

# Politics, Power, and Purpose in Shakespeare's Measure for Measure

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In Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, observing that his Dukedom has fallen into licentiousness and chaos through his neglectful government, has pretended to leave Vienna and has turned over the government to Angelo, his upright and up-tight Deputy; and that the Duke has resolved to remain in [Vienna](#), in disguise, so that he may observe how Angelo's character is revealed or transformed in the crucible of the power with which he has been invested. The Duke tells Friar Thomas, who is party to the plot:

Lord Angelo is precise,

Stands at a guard with [envy](#), scarce confesses

That his blood flows, or that his appetite

Is more to bread than stone. Hence shall we see

If power change purpose, what our seemers be. (1.3.5-54)

My subject is how "power" changes--or at least influences--"purpose." But the "purpose" in question is not, as in the play, the government of a city or of a state, nor even (as in the case of Angelo) the government of one's psychological and physical appetites, but the creation of a work of art, of a theatrical performance. Talking about Angelo, the Duke poses his assertion as a conditional: he wishes to test "if power change purpose." My hypothesis is that, in the theatre, power does indeed change purpose.

I base this hypothesis upon several premises: that the theatre, as a complex collaborative art form, depends upon the coordination of the [talents](#) and temperaments of a wide range of individuals; that, in the theatre, these individuals must be organized into a process which inescapably involves the establishment and articulation of power; that theatrical artists are, by their very nature, sensitive, e...

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...ulates the other characters and, like a playwright, creates scenarios for them to play; etc., etc.

I am, I believe, arguing something else altogether. The play is not alluding to its mode of performance to tell its story. The play and the performance are simply telling the same story: a story about the same power relationships that informed the process by which the performance was created. It's not that life is like the theatre. It's that the play and the performance and the theatre in general are built upon the raw materials of life: upon wayward human beings struggling to work together to live with one another in the world. The story that any production of Measure for Measure tells is that power, in the theatre as in life, changes purpose. Just as the Duke tests Angelo, when we go to the theatre, we go to see, "If power change purpose, what our seemers be."

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