Shakespeare

Cambridge Student Guide

Measure for Measure

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Series Editor: Rex Gibson

Cambridge UNIVERSITY PRESS
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‘With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again’ (Matthew 7.2). There are few plays by Shakespeare where the title of the play is so insistently its theme. In every scene of the play one thing is measured or balanced by another. In Measure for Measure Shakespeare seems to be experimenting with a new style of play: one based on a debate concerning justice and mercy and what constitutes proper government of the self and the state. He asks his audience to make judgements as profound as those made by characters in the play.

The action of Measure for Measure takes place over five days – or several months – as there is double time-scheme in the play. The shorter time-scheme follows the fortunes of Claudio, who is condemned to die for getting pregnant the girl he has promised to marry; the longer time-scheme covers the absence of the Duke and the installation of Angelo as his deputy. Shakespeare had used a double time-scheme in other plays with great success, and in Measure for Measure it is particularly effective, as much of the emotional intensity of the play comes from the abruptness with which Angelo sentences Claudio, and the brevity of time available to Isabella.

Three major characters with an almost pathological denial of their sexuality are presented: Angelo, who ‘scarce confesses / That his blood flows’; Isabella, who considers fornication as the worst possible sin, ‘There is a vice that most I do abhor’; and the Duke who thinks that he is too mature to feel desire, ‘Believe not that the dribbling dart of love / Can pierce a complete bosom’. The play requires each of them to reach a deeper understanding of themselves and of their emotions.

The play begins with unanswered questions. Why is the Duke leaving? Why should Angelo rather than Escalus be left as deputy? Why is Angelo to be tested? At its end, the play implicitly asks questions that are even more challenging. Is Angelo content with Mariana? Has he learned to temper justice with mercy? Why does Isabella say nothing to Claudio? How does Isabella react to the Duke’s proposal? In performance, most of these questions must be tackled and some kind of answer given. The rich ambiguity of the play requires every reader to provide their own interpretations.
Act 1 Scene 1

Measure for Measure opens with mysteries that are never fully resolved during the course of the play: the Duke of Vienna is leaving the city; he gives no reason for his departure, nor does he explain why he is leaving Angelo to govern in his place. Although the Duke goes to some lengths to explain to Escalus that he would be the most experienced, knowledgeable and worthy substitute, he says he is not to be left in charge but is to be given a different ‘commission’ and is warned not to deviate from his instructions. The precise nature of the commission given to Escalus is not revealed to the audience.

The Duke asks Escalus for his opinion of Angelo’s potential as ‘substitute’: ‘What figure of us think you he will bear?’ Describing the absolute power to be left with Angelo, the Duke says that he has ‘Lent him our terror, dressed him with our love’. This is the first of a series of antitheses concerning the power given to Angelo. There are implications in the imagery: the power has only been ‘lent’, and Angelo is merely ‘dressed’ in the authority of the Duke, carrying the suggestion of a temporary abdication of power. There is a balance between ‘terror’ and ‘love’ in the power offered to Angelo, and the play explores the ways in which Angelo deals with these two extremes. Escalus agrees at this moment that there is no one more fitted to be the Duke’s deputy.

When Angelo arrives, the Duke praises him and says that his outward behaviour demonstrates his personality to all those who see him. In a complex sentence, the Duke warns him not to keep his good qualities to himself:

Thyself and thy belongings
Are not thine own so proper as to waste
Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee.  
(lines 29–31)

The Duke compares Nature to an investor, saying that she lends people talents and expects both gratitude and an increase on her investment, but then says that he is speaking to someone (Angelo) who is able to demonstrate this by his own example. In a metrically
short line, ‘Hold therefore, Angelo’, perhaps indicating a change in tone, or a gesture, the Duke then tells Angelo that he is to be regent in Vienna. For the second time the Duke refers to the two extremes of a ruler’s power: ‘Mortality and mercy’. He is giving Angelo the power of life and death over the people of Vienna. Angelo is told that Escalus ‘Though first in question, is [his] secondary’. Angelo hesitates before accepting his new role and, using an image taken from coining, asks for more trials to be made of his character before he takes up so great an honour.

Let there be some more test made of my metal
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamped upon it.  
(lines 48–50)

The Duke refuses and insists that Angelo accept his ‘honours’. He says that his departure is so urgent that he is leaving ‘unquestioned / Matters of needful value’, though he does not explain what they are. Angelo is anxious for more discussion, but the Duke will not even permit his two ministers to escort him part of the way. He reminds Angelo that he has absolute power:

So to enforce or qualify the laws
As to your soul seems good.  
(lines 65–6)

The Duke wants to leave secretly without formalities. He says that though he loves the people, he does not like to appear publicly before them, and that he does not consider anyone trustworthy who courts public opinion. (Shakespeare’s Jacobean audience may well have identified these feelings as resembling those of King James, see page 65.) The Duke says that he will write, and he expects Angelo and Escalus to send him news. When the Duke has left, the two men leave together to talk over the exact nature of the commissions given to them.

