

Theme's in 'measure for measure' essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



' Sex' is a particularly relevant theme in ' Measure for Measure. ' It does not actually appear very often as a theme in itself, but it provides a background to most of the other important themes in the play, such as justice, ' seeming,' sin and morality. All of the separate story lines appear to involve a sexual theme, including Claudio and Juliet's ' crime,' Angelo's hypocrisy involving both Mariana and Isabella, and Mistress Overdone's brothel. Shakespeare has assigned sexual attitudes to particular characters, and through these he presents sex as a theme.

Characters with particular attitudes towards sex include Angelo, Isabella, Juliet and Claudio. Their principles only appear to be presented during the first three acts of the play, as the story line continues on a basis of what we already know about their attitudes towards sex. The individual views of these characters are set against a background of Vienna as a corrupt city; religious and moral principles; Mistress Overdone and Pompey's professional interest, and Lucio's promiscuity. Shakespeare has used Lucio as the representative promiscuous character.

He banters bawdily with two gentlemen in Act I, Scene II, when they accuse each other of suffering from venereal disease, ' I had as lief be a list of an English kersey, as be piled, as thou art pilled, for a French velvet. ' Shakespeare has used humour in this scene as this ' gentleman' is supposedly accusing Lucio of suffering from syphilis. The humour is presented through the use of imagery at this point, and there is a light-hearted tone amongst what the men are saying to one another.

Shakespeare has used imagery in objects such as 'English kersey' and 'French velvet' to represent the idea of the French disease, syphilis, and a rough woollen cloth, which this gentleman would apparently rather be. He has also used alliteration on the words 'piled' and 'pilled,' implying the baldness brought by syphilis. Upon 'Mistress Overdone's' entrance, we are already given an indication of her sexual attitudes through Shakespeare's use of humour in her name.

The character Pompey does not express a particular sexual attitude, but Shakespeare's presentation of this character shows pessimism towards the corrupt Vienna, as Pompey makes a humorous comment that the brothel trade cannot be eliminated unless all of Vienna's people are spayed, 'Truly sir, in my poor opinion, they will to't then.' This could also be the harsh reality of the play, or in fact reality in general as a lot of cities today appear to contain degrees of promiscuity.

The backgrounds that are used for the presentation of the characters' sexual attitudes that I have mentioned appear to have been placed in order to make Claudio's offence of sleeping with Juliet outside of marriage ridiculously innocent. Claudio's sentence is, as most people would agree, unjustified owing to the fact that there are many brothels and people who generally sleep around as they please in Vienna; namely Lucio, and so the general question is: Why is Claudio arrested?

Claudio is obviously outraged as he is taken to prison in Act I, Scene II as, owing to the general impression that he is a simple man, Shakespeare has presented him using notoriously difficult language, 'But it chances the

stealth of our most mutual entertainment with character too gross is writ on Juliet. ' This implies that Claudio is indeed outraged at his arrest. This is possibly what links in with his sexual attitudes. ' We had to hide our love, till time had made them for us,' there is an implication here that Claudio and Juliet were in a loving relationship, but were not married, although were planning to get married.

The main theme of this idea is justice; however, I believe that there are traces in this quote of what we can assume are Claudio's attitudes towards sex. Perhaps this character believes that there should be a loving commitment when sexual relations take place. Although Claudio himself is a minor character in the play, his arrest unleashes all of the main plot lines, including Angelo's re-introduction of the old law and his hypocrisy involving Isabella.

Shakespeare probably created Claudio in order to represent the theme of justice, but this also links in with sexual attitudes as a theme. The character Angelo is possibly the main antagonist of the play, but does not actually have opposing sexual attitudes to Isabella, who is the closest character to a protagonist. He appears to have very strong feelings about the corrupt Vienna that the play is set in, as he re-introduces an old law that has been ignored for nineteen years, stating that no one must sleep with another outside of a marital bond.

However, after Claudio is arrested for violating this law and getting Juliet pregnant, he and Lucio discuss the theory that Angelo is only upholding these laws for the benefit of his reputation, ' And for a name now puts the

drowsy and neglected act freshly on me: 'tis surely for a name' (Act I, Scene II). We do not, therefore, originally know whether or not Angelo is genuinely concerned for the corrupt Vienna, or if he wants to eliminate promiscuous sexual acts going on throughout the city in order to make his status of a higher level.

