the Duke.

Commentary

Things become more muddled just as they are on the verge of clarification. The Duke's plans are carried out, and he instigates a new scheme to save Claudio and Barnadine both. Barnadine refuses to be executed, perhaps even sensing that the Duke and the provost see his life as worthless. His assertion that he will not die is a statement of the sanctity of life in general. The convenient death of the pirate matches the convenient existence of Mariana in its incredibility, and the Duke's attitude encourages us simply to follow along as all the other characters do. Angelo emerges as quite an oblivious figure, as he is tricked by Mariana's substitution for Isabella and a pirate's substitution for Claudio all in the space of one night and morning. Here Shakespeare truly demands that we suspend our disbelief.

The Duke's lie to Isabella is undoubtedly unkind, causing her great distress and anger. There are some possible motivations for this; perhaps, for instance, he believed that she would not argue passionately against Angelo once the point became irrelevant. However, it is likely that he wants to surprise her dramatically before asking for her hand in marriage.

The Duke does not immediately reveal his dual identity, still enjoying the intrigue which only he fully comprehends. To some extent, he is playing with his subjects, making them believe that they act of their own volition while manipulating them. He is also testing them, perhaps to determine how worthy they are of their positions. Isabella no doubt falls into this examination of virtue, and she passes by refusing Angelo's proposals and obeying the Duke and Friar wholeheartedly.

Act V, Scene i

Summary

The Duke greets Angelo and Escalus at the city gates. He thanks them. Friar Peter enters with Isabella and tells her to speak to the Duke. She begs him for justice. The Duke tells her to state her complaint briefly to Angelo. Isabella says that she cannot ask Angelo for help, because he is evil. She wants to speak to the Duke directly. Angelo interrupts, trying to tell the story himself, but Isabella continues, calling Angelo a murderer, hypocrite, "adulterous thief," and "virgin-violator." The Duke tries to send her away, calling her insane.

Isabella asks the Duke to reconsider, arguing that even someone who seems noble, like Angelo, can actually be bad. The Duke realizes that Isabella is far too logical to be insane. Isabella urges him to see reason. The Duke asks her to tell her story, and she begins by recounting how her brother was sentenced to death for fornication, and how she was asked by Lucio to ask Angelo for his pardon. Lucio verifies this, but the Duke tells him not to speak. Isabella goes on to say that Angelo asked her out of lust to have sexual intercourse with him in exchange for her brother's life. She says that she obeyed, but that Angelo sent the warrant for Claudio's execution anyway. The Duke does not believe her, saying it is illogical that Angelo should have acted in such a way. He asks Isabella to confess that she is lying, and to name the person who sent her.

Isabella prays to heaven to make the truth known. The Duke orders her sent to prison. He asks her who knew of her coming, and she names Friar Lodowick. The Duke asks if anyone knows this friar, and Lucio says that he knows him but does not like him. He also accuses the friar of slander against the Duke and claims to have silenced him. The Duke demands to see the friar. Friar Peter comes forth and says that he has heard everything, agreeing that Isabella is lying. The Duke asks him if he knows Friar Lodowick, and Peter says that he does know him, and that Lodowick is a good man who has never said anything bad against the Duke. He says that Lodowick is sick and has sent him in his place. He is meant to share Lodowick's knowledge, beginning with the fact that Isabella is lying. Isabella is led away by guards, and Mariana enters, veiled, as a witness.

The Duke asks Mariana to show her face before testifying, but she says she will not lift her veil until her husband instructs her to. He asks if she is married, and she says no. He asks if she is a maid or a widow, and she again says no. Confused, the Duke asks Mariana to explain. She tells him that she has had intercourse with her husband, though he does not know it, and therefore is not a maid. The Duke says that her testimony is irrelevant to Angelo's case, but she names Angelo as the husband she is speaking of. Angelo denies it and asks to see her face.

Mariana lifts her veil. The Duke asks if Angelo knows her, and Angelo confesses that he was engaged to her five years before. He swears that he has not seen her since. Mariana explains that they had sexual intercourse on Tuesday night. Angelo objects again, saying that both women are crazy and being exploited by some other person. The Duke sends for the other friar. Friar Peter tells him that the provost knows

where he is, so the Duke sends the Friar to find him. He then leaves, telling Escalus to continue listening to testimony.