Act 1 Scene 2

The tone changes as Lucio and two other Gentlemen talk over the prospects of war with Hungary. They speculate whether the Duke will form an alliance with other dukes. The Gentlemen pray for peace for their souls, but not peace on earth, as they look forward to fighting the Hungarian forces. Lucio accuses them of being like a pirate who
erased the biblical commandment against stealing. The Gentlemen and Lucio joke and taunt one another about their morals and sexually transmitted diseases. When Lucio accuses one Gentleman of being a ‘wicked villain’, he retorts that he and Lucio are as bad as one another, cut from the same length of cloth: ‘there went but a pair of shears between us’. He then puns on ‘plied’ and ‘French velvet’, words which had obscene connotations.

When Mistress Overdone enters, Lucio and the Gentlemen continue to joke about the sexually transmitted diseases they have acquired by visiting her brothel. She tells them of the arrest of Claudio for getting a girl, called Juliet, pregnant. She says that he is ‘worth five thousand of you all’ and that he is to be executed for this offence within three days. The stress on the speed of the action concerning Claudio’s execution is characteristic of the play. Lucio and the Gentlemen believe her story, partly because Claudio was supposed to have met Lucio and has not arrived, and partly because there has recently been a ‘proclamation’ concerning the enforcement of the law against fornication.

The men leave to find out more, and Mistress Overdone, briefly alone on stage, bewails all the reasons for the diminishing trade in prostitution: the soldiers are away fighting a war, sexually transmitted diseases are rife, her customers are being executed, and men are too poor to afford a prostitute. Pompey, her assistant, enters and reports that he has just seen a man being led to prison for getting a woman pregnant: ‘Groping for trouts in a peculiar river.’ As Mistress Overdone has already spoken of the arrest of Claudio, when she questions Pompey it is not made clear whether she thinks that this is another case of a man being arrested, or whether Shakespeare wanted to emphasise to the audience that Angelo had put punitive laws into action very swiftly. Pompey speaks in more detail of the proclamation mentioned by Lucio and the Gentlemen, telling her that all the brothels in the suburbs are to be destroyed (as Vienna in the play represents London, this would suggest those brothels on the south bank of the Thames – see page 69). Those in the city are to be allowed to remain, Pompey says, to ‘seed’ new ones. He says that ‘a wise burgher put in for them’, implying that someone with power and influence has found a way to evade the law. He comforts Mistress Overdone, saying cynically that a good brothel-keeper will never be short of customers.
Shakespeare ensures that the audience knows who enters next on stage by having Pompey identify Claudio, the Provost and Juliet. Claudio is shamed by being publicly shown to the world by the Provost, who is obeying Angelo’s orders. Claudio recognises that ‘Authority’ has an arbitrary, but just power approaching that of the gods. Lucio joins him, and Claudio tells him that his imprisonment is the result of ‘too much liberty’ and that excesses are always followed by ‘restraint’ (punning on the official ‘restraint’ or arrest of his present situation). He uses the illustration of taking arsenical rat poison: once taken it causes a desperate thirst, but the satisfaction of that thirst will kill the drinker. Claudio takes his imprisonment seriously and does not attempt to defend himself. Lucio lightens the tone by commenting sardonically on Claudio’s elaborate wordplay, and he asks what crime Claudio has committed. Claudio is at first reluctant to confess to ‘lechery’, but eventually explains that he and Juliet have privately, though not officially, married. Conventions concerning marriage were different in Shakespeare’s time (see pages 67–9). They were waiting to make their marriage public until they had the agreement of Juliet’s guardians, who have control of her dowry. He admits that they have slept together (‘our most mutual entertainment’) and that Juliet’s resultant pregnancy has made their sexual congress public knowledge.

Explaining to Lucio that Angelo has revived a law against fornication that has been dormant for 19 years, Claudio speculates on the possible reasons for Angelo’s severity. He wonders whether he is being made an example because Angelo intends to impress his new authority upon the general public, or whether the power given to him by the Duke has made Angelo into a tyrant, or even whether it is in Angelo’s nature to be tyrannical. He finally decides that Angelo is enforcing this old law in order to enhance his reputation, his ‘name’.

Lucio agrees, and cannot resist making a joke about Claudio’s predicament. He suggests that Claudio should appeal to the absent Duke, but Claudio has already tried to and cannot find out where he is. Claudio would like his sister to make a final appeal to Angelo and he asks Lucio to be his messenger, telling him that Isabella is to enter a nunnery that day. Lucio is to ask Isabella to ‘make friends / To the strict deputy’. Claudio describes Isabella as very persuasive, both in her appearance and in her use of argument. There is a subtext
running through his choice of words, many of which are capable of a sexual interpretation, carrying a possible implication that Claudio expects that Angelo will be persuaded by Isabella’s alluring intelligence and talents:

for in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect
Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art
When she will play with reason and discourse,
And well she can persuade.  

