

A Necessary Evil? Concessions to Theme and Structure in Measure for Measure

Much criticism of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure has either ignored the problems of the play in attempting to advance a coherent reading, or taken the problems as intentional or unintentional literary statements by the author concerning the imperfect state of human affairs. Vivian Thomas—among those who see the problems as intentional—states that, as a problem play, the tensions of Measure for Measure make the audience aware of unavoidable societal and personal difficulties, which are purposely left unresolved in order to mirror the vital and irresolvable problems of human life (21): that is, the work intentionally falls flat. In realistically analyzing this play, however, we need neither ignore the “problems” nor conclude that the play is a failure—intentional or otherwise. By close attention to the text we see that Shakespeare's comedy does in fact have a consistent theme and structure, controlled by the Duke's plan of societal and personal reform which culminates in the brilliant resolution of act five; the awkwardness we sometimes sense, then, does not come from overarching and destructive forces, but reveals isolated instances in which Shakespeare made concessions to theme and structure, pushing himself (and the Duke) into manipulations with which we are not pleased.

The Duke's conversation with Friar Peter in 1.3 establishes the lines upon which we can follow the play's consistent structure. In this conversation, the Duke not only divulges his desire to see the city corrected through Angelo “Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home” (1.3.41), but also his aim to test his counselor. He desires to find out “If power change purpose, what our seemers be” (53-54). By this comment the audience is clued into the fact—before the action; while we still only know Angelo as “A man of stricture and firm abstinence” (1.3.12)—

that the Duke knows something about Angelo which we do not; the Duke has some reason to suspect Angelo of being only a “seemer.” Later in 3.1 (194-224) the Duke recounts to Isabella how the “well-*seeming*” (218 added) Angelo mistreated Mariana, “Left her in her tears, and dried not one of them with his / comfort; swallowed his vows whole, pretending in her dicov- / eries of dishonour” (220-222). This revelation is not an awkward expedience devised by the playwright later in his composition, but helps us to understand the Duke’s original suspicions of Angelo. The structure of the play will continue to unfold as the revelation and enlargement of this plan of the Duke for personal and societal testing and reform.

In addition to revealing the line on which the play’s structure will operate, the conversation with Friar Peter also helps us to understand a major theme the play’s structure will attempt to present. While sincerely trusting the “precise” (1.3.50) Angelo to aid in Vienna’s correction, the Duke is also interested in the moral reformation of a man who breaks off wedding engagements to unfortunate, enamored women with impunity. The problem at issue with Angelo is, as Meredith Skura suggests, his belief that “he can separate the law from the human context in which it is applied. He never thinks about the ultimate source and end of laws, nor of their effect” (42). This is why Angelo has no problem abandoning Mariana, nor does he have a problem condemning Claudio to death. His rigor sees only the fact of the law, not its “human context” the very thing that gives the law any meaning. David Stevenson has a similar position with regards to the play’s concerns that “real justice and real mercy may eventually win out” (277) and that the severer forms of goodness, as in Angelo, might see a “redemption into actual, livable goodness” (277). Thus the conversation with Friar Peter establishes the trial of a too-just “seemer” who will be led away from his rigor to Stevenson’s “livable goodness.” This goal of transformation for Angelo is not directly stated—we only know he is to be tested—and in fact

we don't understand the entirety of the Duke's aim in testing Angelo until the play's dénouement when all is revealed (Wilson 379). Just why the Duke fails to tell the audience his specific goals in testing others we will explore later. For now it is enough to state that a major theme of the play is the reformation of personal and societal extremes into a proper "human context," as Skura says, which has been hinted at in the Duke's desire to test Lord Angelo.

