

# Shakespeare's Measure for Measure and Prostitution in Elizabethan England

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književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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**Shakespearova *Mjera za mjeru* i prostitucija u elizabetanskoj  
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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Boris Berić

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## **Abstract**

In its own unique way, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* portrays the harsh reality and the struggles of the prostitutes who were prosecuted by the same men with whom they had sex. Nevertheless, despite the fact that prostitutes had a hard time, women in general were not in a favourable situation. Their lives were dictated by men who decided their destiny as if they owned it. In the eyes of a man, a woman was neither smart enough nor capable of doing the same things that men did. Moreover, women were expected to follow the standards of good behaviour with which men would just often get away. Being liable to temptation by nature, they made good men fall into sin. Therefore, marrying a man that would take care of them was all they could hope for. For this reason, the decision to escape the burden of marriage was seen as unnatural and did not meet with the society's approval. Yet, it turns that, in reality, neither men nor women are free from sin. They are born as sinners; they die as sinners; they are sinners by nature. Therefore, it is not up to them to mete out the measure to all.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, prostitution, men and women, sin

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show three different points of view on the prostitution in Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*. In the first chapter, the overlapping and the ambiguity regarding female gender roles and their connection with prostitution will be discussed on the example of every woman in the play, that is, from nun to whore. The second chapter deals with pornographic stereotyping of nuns and Isabella's sexuality. Finally, the third chapter shows how those that seemed the most virtuous of them all contributed to Vienna's fornication, while the paper in whole provides the reader with frequent prejudices and double moral standards that are closely associated not only with women but also with men.

Although there are very few taboo subjects left for the society to break, the one about prostitution is still very much present because it continues to stir up strife and to be the reason for transgression in societies and cultures all over the world. Being free of taboos and unmoved by the social restrictions of his time, in his play, Shakespeare unmasks the double standards and the hypocrisy of people who fall in the sin of debauchery while simultaneously trying to eradicate it from the Viennese society. Moreover, he provides the reader with the historical background of prostitution in Elizabethan England and "in his own subtle way, demonstrates a remarkable sympathy for prostitutes and the way that society simultaneously uses and marginalizes them, in a manner similar to its treatment of playwrights, actors, and theater-owners" (Messerschmidt 7).

As Byron Nelson explains, the business of prostitution was one of the most thankless jobs among all the possible occupations. In this sense, the world's oldest profession also became the one of the least respected. Prostitutes were in danger not only because of their violent customers but also because of the sexually transmitted diseases and the fact that, having been regarded as criminals, they constantly had to face prosecution (19). According to Messerschmidt, "Women in this shifting English society were marginalized, and the prostitute occupied an especially precarious place since her profession identified her as an outsider, legally and morally" (2). The increase in population simultaneously increased the demand for prostitutes. There were in average "115 men for every 1000 women" (Nelson 19). Having consisted mainly out of young people, nearly half of England's population was 25 or under. Unlike women and despite any legal restrictions, men were, with the purpose of gaining sexual experience, encouraged to sleep with as many women as possible. Nevertheless, for them a marriageable woman had to be pure



in order to be acceptable (Nelson 19). It is interesting that “women from all social ranks seem to have participated in the oldest trade, although the profession had greater appeal to women who fell below the poverty line” (Nelson 20). According to Nelson, the brothels in which they prostituted were not placed in secluded and dark areas of the city; on the contrary, they could have easily been located throughout the city. Yet, because of the great deal of diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea, these women could only work in the industry for some time. Although they equally shared the guilt with the prostitutes, the male customers successfully managed to evade the punishment while these women would often be whipped or imprisoned. The authorities, the Church and the Puritans, were seen as the biggest opponents of the brothels. Having refused to regard it as necessary evil, they went to great lengths in order to eradicate it from the society. On the other hand, the suppression of the brothels was, for the most part, stopped by powerful individuals who, while pretending to want destroy this type of leisure, often frequented these kind of places (20).

Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* develops around several Biblical concepts. Thus, the title of the play alludes to Matthew 7.1-5. According to this verse, those that judge others will be subjected to judgment as well because nobody is perfect:

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine own eye and behold, a beam is in thine own eye?