(lines 163–7)

Again Lucio’s response to Claudio’s poetic and elaborate imagery is in prose and is reductive. Claudio has spoken of his ‘most mutual entertainment’ with Juliet; in Lucio’s terminology this becomes a ‘game of tick-tack’.

Act 1 Scene 3
The Duke and Friar Thomas enter mid conversation. It appears that the friar has just made a suggestion, which the Duke is now denying (presumably that he has abandoned his position for the purpose of meeting a lover):

Believe not that the dribbling dart of love
Can pierce a complete bosom.  

(lines 2–3)

The Duke seems to think of himself as being above falling in love, referring to Cupid’s arrow as having lost its momentum (‘dribbling’) and saying that his intentions are more mature. He asserts that he has always valued a private and retired way of life. The Duke tells the friar that he has appointed Angelo as regent in his place, whom he describes as ‘A man of stricture and firm abstinence’, and that he has spread rumours that he himself has travelled to Poland.

As justification for such an extreme course of action, the Duke explains to the friar that though there are strict laws in Vienna, he has failed to enforce them. He compares himself to a father who has made a rod out of birch twigs, but has only hung it up to be a warning threat to his children; because they are never beaten, the children mock rather than fear the birch. The laws are ignored:
Friar Thomas points out that it is the Duke’s duty to enforce the law, but Duke Vincentio defends himself by claiming that it would seem ‘tyranny’ to allow the laws to lapse for years then suddenly enforce them. He explains that this is why he has appointed Angelo to be his deputy, to enforce the laws using the Duke’s authority but without damaging the Duke’s reputation. The Duke wishes Friar Thomas to lend him the garments of a friar and to coach him in the appropriate behaviour for a monk, so that he may stay in Vienna disguised to observe how Angelo rules. The Duke says that he will give Friar Thomas the reasons why he intends to do this later. The audience never hears these reasons, only the single one told here to Friar Thomas: that Angelo is ‘precise’ (observes a strict moral code) – he ‘Stands at a guard with envy’ (defends himself against any slander against his reputation) and ‘scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone’ (he does not acknowledge that he has normal human passions and desires) – and the Duke wishes to see if he is changed by the acquisition of power:

Hence shall we see,
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.  

**Act 1 Scene 4**

Again, Shakespeare begins the scene with the characters already talking. The implication of Isabella’s opening question is that the Nun, Francisca, has been detailing the rules of the convent. As the Poor Clares had the reputation of being a very austere order of nuns, Shakespeare gives the audience an insight into Isabella’s character by showing her requesting even more limitations on her freedom: ‘a more strict restraint’. Her choice of words ironically reflects the situation of her brother, who is under a different kind of ‘restraint’ following ‘too much liberty’.

Lucio calls from off stage, and Francisca explains a further rule of the convent: when they have taken their vows, nuns may only be in the company of a man when the prioress is present, and then they have to choose whether to speak to him unseen or to see him but remain
silent. It is therefore Isabella, who has not yet taken her vows, who opens the door to Lucio. Typically, he shows a complete disregard for propriety by greeting her, ‘Hail virgin’, and he informs her that her brother is in prison. Still treating Claudio’s offence as trivial, something for which he should be rewarded rather than punished, Lucio explains why Claudio has been arrested. When Isabella doubts him, he says that though his normal behaviour with women is to deceive them, he regards her as a saint because she has decided to renounce the world, and he is therefore being sincere. Isabella rebukes his exaggerated language. Lucio’s euphemistic description of Juliet’s pregnancy, which follows, is unusually lyrical:

As those that feed grow full, as blossoming time
That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
To teeming foison, even so her plenteous womb
Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry.  

(lines 41–4)

Isabella guesses the identity of the woman immediately, which supports Claudio’s claim of being informally married to Juliet. Her explanation that Juliet is ‘Adoptedly’ her cousin suggests that they have been close friends. Isabella’s solution is simple: Claudio should marry Juliet. Lucio says that it is too late for that (‘This is the point’), and explains that the Duke has disappeared, deceiving the people as to his intentions and his whereabouts. He tells her that the Duke has left Angelo in his place and has given him absolute power. Lucio describes Angelo as a man without passions:

a man whose blood
Is very snow-broth; one who never feels
The wanton stings and motions of the sense  

(lines 57–9)

Lucio says that Claudio is being made an example to demonstrate the newly enforced laws. He emphasises the speed of Angelo’s judgement and encourages Isabella to plead for Claudio’s life. Isabella doubts her ability to do anything to help, but Lucio persuades her, suggesting that young women can easily move men when they ‘weep and kneel’. Isabella seems convinced, and says ‘I will about it straight’.

soon at night
I’ll send him certain word of my success.  

(lines 88–9)
Act 1 is full of unanswered questions and parallels. The audience has to accept that the Duke is leaving in haste for an unknown reason and that Escalus, though the most experienced substitute, is being passed over. Angelo is the chosen deputy, but it seems to come as a surprise to him that he has been selected for such an exalted position. In the theatre the unanswered questions create a strong sense of dramatic tension.

