

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Character Notes

THE DUKE

Duke Vincentio can be played as either a manipulator or as an out of touch ruler on a quest for self-knowledge. He is the young ruler of Vienna. At the start of the play he is unable to control the immoral behaviour of his people. He decides to temporarily transfer his power to Angelo, who is known for his upright behaviour and who will enforce the law. Then he pretends to leave Vienna for Poland. In reality, however, he remains in Vienna disguised as a friar, to see how Angelo gets on. When he realises that Angelo is being overly strict – imposing the death sentence on Claudio for sex outside marriage– he chooses to remedy the situation with a complex game designed to restore justice rather than simply “return” and take control. Interestingly, by the end of the play he has no trouble imposing order on everyone.

ISABELLA

Sister to Claudio and a novice at a convent. She is serious about her commitment to God and to chastity. In her first scene she is asking the convent to impose even stricter restrictions on her. Consequently, Angelo’s offer to save her brother if she sleeps with him is abhorrent. She would rather die. She is articulate and able to argue with passion in her early scenes with Angelo and with Claudio but by the end of the play she is noticeably silent. It is unclear what she makes of the Duke’s offer of marriage – but for someone who was planning to become a nun, the suggestion is that she is shocked into silence.

ANGELO

He has a reputation for being an upright member of society. His name, meaning ‘Angel’, is therefore appropriate. When he enforces the law in Vienna he is not being unjust, he is simply doing what the Duke asked him to do. To everyone else a death sentence for sex outside marriage might seem unjust, but it *is* the law. Angelo is a deeply flawed character. He is often described as cold by the other characters. We learn later from the Duke that he ditched his fiancée, Mariana because her dowry was lost when her brother’s ship sank. Her brother was drowned, yet Angelo showed her no compassion. His encounter with Isabella and the powerful desire he feels for a nun shocks him. He knows he is acting illegally and immorally when he offers to repeal Claudio’s death sentence if Isabella sleeps with him. His decision not to repeal Claudio’s death sentence after Isabella has slept with him (or so he thinks) is deeply criminal. Therefore, when he hears that

the Duke is returning suddenly and wants anyone who has a grievance to air it at the gate to the city, he is worried. However, he convinces himself that Isabella won't risk public humiliation by telling her story.

JULIET

Cousin to Isabella and Claudio. She is not ashamed of her relationship with Claudio. They see themselves as almost married. She is naturally horrified by his death sentence and has only escaped the death sentence herself because she is pregnant.

CLAUDIO

A young gentleman. Juliet's lover and the father of her unborn baby. Brother to Isabella. He is much liked and known as a good man. Despite the high level of sexual infidelity in Vienna, Claudio is loyal to Juliet. His death sentence shocks the city. When Isabella tells him of Angelo's corrupt bargain, he is torn between protecting his sister from Angelo and his very real fear of death. In the end he decides that the lesser sacrifice is Isabella's and that she should sleep with Angelo to save him.

LUCIO

A 'FANTASTICK' – someone with eccentric clothes and mannerisms. Lucio is friends with everyone and speaks his mind. He strongly urges Isabella to argue with Angelo, and when he thinks that Claudio has been killed he shows his compassion to Isabella. His rough handling of the Duke by the city gate - which leads to the Duke's unmasking - actually suits the Duke. Nonetheless, the Duke enjoys threatening Lucio for treating his ruler so badly.

ESCALUS

The name means 'scales', reflecting his balanced approach to situations and his ability to behave in a just manner. Lord Escalus is the oldest and most highly respected man in the city. He is shocked by Angelo's treatment of Claudio but the Duke has explained that, in his absence, Angelo will have power over Escalus. Consequently, Escalus can do little but urge Isabella to be effective in her arguing for Claudio's life.

MARIANA

A well thought of young lady who was engaged to Angelo until her dowry was lost at sea when her brother went down with his ship. At that point Angelo 'dumped her' but they remain 'officially engaged'. Despite his poor treatment of her she continues to love Angelo and is consequently happy to take part in the Duke's game. She reveals a cunning side by taking Isabella's place and having sex with Angelo, she is in fact compromising Angelo and putting him in a position

whereby he has to marry her. This is why Angelo has no option but to agree to the marriage when the Duke proposes it towards the end of the play. She is genuinely distressed when the Duke suggests that Angelo should face the death sentence for ordering Claudio's execution. She begs Isabella to intervene with the Duke and spare Angelo's life.

FRANCISCA

A nun, and Isabella's superior, who is horrified by the Duke's offer of marriage to Isabella.

PROVOST

A judicial gentleman.

FRIAR THOMAS

Aware of the Duke's true identity and happy to play his game.

MISTRESS OVERDONE

The keeper of a brothel and an ex-prostitute.