A person who needs little help placing things in their proper context is Escalus. His encounter in the latter part of 2.1 with the interlopers Elbow, Pompey and Froth is a prime example of an apparently minor scene advancing and supporting the major themes of the play. At this point we know that the laws of Vienna have been dormant so long ("like an o'ergrown lion in a cave / That goes not out to prey" 1.3.22-23), that "Liberty plucks Justice by the nose" (1.3.29). Trying out his rigor, Angelo has already declared the sentence of death for Claudio and proclaimed the destruction of the suburban brothels (1.2), insisting at the opening of 2.1, "We must not make a scarecrow of the law." Escalus' reply, which apparently everyone else in the play (and probably the audience) has already considered, is placatory: "Ay, but yet / Let us be keen, and rather cut a little / Than fall and bruise to death" (2.1.4-6). In the scene—whose significance we might miss for its bawdy humor—Escalus gives us the first example of someone actually capable of applying the model of "livable" (Stevenson 277) justice advanced by the play. Elbow, an incompetent constable, has brought to trial "two notorious benefactors" (2.1.47) as he refers to Pompey—a tapster and pimp—and Froth, a lesser gentleman and frequenter of the brothel where Pompey is employed. Rather than "fall and bruise to death" (2.1.6) Escalus is circumspect in his dealings with the malefactors. Judging Froth to be an example of licentious youth fallen into its natural fault, he chastises him and sends him away, meanwhile learning from him the identity of Mistress Overdone. To Pompey, Escalus extends a firm warning that his next

offense will find firm punishment, while also shrewdly employing the bumbling constable to recruit others to share his post, thereby minimizing the threat of his well-intentioned incompetence (228-244).

The effectiveness of Escalus' style of judgment can be seen in another minor scene. In the latter part of 3.1, set in the prison, Escalus and the Provost enter with Mistress Overdone who begs to be let go: "Your hon- / or is accounted a merciful man, good my lord" (421-22). This plea prompts an uncharacteristically vehement reply from Escalus "Double and treble admonition, and still forfeit in the / same kind! This would make mercy swear and play the tyrant" (423-24). The Escalus that has acted mercifully also understands that justice must have its voice or it becomes impotent, especially concerning this "bawd of eleven years' continuance" (3.1.425). Further, this anecdote alerts the audience that moral change is, in fact, being enacted in Vienna. Pompey, ignoring Escalus' previous admonition, has again been brought in as "a bawd, a wicked bawd!" (3.1.274). He has been incarcerated, and now Mistress Overdone—ostensibly on Escalus' pursuit of Froth's information—is also brought to prison. Mistress Overdone had apparently followed Pompey's advice in 1.2 ("Though you change your place, you need not change your / trade" 88-89) and relocated her "stew" under the front of a sauna. This we have learned earlier from Elbow in 2.1, who states that her "house" was "plucked down in the / suburbs; and now she professes a hot-house, which I think is / a very ill house too" (59-61). However, she has been found out, showing that Escalus' form of justice takes account of its human context with a mercy that will *not* be made a scarecrow of (even while 2.4 has paradoxically seen the disastrous fall of the too-rigorous Angelo). In fact, up until this point the aims of the Duke's plan can be seen coming to pleasant fruition. Not only is the unregenerate

city beginning to see justice, Angelo is doing exactly what the Duke hoped he would do—proving himself a “seemer” (1.3.54) and opening the door to his own transformation.

In the Duke’s visit to the prison we again see the Duke’s plan advanced, thus receiving further testament to the structural consistency of the play. Having finished counseling Claudio to be prepared for death, the Duke observes the entrance of Isabella and requests that the provost “Bring me to hear them speak where I may be concealed” (3.1.51). His concealment allows the Duke to hear of Angelo’s fall and the proposition he has made to Isabella: her chastity for Claudio’s life. With surprising quickness he then conceives a plot whereby Isabella “may most uprightously do a poor wronged / lady a merited benefit, redeem your brother from the angry / law, do no stain to your own gracious person, and much please / the absent Duke” (3.1.198-201). This plot he claims to stem from his own good will: “To the love I have in doing good, a remedy presents itself” (3.1.196-7). Not only does the Duke begin with a plan to better the city, he quickly expands that plan when circumstances shift to achieve ever greater ends, weaving in the potential problems of Claudio’s doom and Angelo’s base proposition to further correct Angelo’s fault.