Shakespeare juxtaposes the private, almost secretive scene of the Duke’s departure with one of the few public scenes of the play. The Gentlemen and Lucio joke bawdily about their sexual experiences. Though the tone is comic as they make fun of one another, their language suggests decay and disease bought expensively at Mistress Overdone’s brothel. As a swift consequence of Angelo’s new authority, Claudio is arrested and paraded publicly through the streets, but his ‘sin’ seems healthy by comparison to Lucio and the Gentlemen. Claudio tells Lucio that his sister is about to enter a convent and asks him to persuade her to plead with Angelo on his behalf. Claudio’s description of Isabella suggests that she has both intellectual and erotic power.

In another of the play’s private scenes, the Duke denies that he has left the city because he has fallen in love. He tells Friar Thomas that he has left Vienna in the charge of Lord Angelo, ‘A man of stricture and firm abstinence’. He describes Vienna as disordered and anarchic, a place where ‘Liberty plucks Justice by the nose’. In the disguise of a friar, the Duke intends to test Angelo: ‘Hence shall we see, / If power change purpose, what our seemers be.’

In the nunnery of the Poor Clares, Isabella is about to enter into her noviciate. Lucio, obeying his promise to Claudio, tells her of her brother’s arrest. In keeping with his sympathetic attitude to Claudio’s situation, he uses terms of natural fulfilment and harvest to describe Juliet’s pregnancy. He persuades Isabella to attempt to use her power to reason with Angelo, ‘a man whose blood / Is very snow-broth’, who has decided to revive the old laws and to make an example of Claudio. Both Isabella and Angelo have now been taken from a ‘life removed’ and given responsibilities in the public sphere.
Act 2 Scene 1
Angelo and Escalus are discussing the newly enforced laws against fornication. On stage, Angelo opens the debate by saying that the law must be enforced or it will be ignored. Angelo’s image of a scarecrow no longer feared by the birds echoes the Duke’s image of a birch rod that is not feared by children in Act 1 Scene 3 (lines 24–7). Escalus responds with three separate arguments in defence of Claudio: first, he merely asks Angelo to be less extreme; second, he states that he knew and respected Claudio’s father; third, he asks Angelo to consider whether he might, in certain circumstances, have thought about committing the same offence as Claudio. This last argument is to become one of the major themes of the play and is the only one to which Angelo responds:

’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall.

(lines 17–18)

Angelo makes the point that there may be thieves in a jury that condemns a thief, but that this does not make wrong the sentence that they impose. He denies that Escalus’ argument has any validity, claiming, ironically as it turns out, that were he ever to commit the same sin as Claudio then he should receive the same punishment without any special consideration:

When I that censure him do so offend,
Let mine own judgement pattern out my death
And nothing come in partial.

(lines 29–31)

Shakespeare reinforces the sense of the speed of Angelo’s judgement by having him immediately instruct the Provost concerning the time of Claudio’s death: ‘See that Claudio / Be executed by nine tomorrow morning.’ Escalus’ reply, in rhyming couplets, is a series of *sententiae* (aphorisms or short sayings). The precise meaning is obscure and various editors have attempted to clarify the four lines by changing the spelling of some words. However, the general sense is clear: that some people can get away with sinning and others cannot.

The scene is then interrupted by the entrance of Elbow the constable, who is bringing in Pompey and Froth for judgement. The
constable has a shaky grasp of English and confuses words, frequently giving the opposite meaning to his purpose: ‘benefactors’ for malefactors, ‘detest’ for respect, for example. His honest intention, but foolish inability to deal with the offenders is perhaps one reason for corruption being rife in Vienna; the power of the state depends upon the competence of its officers. Elbow has arrested Pompey and Froth, whom he calls ‘precise villains’. ‘Precise’ is a word that has already been used to describe Angelo and it will be used about him again later in the play. It is not an appropriate word to use in relation to Pompey and Froth but it acquires a certain resonance from its misuse here. In his accusation of Pompey he also shows the consequences of Angelo’s proclamation: Mistress Overdone’s house has been ‘plucked down’ and she is now running a ‘hot-house’ or bathhouse, which is a cover for a brothel. Angelo’s proclamation seems to have had little effect on the day-to-day running of the city.

Pompey tells a long and complicated story about Elbow’s wife, involving a number of sexual innuendoes concerning prunes (see page 75). He is cunningly using an age-old technique of burying the exact details of his misdemeanours in a welter of irrelevant information: here, about the cost of the dish and the date of the death of Master Froth’s father. His trick works, as Angelo becomes too irritated to continue listening to the evidence and leaves Escalus to hear the case. This could be interpreted as an echo of the Duke’s abdication of power. Angelo also assumes the men are guilty, hoping that Escalus will ‘find good cause to whip them all’.