Angelo continues to stand by Claudio's sentence; as a conversation with Escalus in Act II, Scene II shows, ' Let it keep one shape till custom make it their perch, and not their terror. ' The scene has begun in mid-discussion, as Angelo states that the law must be upheld strictly, in order to allow the people of Vienna to become accustomed to it. Escalus attempts to convince Angelo to show a little mercy, however, Angelo refuses personal involvement. At this point, he also mentions, " Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall.

This is significant, as later on, Angelo becomes overwhelmed with desire for Isabella. The next scene that I feel is significant concerning Angelo and his attitudes to sex is Act II, Scene II, which opens with the Provost attempting to persuade Angelo to reconsider Claudio's fate. It could be argued that Angelo's views are slightly sexist, as he comments, ' Dispose of (Juliet) to a more fitter place; and that with speed. ' I notice here that although she, too, has committed the ' crime' of having sex outside of marriage, Angelo has been flippant in what is done with her, but has sentenced the other ' offender' to death.

This may mean that he treats women better than he does men, or perhaps he feels that Juliet's pregnancy has made her the victim of the deed.

Shakespeare has, here, presented many possibilities to Angelo's attitude to sex. However, as Isabella pleads for him to pity Claudio's situation, Angelo states, ' I pity those I do not know, which a dismissed offence would after gall. ' Therefore, Angelo shows pity for the victims of the crime; by that, we can assume that he means Juliet.

This means that his previous comment meant that he favoured Juliet because she has ' suffered' as a result of the ' crime. When Isabella first begins to plead for her brother's life in Act II, Scene II, her argument is supposedly weak and has little effect on Angelo, as Shakespeare presents his responses as short, brief and precise, ' He's sentenced, 'tis too late. ' This supposedly denotes the character's coldness, but I also believe that it is used deliberately to hide Angelo's true emotions from the audience until further through the scene, when his responses to Isabella's pleadings begin to get longer and more detailed.

I notice that Shakespeare has begun to use sexual imagery in Angelo's speeches, '... Or by remissness new conceived, and so in progress hatched and born. ' This could be an implication of his desire for Isabella beginning to emerge, and Shakespeare is therefore presenting a gradual change in Angelo's attitude towards sex through a gradual change in aspects of Angelo's language. The audience/reader becomes more or less aware of Angelo's new found desire for Isabella when he speaks aside, ' She speaks, and 'tis such sense that my sense breeds with it. - Fare you well.

Shakespeare has used imagery in the word ' breeding' as it has implications of sexuality in it.

As Angelo mentioned further back, " 'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall,' we know that he has previously believed that it is easy to resist sexual temptation. Shakespeare has included the idea of 'hypocrisy;' that being that although Angelo feels that the law is the law and so should be upheld, he breaks it himself because he could not resist the temptation. This does not mean that his attitude has yet changed, he has simply realised that this law is very difficult to follow.

It is difficult to identify what his attitude towards sex is at the end of Act II, Scene II, as he is overwhelmed with emotion for Isabella, and so his speech is therefore quite erratic. Shakespeare has presented Angelo's confusion through the use of soliloquies, which is effective as we can gather his thoughts and feelings without any of the other characters supposedly hearing about it. He makes comments such as, ' O, let her brother live! ' on impulse, which could be because he now favours Isabella's desires, or because he wants to drop the law and Claudio's sentence so that he can now have relations with Isabella outside of marriage.

Shakespeare is, here, presenting confusion within Angelo, and a conflict between his principles and his desires. The quote that I have just mentioned is also a perfect example of Shakespeare's use of language, as he has created an uneasy and irrational tone by apostrophising. There is repeated use of sexual imagery in Angelo's monologue at the end of the scene, for example, ' O, cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint, with saints dost bait my thy hook! There is a definite irrational tone created in this speech, as in contrast to Angelo's earlier short and cold responses, his speech here has

been presented as unorganised and erratic by Shakespeare, which implies to the audience/reader that Angelo is overwhelmed with desire.

