

## *Language and Rhetoric*

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*Measure for Measure* has approximately 65% of its lines in verse, usually iambic pentameter, and the remaining 35% in prose. Isabella and Claudio speak their most impassioned speeches in verse—her profound plea for her brother’s life, his sudden and harrowing realization of mortality on the brink of death. Angelo almost exclusively speaks verse (as befits his own conception of his moral and legal stature), yet he never reaches the heights of either Isabella’s or Claudio’s eloquence. Some minor characters, such as Mariana and the various religious figures, tend to speak in verse. But Elbow, Pompey, Mistress Overdone, and the other denizens of Vienna’s underworld speak a vulgar yet comic prose, which indicates their low social rank and, more important, provides for the bawdy and humorous interludes. The Provost also speaks largely in prose, as is appropriate to his simple disposition and his need to deal with lowlifes in prison. Lucio almost always speaks prose, but he can switch into verse on occasion, such as in 1.4 with Isabella. His prose banter in 3.2 and 4.3 confronts the disguised Duke with some unpleasant and unwelcome assertions. Escalus treads in both waters, showing his expertise in the social languages of both the higher and lower realms of society. The Duke himself, finally, is fluent in both tongues, each useful respectively to his roles as leader and as friar. His versification, more flowery and complex at times in its phrasing than that of any other character, gives him a unique theatrical power and presence.

*Measure for Measure* has fewer rhyming lines than many of Shakespeares’ other plays (only 82 rhyming lines in all). Some rhymes signal a sententious moral proverb or an aside; some eloquently end an act or scene; some cue exits or entrances; one contains the title-line (Ness, 143).

**Claudio's refusal to speak prose (1.2.109):** Wright (254) observes that Claudio seems to refuse to speak in prose. Although Claudio is not as bawdy as Lucio, both technically are guilty of the same crimes: fornication and the impregnation of a woman. Lucio just has not been caught yet. While Lucio speaks largely in prose, Claudio speaks largely in verse, a medium that suggests his noble character, even though he is deemed a criminal in Vienna. It even appears that, prosodically at least, Claudio ennobles Lucio by ending Lucio's prose half-lines in verse, thereby making them both speak verse:

LUCIO What is't murder?

CLAUDIO No.

LUCIO Lechery?

CLAUDIO Call it so. (1.2.129-30)

**Escalus' moral quatrain (2.1.37-40):**

Well, heaven forgive him and forgive us all.

Some rise by sin and some by virtue fall;

Some run from breaks of ice and answer none,

And some condemnèd for a fault alone.

In the Folio the quatrain is placed in italics, which is often a sign of a proverbial or moralizing phrase; few modern editions, however, retain the original italics. The rhymes should tip off the reader that Shakespeare is calling attention to the passage. Ness notes that even though rhymed asides are often used merely to give the audience information not to be heard by other characters onstage, "the numerous rhymed asides in the later plays seem mostly designed to convey moral observations upon the words or actions of the characters" (Ness, 58). The rhyme calls attention to the wisdom that is inherent in the lines, as well as to the gentle and forgiving character of the sober Escalus.

**Angelo's giving up of prose (2.1.122-5):** While trying to mediate the dispute between Pompey, Froth, and Elbow with Escalus, Angelo becomes sorely annoyed and distraught; he utters four lines of verse before he exits in a huff:

This will last out a night in Russia,

When nights are longest there. I'll take my leave,

And leave you to the hearing of the cause,

Hoping you'll find good cause to whip them all.

Angelo “speaks prose with reluctance” (Wright, 254), a sign that he, arrogant and self-consciously noble, cannot relate to the unwashed masses as well as Escalus. This burst of verse not only underscores Angelo’s disgust at the lower class (and by extension his bloated ego) but it also highlights Angelo’s inability to speak to the common man. Such inability suggests that he cannot be an effective and just leader. If Angelo cannot even bear to be in a room during a trivial dispute, how can he preside over more serious matters?

**The Duke’s elevated language elevates him (3.1.5ff.):** Houston notes in the Duke’s “Be absolute for death” speech to Claudio a heightened sense of rhetoric and inverted syntax. He (154) finds elegance in the unusual and unconventional sentence structures—“a rather stark alternation of the conjunction ‘for’ and the absence of any explicit connection between clauses.” The Duke’s unusual sentence structure, abundant metaphor, and sententious reworking of classical sources here suggest that he is not exactly on the same plane as the rest of the characters. Perhaps analogous to the playwright, he is not subject to circumstance in the play but is indeed the subjector.

**The Duke’s transition into prose (3.1.155):** While capable of eloquent verse, the Duke speaks prose for the first time in the play at this crucial moment, “Vouchsafe a word, young sister, but one word.” The Duke comes forward at the height of both Claudio’s intense fear of death and Isabella’s agitated revulsion. The Duke’s prose has a certain “dampening effect after great emotional stress” (Vickers, 319). His cool rhetoric contrasts with Isabella’s emotional vocatives and exclamations. His calm, ordered language allows him to defuse the tense situation.

**The Duke’s scene-end soliloquy (3.2.228-49):** The Duke’s soliloquy here (“He who the sword of heaven will bear / Should be as holy as severe”), efficiently ending Act III, is the only occurrence of an extended set of consecutive rhymes in the whole play. The speech strangely mixes iambic pentameter and trochaic tetrameter. Ness (144) suggests that this extended set of rhymes in an unusual mixed meter accentuates the supernatural character of the Duke, highlighting his mysterious role as

a sort of metacharacter elevated above the terrestrial action of the play. Even the tone is quite eerie, resembling a sort of chant or incantation as he effectively damns Angelo with his words, “Twice treble shame on Angelo, / To weed my vice and let his grow!” (236-7).

**The Duke’s verses on “place and greatness” (4.1.57-62):** Most see these verses as problematic because they seem out of context and too short to cover Isabella’s off-stage revelation of the bedtrick scheme to Mariana. Walker argued that they were removed from their original place in 3.2, preceding the couplets on greatness that the Duke speaks after Lucio’s exit:

No might nor greatness in mortality  
 Can censure scape; back-wounding calumny  
 The whitest virtue strikes. What king so strong  
 Can tie up the gall in the slanderous tongue? (159-62)

Taylor and Jowett argue for their placement before Isabella’s entrance at 4.1.19.

**The silences in the conclusion of the play (5.1.493ff.):** Most unsettling silences occur in the last moments of the play. The Duke’s remitting of the death sentence for Angelo, Barnadine, and Lucio, as well as his revelation of Claudio alive, evoke no words of gratitude. The only words we hear regarding the cancelled death sentences come from Lucio, and express *ingratitude*, for he would rather be tortured and killed than marry “a punk” (5.1.524-5). “The silences of Angelo, Barnadine, Claudio, Juliet, Mariana and Isabella are made all the more striking by the sustained contrast with Lucio’s irresponsible garrulousness” (McGuire, 63). Moreover, the betrothed couples—Angelo and Mariana as well as Claudio and Juliet—do not speak a single word to each other on stage. And Isabella says nothing to the Duke though he twice proposes to her, a silence that can signal joyful assent or defiant rejection. Various productions utilize and interpret these open silences to various ends.

*Sources*

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