

"if the law would  
allow it": pragmatism  
and absolutism in  
measure for measure



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Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* explores concepts of moral law within an immoral setting and set upon by leaders with questionable morals. *Measure's* Vienna is a setting where pragmatism and absolutism can compete both in the shadows and up front for the control of the city's system of justice regarding sexual immorality. The conflicts between these two thoughts of law are played through the characters of Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke. Shakespeare uses the apparent sexually immoral city as a backdrop for the change from absolutism to pragmatism to parallel the need for the characters themselves to change from one to the other. One could argue that this dark comedy vindicates the idea of pragmatism towards issues of sexual immorality, rather than absolutism, but Julia Lupton points out that the ending of the play seems to leave the reader on a questionable note, making way for the argument that Shakespeare might have been titling pragmatism as the lesser of two evils, but perhaps not absolutely vindicating for either school of thought regarding the law, especially in cases where corruption seems to have a hold like it does in Vienna. Nevertheless, *Measure for Measure* follows the transformation of an administration and society from absolutism to pragmatism, setting the latter above the other when it comes to law regarding sexual morality, while still casting a skeptical eye towards the validity of governing under "consent in reserve".

*Measure for Measure's* Vienna and the people who are represented in it play a vital role in why there is a change from absolutism to pragmatism within the plot. There seems to be rampant sexual immorality, which no one is quite sure how to control, or whether they should control it. Pompey says in Act 4, "I am as well acquainted here as I was in our house of profession. One

would think it were Mistress Overdone's own house, for here be many of her old customers" (90). Here, Pompey is calling out many of the courtroom's inhabitants as being visitors of prostitutes. It can be understood why a city might stick itself under absolute rule under dire pressures, as the Duke says, " We have strict statutes and most biting laws, / The needful bits and curbs to headstrong steeds, Which for this fourteen years we have let slip, Even like an o'ergrown lion in a cave / That goes not out to prey" (30). Here, it is said that Vienna has been acting cavalier about the rule of law, with the Duke choosing to rule by amoral relativism and finding it not to be working well for the deviance. Though these lines show the Duke vindicating the reasons that an absolutist take on the law is needed in Vienna, the language Shakespeare uses here describes how the people of Vienna might feel about it. To the people under the law, it would feel like a " biting" predator, as the Duke likens the law at its best to be. There needs to be rampant immorality in Vienna for the Duke's next lines on that page, " For terror, not to use, in time the rod / Becomes more mocked than feared, so our decrees / Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead" to have grounding. If the people of Vienna were not indeed seeming to mock rather than fear the law as it stands, there would not be such a battle between absolutism and pragmatism.

Angelo is described as an absolutist by many characters, such as when Lucio says, " And with full line of his authority, / Governs Lord Angelo, a man whose blood / Is very snow broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense, / But doth rebate and blunt his natural edge / With profits of the mind, study, and fast" (33). This is giving Angelo, and absolutism, quite a positive light, giving way to an argument that this kind of

ruling can be perceived as needed to people in a setting such as this Vienna. There are far more instances where Angelo's power seems to hint at corruption, however. He is described as a tyrannical such as when Claudio says, " Whether it be the fault and glimpse of newness, / Or whether that the body public be / A horse whereon the governor doth ride, / Who, newly in the seat, that it may know / He can command, lets it straight feel the spur, / Whether the tyranny be in his place, Or in his eminence that fills it up" (28). This is commenting on the fact that Angelo does not rule by the same relativism that the Duke once did. He " lets" the city " feel the spur", enforcing even arbitrary laws for the sake of law. We see one such law when Pompey says, " All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down" (25). Shakespeare includes this example to show the extent to which Angelo is practicing his absolutism. Even when a law seems to be harming more than helping, Angelo feels he must enforce it. This prepares us for Angelo's decisions on Claudio. Lucio says, " He arrests him on it / And follows close the rigor of the statute / To make him an example" (33). This is an obvious use of arbitrary absolute power. This is a direct rejection of the apparent relativism that the Duke practiced beforehand, because it ensures that no one is to be spared, case by case, but that Claudio's life will be struck down to make an example to everyone else in Vienna. The Corruption of this Absolutism Julia Lupton mentions in Citizen-Saints the corruption of governing within the means of " consent in reserve", meaning the citizens are not quite giving consent to what's happening. This is seen especially in regards to Isabella and the Duke's marriage, which we will see later on. It is easy to see the corruption in the examples of the Angelo's absolutism. When Angelo says to Escalus, " We must not make a scarecrow of the law, / Setting