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt

thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye. (New Jerusalem Bible)

This becomes evident in the case of all the characters in the play since they all turn out to be nothing more than hypocrites. At the beginning of the play, Angelo is determined to be a strict ruler and, as a result, decides to punish Claudio, Isabella’s brother, for having sex with his

fiancée. Nevertheless, after meeting Isabella, Angelo agrees to let her brother out of prison if she accepts to indulge in a sexual relationship with him. What is more, Claudio encourages her to accept his proposal because he thinks that his act should not be punished so severely. While hiding behind her chastity, Isabella refuses to sleep with Angelo, even if that means that her brother will be killed. She believes that sleeping with him would be worse than death. However, while she is disgusted by Angelo's proposal, she is ready to sacrifice Marianna for the same cause. Although Duke Vincentio seems to be the righteous one, he constantly plays with people and is the one who pimps out Marianna to sleep with Angelo in the garden. Moreover, he is the one who decides the fate of each and one of the characters in the play. For example, he orders Lucio to marry the prostitute with whom he has fathered a child, while thinking about whipping and hanging him. Finally, a few scenes also include the madam who runs the house of prostitution and the men discussing frequenting brothels, suggesting that no efforts and strict rules can succeed in reforming the city. Yes, there are different types of prostitution in this play no matter whether it is voluntary or involuntary, visible or obscure, no matter whether women are the ones trading their bodies or whether the men do it for them. However, at the end, everybody gets exactly what they deserve or at least it seems so.

## 1. Female Gender Roles: from Nun to Whore

*Measure for Measure*, among other things, portrays the importance of female gender roles that are being imposed on women by men who not only seek to control their sexuality but also give themselves the right to control their entire lives. Besides the need for chastity, fidelity, obedience and the need to get married, women are also considered to be inferior to men and, therefore, excluded from any decision making processes. Since they are constantly being forced to conform to the acceptable types of behaviour, any role confusion is expected to be fixed in order to restore the overall balance. This restoration of balance happens, at the very end, when all women become wives through marriage and, thereby, fulfil their predestined role. While Duke Vincentio, in his conversation with Mariana, tries to determine to which of the ascribed female roles she belongs, Lucio concludes that all women are, in fact, prostitutes:

Duke: What, are you married?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: Are you a maid?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: A widow, then?

Mariana: Neither, my lord.

Duke: Why, you are nothing then. Neither maid, widow, nor wife?

Lucio: My lord, she may be a punk. For many of them are neither maid, widow nor wife. (*Measure*, 5.1.172-79)

Nevertheless, none of the women in the play, except for the bawd Mistress Overdone, fits into any traditional female gender roles that are listed above. Moreover, since they occupy the uncharted gaps between the different categories, they present an exception to the rule. In this sense, Shakespeare plays with all the possible combinations that vary along a determinate range between the two extremes, that is, between the possibility of being a nun and a whore (Fouassier).

As far as Isabella is concerned, throughout the play, she occupies the position of a nun, that is, the extreme value that differs from the acceptable female gender roles. When the character of Isabella is first introduced in the convent, she considers the idea of joining its religious order of St Clare and expresses her wish for “a more strict restraint” (*Measure*, 1.4.4.). However, after Lucio comes to tell her about her brother’s imprisonment, she does not return to the convent again. During the course of the story, Isabella ardently defends herself against male sexual desire. For example, she even blackmails Angelo by threatening to tell everyone about his abominable proposal: “Sign me a present pardon for my brother, / Or with an outstretch’d throat I’ll tell the world aloud / What man thou art” (*Measure*, 2.4.152-54). Yet, at the end and in spite of her resistance, Isabella gets confronted with Duke Vincentio’s marriage announcement. In this sense, her silence might mean that, just like the voices of prostitutes in the play, even her voice becomes silenced and the marriage becomes her punishment. According to John Dollimore, “this actual absence, this actual silence, is one of the most revealing indications of the extent of their powerlessness and exploitation in a culture ... which obsessively invokes them” (qtd. in Messerschmidt 19).