Escalus makes an attempt to discover the true facts of the case but they are obscured by Pompey’s constant distractions and by Elbow’s malapropisms. In the event ‘what was done to Elbow’s wife’ by Froth is left to the imagination of the audience. Pompey exploits the constable’s misuse of language, leading Escalus to wonder, ‘Which is the wiser here, Justice or Iniquity?’ Escalus instructs Elbow to allow Pompey to ‘continue in his courses’ until he has concrete evidence of an offence. Elbow is pleased, assuming that this is Pompey’s punishment. Shakespeare seems either to have had a particularly low opinion of the intelligence of constables, or they were easy targets for comedy. Escalus deals with each offender leniently, warning Froth to stay out of taverns.

Escalus makes a joke about Pompey’s surname, Bum, with a probable reference to the fashion of his padded breeches. It is clear
that Escalus does not believe Pompey’s claim to be merely a ‘tapster’ (barman), and he warns him that he must stop being a ‘bawd’ (pimp). Pompey’s defence is that the law is arbitrary (selling sex would be lawful if there were no law against it) and that sexual activity, especially amongst the young, is characteristically human. Escalus warns him that the laws concerning fornication are being enforced more rigorously, with infringements punishable by ‘heading and hanging’. Pompey asks whether Escalus intends to castrate all the young people in the city, and says cynically that this law will radically diminish the population of Vienna. Referring to Caesar’s defeat of Pompey, Escalus puns on Pompey’s name and tells him that any further offence, however minor, will be severely punished. Pompey thanks Escalus for his warning, but makes it clear to the audience that he has no intention of reforming.

Escalus then turns to a possible root cause of the disorder by questioning Elbow about his role as constable. He discovers that when citizens are elected to do their term of office as constable of their parish, they pay Elbow to perform it for them. Escalus arranges to see the most ‘sufficient’ or able men in Elbow’s parish the next day, presumably to stop them abusing the system (see page 64).

Escalus defends Angelo in his final conversation with the Justice, who has been silent on stage until this point. He refers to one of the themes of the play: that, in general, being merciful is not always the best course, which he balances with his sympathy for the particular case of Claudio. Ironically, this appears to be true in Pompey’s case; he has been shown mercy by Escalus, but will continue to be a pimp.

Mercy is not itself that oft looks so,
Pardon is still the nurse of second woe.
But yet, poor Claudio; there is no remedy.  
(lines 244–6)

**Act 2 Scene 2**

The Provost goes to see Angelo in the hope that he will have reconsidered his decision. Like Pompey, the Provost considers Claudio’s sin such a common offence that he should not be executed for it. Angelo seems angry at having his sentence queried and threatens the Provost coldly with dismissal. He instructs the Provost to move Juliet to a more suitable place to give birth: ‘Dispose of her / To some more fitter place’, calling her a few lines later the
‘fornicatress’. Juliet is to be allowed what is necessary for her condition but not ‘lavish’ (extravagant) provision.

Isabella is announced and enters escorted by Lucio. Though the ensuing debate is between Angelo and Isabella, the Provost and Lucio are both present and, like onstage spectators, comment occasionally on the action, especially on Isabella’s attempts to change Angelo’s mind. Isabella has a difficult moral dilemma. She wishes to plead for her brother’s life, but without making any suggestion that she approves of what he has done. Her language reflects the internal conflict she experiences:

There is a vice that most I do abhor,
And most desire should meet the blow of justice;
For which I would not plead, but that I must,
For which I must not plead, but that I am
At war ‘twixt will and will not.  

(lines 30–4)

Her argument that Angelo should ‘Condemn the fault’, and not Claudio himself, is easily defeated by him. By definition the fault is already condemned. She recognises and accepts the force of this and turns to leave. Lucio persuades her to try again to ‘entreat him’, and tells her to kneel before Angelo. He tells Isabella that she is too ‘cold’ and must argue more forcefully:

If you should need a pin,
You could not with more tame a tongue desire it

(lines 46–7)

Her reasoning now centres on the need for Angelo to show mercy and on the Christian doctrine that Christ died to redeem sinners. Angelo adamantly refuses to be moved. She reminds Angelo that mercy is considered to be the most fitting attribute of the powerful, greater than the king’s crown and other symbols of authority. She also claims that if the situation had been reversed, Claudio would not have been so severe, and she draws attention to Angelo’s potential to be tempted:

If he had been as you, and you as he,
You would have slipped like him, but he like you
Would not have been so stern.  

(lines 65–7)
Angelo merely demands that she leave, but Isabella continues to press him to consider how it would be if their situations were reversed. As she is a novice, it is appropriate that Isabella’s arguments should be based on Christian doctrine. She reminds Angelo of Christ’s infinite mercy, and demands:

How would you be
If he, which is the top of judgement, should
But judge you as you are?  

(lines 77–9)

Angelo denies a personal judgement: ‘It is the law, not I, condemn your brother’. Again Shakespeare draws attention to the speed with which Claudio’s execution will take place, as Angelo says, ‘he must die tomorrow’. The suddenness of this seems to spur Isabella on to more forceful persuasion, asking for time for Claudio to be prepared for death. Isabella repeats an argument used by the Provost (at lines 4–6) and which will be echoed by others later in the play: that ‘many have committed’ the same offence as Claudio, and why should only he die for it? Lucio applauds her argument.

