

2010

Looks Can Be Deceiving: Angelo's Intentions in *Measure for Measure*

Michael Langen
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Langen, Michael (2010) "Looks Can Be Deceiving: Angelo's Intentions in *Measure for Measure*," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 2009, Article 8.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2009/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day Collections at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

Looks Can Be Deceiving: Angelo's Intentions in *Measure for Measure* Submitted by Michael Langen



In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, there are two common interpretations for Angelo's character. The first interpretation sees Angelo as a moral man, who is earnestly trying to clean up Vienna, but happens to take things too far in his strict treatment of Claudio's case. He succumbs to the temptation of Isabella—a temptation he had never known before—but he repents for it by the play's end. The second interpretation sees Angelo as power-hungry, and hypocritical in his preaching of strict morality. He is ill-intentioned and pursues his selfish agenda at the expense of others. Angelo tries to dupe the other characters into interpreting him the first way, but in truth, the second interpretation is more accurate.

Angelo appears modest when he, at first, refuses the Duke's offering of the ruling position. He says: "Let there be some more test made of my mettle / Before so noble and so great a figure / Be stamped upon it" (*Measure* 1.2.49-51). Despite his humble appearance, Angelo is actually quite excited about receiving such a position of power. The way he uses the power given to him proves this. He immediately begins using his power to enforce the law to an unprecedented extreme; he sentences Claudio to death for sleeping with Juliet out of wedlock, even though Claudio was engaged to marry her. Angelo is told to clean up the city, but he takes it too far. His steadfastness

in sticking to extremes demonstrates his love of power, and his refusal to give any of it up. Angelo even refuses the advice of the more experienced Escalus, who advises Angelo that he might regret being so strict (2.2.10-13). Angelo ignores him, asserting that he is the only one who will have any say in the matter.

One could argue that Angelo is not power-hungry, and must be well-intentioned, since the Duke trusts him with his position upon his leave. There is evidence, however, that the Duke does not actually trust Angelo to do a good job, and that he knows that Angelo is going to be corrupt. After the Duke gives up his power, he does, after all, stick around in disguise to keep an eye on things. The fact that he does not let Angelo rule on his own, without being secretly monitored, suggests that he does not trust Angelo with power. When speaking to Friar Thomas, the Duke explains that "Lord Angelo is precise, / Stands at a guard with envy, scarce confesses / That his blood flows or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone. Hence shall we see, / If power change purpose, what our seemers be" (*Measure* 1.3.50-54). The Duke suspects that Angelo is more corrupt than he seems to be, and he is interested in seeing if giving him power will expose his corrupt nature. At the end of the play, the Duke tells Isabella to plead her case to Angelo, telling

her: “Here is Lord Angelo shall give you justice. / Reveal yourself to him” (5.1.28-29). The Duke knows that Angelo will not give her justice, yet he seems to test him, like he does at the beginning of the play when he gives him power. The Duke’s words cannot be taken at face value, as he bears another face for most of the play. His true self does not consider Angelo to be a trustworthy leader any more than he thinks that Angelo will give Isabella justice at the end of the play. David Bevington agrees that “the Duke obviously expects Angelo to fall” (415).

Angelo lives up to, or perhaps down to, the Duke’s expectations and fails as a leader. He abuses his power, and his motivation is selfish, not moral. Angelo does not have ethical reasons behind his strict punishing of Claudio. He claims that he is using Claudio as an example in an effort to clean up the city and bolster respect for the law, but he proves to be uninterested in respecting the law when he propositions Isabella. One could argue that he was merely tempted by sexual lust on that one occasion, and that his motivation for punishing Claudio is still that he wants to set an example so that the law will be respected and justice will be pursued. This, however, cannot be true, because he claims that he will pardon Claudio if Isabella sleeps with him. If Angelo pardons Claudio, then he discredits his stance that Claudio must be used as an example. He prioritizes selfish desires over what he claims Vienna needs. Personal motivation clearly influences his decision more than an honorable pursuit of justice does. His selfish motivations are further exposed when he threatens that, unless Isabella sleeps with

him, he won’t only have Claudio killed, he’ll have Claudio tortured. He is clearly not chiefly concerned with justice, but in using his power to fulfill his own selfish desires, even at the expense of others.