According to Mario DiGangi, despite being betrothed and then deserted and despite her sexual intercourse with Angelo, before the marriage itself, Mariana is “neither maid, widow nor wife” (*Measure*, 5.1.172-79). As a matter of fact, she is not even a whore in the full sense of the word. Although the terms considering the dowry could not be fulfilled, once the relationship between Mariana and Angelo is physically consummated, the couple must get married and the agreement between them cannot be broken anymore. Consequently, as the Duke Vincentio tells her, sex is not considered to be a sin in this case. Moreover, since the engagement is made in front of the witnesses, it is considered to be legally acceptable: “He is your husband on a pre-contract: / To bring you thus together ‘tis no sin” (*Measure*, 4.1.66-67). As a result, Mariana agrees to prostitute herself for the cause. In fact, her decision probably does not have as much to do with love as with the fact that marrying the man because of whom her reputation has become stained is also the only way to repair it. Her actions are the actions of a person who is in a desperate situation. After all, Angelo refuses to marry her and invents the story about her stained reputation only because her dowry gets lost in the sea: “She should this Angelo have married; was affianc’d to her by oath, and the nuptial appointed; between which time of the contract and limit of the solemnity, her brother Frederick was wrack’d at sea, having in that perish’d vessel the dowry of his sister” (*Measure*, 3.1.).

Juliet also occupies a gap between a wife and a prostitute. Yet, her situation is slightly different. Being made without witnesses, her engagement with Claudio is not legally acceptable and their sexual intercourse is seen as adultery. Although the Church expects people to consummate the marriage after the wedding, there are other forms of making this union official:

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract

I got possession of Julietta's bed.

You know the lady; she is fast my wife,

Save that we do the denunciation lack

Of outward order. This we came not to,

Only for propagation of a dow'r

Remaining in the coffer of her friends, (*Measure*, 1.2.87-91)

In this case, there is a promise of marriage, according to which Juliet and Claudio vow one to another. Yet, this kind of union is still considered to be unsatisfactory, although, unlike Angelo, Claudio actually plans on marrying Juliet, when they get her dowry. In accordance with one version of the story, Shakespeare has "deliberately lessened the severity of Claudio's crime" (Smith 25). In this version, instead of being imprisoned for "the mutual act of extramarital sex" (Smith 115) with his fiancée, Claudio is accused of raping Juliet. This makes the prison encounter of Juliet and Duke Vincentio, who is disguised as a friar, even more surprising. After finding out about their mutual sexual intercourse, Duke Vincentio puts the entire blame on Juliet:

Duke: Love you the man that wrong'd you?

Juliet: Yes, as I love the woman that wrong'd him.

Duke: So then it seems your most offenseful act

Was mutually committed?

Juliet: Mutually.

Duke: Then was your sin of heavier kind than his.

Juliet: I do confess it, and repent it, father. (*Measure*, 2.3.24-28)

This double standard reveals the fact that it is normal for men to want to have sex with women, but it is sinful for women to seduce or to be seduced because that makes them whores. Men often justify rape by telling that woman's features or clothing incite to rape. If Claudio rapes Juliet, she can be forgiven, but since their sin is mutual, her consent does not meet with the society's approval. By accepting this kind of remark, she agrees with this victim-blaming concept by which she and other women are the reason for which men fall into a sin in the first place. This false assumption has its roots in the Bible and is still, as such, deeply ingrained in the society:

As a major institution in Western society, the Church inevitably affected the mind of a people in Western countries, including in the matter of sexual stereotypes. The sexual stereotyping of woman as the temptress is derived from the story of the fall of man in the Bible. Eve, having been deceived by the serpent, caused Adam to disobey God. Because of this, women are often seen as the temptress, they are blamed for causing man to fall into sin. (Wulandari 32)

