Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Theme of appearances in *Measure for Measure*

**Introduction**

Appearances closely linked with hypocrisy and disguise. People and places are not what they appear to be and people do not behave as we would expect them to.

**Social**

- Vienna has strong laws and statutes yet paradoxically disorder and licentiousness appear to be rife
- Impotence of rulers who are supposedly experienced in the law is clear from Act 1 Scene 2 onwards
- Play explores the potentially corruptive nature of power and this is worked out through the character of Angelo as new figure of authority
- Prison should be a place of order, punishment and rehabilitation yet is in chaos eg. Barnadine refuses to be executed; Pompey is made an “apprentice” executioner

**Individual**

- Angelo does not turn out to be as name suggests - becomes corrupt but uses office and blameless exterior to hide corruption and, indeed, further his ambitions.
- Does Isabella’s appearance as nun hide her worldly passion and her human failings?
- Both Isabella and Angelo appear to be sure about their beliefs yet these convictions are powerfully shaken
- Duke: unlike above characters, he consciously chooses disguise as a means of uncovering corruption and finding the true way to govern (perhaps also to find his true self?)
- However, Duke appears to love the people yet abandons them
- Lucio appears to be a superficial and licentious dandy-about-town yet is only one who tries to protect Isabella and (however unwittingly) unmasks the Duke in the denouement
- Claudio appears at first to accept death and yet then fights against it

**Disguise** and **substitution** Well-known Jacobean conventions (see *The Malcontent* and *The Duchess of Malfi*) but are also essential to the working out of the plot and our understanding of this theme.

- Duke becomes friar (then back to Duke)
- Mariana substituted for Isabella in bed trick
- Ragozine’s head substituted for Claudio’s
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Appearances…….

**Structure**

- Structure of play reflects a stripping away of the surface to reveal what lies beneath and reaches climax in final scene where the literal lifting of hoods and disguise of characters becomes symbolic.

- Eventually the worlds of the palace, the street, the monastery, the nunnery, Angelo’s house, the moated grange and the fields outside the city walls become increasingly similar as the secular and the worldly merge. The final scene takes place in an open place (outside city walls) to show that justice must be seen to be done. This contrasts with the secrecy and claustrophobia of the ducal palace, Angelo’s house, the nunnery and the prison.

- The dynamic structure of play is underpinned by its symmetric structure in the form of its parallel characters, plots, settings, and images; this serves to reveal truth through comparison and contrast.

**Language**

- The soliloquy is one dramatic vehicle through which truth is revealed. Self-revelation and learning about inner truth (eg. Angelo, Duke, Isabella, Claudio).

- Emotionally charged encounters in which characters are forced to face truths: Act 2 Scenes 2 and 4; Act 3 Sc 1; Act 5 Sc 1.

- Images of coins (two sides), clothes (to hide truth and create illusion), repetition of word “seeming”; irony of the name “Angelo”.

- Shifting from abstract concepts to concrete realities ie. Angelo and Isabella.

- Isabella’s unconscious sexual word play contrasted with her vows of chastity.
Introduction

• Definition of justice= principle that punishment should be proportionate to the offence
• Justice inextricably interwoven with mercy, forgiveness, the law, and how a ruler should govern fairly and wisely
• Theme works on 2 levels: social and individual
• Play opens with Duke handing over power to third deputy Angelo and Duke reminds Angelo he has power to either sentence to death or grant mercy. Although laws and statutes are in place, at heart of play is when to punish and when to show mercy. This is Duke’s dilemma and should be Angelo’s

Social

• Laws and statutes in place and Duke, Escalus, and Angelo well-versed in these
• Yet law not working in Vienna – in state of moral disorder, lust and vice reign through too lax an implementation of law - justice weighted in favour of mercy
• Duke admits to Friar Thomas that reform needed (Act 1 Sc 3)
• On assuming power, Angelo immediately imposes excessively harsh form of justice
• Angelo’s attempt to bring moral order to Vienna, instead causes moral disorder and indeed corruption
• Escalus unsuccessful at reforming Pompey’s behaviour – not severe enough
• Ending of play sees a public meting out of justice; transparency also a vital element in the execution of justice

Individual: the Duke

• Duke leaves Vienna to test Angelo and perhaps to see how a state should be ruled (or not ruled) ie. to see how firm a ruler can be without being cruel
• Throughout Duke acts as arbiter of justice
• While not condoning wrong Duke is nevertheless: indulgent to Juliet; gives consolation to Claudio; helps Isabella with bed trick idea; criticises Angelo severely for his hypocrisy
• At end delivers justice though calling on Isabella to forgive Angelo who is publicly humiliated. He forces Angelo to marry a woman he once spurned and Lucio to marry Kate Keepdown, a prostitute
• In Act 5, not the secular law which administers justice to Angelo but the spirit of human forgiveness through the figure of Isabella. But Duke calls upon secular law to bring give Lucio his just desserts
• Final Act sees the merging of the religious/spiritual and secular
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Justice…..