Angelo’s treatment of Claudio cannot be defended as just in any way. His intentions are not to punish Claudio for unethical behavior, nor to make an example out of him. He states that “He should have lived, / Save that his riotous youth, / with dangerous sense, / Might in the times to come have ta’en revenge” (*Measure* 4.4.28-30). It is out of fear of revenge that Angelo upholds Claudio’s death sentence, not out of concern for justice. Angelo values himself and his power over any of the lofty ideals that he claims to stand for. John Simmons notices that it is “only when [Angelo] infers that there is some personal gain to be realized that he adjusts any judicial decision” (283). Angelo explicitly states that he uses his power, not to uphold justice, but to promote his own personal pleasure. He admits to Isabella: “I give my sensual race the rein” (*Measure* 2.4.161). He also admits to being cruel. When Isabella refuses to sleep with him to save her brother, Angelo asks her: “Were not you then as cruel as the sentence / That you have slandered so?” (2.4.110-111). Ruling with cruelty and prioritizing the fulfillment of personal wishes over justice are not the actions of good-intentioned leader.

If someone is power-hungry then he will not make a good ruler. His decisions will be clouded by the goal of attaining and retaining power, instead of making decisions based on what is best for the people. Angelo is a bad and dangerous leader

because of his “excessive appetite for power” (Simmons 284). At face value, he seems to be standing up for justice, claiming that he “must not make a scarecrow of the law” (*Measure* 2.1.1). This is a noble goal, and it makes sense to enforce the law, but it would be wise to remove the laws that are unfair and unreasonable so that the law can be enforced with dignity and respect. Angelo does not, however, do away with nonsensical laws like the one that punishes Claudio for sleeping with his fiancée. Doing so would reduce Angelo’s power. Instead, he enforces that law to its full extent and sentences Claudio to death. Simmons recognizes that Angelo “administers justice in its most severe form in order to establish himself as the hardnosed stand-in ruler he wishes to appear to be” (283). If Angelo were more interested in public service instead of power, he might realize that by killing Claudio, he would be responsible for the very thing that he claimed to be trying stop in the first place—the creation of a fatherless child. This does not seem to bother Angelo, though. Instead, he seems only to be interested in doing things his way, and using his power to the maximum extent possible. And what greater show of power could there be than to suppress basic human instincts?

Angelo can only suppress others’ instincts because he is too weak, hypocritical, and corrupt to apply the same standards to his own behavior. Simmons recognizes Angelo as “a power seeker, unable to curb the very libidinous desires he so severely judges in others. He serves as a classic example of hypocritical behavior” (284). Angelo claims that he would want the same

treatment if he were he to commit the crime, as he says: “Let mine own judgment pattern out my death / And nothing come in partial” (2.1.30-31). However, when it comes to the test, he does not stand by this noble-sounding declaration. At the end of the play, when Isabella brings forth her case against him, he does not admit to his crime, but instead tries to get out of it by trying to discredit Isabella, saying that “she will speak most bitterly and strange” (5.1.38). Rosalind Miles observes that “Angelo desperately (and hypocritically) shores up his self-image in the eyes of the world, and of the Duke” (207).

At first, in the final act, Angelo tries to protect his image instead of accepting the punishment that, earlier in the play, he said he would deserve and accept. It is only after the Duke reveals himself, and Angelo knows that he is caught, that he kneels and begs for the death sentence (*Measure* 5.1.374-382). I disagree with M.C. Bradbrook, who contests that “in this alone Angelo is not a seemer; he has the consistency to sentence himself” (394). I see Angelo’s plea as a final, desperate attempt to avoid punishment. He does not actually hope to be killed in the name of justice. Instead, I think that he hopes to appear as if he has learned his lesson, and therefore does not need to be punished. The Duke may be the one in disguise for most of the play, but Angelo is just as much a seemer, and deserves to be punished for it. I agree with Samuel Johnson, who believes that “every reader feels some indignation when he finds [Angelo] spared” (qtd. in Geckle 72).

One who argues that Angelo is an essentially good-intentioned person who

happens to fall victim to temptation could point to the evidence that Angelo struggles with his lust for Isabella. Miles points to Angelo's "amazement, disgust, and grief expressed in the soliloquies of 2.2 and 2.4," stating that they "almost invariably elicit an unconditionally sympathetic response from the audience" (199). I am one of the variants who do not feel sympathy for Angelo upon seeing his self-examination. Just because Angelo is surprised by his lust for Isabella does not mean that he is a good-intentioned ruler. One can abuse authority and still feel surprised at feeling sexual lust if one has never felt that before. His surprise over his sexual lust does not excuse his other corruptions, and by acting on that lust, he only adds to his moral corruptness. As Miles points out, "He is undoubtedly suffering as he wrestles with his conscience, but he is still using his every means to save himself from exposure... the establishing of this blind and destructive self-interest is hardly to be regarded as a sympathetic stroke of characterization" (211).

