

Point - Counterpoint: The Duke



The Duke

“a very superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow”

Since the play's emergence in 1604, critics like Roy Battenhouse and G. Wilson Knight cast the Duke as an allegorical God figure who resolves the action of the play. However, other critics, including Meredith Skura and William Hazlitt, resist such an interpretation and instead seek to expose the Duke for what he really is, a manipulative and self-interested man who uses his subjects like chess pawns. As Lucio asserts, he is “a very superficial, ignorant, unweighing fellow” (3.2.122), a man whose ego and seeming benevolence falls into the realm of megalomania.

First, the Duke willingly admits that his lax enforcement of the laws has led to the present state of moral decay in Vienna: “Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope” (1.3.35). Yet, as Friar Thomas points out, it rested in him “to unloose this tied-up justice” (1.3.32). Instead of rectifying his laxity by enforcing the laws, the Duke commissions the stringent Angelo to do the job for him, leaving the anger of the people to fall solely on this newly appointed deputy instead of on the one rightly deserving blame, the ruler who loves “the life removed” and dislikes the very shouts of approval from his own people's mouths (1.3.8; 1.1.70).

But why does the Duke choose Angelo? In the opening of the play, he showers Escalus with accolades: “For common justice, you're as pregnant in / As art and practice hath enriched any / That we remember” (1.1.11-13). The Duke knows that Escalus is the more qualified candidate, but makes him Angelo's subordinate (“Old Escalus / Though first in question, is thy secondary,” 1.1.45-6). Surely the Duke is aware of Angelo's shady past with Mariana, a woman he abandoned after she lost her dowry at sea,

because he reveals this information later on to Isabella. It is apparent that the Duke must not fully trust Angelo because he sticks around to spy on him. He seems very certain Angelo will transgress and that “power [will] change purpose” (1.3.54). So, who sins more, the tempter or the tempted (2.2.170)? Although it cannot be said that the Duke causes Angelo to fall, he certainly sets the stage for entrapment.

Instead of observing Angelo unobtrusively in the background, the Duke actively chooses to engage in the action by dressing as a friar. But Lucio reminds us that “*Cucullus non facit monachum*” (5.1.268, “A cowl does not make a monk”). The Duke clearly abuses his power by assuming the duties of a clergyman, someone whom the faithful trust to hear their confessions and offer spiritual guidance. What’s worse, he falsely represents himself to his subjects at critical times in their lives: Claudio faces the chopping block and Isabella must decide whether or not to give in to sexual coercion. And the Duke is not a very good friar at that. His “Be absolute for death” speech (3.1.5-41) is not at all Christian but more Stoic because it depicts death as part of a natural process and has no mention of God. The speech, in fact, is almost cruel to the fearful lover because it acknowledges no hope of heaven or redemption, even though Claudio fully repents his sexual dalliance. Samuel Johnson says of it that “I cannot without indignation find Shakespeare saying that death is only sleep, lengthening out his extortion by a sentence which in the Friar is impious.”¹ It seems insidious that the Duke, disguised as a man of faith, would expound such anti-Christian principles to followers who are unaware of his disguise.

Furthermore, the Duke is inconsistent. Having premarital sex is a “sin of heavier kind” (2.3.28) for Juliet than it is for Claudio, but “’tis no sin” at all for Mariana (4.1.70). The Duke contorts religious doctrine in order to satisfy his temporal desires. As a friar, he does not really care about arraiging consciences or ministering to the people. Falsely assumed vestments and a religious role provide him with an even more invasive authority over his subjects. It seems he will do whatever he can to create and execute a grand plan for disgracing Angelo, one that results in “dark deeds darkly answered” (3.2.152).