The increase of the Duke’s plans to do good seems now to extend even to the reformation—conscious or unconscious—of *himself*. We have learned at the play’s beginning that the Duke has “always loved the life removed” (1.3.9). However, as Harold Wilson suggests in “Action and Symbol in Measure for Measure and The Tempest,” this remove seems to have affected his ability to govern Vienna in the same way that Prospero’s studiousness affected his ability to govern The Tempest’s Milan (382). Both leaders became delinquent in their leadership. Additionally, the Duke considers himself to possess “a complete bosom” immune to “the dribbling dart of love” (1.3.2-3), yet in the scene in the prison we have a first indication of

the Duke's attraction for Isabella. His very first words to her, "The hand that hath made you fair hath made you good" (3.1.181-2), are followed by the comment that her beauty, being inspired by her goodness (rather than vice versa) promises "to keep the body of it ever / fair" (183-84). If cupid's arrow cannot "pierce" (1.3.3) Vicentio, it has at least pricked him. Its entrance, however, is made possible by the resemblance between Isabella's virtue and his own. The Duke's resistance to "the aims and ends / Of burning youth" (1.3.5-6) mirrors the chaste Isabella: "a thing enskied and sainted / By your renouncement" (1.4. 33-4), as Lucio refers to her. We are further affirmed in their shared virtue by Escalus' description of the Duke later in the scene as "a gentleman / of all temperance" "Rather rejoicing to see another merry than merry at / anything which professed to make him rejoice" (3.1.459-461). Not only does Escalus' comment further point out the complementarity of Isabella and Duke Vicentio,¹ it also ensures our opinion of the Duke as one genuinely concerned to do good. Because of their similar virtue, a seed is planted in the Duke's ever expanding and adapting purpose, which will eventually grow into a thematically and structurally consistent proposal of marriage to Isabella.

Before that proposal can occur, we must first witness Isabella concede to the Duke's plan to deceive Angelo with the infamous bed-trick. Though the Duke attempts to placate Isabella by insisting that "the doubleness of the benefit" of his plot "defends the deceit from reproof" (3.1.247-8), the real problem for the contemporary audience with substituting the affianced Mariana for Isabella arises as much from the Duke's apparent hypocrisy as any deception of Angelo. The contract binding Angelo and Mariana seems parallel to the contract binding Claudio and Juliet, whose sexual consummation the Duke had denounced earlier as a "most offenceful act" (2.3.28). We find it problematic that the Duke can censure the behavior of one

¹ A complementarity *visually* confirmed by the fact that Isabella is probably—and the Duke definitely—dressed in religious habit.

couple, and then proceed to facilitate the same sort of coupling when it suits his do-gooder schemes. For Skura, this is really a problem, and reflects the fact that the Duke too fails to keep his plans in a proper human context (44-45). However, as Skura herself states—citing the work of Ernest Schanzer—“Claudio was bound to Juliet by a *de praesenti* contract, and Angelo to Mariana by a *de futuro* which legally became a marriage contract if the parties consummated the relationship” (47). Though Skura dismisses such “precision” as worthy of Lord Angelo, and others such as Stevenson are strongly resistant to the limiting effects of historically contextual arguments (259), it is worth invoking history in this instance to clarify that the Duke—and Shakespeare’s early modern audience—may have seen no double standard because of the different nature of the two contracts, leaving the Duke to only defend the deception of Angelo and removing at least one possible “problem” of the play.

Whether or not we are convinced of the Duke’s freedom from blame in this matter, we see his aims frustrated in Act 4 when the Provost receives Angelo’s special order to proceed with Claudio’s execution. Believing he has slept with Isabella, Angelo issues the order in fear of what Claudio, prompted by “his riotous youth” (4.6.28) might do to avenge his and his sister’s shame. Again, this challenge and others result in an expansion of the Duke’s positive purpose. Upon hearing of Angelo’s order in 4.2, the Duke’s first response is to take advantage of the provident presence of Barnardine’s head as a substitute for Claudio’s, for “death’s a great disguiser” (161). Later, on account of Barnardine’s unpreparedness, the Duke’s plan is again challenged (“to transport him in the mind he is / Were damnable” 4.3.60-61) but here provident circumstance again intervenes to provide the head of Ragusine “died this morning of a cruel fever” (63). Later, in the dénouement, even Barnardine will be incorporated into the Duke’s dexterous manipulation of events to produce the comedic resolution.