Angelo points out that fornication has always been against the law, even though punishment has not been enforced. He says that if the first person to offend in this way had been punished then it would have set an example to others, who would not have ‘dared to do that evil’. In his personification of the Law he speaks of it as waking, seeing what the consequences of indulgence might be, and making a decision to prevent future offences. Like Escalus before her, in Scene 1, Isabella acknowledges the truth of his reasoning and can only ask for pity. Angelo responds with abstract, rather than personal justification: pity lies in justice. To punish a crime now is to show pity to unknown future generations by ensuring that the crime will not be committed in the future.

Isabella seems to become more angry and impassioned, possibly in response to his emotional detachment. She attacks Angelo personally in a long speech punctuated by encouraging asides from Lucio and the Provost. She accuses Angelo of arrogance and tyranny because he wants to use the power he has been given:

So you must be the first that gives this sentence,
And he, that suffers. Oh, it is excellent
To have a giant’s strength, but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.  

(lines 109–12)

In strongly sarcastic terms, Isabella claims that if man (‘every pelting, petty officer’) could wield power like the gods, there would never be any peace. She attacks the pride of mortal power by comparing it to that of ‘Merciful heaven’, which is used more sparingly and appropriately. Her image of ‘man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority’, recalls the Duke’s words from Act 1 Scene 1, line 19: ‘Lent him our terror, dressed him with our love’. She derides man’s confidence in the possession of a soul about which he knows nothing. She creates a memorably scornful picture of the petty judgements of ‘proud man’, who:

like an angry ape
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,
Would all themselves laugh mortal.  

(lines 124–7)

When Angelo eventually interrupts to ask her, ‘Why do you put these sayings upon me?’ she says that ‘authority’ is also capable of sin but has a greater capacity to conceal it. Again Angelo is asked to assess his own conscience. Isabella says that if he can acknowledge this ‘natural guiltiness’ in himself, Angelo should not condemn Claudio:

Go to your bosom,
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That’s like my brother’s fault.  

(lines 140–2)

Earlier, at line 129, Lucio had noticed a reaction from Angelo. Now, in an aside, Angelo reveals to the audience that his emotions are stirred by Isabella, punning on the different meanings of ‘sense’ (reason and desire):

She speaks, and ’tis such sense
That my sense breeds with it.  

(lines 146–7)

He turns away to leave her and Isabella begs him to turn back. Angelo gives her some hope by telling her to visit him ‘tomorrow’. She
shocks both him and Lucio with an offer to ‘bribe’ him, but Isabella is in fact offering to bribe Angelo with prayers. She uses two conventional phrases of leave-taking: ‘Heaven keep your honour safe’, and ‘Save your honour’, each of which Angelo interprets literally. To the first he replies, ‘Amen’ (so be it) because he is aware how much his desire for Isabella tempts him to sin, and to the second, ‘From thee: even from thy virtue.

In his soliloquy, Angelo reveals how appalled he is by how much Isabella sexually attracts him. In the first lines he almost seems to blame her (‘Is this her fault, or mine?’) but he goes on to show that he is very clearly aware that he is tempted to sin and that it is her virtue which has seduced him. He compares her to the sun, which shines on both flowers and dead flesh; the flowers are nurtured, but the flesh rots. Denying the truth of his own reasoning from Scene 1, lines 18–23, he now feels that he should let Claudio live, as ‘Thieves for their robbery have authority / When judges steal themselves’. The whole soliloquy conveys a profound sense of the absolute shock experienced by Angelo that he has been attacked so suddenly and so completely by sexual desire:

What, do I love her
That I desire to hear her speak again
And feast upon her eyes?  

(lines 181–3)

Shakespeare also gives the audience an insight into Angelo’s inflated opinion of himself, as he terms himself a ‘saint’ tempted by another saint. He reflects on how, in the past, he could overcome all sexual temptation, but is now seduced by Isabella’s virtues. He ends by declaring that until now he has never understood what makes other men fall in love.

Ever till now
When men were fond, I smiled, and wondered how.  

(lines 190–1)

**Act 2 Scene 3**

The Duke, now disguised as a friar, is visiting the prison and asks the Provost for permission to visit the prisoners to offer them spiritual counsel. The Provost’s ready assent adds to the audience’s impression
of him as a sympathetic man: ‘I would do more than that, if more were needful.’ In speaking of Juliet, he describes her plight as a consequence of her youth. Claudio he describes as:

a young man

More fit to do another such offence
Than die for this. \(\text{lines 13–15}\)

Shakespeare again reminds the audience of the speed with which Claudio’s execution is to be carried out (‘tomorrow’). The Provost tells Juliet that he has ‘provided’ for her, presumably according to Angelo’s instructions. The Duke questions Juliet about her attitude to Claudio, to the sin and to her shame. She echoes Claudio’s description of their ‘most mutual entertainment’ (Act 1 Scene 2, line 135) when she agrees that their offence was ‘mutually committed’. The Duke alludes to the conventional idea of Shakespeare’s time that makes the woman more culpable than the man: ‘Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.’ Juliet accepts the judgement, but the Duke wonders whether her repentance is caused by her sense of sin or whether it is merely because her pregnancy has made her crime public. Juliet interrupts him to assert that she repents the sin and carries the shame (her baby) ‘with joy’.