By manipulating the other characters, the Duke takes away their independence and agency. They become puppets in a game they don’t even

¹ Samuel Johnson (1765) in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Brian Vickers, 6 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974-81), 5: 104.

know exists. After he begins his machinations, the emotional intensity is lowered and none of the major characters gives powerful speeches like those heard in the first half of the play. What is worse, the Duke shows no evidence of sensitivity to their plights and, indeed, willingly prolongs their suffering. He is criminally negligent, leaving Barnardine to rot in jail for nine years. Only when Angelo orders Claudio's and Barnardine's executions does the Duke decide to rush Barnardine off to death because he needs his head for Claudio's (4.2.156-8). Worst of all, the Duke tells Isabella that her brother is dead even though he's not, "to make her heavenly comforts of despair / when it is least expected" (4.3.103-4). That is cruel and unusual punishment. He then has Isabella shamefully and publicly admit to sleeping with Angelo even though she did not (4.6.1-4). After resuming his identity of the Duke, he calls Mariana a "pernicious woman" and publicly dismisses her although he knows the truth of the entire matter (5.1.246). Instead, for an entire scene he fully defends Angelo and lets Isabella get arrested. He works the confusions to their height until he can arrange for Claudio to enter with a bag over his head. He takes his own games too far, as if he enjoys trapping people into positions of weakness and despair so that they can sing his praises when he rescues them. His handling of Barnardine, Isabella, Mariana, and Claudio are clear examples of his abuse of power.

For many critics and audiences alike, the ending of the play is unsatisfying. First, Angelo is pardoned. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that "Our feelings of justice are grossly wounded in Angelo's escape."² After coercing people into submissive positions, the Duke then bestows mercy upon them, even if they don't want or need it. This "orgy of clemency," as A. D. Nuttall³ aptly names it, leaves some characters silent at the end with their fate determined for them by the Duke. Claudio and Isabella do not utter a word to each other. The Duke instead proceeds to propose to her only a few moments after the emotional revelation that her brother lives. Angelo is married off to Mariana even though he "crave[s] death more willingly than mercy" (5.1.479). Barnardine is pardoned for his "earthly faults," even though a couple scenes before the Duke was eager for his dismembered head (5.1.486). Strangely, the Duke will not pardon Lucio. Instead, he punishes him primarily for slander, not for getting Kate

² *The Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Morley, (London, 1890), 57.

³ "Measure for Measure: Quid Pro Quo?", *Shakespeare Studies*, 4 (1968), 231-51 (239).

Keepdown pregnant, a crime that was, only a moment ago, punishable by death. Like Angelo, Lucio begs for corporeal punishment but is unwillingly married off instead (5.1.508-9, 5.1.515). “Slandering a prince deserves it” (5.1.526). The Duke is overly concerned with his public image and what people think of him, not with administering justice.

Although the Duke is allegedly a man who “contended especially / to know himself” (3.2.203-4), he seems to know very little about human dignity. Coercing and controlling individuals through deception is inconsiderate and immoral. Above all, it is not characteristic of a merciful and loving ruler (let alone of God), but of someone self-absorbed and devious. The Duke strips others of choice through humiliation. As a result, these characters become “instruments of some more mightier member” (5.1.242), but one who is mighty only in ego and self-conceit.

The Duke

*“he foils the villains, saves the innocent,
and gives the audience a relatively happy ending”*

Several critics have described Duke Vincentio as a Machiavellian ruler, but he effectively saves Claudio from death, protects Isabella’s chastity, helps Mariana gain the husband for whom she has pined, and publicly exposes Angelo and Lucio. In short, he foils the villains, saves the innocent, and gives the audience a relatively happy ending. The Duke resolves the conflicts mounting in the first half of the play, and he prevents *Measure for Measure* from becoming a tragedy. Furthermore, the Duke is defensible on strictly moral grounds because he is a merciful ruler with practical motivations for temporarily abdicating the throne, and he uses “craft” to guide the other characters’ actions toward the positive conclusion without stripping them of their dignity or free will.

The Duke is partially to blame for the lecherous state of Vienna at the play’s opening. He humbly admits:

Sith ’twas my fault to give the people scope
’Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them
For what I bid them do: for we bid this be done
When evil deeds have their permissive pass

And not the punishment. (1.3.35-9)

His pardons at the end of the play suggest that his earlier hesitation to enforce the strict law arose from a merciful nature, rather than from impotence or cowardice. Pompey wittily predicts that if the anti-fornication law were to last in Vienna, then the government would need to take measures to repopulate the state after all of the executions. Therefore, a strict enforcement of the law is not a satisfactory response to rectify the condition of immoral Vienna; “heading and hanging” (2.1.214) all violators, as Angelo seems to desire, would certainly rid the state of lechers, but it could cost an enormous amount of otherwise innocent civilian lives. Over the course of the play, Duke Vincentio attempts to discover a middle-ground to temper justice effectively with mercy for the good of the people.