It is, however, exactly this technique of manipulation that causes some of the unavoidable awkwardness of the play. Meredith Skura extends her critique of those who remove such institutions as law from their necessary human context to include the Duke's machinations:

In the Duke's operation not only are means subordinate to ends but *structure* is more important than the individual, and the symbolic significance of events more important than their immediate literal impact on the characters (or on us). Once the Duke takes over, people and actions lose their inherent significance and are reduced to parts of his design. (45 *emph. added*)

Duke Vicentio—in his love for doing good, in his desire to take in every challenge to his plan and make of it a more beautiful and complete transformation—must eventually resort to treating people as parts in a schematic design. This is where we see the play stumble. The structure is intact and moves consistently forward, but in taking so much into itself begins to abuse the audience's sensibilities. Thus it is not only the Duke, but Shakespeare who, in devising the Duke's complex dilemma somewhat alienates his audience.

A case in point of the structural requirements of the play creating awkwardness is the Duke's lie to Isabella concerning Claudio's death. It is absolutely necessary to keep Isabella ignorant if either the Duke or the playwright want to preserve the theme of the play, but it causes us to think the Duke cruel. That theme is the "redemption" of various deficient or idealistic forms of goodness "into actual, livable goodness" (Stevenson 277). Most scholars recognize the need of such redemption for Isabella, noting the striking similarity between "The Angelo whose eyes are sealed to his own shortcomings, the Angelo of the opening of the play" and "Isabel in her narrow holiness and self-righteousness" (Wilson 382). In fact, as Warren Smith states "all the principals—to an extent the Duke himself, as well as Isabella, Claudio, and Angelo—are dynamic, are intended to change as the plot develops" (309). What is dynamic in Isabella—the completion of virtue which the Duke has included as part of his grand design—is this "narrow

holiness and self-righteousness” (382) alluded to by Wilson. Wilson sees in Isabella’s struggle to forgive and plead for Angelo while still believing that her brother is dead at his hands a “vital change in Isabel” a “newly awakened charity...Isabel, once intent upon justice, is offered the choice between justice and mercy and chooses mercy” (Wilson 378). However cruel we may think it of the Duke to let Isabella believe that Claudio is dead, it is an unavoidable concession which Shakespeare had to make to the more important themes, and to the structure of his play.

A second instance which shows the encroachment of structure is the admitted shock we may feel at the Duke’s proposal to Isabella. While the proposal itself can be seen as technically necessary and even brilliant, it nonetheless takes us by surprise. First the brilliance. In the play’s opening scene the Duke alluded to Christ’s words in Matthew 5 while delivering Angelo his commission to govern in Vincentio’s stead, insisting that “Heaven doth with us as we with torches do, / Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues / Did not go forth of us, ‘twere all alike / As if we had them not” (32-35)². Thematically, then, the retiring Duke and the novice Isabella, both lovers of virtue, each have something to learn about employing virtue rather than wasting it. It is ironic that the Duke should warn Angelo against wasting “Thyself upon thy virtues, they on thee” (1.1.31) when this is the very lesson the cities delinquency has taught him. Therefore it is brilliant that, in the end, Shakespeare should have these two—Vincentio and Isabella—come together, as their complementary, reformed virtue reinforces the play’s theme and provides hope for proper rule in Vienna in the future. As an audience, though, we are not sufficiently prepared to see that complementarity take the form of marriage. We might ask why Shakespeare could not find room to prepare us, and the answer would be that he did not have room. True, we might have had Isabella giving credence to her affection for the Duke and

² _____ directs our attention to this theme...

thereby bolstering the comic finale, but this would have contradicted the method employed by Shakespeare in this drama.

In establishing that method, Harold Wilson compares Measure for Measure with The Tempest, claiming that while the latter is “largely spectacle invested with some of the finest poetry Shakespeare ever wrote” (382), “The method of Measure for Measure might...be called ‘symbolic action’; that is, the theme of the play emerges in the action without the help of any anticipatory hint or clue” (379). As Wilson argues, in contrast to a Proserpo who very clearly states his plan and intention at the beginning—and throughout—the play, Vicentio is persistently reticent, always keeping those involved in his plots (and even the audience) in the dark concerning his motives (375, 379). This allows the structure of the play to speak the message, not “any anticipatory hint or clue” (Wilson 379). If we agree with Wilson’s sensible approach, then an overt statement of the Duke’s plans toward Isabella—and even perhaps an obvious “hint or clue” concerning Isabella’s own affection—would undermine the technique the bard seems to have been testing out. All must wait upon the final revelation; if, in holding to his method Shakespeare abused our sentiments, we can understand it as the natural result of skilled genius constrained by his own established limits.