When the Duke tells her that he is going to visit Claudio, he also abruptly informs her that Claudio is to die ‘tomorrow’. The news shocks Juliet. Her reaction is one of distress that her pregnancy has saved her life but that she will have to live with the ‘horror’ of Claudio’s death.

**Act 2 Scene 4**

Angelo is trying to pray, but while he speaks the words of the prayer he is thinking only of Isabella. He is all too aware of the contrast between the empty words of his prayer and his imagination, which is obsessed with Isabella’s image:

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. \(\text{lines 4–7}\)
Shakespeare gives Angelo a powerful image in this speech: of his merely mouthing the words of a prayer, or even perhaps of taking the Eucharist (the bread and wine taken at Mass), while the language gives a profoundly physical representation of Angelo’s desire for Isabella. The word ‘conception’ is reminiscent of his senses ‘breeding’ in Scene 2, line 147. His former serious, puritanical interests have lost their attraction. He admits privately that he was proud of his ‘gravity’, but now feels that he would be prepared to exchange it for a more worldly reputation. He speaks of his consciousness that the outward forms of wealth and authority make the masses obedient, and that even those amongst them who are ‘wiser’ are deceived by ‘false seeming’. ‘Seeming’ recalls the Duke’s final lines of Act 1 Scene 3 and anticipates Isabella’s reaction to Angelo later in this scene, at line 151.

Angelo is now forced to acknowledge that he is as human in his passions as other men; his statement ‘Blood, thou art blood’ reminds the audience both of the Duke’s assessment that he ‘scarce confesses / That his blood flows’ (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 52–3), and of Lucio’s more exaggerated view of him as a ‘man whose blood / Is very snow-broth’ (Act 1 Scene 4, lines 57–8). At the end of his soliloquy, Angelo acknowledges that it is impossible to disguise the true nature of evil: ‘Let’s write “Good Angel” on the devil’s horn, / ’Tis not the devil’s crest’.

When Isabella is announced, Angelo utters one of the most powerful descriptions of the effects of sexual desire:

Oh, heavens,
    Why does my blood thus muster to my heart,
    Making both it unable for itself
    And dispossessing all my other parts
    Of necessary fitness? (lines 19–23)

He uses two further images in this personal and direct physical description of his feelings: that of a crowd depriving a fainting person of air by their over-eagerness to help, and that of the general public leaving their proper places to applaud their king, crowding him with their numbers (a probable reference to King James – see page 65).

The exchange between Angelo and Isabella which follows is this time in private, adding powerful dramatic effect to their uninterrupted dialogue. Isabella’s greeting, ‘I am come to know your
pleasure’, echoes Angelo’s first words to the Duke in Act 1 Scene 1. Angelo gives her a sexually suggestive reply: ‘That you might know it would much better please me / Than to demand what ’tis.’ She accepts without question his statement that Claudio must die and turns to go. Angelo is forced to prevaricate in order to keep her there by suggesting that he might postpone the execution: ‘Yet may he live a while’. Isabella shows that her concern is for Claudio’s soul by asking Angelo to specify the time so that Claudio may prepare himself for death by confession and repentance.

Angelo suddenly breaks the flow of the discussion to repeat his disgust at fornication (‘Fie, these filthy vices!’), but in his language he reveals his now more ambivalent attitude to sex. He says that the creation (‘saucy sweetness’) of illegitimate children is as sinful as murder, and as easy a sin to commit. Isabella agrees that they are both mortal sins but that society does not usually punish fornication with death. Angelo offers Isabella a choice based on her argument and again betrays to the audience his own confused feelings in the oxymoron ‘sweet uncleanness’:

Which had you rather: that 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? (lines 51–4)

The bargain offered by Angelo is between Claudio’s execution and Isabella’s virginity but she does not fully comprehend his meaning, taking it as part of a hypothetical discussion. Isabella replies that she would rather die than commit a mortal sin, and the reference to her soul seems to irritate Angelo who wishes her to consider the question more carefully. In performance, Angelo’s ‘I talk not of your soul’ often provokes audience laughter because, unlike Isabella, the audience knows that Angelo has only Isabella’s body in mind. Using an argument to be echoed later by Claudio, he tells her that ‘compelled sins’ (forced wrongs) would not be held in judgement against her, though he immediately steps back from that point. He rewords his argument slightly more specifically:

I, now the voice of the recorded law,
Pronounce a sentence on your brother’s life.
Might there not be a charity in sin
To save this brother’s life?  