**Individual: Angelo**

- Angelo believes himself to be fair and his adherence to the letter of law is the manifestation of this
- Angelo immediately uses newly acquired power to impose death not grant mercy
- Even has Claudio humiliatingly paraded through streets to prison
- For him law has become ineffectual through lack of use
- He says that he would treat everyone alike even himself and says he shows mercy when he shows justice ie. two concepts are the same
- Angelo uses power to blackmail Isabella.
- Even when he believes he has had his own way, shows no mercy to Claudio
- Final act admits his guilt but only after Duke’s identity been revealed
- Many critics think Angelo has escaped true justice. However, forced to marry Mariana and a dangerously proud man is publicly humiliated

**Individual: Isabella**

- Thrust unexpectedly into the arms of secular justice when persuaded to plea for Claudio
- Pleads for Duke to forgive brother yet refuses to grant Claudio mercy herself
- Chooses chastity over brother which for her is morally and religiously right (or she convinces herself it is)
- However, allows Mariana to take her place
- She is forced (rightly or wrongly) to forgive Angelo for two crimes
- Her spiritual values are so severely tested that she has become too worldly for the convent
- It has been said that Isabella represents the vehicle through which Christian ethic of forgiveness is conveyed

**Individual: Lucio and Pompey**

- Both Lucio’s and Pompey’s bawdy language relates to the theme of justice
- Indeed both seem undaunted by institutions
- Only person who helps Isabella = Lucio
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Justice…….

**Structure**

- Parallel structure reflects how play fluctuates between punishment and mercy until it finds its correct balance in the last act though the intervention of the Duke as final judge and the saving act of Isabella’s forgiveness
- Ironically, those required to show fairness are those who have no real power ie. Isabella and Mariana and vice-versa
- Constant juxtapositioning of scenes in which we see mercy and punishment dealt out
- As play progresses, two parallel worlds of higher and lower strata (people and places) seem far more similar than first imagined. Prison brought to the court and court brought to the prison

**Language:**

- Frequent pattern of antithesis and paradox found throughout play enhanced by skilful use of the caesura
- Key speeches (including soliloquies) eg. Isabella’s plea for mercy in Act 2 Sc 4 and key scenes (especially Act 2 Scene 2 and Act 5 Sc 1) deal directly with the issue of justice
- Biblical references particularly regarding the law, government, and the figure of Angelo
- The Sermon on the Mount
- Imagery: image of law sleeping; image of law as overfed lion, scarecrow; weeds representing corruption

**Conclusion:**

- Play shows that justice must combine mercy and punishment and take human failings into account?
- There is no such thing as true justice?
- The law is only as strong as those who administer it?
- At the heart of justice is Christian forgiveness?
- At the end no one is treated fairly?
- Is Shakespeare attempting to portray James I as a just monarch?
Themes in Measure for Measure

Theme of love in Measure for Measure

All the following touched upon in the play:

- PLATONIC LOVE
- SEXUAL LOVE (LUST)
- PATERNAL LOVE
- CHRISTIAN LOVE
- LOVE OF GOD
- SIBLING LOVE
- LOVE OF ONE’S COUNTRY
- SELF-LOVE
- MARITAL LOVE