Reflecting on another piece of awkwardness: Isabella’s silence, we again see the limitation of form. If we are shocked at the Duke’s proposal, we would at least like Isabella to say something and make us feel comfortable again. Since the cat is out of the bag and Claudio out of his muffle, there is no need to hold back now. But she says nothing. While this is awkward, it is hard to imagine another scenario. If Isabella—freshly united with her beloved brother whom she thought dead—were to blithely lift up her hand to the Duke and offer an eloquent acceptance, we could hardly be less shocked than we are by her silence. Constrained by

the movement of his “symbolic action” however, Shakespeare needs to unite these two, and needs to do it quickly so that the brilliance of the Duke’s achievement doesn’t lose its edge by hanging around on the stage. Again, we have an awkward situation, but it doesn’t result from overarching conscious or unconscious failure. It is a momentary smudging of dramatic felicity in the midst of a largely consistent work.

Returning to Shakespeare’s employment of minor scenes to advance the major themes of the plot, we are given a further foil against those who claim that, as a problem play, Measure for Measure has not really dealt with the main problems presented at the beginning of the play. In this vein, Vivian Thomas states that Measure for Measure is one of those plays which

explore fundamental problems relating to personal and social values within a framework which makes the audience acutely aware of the problems without providing amelioration through the provision of *adequate answers* or a dramatic mode which facilitates a *satisfactory release of emotions*. (21 added)

Though we might agree with Thomas that Shakespeare’s struggle to manage his form does result in a sometimes stilted release of emotion, we have already seen many of the thematic questions answered. Some lesser scenes in Act 4 in particular respond to the questions of societal reform which are still left unanswered by attracting our attention to the fate of Pompey as representative of the bawds and reprobates. 4.2 opens with the Provost’s address to Pompey “Come hither, sirrah. Can you cut off a man’s head?” What follows is a changing of careers for the old tapster. The discipline of Angelo and Escalus has made it impossible for lewd types to flourish at their old trades. As Pompey makes quite evident at the opening of 4.3, the prison is so full of reprobates finally forfeit to the awakened force of the law that “I am as well acquainted here as I was in our house of profession” (4.3.1). He then proceeds for twelve meandering lines to list the incarcerated, ending his statement with the observation “and I think forty more, all great / doers in our trade” (4.3.15-16). Pompey has been forced to abandon that illegal trade for the

legitimate—if not much more tasteful—occupation of executioner. As he says in response to the Provost's offer of a pardon if he will accept the employment "Sir, I have been an unlawful bawd time out of mind, / but yet I will be content to be a lawful hangman" (4.2.12-13). The Vienna which the Duke "returns" to at the plays end is not only the stage for the clever reversals and transformations of Angelo, Isabella and even himself, it is also a Vienna which has seen a reinstatement, on the larger social level, of a " 'measure' or moderation in human affairs" (Stevenson 269)³. In contrast to Thomas' view that "The real world, this play suggests, is disordered, untidy and perplexing, but manifests life" (208) and cannot be regulated without a brutality which snuffs out that life, the Vienna of the play's end has attained an enviable balance: liberty has been restrained, though not eradicated (Lucio, for example is not put to death), and the Duke has made a motion which should soon see he and Isabella joined in tempered, active governance of the city.

By this we are confirmed in the understanding that Measure for Measure is a structurally and thematically consistent comedy in which circumstance cooperates with the cleverness and good will of the Duke to produce the comic resolution. Though the play at times handles awkwardly, this awkwardness is not a subtle literary statement about the general impossibility of human personal and social issues, but perhaps simply reflects the concessions made to form by a skilled, but limited playwright.

³ In fact, the reformation of Vienna—in comparison with the other elements of the Duke's plan—is perhaps the least problematic reformation in the play, occurring naturally through a believable progression in the minor scenes.

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