In Act II, Scene IV, Angelo proposes that Isabella sleep with him in order to save her brother's life, ' You must lay down the treasures of your body to this supposed, or else let him suffer. ' Shakespeare has created an intense, valuable idea about Isabella, and Angelo's feelings, through Angelo's use of the word ' treasures. This proposition implies that Angelo's strict principles are actually only upheld for his reputation, for he is being highly hypocritical (though only to Isabella), and is prepared to break the law to suit himself. He also points out that such hypocrisy will not affect his reputation, as nobody will believe Isabella's claims over his, ' As for you, say what you can: my false o'erweighs your true. ' Ironically, Angelo is saying that reputation is so clean that it cannot be corrupted. This claim presents an evil tone within Angelo as he is clearly abusing his power at this point.

To conclude Angelo's attitudes towards sex, Shakespeare has presented them through his determination to uphold the abandoned law of sex only being inside of marriage, and the hypocrisy hidden from the public of Vienna proves that it is actually only for his reputation. The character Isabella has very modest and morally defined views of sex. We are introduced to her principles in her first appearance in the play, as she discusses with ' Nunnery' her forthcoming career as a nun.

At first she seems to dislike the low amount of privileges a Nun has, ' And you nuns have no farther privileges? However, after she is questioned, the context of the question turns out to be very different, ' I speak not as

desiring more, but rather wishing a more strict restraint. ' From these very lines we can safely assume that Isabella has a burning ambition to become a nun, and takes the concept very seriously. It is common knowledge that nuns have to live a life of celibacy, and so we can assume that Isabella intends to remain chaste. Isabella's attitude towards sex has immediately been presented in her first scene in the play, because we are aware of her values as a nun.

However, these values only regard herself, and so we are yet to learn how she views sex in general. When Lucio enters the scene, he greets Isabella with, ' Hail virgin, if you be - as those cheek roses proclaim that you are no less. ' The words ' cheek roses' are very modest imagery that Shakespeare has used. This denotes Isabella's purity and modesty, another implication of her sexual principles to live a life of chastity. After being informed about what has happened to her brother, her response is, ' O, let him marry her! There are many implications from this quote. She possibly feels that when other people are involved in sexual relations there should be an element of love involved, and with knowledge that her brother loves Juliet she feels that they should be married and then the matter can be disregarded. Of course, it could also be simple emotional attachment to her brother.

Isabella's true character is revealed in Act II, Scene II, when she pleads for Angelo to spare her brother's life, ' I do beseech you, let it be his fault, and not my brother. She apparently disapproves of her brother's act as she wishes that it were that that was condemned, but not her brother. This implies that her previous comment was based on sentiment. Also, most of

Isabella's argument appears to be based upon justice for Claudio, and not that his act was morally or lawfully right. Her original arguments, in comparison to her later, impassioned ones are short and to the point, possibly because her status as a 'pre-nun' makes the subject of the argument embarrassing to her.

Shakespeare has used language at this point to present her humiliation. However, after encouragement from Lucio, 'Ay, touch him, there's the vein,' Isabella launches into more persuasive and impassioned arguments. She uses sexual imagery at this point, which I believe Shakespeare has used in order to give Angelo the wrong impression, 'Go to your bosom, knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know that's like my brother's fault.' Her speeches also denote her naivety and innocence, as she is quite obviously oblivious to the idea that this is in fact sexual imagery.

Not surprisingly, Isabella is unhappy to go ahead with Angelo's proposition. Her view is that she will be eternally damned if she commits the act, and although if she doesn't go ahead Claudio would die instantly; she would rather this than her soul 'die forever.' When Claudio hears of Angelo's demand, he begs Isabella to go ahead with it. Isabella's innocent side is suddenly seen in a different light, but her stubborn desire to live a life of chastity is also revealed as she rejects Claudio severely, 'O, you beast! O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch! Shakespeare has presented Isabella's true, deep desire through this very response, involving a very intense reaction.

The word ' O' is used again repeatedly, emphasising Isabella's anger through the use of tone. Isabella's agreement to the Duke's plan involving Mariana proves that she keeps her views of chastity upon herself and no one else, and the fact that Mariana and Angelo are not actually married means that perhaps she does not have rigid views of sex being inside of marriage. Again, she may just agree to it because of her desire for her brother to live.

Shakespeare, overall, presents Isabella's attitudes towards sex through her background as a potential nun, as well as her responses to other characters within the theme, and her agreements involving Mariana having relations with Angelo instead of herself. Juliet is mentioned a few times in the play, but only appears in Act II, Scene III, when she finds out that Claudio is to die. She goes to the Friar/Duke in order to repent her sins, and states that she believes that the sin was mutual.