Escalus calls for Isabella, saying that he wants to question her himself. Lucio advises him to question her in private, suggesting that she might be ashamed to speak the truth in public. Escalus tells Isabella that someone has denied what she said, attempting to get the truth out of her.

The Duke enters, disguised as a friar, and Escalus begins to question him instead. Escalus asks him if he sent Isabella and Mariana to slander Angelo, claiming that they have already accused him of doing so. The Duke says this is untrue and asks to see the Duke. Escalus says that the Duke has given him free reign. Escalus threatens to torture the Duke's friar alter ego, who says that he has seen a lot of corruption during his visit to Vienna.

Angelo asks Lucio to testify against the Duke/Friar, and he claims that he heard the Duke/Friar slander the Duke. The Duke argues that it was actually Lucio who insulted the Duke, saying that he loves the Duke as much as he loves himself. Escalus tries to send the Duke off to prison, but the Duke tells the provost not to obey. Lucio pulls the Duke's hood off, revealing his identity.

The Duke turns to Angelo and asks if there is anything he would like to say in his own defense. Angelo confesses to his crime and asks for a death sentence. The Duke sentences him to marry Mariana instead. The Duke asks Isabella to come to him, and she says that she is ashamed to have asked him for help. He supposes that she must be wondering why he did not disclose his identity earlier in order to save Claudio's life, and he tells her that the death occurred sooner than he expected, but that Claudio was now in a better place. On Isabella's behalf, the Duke orders Angelo to be executed to pay for Claudio's death.

Mariana says, "I hope you will not mock me with a husband!" (V.i.420). She is worried that she will be a widow instead of a married woman, and so she asks for her husband to be pardoned. The Duke refuses, saying that at least her virtue will be preserved, and that she can find a better husband now. Mariana asks for Isabella's help in persuading the Duke, saying that everyone has their faults.

Isabella kneels and asks the Duke to pardon Angelo, saying that she believes he meant well in his original plans to clean up the city. The Duke is distracted by another question and asks the provost why Claudio was executed at such an unusual hour. He fires the provost for obeying private orders. The provost argues that he went against private orders by saving [Barnadine](#), and the Duke asks to see him.

The provost brings Barnadine, along with a muffled Claudio. The Duke pardons Barnadine, telling the friar to take care of him. He then asks who the muffled man is. The provost says he is another prisoner meant to be executed, one that looks like Claudio. He unveils Claudio. The Duke tells Isabella that Claudio is pardoned and asks her to marry him. He then sentences Lucio to marry whatever woman claims to have been impregnated by him. The Duke concludes by saying that everyone should live happily ever after, including Isabella and himself.

Commentary

Shakespearean comedies traditionally end with marriage, and *Measure for Measure* is no exception. Isabella, originally on the verge of becoming a nun, finds herself about to marry the Duke. It is interesting that she is not given a chance to respond to the Duke's marriage proposal in the play. She is assumedly very happy to become the wife of the town's leader, particularly since he has saved her brother's life. But at the same time this situation reinforces her loss of sexual independence. The central conflict in the play revolves around Isabella's refusal to follow the ways of most of the women in Vienna. Her marriage to the Duke confirms her virtue while denying her independence.

There are no independent women in *Measure for Measure*. Of course, this is not strange, considering the setting and Shakespeare's own era. But *Measure for Measure* gives its women characters even less freedom than other Shakespearean plays. They are prostitutes, nuns, or jilted lovers, given no chance to control their own lives. Isabella is the one exception in that she refuses to respond to Angelo's advances. However, she is still obedient toward the Duke, following all of his instructions.

At the conclusion of the play, the Duke administers punishment to all of the wrongdoers and rewards the virtuous. Angelo is told to marry Mariana, and he escapes death at her request. The Duke probably does not intend to execute Angelo, but wants it made clear that his crime deserves such a punishment. Mariana's reward is Angelo, which she takes happily, although the Duke tells her that he is unworthy of her love. Claudio is allowed to marry [Juliet](#), and Lucio is punished by being made to marry a prostitute. Marriage is not a clear-cut punishment or reward, therefore. Instead, its qualities revolve around the individual situations in which it occurs.