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it up to fear the birds of prey, / And let it keep one shape till custom make it / Their perch and not their terror." (35) This is another example of Angelo denouncing relativism, which can make way for custom in the rule of law, but is also an indication that Angelo does not want the courts to be involved in law enforcement. This should give the characters pause, as a large portion of the action of this play happens inside a jail cell. An absolutist leader calling for an end to the courts in the rule of law screams corruption at anyone who is experienced with a democracy, and Shakespeare included these lines to criticize both absolutism and the corruption found in Angelo's administration. Perhaps the biggest example of Angelo's corruption is when he couples his absolutist ruling on the death of Claudio (" It is the law, not I, condemn your brother"(47)) with a sexual proposition to Isabella. He does this by asking, " that there were / No earthly means to save him, but that either / You must lay down the treasures of your body / To this supposed, or else to let him suffer. What would you do?" (57). This is not only a break from Angelo's rule of absolutism, but corruption at its highest. He is using his absolute power and justice to put Isabella between her brother's death and the death of her sexual purity, which is very important to a somewhat moral absolutist like Isabella.

The examples of the corruption of absolutism cannot be said to vindicate the Duke's standing, however. The Duke says outright, " I have delivered to Lord Angelo, / A man of stricture and firm abstinence, / My absolute power and place here in Vienna" (29). The Duke, although he stands for pragmatism, gave Angelo this power after doubting the validity of his practice of relativism. This is an example of not only the government and community

changing to a more pragmatic stance, but the characters as well. The Duke's Pragmatism Thought we can only know about his prior actions through comments made by him and others regarding the law before Angelo took power, the Duke is proven to be quite the pragmatist during the play. He says about Angelo, " Shame to him whose cruel striking / Kills for faults of his own liking... Craft against vice I must apply. / With Angelo tonight shall lie / His old betrothed but despised; / So disguise shall, by the disguised, / Pay with falsehood false exacting / And perform an old contracting" (79). He is not held back from harming his morality by lying and sneaking around, because he knows his actions will bring about mercy for Claudio and Isabella. The Duke disguises himself a Friar often in the play, as when he says to Juliet, " I'll teach you how you shall arraign your conscience, / And try your penitence, if it be sound / Or hollowly put on" (52). This can either be seen as corruption, similar to the actions of Angelo, or as reflections of mercy within the pragmatist standpoint. By reflecting the Duke as a Friar, even if he is disguising himself as one, Shakespeare is placing him in a position of moral soundness. Though the Duke may be exhibiting questioning morals when he lies about being a Friar, he is doing it for mercy towards Juliet and Claudio. The Duke is also entreated upon for moral soundness in the legal setting, as well. Isabella says to him, " O gracious Duke, / Harp not on that, nor do not banish reason / For inequality, but let your reason serve / To make the truth appear where it seems hid, / And hide the false seems true" (102). The continued moral portrayals Shakespeare gives of the Duke provides a foundation for the argument that the Duke's pragmatism is being propped up as, at least, the greater of the two schools of thought.

Isabella seems to be absolutist in her belief for equal justice under the law and sexual morality in certain times of this play. For example, when Angelo asks her, " Might there not be a charity in sin / To save this brother's life?" as a justification for getting a favor from sex, she replies, " I'll take it as a peril to my soul; / It is no sin at all, but charity" (56) and later says, " As much for my poor brother as myself; / That is, 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" (57). These lines show us how absolutist Isabella is about her sexual morality, which she could find reason for in the rampant sexuality immorality in the city. We see this again when she says to her brother, " Might but my bending down / Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed. / I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death, / No word to save thee" (66). She is vehemently saying no to her brother's request here, for the sake of her absolutist belief in her morality. She does not share the relative thought of Claudio when he says, " What sin you do to save a brother's life, / Nature dispenses with the deed so far / That it becomes a virtue." Lupton makes the argument that in sticking so firmly to her absolute morality, Isabella is " electing her own chastity rather than the body of her brother" (Lupton 140). This furthers the absolutist Isabella we see until she is given a justification by the Duke later on. We see an example of Isabella's legal absolutism when she says of her brother's crime, " Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade. / Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd; / ' Tis best that thou diest quickly" (66). This is an echo of Angelo's idea that the law should be applied to anyone who breaks it, and the punishment harsh.