Critics sometimes question the Duke’s mixed motives for temporarily abdicating his position and rebuke him for setting up Angelo as a scapegoat; however, Angelo enforces and qualifies the pre-existing laws of Vienna according to the mandates of his own conscience, and the Duke does not force him to act with such rigidity, not to mention hypocrisy. Although they are not explained in depth, the Duke’s desire to test Angelo’s moral resolve and his suspicion of him are justified by the deputy’s subsequent lustful, merciless actions. Furthermore, Duke Vincentio’s wish that his name be kept free from the stain of popular slander is a decision more prudent than egomaniacal. In order for the Duke to govern well, he must protect his image and maintain the proper respect of the citizens; this also explains why he must be firm in his punishment of the loose-tongued and slanderous, though endearingly comical, Lucio at the end of Act 5.

The Duke disguises himself as Friar Lodowick to prevent any disastrous consequences that may result from Angelo’s rule. His application of “craft against vice” (3.2.244) may be vindicated by Elizabeth Pope’s “The Renaissance Background of *Measure for Measure*,” specifically her citation of William Wilymat, a clergyman contemporary of Shakespeare; Wilymat explained that rulers derive their authority from God and therefore have “the privilege of using extraordinary means”⁴ to accomplish their positive ends in a secretive way. The friar-disguise is an extraordinary mean to positive ends, such as the counseling of distraught citizens in dire need. When he hears of Angelo’s indecent proposal, Vincentio immediately

⁴ Elizabeth M. Pope, “The Renaissance Background of *Measure for Measure*,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 2 (1949), 68-82 (72).

responds to the plight of his subjects and chooses a course that he believes benefits Isabella, Mariana, Claudio, and even Angelo, who is prevented from committing several monstrous sins.

Although some critics view the substitution bedtrick as the greatest moral blemish on the play, James Black argues that “the play turns upon the positive virtue of [Mariana’s] action.”⁵ Even if the Duke’s proposal of the substitution bedtrick is taken to be an imperfect solution to Isabella’s dilemma, then it is certainly the lesser of two evils, and any fault lies just as much with Isabella for her complicity and assistance. Rather than coldly manipulating the other characters and stripping them of their individuality, the Duke assists and guides Isabella and Mariana with their full consent at each step of the process. Isabella’s individual virtue actually reaches its height in Act 5, when she mercifully kneels beside Mariana on behalf of Angelo. Although some readers interpret the Duke’s concealment of Claudio’s survival from Isabella as a sign of cruelty or an arbitrary abuse of power, her climactic plea for mercy would lose much significance if she already knew of her brother’s safety. By remaining in disguise and helping to bring about positive results without using his ducal powers, Vincentio gives his subjects a considerable degree of autonomy and allows them to exercise their own virtues as a method of moral instruction.

Some find the Duke’s proposal to Isabella unsavory at best and a politically-motivated subjugation of her distinctly feminine virtues at worst, but Isabella is “yet unsworn” (1.4.9). She has no formal commitment to the sisterhood of Saint Claire beyond the confines of her own conscience and religious convictions. She is perfectly free to change her mind and marry. The number of interpretations that take her acceptance of the proposal for granted may be a sign of the appropriateness of this union. And Vienna, furthermore, is much better off for the Duke’s attentions: bawds are in jail, the brothels in the city have been torn down, a lecher and slanderer has been suitably punished, two of Vienna’s most eloquent citizens have been taught the value of mercy, wise Escalus and the conscientious Provost are promised rewards and promotions, and even Vincentio has learned the moral advantages of staging himself to the eyes of his subjects. Although the state has some remaining problems to solve, major improvements have resulted from the prudent actions of the Duke.

⁵ James Black, “The Unfolding of *Measure for Measure*,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), 119-128 (120).