The presentation of women

Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare

All page references and line numbers are taken from the Arden Shakespeare edition.

There was widespread interest and debate in Shakespeare’s time about the position of women in society and about the relationship between sexuality, power and morality. In particular, this play investigates the double standards that applied to men and women through a range of characters and relationships.

As you read the play, answer the following questions.

Act I  Scene 2

At line 66 (‘I am too sure of it...’) Mistress Overdone tells Lucio the reason for Claudio’s arrest, then immediately afterwards asks Pompey what offence Claudio has committed. Her attitude here represents the general low life/comic characters’ view of sexual relations between men and women. What is this view?

Act I  Scene 4

1. What does Isabella mean in her conversation with the nun at lines 1-5 and what does it tell us about Isabella?
2. How does Lucio treat Isabella from when they meet, at line 16 (Hail, virgin...)? Do you sympathise with her response at line 38?
3. In this scene what are Isabella’s reactions to Lucio’s news about her brother?

Act II  Scene 2

1. Just before Isabella enters, Angelo refers to Juliet as ‘the fornicatress’ line 24. Look this up in a dictionary. What does it tell us about Angelo’s character?
2. How does Angelo address Isabella when speaking to her? In contrast, in the soliloquy at the end of the scene he refers to her as ‘the tempter’ (line 164). What more do we learn about Angelo’s character and view of morality?

Act II  Scene 3

1. This scene spells out the male view of women’s position in society. It illustrates the double standards of morality applied to men’s and women’s behaviour. Which single line spoken by the Duke best illustrates this, in response to Juliet’s claim that the offence was ‘mutually committed’? ( line 27)
2. What is Juliet’s view of her ‘crime’ at line 35-6 (I do repent me...)? How far could she blame society for labelling her a criminal?
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**Act II Scene 4**

1. At lines 74-5 (‘Your sense pursues…’) Angelo says he cannot decide to which of two extremes Isabella’s character leans. What are these two extremes?

2. What does Angelo want Isabella to do in return for her brother’s pardon, lines 88-98 (‘Admit no other way…’)?

3. How does the imagery used in her answer at lines 99-104 (‘As much for my poor brother…’) deepen the complexity of her character?

4. How does Angelo, at lines 114-6 (‘You seem’d of late…’) use Isabella’s plea for her brother against her?

5. Is it fair to accuse Isabella of double standards for refusing to comply with Angelo’s request?

6. When Isabella agrees with Angelo that women are ‘frail’ and so must do as men say, how does he use this to his own advantage at lines 133-7 (‘I do arrest your words…’)?

7. What view of women does Angelo put forward in lines 160-2 (‘Fit thy consent…’)?

8. Why might Isabella’s chastity be worth more than life itself to her in lines 183-4 (‘Then Isabel, live chaste…’), considering the position of women in Elizabethan times?

**Act III Scene 1**

1. What does the imagery Isabella uses in lines 135-146 (‘O you beast!’) again suggest about her character?

2. How did Angelo view Mariana, as reported by the Duke, in lines 213-30 (‘She should this Angelo…’)? For what reason must we assume he was going to marry her? Why did he break off the wedding and what reason did he give for doing this?

3. Why does the Duke think Mariana will take part in his ‘bed trick’ plan, in lines 239-43 (‘This fornamed maid hath yet…’)?

4. What crime will the Duke ask Mariana to commit and who has already been reprimanded by him for committing the same crime?

**Act III Scene 2**

1. How do official and comic characters’ views of prostitution differ in lines 6-10 (‘Twas never merry world since…’)? Look at the text commentary for help.

2. What happens to Mistress Overdone in this scene?

**Act IV Scene 1**

How does the Duke justify his plan to Mariana in lines 71-76 (‘Nor, gentle daughter…’) and how does this contradict what he said to Juliet in Act II Scene 3?
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Act IV Scene 3

Lines 106-9 (‘The tongue of Isabel...’) and Scene 6 lines 5-8 (‘Besides, he tells me...’) are examples of how the Duke is treating Isabella. Do you think he is justified?

Act V

1. What is the Duke’s view of women in lines 171-79 (‘Pardon, my lord...’)?

2. What difference in emphasis does Angelo put on his reason for leaving Mariana at lines 215-20 (‘My lord, I must confess...’), compared with the Duke’s explanation earlier? What does it tell us about society’s view of women then?

3. To what does Angelo attribute Isabella’s and Mariana’s accusations in lines 235-7 (‘These poor informal women...’) and how correct is he? Explain the dramatic irony created here by the Duke’s response.

4. Isabella gives a reason for showing Angelo mercy in lines 443-5 (‘I partly think...’). How has Shakespeare developed her character during the course of the play?

5. Lucio gives another example of double standards with regard to sex and morality in lines 512-15 (‘I beseech your highness...’). What is it?

6. What does the Duke offer Isabella in his final speech? What would you expect her response to be and why?