Being a prostitute, Mistress Overdone represents another extreme that is out of man's reach. Similarly, she is the only one who does not get the chance for redemption. While Isabella, Angelo and Duke Vincentio worry about their virtue and try to fight fornication, she has some very different concerns. The execution of fornicators, in cooperation with plague and war might have a bad influence on her business: "Thus, what with the war, what with the sweat, what with the gallows, and what with poverty, / I am custom-shrunk" (*Measure* 1.2.79-81). Ironically, she is the only one who is concerned with the real problems that threaten the city. Lucio states that he has "purchased as many diseases under her roof as come to" (*Measure*, 1.2.44-45). Yet, despite being worried about syphilis, men who frequent brothels fail to recognize their responsibility in spreading the disease. Before going to jail and out of revenge for blowing her cover, Mistress Overdone accuses Lucio for having an illegitimate child. Despite the fact that prostitutes are usually regarded as the worst society has to offer, she takes care of his child:

Mistress Kate Keepdown was  
with child by him in the Duke's time; he promised  
her marriage. His child is a year and a quarter old  
come Philip and Jacob. I have kept it myself, and see  
how he goes about to abuse me. (*Measure*, 3.2.200-204)

Hypocritically, while prostitutes are good for casual sexual diversion, the women men want to marry have to be chaste in order to be acceptable. After being sentenced to marry Mistress Kate Keepdown, Lucio begs Duke Vincentio not to “recompense me in making me a cuckold” (*Measure*, 5.1.479) because “Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging” (*Measure*, 5.1.483).

Early from their childhood, women are gradually prepared to take over a role of a wife, a role which is considered to be the pinnacle of achievement in a woman's life. In this sense, all other categories are only leading a woman to this final and desired stage. Since both nun and prostitute step outside the framework of what is considered to be acceptable female behaviour and, thereby, reject the marriage, they continue to attract male attention and arousal. Likewise, as long as they are able to withstand masculine sexuality that tries to make them conform to made-up categories, they manage to keep their identity, their meaning. In the end, after being lost in the multitude of categories, Marina and Juliet evade the stigma of non-affiliation by accepting their ascribed roles. While accepting who she is, Mistress Overdone becomes the only one who is neither worried, nor insecure about her identity. Finally, Isabella seems to get lost along the way. While fighting for her chastity, she not only stumbles on the way of virtue but also approaches both the notion of a prostitute, through Angelo, and the notion of a wife, through Duke Vincentio. In the end, it is not sure if she is going to accept his proposal or if she is going to return to the convent. After all, since being a temptress is an innate state, the category of a prostitute is the only choice that always seems to be at woman's disposal (Fouassier).

## 2. Isabella's Sexual Appeal

By refusing to prostitute herself for her brother's life, Isabella also refuses to give up her valued chastity in order to save her own soul. According to Maus, she "believes that sleeping with Angelo will defile her forever, even if she does it in order to save her brother's life" (qtd. in McGarrity 49). In Isabella's eyes, while in the cell, her brother does not only ask her to prostitute her body for his life, but also to give up her identity, her soul. In this sense, the mortal damnation of the soul is far worse than the death of the body:

And 'twere the cheaper way:  
Better it were a brother died at once,  
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,  
Should die forever. (*Measure*, 2.4.107-109)

According to some interpretations, women, such as Isabella, often choose to become nuns in order to escape the burden of womanhood that the society places on them:

For women in the late Middle Ages, the Church may have provided a safe refuge from the expectations of womanhood. By joining an order of nuns, a woman could avoid marriage, sexual intercourse, childbirth, and motherhood by remaining a virginal Bride of Christ. In addition, the Church may have provided women with new avenues for exploring their individuality. With the rejection of the traditional signifiers of womanhood (marriage, sex, and children), these women may have been, in a sense, "liberated" from their ascribed social identities and may have been able to explore for themselves new identities within the Church. (Lester 196)

For this reason, it could be said that Isabella too provided resistance to male dominance with the aim of becoming something more than just someone's wife. It seems that, in this religious environment and through the curtailment of sexual desires, women could not only be free of the chains of marriage but also completely out of man's reach. What is more, by withholding sex from men, Isabella becomes the only one who has the complete control over her body and her soul (Fouassier). Nevertheless, the enormous interest in her sexuality and chastity lies, first of all, in some of the stereotypes that, just like the veil of mystery, surround not only nuns but also their religious calling:



A widespread assumption that the nun's vow of chastity means that she is actually sexually repressed, a hotbed of seething and barely restrained passions, has affected interpretations of Isabella's character. Certainly, Isabella is not unaffected by her involvement in a plot which is preoccupied by illicit sexuality. She is the focus of the play's sexual dynamic, as Angelo finds himself almost overwhelmed with desire, and even the Duke proposes marriage to her. (Smith 75-76)

In this sense, her sexual appeal is directly connected with the fact that she is a nun and with the ambiguity around gender roles. This is primarily visible in the example of Angelo, since, through him, Isabella is seen in the new light. In his eyes, since she is forbidden, she becomes even more desirable than a prostitute or any other woman. What is more, in a person of Isabella, a prostitute and a nun become one (Fouassier):

Never could the strumpet,  
With all her double vigor, art and nature,  
Once stir my temper; but this virtuous maid  
Subdues me quite. (*Measure*, 2.2.183-86)

In Angelo's eye's, Isabella has such a strong influence on him that he perceives her as a temptress and a prostitute that is sent to seduce him until he eventually gives in to temptation: "O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint, / With saints dost bait thy hook!" (*Measure*, 2.2.184-85). However, Isabella's body is not the only thing that tempts him. Being sexually charged, her words are also frequently interpreted as subconsciously having sadomasochistic meaning (Smith 29), suggesting that, despite her efforts to control it, her sexuality oozes out of her:

As much for my poor brother as myself:  
That is, were I under the terms of death,  
The impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,  
And strip myself to death, as to a bed  
That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield  
My body up to shame. (*Measure*, 2.4. 99-104)

As a matter of fact, when she first visits Angelo to beg for her brother's life, it is Lucio who leads the way. Claudio advises him to bring Isabella to see Angelo because he believes that she can influence him by using her charm:

I have great hope in that; for in her youth

There is a prone and speechless dialect,

Such as move men; beside, she hath prosperous art

When she will play with reason and discourse,

And well she can persuade. (*Measure*, 1.2.122-126)

In her conversation with Angelo it is not only her physical appeal that emerges to surface; her knowledge and education make her stand out from all the other women in the play. Yet, Lucio encourages her to kneel and weep and to show Angelo her weakness and inferiority in order to get what she wants:

By fearing to attempt. Go to Lord Angelo,

And let him learn to know, when maidens sue,

Men give like gods; but when they weep and kneel,

All their petitions are as freely theirs

As they themselves would owe them (*Measure*, 1.4.79-83)

He does not believe that there is any other way to persuade him and, therefore, becomes the third man who expects her to prostitute herself for her brother's life. Lucio is not satisfied with the way the conversation between Isabella and Angelo flows. He wants her to use her sexual appeal; he, just like the others, expects her to give her body as if there is nothing else she can offer: "You are too cold" (*Measure*, 2.2.56); "Ay, touch him; there's the vein" (*Measure*, 2.2.70); "O to him, to him wench! He will relent. / He's coming; I perceiv't" (*Measure*, 2.2.124-25).

### 3. The Fall of Virtue

There is always something bad in something good. Likewise, it is in the nature of a virtue to have a vice hidden inside. Thanks to social norms, cultures and basic human nature, all people tend to gravitate towards virtue. But, despite being conceived as a display of moral perfection, since it is attributed to people, virtue turns up to be deeply flawed. Not only can it mask vices, but it is generally not entirely virtuous. After all, people can aspire to perfection but, when all is summed up, they can never actually be perfect.

At the beginning of the play Duke Vincentio decides to test Angelo's virtue by making him in charge of Vienna during his absence. As a deputy, Angelo is "charged with bringing lapsed laws back into force and tackling the city's problems of prostitution and sex outside marriage" (Smith 10). One of these laws requires capital punishment for a man who impregnates a woman out of wedlock. Consequently, after getting Juliet impregnated, Claudio ends up arrested and condemned to death:

See that Claudio

Be executed by nine tomorrow morning.