If one were to still argue that Angelo is ultimately good-intentioned, but falls victim to temptation, one could point to the fact that Lucio instructs Isabella to charm Angelo into changing his mind. He says that when women "weep and kneel, / All [men's] petitions are as freely theirs / As they themselves would owe them" (*Measure* 1.4.81-83). In addition, Lucio tells her to "touch him" (2.2.75) in an attempt to persuade him into giving in to her. Further, one could point out that Angelo is not the only one tempted by Isabella, as she also charms the Duke when she kneels and begs him not

to give Angelo the death sentence. The Duke suggests that Isabella has seductive power because he grants her wishes and pardons Angelo from death, and then he expresses his love for her by proposing marriage. This evidence alone certainly makes Isabella seem, in some way, seductive, and Angelo seem like a victim of manipulative flirting—but Angelo quickly shows that it is Isabella, not he, that is the victim. Angelo exploits his power and propositions Isabella because he thinks that he can get away with it. If she were to try to expose him, nobody would believe her word over his, due to his high status. William Lawrence points out that "[Angelo's] readiness not only to put Isabella in her dreadful predicament in order to satisfy his lust, but also to break faith with her and to kill her brother, do not point to native virtue" (113). If one still tried to claim that Angelo is originally good-intentioned, and only falls to evil measures due to his temptation for Isabella, I would refer to Lawrence's statement: "One further piece of evidence seems to point to Angelo's native baseness: his flat refusal to temper justice with mercy, and spare Claudio, long before the dishonorable proposal is made to Isabella" (114).

It is surprising that Angelo is not more merciful toward Claudio, since he recognizes that "we are all frail" (*Measure* 2.4.122). Angelo says: "Blood, thou art blood" (2.4.15). Bevington explains that Angelo is saying that "no position of authority or birth, no matter how lofty, can protect a person from the instinctual power of desire" (431). I would expect Angelo to have more sympathy for Claudio's situation, since he, too, acted on lust. But instead of

showing Claudio mercy, Angelo asserts that one cannot write “‘good angel’ on the devil’s horn” (*Measure* 2.4.16). Angelo does not actually serve justice, though, because he punishes Claudio for personal, not ethical, reasons. Simmons points out that Angelo “does not apply the law in any consistent manner. In his application of the laws, people suffer unequally depending on his arbitrary, biased perceptions of them” (283).

One could still argue that Angelo must have been good-intentioned, though, or else Isabella would not have begged the Duke to pardon him. Isabella claims that she partly thought that “A due sincerity governed his deeds, / Till he did look on me” (*Measure* 5.1.454-455). It is important for one to remember, though, that Isabella only asks for him to be pardoned after Mariana begs her to do so, so that she won’t be left without a husband. Isabella, being the devout Christian that she is, is of course willing to forgive Angelo, especially at the request of poor Mariana, whom Angelo quickly left when she lost her dowry in a shipwreck. The fact that Isabella has sympathy for Mariana and forgives Angelo does not relieve him of the guilt that he has acquired from his selfish, menacing dealings.

While Angelo appears pious by punishing lechery, he forgets that his God is merciful. Angelo certainly does not engender this quality. Through his treatment of Claudio, Isabella, and Mariana, Angelo demonstrates that his own selfish interests are more important to him than anyone else. Angelo is greedy, power-hungry, and unjust. He abuses his authority and takes advantage of other people. From the beginning

of the play on, his intentions are solely to gain and demonstrate power, and to look out for his own interests, at the expense of others if necessary. If one is tempted to interpret Angelo as good-intentioned, one should consider that his selfish, hypocritical, and corrupt ruling pushes Isabella to run to the Duke, begging for “justice, justice, justice, justice!” (*Measure* 5.1.26).

Bibliography

- Bradbrook, M. C. "Authority, Truth, and Justice in *Measure for Measure*." *The Review of English Studies* 17 (1941): 385-99.
- Geckle, George L. "Coleridge on *Measure for Measure*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18 (1967).
- Lawrence, William. *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1931.
- Miles, Rosalind. *The Problem of Measure for Measure*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1976.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Ed. David Bevington. 5th ed. New York, NY: Pearson Longman, 2004.
- Simmons, John S. "Measure for Measure: links to Our Time." *Teaching Shakespeare Today*. Ed. James E. Davis and Ronald E. Salomone. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication, 1993. 281-87.