

Measure for Measure Summary

Writer: William Shakespeare | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background: “Measure for Measure” was written in the early 1600s. During this time, people discussed morality, justice, and authority. Shakespeare based his story on “*Promos and Cassandra*” by George Whetstone. The play looks at justice, mercy, power, and human behavior. It shows the struggle between law and morality, a big issue in Shakespeare's time.

Summary

“Measure for Measure” is one of William Shakespeare’s most serious comedies. It was probably written in 1603 or 1604. It is called a “problem play” because it mixes serious moral questions with comic endings. The story is set in Vienna, a city where moral order has broken down. The Duke, who rules Vienna, decides to test his people by leaving the city and watching secretly in disguise. Through this action, Shakespeare explores the conflict between justice and mercy, power and corruption, and sin and forgiveness. The play also shows the double standard of men and women in a strict society.

The Duke’s Plan: The Duke of Vienna is Vincentio. He feels that his city has become full of corruption and vice. People break laws freely because the Duke has been too kind and forgiving. Brothels are common, and premarital sex is increasing. To restore order, the Duke decides to step away from power for a while. He calls two trusted men: Angelo, a strict and moral deputy, and Escalus, a wise old counselor. He tells them that Angelo will act as ruler during his absence, and Escalus will assist him. The Duke secretly plans to stay in Vienna, disguised as a friar, so that he can observe how Angelo rules. The Duke wants to test whether Angelo can maintain justice and morality better than himself.

Angelo’s New Rule: Angelo accepts the responsibility with great seriousness. He believes in strict justice and immediately begins to enforce laws that have long been ignored. One of those laws is against sexual relations before marriage. Soon after, a young gentleman named Claudio is arrested. His crime is that he made his fiancée, Juliet, pregnant before their formal wedding. They were already engaged and planned to marry soon, but Angelo ignored these details. He declares that Claudio must die to serve as an example to others. This harsh sentence shocks everyone, including Escalus, who suggests mercy. But Angelo insists that the law must be obeyed without exception. He wants to show his firmness and earn a name for justice.

The News Reaches Isabella: Claudio's friend is Lucio. He is a talkative and humorous man. He visits the prison and learns about the sentence. He feels sorry for Claudio and decides to inform Isabella, Claudio's sister. Isabella is a young woman about to become a nun at Saint Clare's convent. She values purity and chastity above all else. When Lucio tells her about her brother's situation, Isabella is very sad but also shocked by his act. However, Lucio persuades her to meet Angelo and plead for her brother's life. Isabella agrees, trusting that her words and moral purity may soften Angelo's heart.

First Meeting of Angelo and Isabella: Isabella goes to the court with Lucio. She kneels before Angelo and pleads for her brother's life. Her argument is calm, logical, and full of feeling. She says mercy is stronger than punishment and that no one is without sin. Angelo listens carefully. Her beauty, grace, and moral strength begin to touch him deeply. He tries to resist these feelings but cannot. He tells her to come again the next day to hear his final decision.

After Isabella leaves, Angelo becomes restless. He realizes that he is attracted to her purity and innocence. This feeling disturbs him because he has always considered himself pure and self-controlled. He begins to fight between desire and duty.

The Wicked Proposal: The next day, Isabella returns to Angelo's court. At first, Angelo speaks kindly but slowly reveals his true desire. He tells her that he will pardon Claudio only if she agrees to sleep with him. Isabella cannot believe her ears. She thinks at first that he is testing her or joking. But soon she realizes that he is serious. Shocked and angry, she refuses the proposal immediately. She says she would rather die than commit such a sin. Angelo warns her that no one will believe her if she accuses him. Heartbroken, she leaves, deciding to tell her brother everything.

The Duke in Disguise: Meanwhile, the Duke has disguised himself as a friar named Friar Lodowick. He visits the prison to observe what is happening. He meets the Provost, who is the kind-hearted officer in charge of the prison. The king learns about Claudio's sentence from him. The Duke also meets Juliet, Claudio's fiancée, who feels deep remorse for her mistake and prays for forgiveness. The Duke advises her kindly. He believes that human weakness should be corrected with mercy, not death.

Isabella tells Claudio: Isabella goes to see Claudio in the prison. At first, Claudio is full of courage. He says he would rather die than see his sister lose her purity. But as she describes the horror of death, Claudio becomes afraid. He begs her to accept Angelo's offer. He says that life is precious and death is terrible. Isabella is deeply hurt. She calls him weak and cowardly and leaves him in anger. Their conversation shows the deep moral conflict between ideal purity

and human fear.