- Often these types of love in conflict. Sexual love associated with disease and corruption eg. the lower strata and Angelo but also fertility and plenty and good eg. Juliet and Mariana who are both loyal and forgiving
- Angelo struggles against carnal nature and loses – provokes his moral and spiritual downfall and near tragedy
- Claudio represents youthful, sensual, and over-enthusiastic love
- Isabella chooses love of God over love of brother and some would say that she is made to pay the price for this ie. thinks her brother is dead; marries Duke?
- Yet is Isabella hiding a more worldly side to her character?
- Duke says he loves people yet paradoxically does not like to parade in front of them. Assumes disguise to be among people. Is his removal prompted by personal ambition or by concern for the reformation of his state?
- Suggestion that Duke has had a romantic past (see Act 1 Sc 3) and would fit in with end of play
- Duke proposes marriage to Isabella indicating a more sensuous nature
- However marriage could be interpreted as a form of punishment
- Angelo loves himself or rather his convictions. Self-indulgent, delighting in his blameless character. It has been suggested that Angelo hates himself and sees much of his own true nature in that of Claudio ie. In punishing Claudio, he is punishing himself
- Shakespeare chooses to focus on the “sin” of lust as it is perhaps the most universally applicable (and interesting) of all the sins
- Lower order characters see sex as natural and a necessity
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Love…..

**Language**

- Conscious sexual puns and wordplay of Lucio
- References to sexual disease and fornication by lower strata
- Angelo begins using abstract and restrained detached language but ends up being sexually charged, sensual, and even violent
- Claudio’s sensual language eg. *Embrace death like a bride*
- Isabella’s unconscious sexual wordplay which arouses Angelo’s desire even more

**Imagery**

- Fertility and plenty
- Religious habits (the friar’s and the nun’s)
- Blood representing lust (particularly with reference to Angelo)

**Structure**

- Play ends in marriage perhaps suggesting this is the ideal relationship (or not)
- However, sexual licentiousness must be punished as it leads to disorder hence Lucio’s punishment
- Play ends with display of Christian forgiveness, a sign of God’s love
- Self revelation destroys self love (refer to Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio)
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Theme of self knowledge in *Measure for Measure*

**Introduction**

- A very common theme in many Shakespeare’s plays and is interlinked with hypocrisy
- Often characters forced to confront their true nature due to a crisis which is thrust upon them
- Also implicit in play is that to know others well and hence be able to govern them, one must first know oneself. We see this through the Duke and conversely through Angelo ie. denying his true self leads to hypocrisy and the unleashing of destructive forces

**Social**

Could be argued that Vienna’s morally precarious state is a reflection and indeed a direct result of the Duke’s inability to rule effectively through a lack of self knowledge (see Duke’s words to Friar Thomas and particularly his soliloquy at end of Act 3 Scene 2 (*He who the sword of heaven should bear …*)

**Individual**

- Both Angelo and Isabella people of absolute and intransigent beliefs (or appear to be)
- Angelo believes himself to be fair and knows that he would not sin like Claudio
- These certainties shaken when he meets Isabella: see Act 2 Sc 2 and his soliloquies where he is forced to confront an intrinsic part of his nature ie. sexual desire
- Isabella too forced to look deep into her heart and mind by being forced to choose between chastity and her brother: depending on interpretation of character it could be an easy decision or a difficult one
- However, Isabella mysteriously asks prioress if there are more rules to be obeyed perhaps indicating an underlying worldliness or wilfulness
- Ironically, Duke leaves to uncover hypocrisy and to “know himself”
- Lucio and Pompey and lower class characters seem to have a firmer grasp of their true natures - they like their lives and their way of life and are at ease with the world they inhabit
- Claudio seems to have greater insight into character. In Act 1 Scene 2 admits his fault. Bravely (or cowardly as some critics have suggested) admits to Isabella his horror of death (see Act 3 Sc 1)
Themes in *Measure for Measure*

Self knowledge…..

**Structure**

- Play built around scenes of intense emotional and psychological tension which serve to reveal the inner natures of the characters to themselves and to the audience – a kind of psychological unmasking takes place. The scenes between Angelo and Isabella and their soliloquies show a tortured battle between their old beliefs and certainties and the reality of their natures and situation.

- Denouement provides a public exposition of crimes but characters are now also exposed to public scrutiny. Again physical unmasking symbolic of the psychological unmasking which is at work.

**Language**

- Images of coins, clothes
- Isabella’s famous speech on mercy when she talks about man’s “glassy essence” (Act 2 Sc 4)
- Isabella’s speech “Go to your bosom and knock there”
- Dramatic irony in way in which audience either suspects something about a character or actually knows things other characters do not. Also dramatic irony in last scene: the Duke is fully aware of Angelo’s true nature but continues the pretence to increase tension and make Angelo’s crimes more shocking when they are finally exposed.

- repetition of word “seeming”
- play on name ”Angelo”
- “this outward sainted deputy”