Measure for Measure

Explore the way in which Shakespeare’s characters ‘act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated.’ (Dr. Johnson)

1. Introduction

- *Measure for Measure* revolves around opposite forces: desire and restraint, punishment and mercy, sense and reason.
- The play opens with a city consumed by vice, lawlessness and ‘too much liberty.’
- The plot is set in motion by the temporary removal of a Duke and the appointment of a stricter and more severe deputy, Angelo, who stands for restraint and harsh justice.
- It is the tension caused by this transfer of power and a harsher approach by the law toward the vice of the city that causes the chief drama of the play - also of temptation of more restrained characters towards the freedom and sexuality of Vienna.

A. PASSIONS

- Vienna - full of lust and vice.
- Characters such as Pompey, Mistress Overdone & Lucio - signify this liberty and licentiousness.
- ‘Does your worship mean to geld and splay all the youth of the city?’ (Pompey, II.1.227)
- ‘If you head and hang all that do offend that way ... you'll be glad to give out a commission for more heads.’ (Pompey, II.1.235-7)
- ‘All sects, all ages, smack of this vice.’ (Provost, II.2. 5-6)
- Claudio and Juliet - establish basis of the plot. Claudio’s crime is ‘from too much liberty’ (I.2.117-122)
- Juliet as pregnant body, is physical evidence results of vice

B. THE DUKE

- Attempts to solve vice problem - has been too lax - ‘twas my fault to give the people scope’ (I.3.35)
- Appoints deputy - motives - to let someone else take over / to test Angelo’s apparent purity and virtue. (I.3.54)
- Advises Angelo to let ‘mortality and mercy in Vienna / Live in thy tongue, and heart.’ - hint of Angelo’s fall - he is to say one thing and mean another - pretence of goodness...
- Actions in disguise - removed, objective, omnipresent - observer at this point in play.
- Significance of disguise - spiritual, dispassionate...
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C  PRINCIPLES

1. Angelo
   - Seeming - reason and coldness: is considered by Duke and Escalus a good man ('A man of stricture and firm abstinence' (Duke, I.3.12)
   - His fall from virtue is suggested (by his name?), and he is reluctant to take on responsibility without a trial (I.1.47-9).
   - Suggestions of his lack of humanity as a cover: ‘scarce confesses that his blood flows …’ (Duke, I.3.50-54)
   - Unable to recognise his own potential for passion desire etc.: ‘When I that censure him, do so offend, Let mine own judgement pattern out my death.’ (II.1.29-30)
   - Temptation and fall: Isabella’s purity prompts his blood and passion - he succumbs, using his seeming justice and goodness to aid his evil designs: (II.2.181-3) - ‘My false o’er weighs your true.’ (II.4.169)
   - Once he succumbs to temptation, Angelo allows his ‘sensual race’ (II.4.158-9) a free rein - apparent goodness is revealed as merely strict self control and refusal to acknowledge own failings.

2. Isabella
   - Chaste nun - wishing for more ‘strict restraint’
   - Vacillates between love for her brother and need for chastity - chastity wins over charity - ‘I had rather give my body than my soul.’ (II.4.56)
   - Reminds Angelo that he too is human ‘Go to your bosom, knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know that’s like my brother’s fault.’ (II.2.137-9)
   - Argues the case for mercy and temperance over tyrannical justice - measure for measure.
   - Isabella - problematic character - criticised for sticking blindly to principle of chastity over any other consideration.

CONCLUSION

At the end of section - moral maze which characters must be led through by a diverse and complex system of the duke’s plans. Two protagonists - locked in seemingly impossible conflict between Angelo’s new found passions and Isabella’s strict moral code.