This creates contrast with Angelo's belief that Juliet is the victim of Claudio's offence, but not the ' co-offender. Because Juliet has arrived to repent her sins, we get the impression that she believes that sex outside marriage is a sin, ' I do confess it, and repent it, father. ' However, she also states, ' I do repent me as it is an evil, and take the shame with joy. ' Shakespeare has presented well-defined comment here, as Juliet repents her offence's evil but also implies that she does not think that her defence was altogether evil, as it was a loving act. We can tell from her horrified response that Juliet has a strong attachment with Claudio, ' Must die to-morrow!

O injurious love,' meaning that she cares about him immensely, and Shakespeare is possibly presenting this in order to let the audience/reader

get the impression that Juliet loves Claudio. Juliet's attitude to sex could, in other words, be the same as Claudio's, as she probably believes that there should be an element of love involved. ' It is of course the pregnant condition of Claudio's faithful Juliet that, by making their love public or visible, has initiated the action of the main plot' (' A Dreame of Passion,' by Barbara Everett).

I agree with this idea, as once Angelo has assigned the Duke's power, it is in fact Juliet's pregnancy that introduces the theme of justice and, of course, sex in ' Measure for Measure. ' I believe that it is also important in regards to Juliet's role, because we assume a general impression of her attitudes towards sex. Overall, I believe Shakespeare has presented Juliet's attitude towards sex alongside his presentation of Claudio's attitude, as well as through her condition, which has inspired the entire story line of ' Measure for Measure. ' Other characters in the play also appear to have attitudes towards sex.

The Duke, for example, hands over his power to Angelo temporarily because he is concerned for the lack of morality amongst the public of Vienna, and knows that Angelo is strict and firm enough to enforce the neglected laws, ' So our decrees, dead to infliction, to themselves are dead. ' Shakespeare has presented the Duke attitudes towards sex through his reasoning for his actions. ' The simplest way to focus correctly the quality and unity of Measure for Measure is to read it on the analogy of Jesus' parables', and that ' the Duke's ethical attitude is exactly correspondent with Jesus" (' The Wheel of Fire,' by Wilson Knight).

I feel that this is an interesting approach to the Duke's role in regards to religion as a theme, as he does appear to act very much in the way that Jesus is written to in the New Testament of the Bible. It also introduces a range of ways that Shakespeare could be presenting this character's attitude towards sex, because he could assume ideas and principles along the same lines as Jesus'. Each of the characters' attitudes that I have mentioned fit together, and when the point comes in the play that we have gathered together the complete attitudes of the relevant characters, a contrast and importance is brought together for each of them.

Angelo is the enforcer of the relevant laws, but only on the surface as he wishes to break the old law himself, making him the antagonist of the play. Isabella is the purity of the play, and although she shares Angelo's stubbornness, her sexual attitudes and moral principles make her the protagonist of the play. Claudio and Juliet's attitudes are in agreement for the majority, as their acts and even sexual attitudes unleash the main story lines of the play, and Juliet's mutual values create contrast with Angelo's sexist ones.

The Duke's minor attitudes more or less sit alongside Angelo's, although the contrast is created as the Duke is genuinely concerned for Vienna, whilst Angelo is only concerned for his reputation. I personally feel that Shakespeare's presentation of the characters' sexual attitudes is very well contrasted and brought together. I also think that his use of imagery and tone creates a clear presentation of the characters. ' The voices of Pompey

and Lucio represent a humorous and humane view which runs like a thread through ' Measure for Measure" (Dennis Walder).

As I mentioned, Pompey does in fact speak out what Shakespeare probably intends to be the reality of the play. I agree to a degree that Lucio, too, represents the humane view of the play, although I think that he is the humour of it, and Pompey represents the humane view. Walder's comment relates to both Lucio and Pompey's attitudes towards sex because, although many characters uphold principles based on aspects such as religion and justice, their view is based on the reality of the corrupt city.

Their attitudes towards sex are probably the most important of all the characters in the play because their characters were, I believe, created to present the theme of sex, whereas with the other characters, their sexual attitudes were simply assigned to them after Shakespeare created them. I do believe that these characters provide the basis for the theme of sex, and the other characters' sexual attitudes. It is of course, I think, through these attitudes and principles that the theme of sex is presented.