The Duke's Secret Plan: The Duke overhears this conversation. When Isabella leaves, he comforts Claudio and gives him hope. Then he meets Isabella secretly and tells her that he has a plan to save Claudio without breaking her vow. He explains that Angelo once loved a woman named Mariana. They were engaged to be married, but she lost her dowry in a shipwreck, and Angelo broke off the engagement. The Duke proposes that Isabella should pretend to accept Angelo's offer but send Mariana in her place at night. Since it will be dark, Angelo will not know the difference. In this way, Angelo will commit the same act he condemned in others, and Claudio will be saved. Isabella agrees to this plan, seeing it as the only moral solution.

The Bed Trick: The Duke visits Mariana, who lives alone near a moated house outside Vienna. She still loves Angelo even after his betrayal. When the Duke tells her of his plan, she agrees to help. That night, Isabella arranges a meeting with Angelo and promises to come to him. In the darkness, Mariana takes her place and sleeps with Angelo. Angelo believes that he has fulfilled his bargain. However, the next morning, he sends a message to the Provost ordering Claudio's execution. He fears Claudio might reveal his sin, so he wants him dead. This proves Angelo's hypocrisy and cruelty.

A Substitute Head: When the Duke learns of Angelo's new command, he quickly acts. The Provost informs him that another prisoner named Ragozine, who looks like Claudio, has just died of natural causes. The Duke orders the Provost to send Ragozine's head to Angelo and to hide Claudio in another cell. Angelo receives the head and believes Claudio is dead. He feels uneasy, knowing he has sinned and broken his word.

The Duke then decides to test everyone in public. He tells Isabella that her brother is dead. She weeps but remains strong in faith. The Duke, still disguised, tells her to wait for the Duke's public return and to accuse Angelo before the crowd.

Angelo's Fear and Guilt: Angelo begins to feel the weight of guilt. Though outwardly proud, he is tormented inside. He knows that he has sinned and fears that his secret might be revealed. His conscience troubles him, and he cannot find peace. At the same time, the Duke prepares to return to Vienna in his true identity. He plans a public ceremony at the city gates, where citizens can bring their complaints to him.

The Public Scene: In Act Five, all the main characters gather at the city gate. Angelo and Escalus welcome the Duke back with honor. Isabella appears among the crowd, followed by Mariana. She kneels before the Duke and cries for justice. She accuses Angelo of corruption, saying he condemned her brother but demanded her body in return. The Duke pretends not to

believe her. He says she must be mad or lying. He calls for "Friar Lodowick," the man who encouraged her to come forward. Angelo insists that the friar should be punished for slandering him.

Mariana then steps forward, veiled. She says that Angelo is her husband. The Duke, pretending not to understand, asks her to explain. She tells the story of their broken engagement and the meeting in the dark. Angelo denies everything. The Duke leaves the stage for a moment. He says he will look into the matter.

The Duke Reveals Himself: When the Duke returns, he is dressed again as the friar. Angelo orders his arrest for falsehood, but during the struggle, the Duke's disguise is removed. Everyone realizes that the Duke himself was the friar all along. The Duke calmly explains the truth. He reveals Angelo's guilt and Claudio's hidden survival. Angelo, full of shame, admits his crimes and begs for death. The Duke, however, decides to teach a moral lesson rather than destroy him.

Justice and Mercy: The Duke orders Angelo to marry Mariana immediately. Angelo obeys, but after the marriage, the Duke condemns him to death as punishment for his sin and cruelty. Mariana pleads for his life, saying that as his wife, she cannot live happily if he dies. Isabella, too, joins her in mercy. She forgives the man who tried to destroy her. Their compassion softens the Duke's heart. He pardons Angelo, showing that mercy is greater than revenge.

Then the Duke brings out Claudio, who is still alive and well. Isabella is overjoyed. Claudio and Juliet are allowed to marry, which makes their earlier act lawful. Lucio, the talkative man, is punished for his lies and insults. He must marry the prostitute who bore his child. The Duke forgives the other minor offenders as well, including Pompey and Mistress Overdone.

The Duke's Proposal: After restoring justice and mercy, the Duke turns to Isabella. He praises her courage, faith, and honesty. He asks her to leave the convent and marry him. The play ends without Isabella's reply. Her silence leaves the ending open and thoughtful. Some believe she accepts; others think she remains devoted to her faith. The uncertainty fits the play's tone of moral complexity.

In the end, the play teaches that human beings are neither completely good nor completely evil. Power tests character, and even the strongest may fall. Mercy can redeem the sinner more than punishment can. The law must serve people, not destroy them. Shakespeare shows that forgiveness, compassion, and self-knowledge are higher than pride and hypocrisy.