

A character analysis of angelo



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In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Angelo emerges as a double-sided character; an appropriate focal point for such a 'problem play', as many of Shakespeare's later works are considered to be. Shakespeare appears to have taken his inspiration for the story from sources such as *Promos* and *Cassandra* (George Whetstone) and Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, both plays in which a self-righteous deputy, be it *Promos* in Whetstone's version, or Angelo in Shakespeare's, seduces a woman (*Cassandra* or *Isabella*) by promise of pardon for her condemned brother.

Scholars have argued for centuries whether Angelo, or indeed *Promos*, is a moral or an evil character. Those scholars who support the notion of Angelo as moral often cite the following factors in the play: the Duke obviously trusts Angelo; Angelo is disheartened enough by the end of the play to offer a sincere apology; and Angelo tries to resist the temptation that *Isabella* presents. On the other hand, others have argued that Shakespeare depicts Angelo as a purely evil man. These critics emphasise Angelo's treatment of *Marian*, the Duke's possible suspicion of Angelo, his desire for *Isabella*, and his broken promise to *Isabella*.

By examining Angelo in both of these circumstances, it will become apparent that the most successful interpretation of Angelo's character is a combination of both of these facets. One of these critics, Leo Kirschbaum, suggests that the change in the structure of *Measure for Measure* is the result of a change in the characterization of Angelo. At the beginning of the play, Kirschbaum notes, Angelo is cruel and inflexible, but this is tempered somewhat by the fact that he is also noble in his consistent adherence to the law.

But in the end he is a character who is no longer noble but who is instead "small-minded, mean, calculating (and) vindictive." Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the character and his significance is necessary to decide whether Angelo does actually deserve sympathy. Upon analysis of the early scenes, we, as the audience, would instinctively begin to consider Angelo a character not worthy of sympathy, as he has ostensibly fooled the Duke into trusting him enough to give him power over Vienna and then immediately condemns Claudio to death for impregnating his lover, despite his genuine love for her.

By telling Angelo "Mortality and mercy in Vienna Live in thy tongue, and heart", it is apparent that the Duke trusts Angelo, even more than his own right-hand man, Escalus, who is overlooked to be the Duke's deputy. This, however, is overshadowed by the Duke's conversation with the friar in I. iii where he says "Believe not that the dribbling dart of love Can pierce a complete bosom" and "I have on Angelo impos'd the office; Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home ..."; in both quotes we are led to believe that the Duke perhaps does not trust Angelo to the extent that is initially apparent. Instead, it appears to be part of a wider plan of which we are so far unaware. To make a moral judgement on Angelo at this stage of the play would be incorrect however; we have barely met him as a person, and only seen him in a brief exchange whilst accepting the position the Duke offers him. He is, however, "tyrannous" enough to promise Claudio's liberty in return for Isabella's virginity, such is his power in the Duke's place.

These factors, along with his cruel treatment of Mariana, with whom he had plans of marriage which broke down because "her promised proportions

Came sort of composition", exposing his shallow and hypocritical nature, would point to Angelo not being worthy of the audience's sympathy, and simply a cold, emotionless character (" whose blood is very snowbroth") created by Shakespeare to reflect the promiscuous evil of Viennese society at the time.

For all the negative criticism of Angelo, there is in fact plenty of evidence to suggest he is a character with redeeming features who can be seen as reflecting the positive implications of punishment in a play so concerned with the theme of justice. His apology in the final scene is the prime example of his somewhat altered attitude, due to the events of the story. He is " sorry that such sorrow I procure And so deep sticks it in my penitent heart" - a quote which refers to the Duke's analysis that " the dribbling dart of love Can [not] pierce a complete bosom".

This apology, especially with its placement at the end of the play, does leave the audience with a slightly more positive view of Angelo than would be had otherwise. Angelo's initial refusal of Isabella's offering whilst carrying out the Duke's plan is another factor of the play which would lead the audience to sympathising somewhat with Angelo and not considering him an entirely malicious character.

Despite the evidence of these two points, however, I firmly believe that Angelo is mainly a character undeserving of sympathy, whose reputation amongst the masses is well-founded by his selfish actions and hypocritical nature, as we learn that he has committed a crime far worse than Claudio's - something apparently known by the Duke, who soliloquises at the end of Act

III, saying " He who the sword of heaven will bear Should be as holy as severe".

Although the best analysis of Angelo as a person would clearly be a combination of both malicious and beneficent, as many of the key characters in Shakespeare's 'problem plays' would best be described as, he does appear to be vastly a malevolent being, not worth of the audience's compassion.