(lines 61–4)

Again Isabella misunderstands his darker meaning, interpreting the ‘sin’ mentioned at line 63 to be Angelo’s leniency in pardoning Claudio, and she says she will accept the sin of begging for his life. Their words and phrasing echo one another’s but are profoundly different in meaning:

ISABELLA
Please you to do’t,
I’ll take it as a peril to my soul,
It is no sin at all but charity.

ANGELO
Pleased you to do’t, at peril of your soul,
Were equal poise of sin and charity.  

(lines 64–8)

Angelo seems unsure if Isabella is being deliberately obtuse or ‘crafty’, though she denies it. He feels she is displaying a kind of false humility by drawing attention to her own lack of understanding. He says that, in order to make his meaning clear, he will ‘speak more gross’, first restating the fact of Claudio’s crime and the justice of his sentence. Isabella accepts this, and for the third time Angelo offers her the choice. Though he has said that he will speak plainly, he still obscures his meaning with euphemisms; he does not mention himself but ‘a person / Whose credit with the judge, or own great place’ could secure Claudio’s freedom, and he refers to the sexual act as laying down ‘the treasures of your body’. Isabella now understands the nature of the bargain offered by Angelo but still sees it as part of a theoretical debate. Many critics see her reply as exposing hitherto unsuspected elements of her character. They feel that she reveals the kind of repressed sexuality displayed by Angelo, because in her reply there is a sharp contrast between form and content. Her denial is absolute but the language is very sensual and the imagery erotically physical:

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

(lines 100–4)
Angelo’s line in response is short (six syllables), ‘Then must your brother die’; and Isabella matches it with another six-syllable line, ‘And ’twere the cheaper way’. She goes on to make it clear that she is refusing because she thinks that she would suffer eternal damnation if she were to accept the bargain of her virginity for Claudio’s life. Angelo asks her if she would not then be as severe as the law if she refuses an opportunity to save her brother. Isabella points out, in a doubly balanced set of images, that there is a great difference between a shameful ransom and freely offered pardon. Referring to her desperate pleading for Claudio’s life in their last meeting, Angelo accuses her of diminishing the seriousness of his crime. Isabella still appears to think that she is taking part in an academic debate on the nature of Claudio’s sin, and that the weakness of her argument has been exposed by Angelo:

I something do excuse the thing I hate  
For his advantage that I dearly love.  (lines 120–1)

Angelo’s response, ‘We are all frail’ seems like a dryly sardonic comment on his own situation. Isabella suggests that if her brother’s death were to result in the cessation of frailty, she would accept it. Angelo continues the theme of frailty, or weakness, and Isabella agrees that women are as frail and as easily broken as mirrors, and that men take advantage of their frailty. Angelo appears to be impatient and his tone becomes more imperative: ‘Be that you are, / That is, a woman’. Isabella still does not understand his intentions and, again matching each other in two metrically short lines, Angelo tells her that he loves her; Isabella responds, ‘My brother did love Juliet’. She still thinks that he is testing her virtue, but he insists that he is telling the truth: ‘Believe me on mine honour, / My words express my purpose.’ At this point in some modern productions, Angelo has physically assaulted Isabella, intending rape, and she has fought him off. Echoing his words ‘honour’ and ‘purpose’, Isabella accuses Angelo of ‘seeming’. Her solution appears simple: he must pardon Claudio or she will tell the world of his hypocrisy.

Angelo’s reply is chilling: ‘Who will believe thee, Isabel?’ He knows that his public reputation for austerity, and the fact that he is the Duke’s chosen deputy, will make her accusation seem slanderous. Angelo uses an image of horses to imply that he is allowing his
sensuality to take its own control: ‘I give my sensual race the rein’. In a line full of aggressive consonants, he speaks of his ‘sharp appetite’. For the first time he makes brutally clear the bargain he has already offered to her three times: ‘redeem thy brother / By yielding up thy body to my will’ or Claudio will not only die but suffer torture too. Again, the fact that she must give her answer ‘tomorrow’ gives the audience another reminder of the urgency and speed of the drama. Harshly, Angelo warns her that his position in the state will outweigh her innocence:

Say what you can, my false o’erweighs your true.  
(line 171)

Isabella is left alone on stage and desolately acknowledges the truth of Angelo’s words: ‘Did I tell this / Who would believe me?’ She reflects that it is dangerous when those who represent the law are themselves corrupt, using their power to satisfy their desires. Isabella decides to go to her brother and, using a hyperbolic image, declares she is confident that even though his sin was provoked by sexual desire, he would rather die twenty times before he would allow his sister to be sexually corrupted. Isabella is threatened with rape; she intended to spend the rest of her life withdrawn from the world with her virginity devoted to God. At the end of her speech she measures the value of her virginity against that of her brother’s life and many critics have hotly debated her decision:

Then Isabel live chaste, and brother die:  
More than our brother is our chastity.  
(lines 185–6)