However, we see how easy it is for her change into a pragmatic way of thinking when she wants mercy for her brother, i. e. " O Just but severe law!" (45) or herself. She says to Angelo of her brother's death sentence, " Yes, I do think that you might pardon him,/ And neither heaven not man grieve at the mercy" (46). Here, she is advocating for more mercy than justice. She also sees the need for relative thinking when she says to Angelo, " O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant" (48). By this, she is saying that it is difficult to have absolute power without using it with absolute corruption. She also says to Angelo, "' Tis set down so in heaven, but not in earth" (55). This is an important line because with it, Shakespeare is showing Isabella's reconciliation of her religion and her newfound pragmatism within herself. It is especially seen how quickly Isabella turns pragmatic when the Duke presents a way to use legalities to their benefit. The Duke says to Isabella, " I do make myself believe that you may most uprighteously 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, if peradventure he shall ever return to have hearing of this business" (68) Isabella is instantly moved by this, saying back, " Let me hear you speak further." By giving her a justification for an action that would otherwise be deemed quite sketchy by an absolutist, Isabella is swayed over to pragmatism. This is because she measures mercy higher than justice quite a lot of the time, especially in regards to her brother's sentence, so it is easy for her to justify relative morality when it involves enacting mercy. Shakespeare makes it so that mercy is what changes her mind on pragmatism to show that mercy is much more



applicable to the Duke and Isabella's pragmatism than it is to Angelo's absolutism.

Angelo returns to absolutism only to ask for death, saying, " No longer session hold my upon my shame, / But let my trial be mine own confessions. / Immediate sentence then and sequent death / Is all the grace I beg" (112). The guy is incredibly harsh on himself because his absolutist beliefs ring true even for himself. The death he asks for greatly juxtaposes with the life the Duke has granted through the play. Through his workings of pragmatism, the Duke grants life to Claudio and Juliet, and instead of death grants a marriage (however unwanted it may be) to Angelo and Mariana.

As mentioned before, however, it is not sufficient to say that the ending makes this a vindication of the Duke's pragmatism on Shakespeare's part. Another marriage the Duke proposes is one between he and Isabella. Lupton points out that we do not witness Isabella's reply. She writes, " By leaving her response in question, I argue, the play ends with the startling spectacle of consent in reserve, bringing forward, suspending, and illuminating the element of mutual agreement" (Lupton 140). Pragmatism is given the better light at the end of the play, but by not giving a direct answer as to whether or not consent of the govern is being given, the corruption discussed earlier could be a stumbling block for Shakespeare's absolute vindication of the Duke's practices.

The battle between absolutism and pragmatism is explored in Measure for Measure in a personal and social way. Angelo swims into the waters of corruption because of personal flaws while striking down any rule breakers

he governs with his absolute rule of law. The Duke and Isabella represent the pragmatist standpoint, putting straightaway morals into question for the overall good of their causes. After all is said and done, the pragmatists seem to win out, with the Duke being likened to true religious piety and moral upstanding and Isabella succeeding in saving her brother's life without sacrificing her sexual purity. However, the end, where we miss out on Isabella's response to the Duke reminds us that no skeptic such as Shakespeare can truly sign his absolute approval on a system like Vienna. In regards to this relativism, Isabella says, " My brother had but justice, / In that he did the thing for which he died. / For Angelo, / His act did not o'ertake his bad intent, / And must be buried but as an intent / That perished by the way. Thoughts are no subjects, / Intents but merely thoughts" (115). Here, we find the reconciliation of the idea of absolutist justice with pragmatic mercy and customs. It is fitting that Isabella, who expresses ambivalence towards both rules of law in the play, deliver these lines.

## **Works Cited**

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