Bring him his confessor, let him be prepar'd,

For that's the utmost of his pilgrimage. (*Measure*, 2.1.33-36)

Since Angelo believes that showing mercy is a sign of weakness and that this rigid conduction of laws will turn people away from committing sin of fornication, he refuses to listen to Escalus, a second-in-command counsellor, when he warns him that he and all other people are liable to sin:

Well; heaven forgive him! And forgive us all!

Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall;

Some run from brakes of ice and answer none,

And some condemned for a fault alone. (*Measure*, 2.1.37-40)

Moreover, Angelo believes that "'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, / Another thing to fall" (*Measure*, 2.1. 17-18). Ironically, this is exactly what happens to him when he meets Isabella.

In their conversation, Isabella tries to convince him that everybody makes mistakes but states that they should also be forgiven. Angelo then tries to mislead her into committing a sin by saying that women too are liable to temptation. Isabella then innocently agrees with him: “Women? Help heaven! Men their creation mar / In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail” (*Measure*, 2.4.127-128). After hearing that, Angelo goes on with his plan by making an indecent proposal. He suggests that it is in her nature to give in to men; he invites her to do what every woman is supposed to do:

I think it well;

And from this testimony of your own sex

(Since I suppose we are made to be no stronger

Than faults may shake our frames), let me be bold.

I do arrest your words. Be that you are,

That is a woman; if you be more, you're none;

If you be one (as you are well express'd

By all external warrants), show it now,

By putting on the destin'd livery. (*Measure*, 2.4.131-138)

When Isabella refuses his offer, she does it in order to preserve her virtue and her innocence. She is insulted by his offer of exchange of her chastity for her brother's life precisely because her brother is destined to be killed for committing a far lesser crime:

Angelo: Plainly conceive, I love you

Isabella: My brother did love Juliet,

And you tell me that he shall die for't.

Angelo: He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love.

Isabella :I know your virtue hath a license in't,

Which seems a little fouler than this

To pluck on others (*Measure*, 2.4.141-147)

To make the matters worse, his proposal is made even more abominable when he threatens to torture Claudio if she refuses to give her body to him:

Redeem thy brother

By yielding up thy body to my will,

Or else he must not only die the death,

But thy unkindness shall his death draw out

To ling'ring sufferance. (*Measure*, 2.4.163-167)

When Isabella threatens to expose him in front of others, he remains calm because he is sure that no one will believe her:

Who will believe thee, Isabel?

My unsoil'd name, th' austereness of my life,

My vouch against you, and my place i' th' state,

Will so your accusation overweigh,

That you shall stifle in your own report,

And smell of calumny. I have begun,

And now I give my sensual race the rein. (*Measure*, 2.4.154-160)

Moreover, being a hypocrite and a liar, once he has satisfied his pleasure, Angelo does not even intend to fulfil his deal of bargain, that is, he plans to go on with the execution of her brother, despite the fact that she practically sells her body for the purpose. While Isabella does not actually end up engaging in the act of prostitution, she does agree to take part in the morally doubtful "bed trick". In other words, when Duke Vincentio suggests the substitution of two women, Isabella is ready to sacrifice Mariana's body and soul for the same cause. She consents

to his plan of making Mariana perform the same act she is appalled by. At the end, Mariana condemns Angelo's cruel behaviour and reveals that she is the one who has substituted Isabella in the "bed trick" and, therefore, prostituted herself with the aim of regaining her honour:

My husband bids me, now I will unmask.

Unveiling.

This is that face, thou cruel Angelo,

Which once thou swor'st was worth the looking on;

This is the hand which, with a vow'd contract,

Was fast belock'd in thine; this is the body

That took away the match from Isabel,

And did supply thee at thy garden-house

In her imagin'd person.

As it turns out, although the character of Isabella poses herself as a virtuous, innocent, holy and practically godlike creature, by stumbling on the path of holiness and being trapped in the attempt to live up to the chaste, she shows imperfections of a human being. Moreover, while going from one extreme to another, she reveals the conflict of all the characters in the play; she reveals their moral dilemmas.

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