The Kindly Summons

In many ways, Shakespeare's Measure for Measure may be considered a culmination of the Morality tradition that extends from Pride of Life to Doctor Faustus—a tradition that poses the moment of death as an understanding of life, offers the soul a last chance on earth to choose salvation or damnation, and dispatches the soul accordingly. But in Measure for Measure, the soul is not dispatched. And in this respect, Shakespeare's "problem" play mirrors the "problem" of life itself: that even though death offers the perfection of salvation to an imperfect world, we are often afraid to accept the terms of the offer; and that when we have overcome our fear and are ready to embrace death as a release, the kindly offer may be withdrawn.¹

This is not to suggest that Measure for Measure is a grim forerunner of the twentieth-century pessimistic school, or that we are meant to leave the theater shaking our heads in pity over the bad fortune that has inflicted life upon the characters of the play. Claudio, Isabella, and Angelo, we feel—yes, even Lucio and Pompey—will be as moderately happy with their lots as any human creatures can hope to be. But there are some grim sets of images that dominate the action of the play, of which the primary and most pervasive is that of the prison, both the literal prison of Vienna and the figurative prison of life.
The pivot of the action in Measure for Measure is, of course, Claudio's death sentence, and throughout all but the first and last scenes of the play, Claudio remains in prison. To this prison come the Duke, Isabella, Lucio, and Pompey; in this prison reside the Provost and Abhorson the executioner; and ordering its affairs are Angelo and Escalus. Outside the prison walls are more walls: Isabella's convent, Mariana's moated grange, and Angelo's double-locked garden and chamber. By the end of the play, although some of the characters will elect to remain in their enclosures, or will exchange one enclosure for another, most of the doors will be opened, and the inmates allowed to leave. What is interesting, however, is that each character will first come to realize that there are more ways out of prison than the one that he or she has planned, and that one of the doors is death.

In several of the possible sources of Shakespeare's play, this alternate exit is indeed made the subject of a grim joke. Juriste, the Angelo-counterpart of Cinthio's Epitia (1582), also promises to free Epitia's brother from prison if she will go to bed with him; but after she has done so, Juriste sends her the dead body of her brother with a messenger who explains: "This . . . is your brother whom my lord Governor sends you freed from prison." In the play that Cinthio himself created from this story in the Hecatomithi, the joke becomes more elaborate; the messenger is made to deliver the message twice—once to the Maid and once to Epitia—and Juriste's sister, Angela, explains the irony to the audience, who may have missed the point:

Angela: My brother I have cursed. . . .
He answered, that he promised Epitia
To give her Vico freed from prison, true,
But never promised to release him living;
So that she has exactly what he promised.

(3.2; Bullough, 436)

In George Whetstone's Promos and Cassandra (1578), another promiser fulfills his promise ironically. With the head sent to Cassandra, Promos sends a message: "To Cassandra, as Promos promised thee, / From prison, lo, he sends thy brother free"
(4.2; Bullough, 469). And in Thomas Lupton’s Too Good to Be True (1581), although no such ghastly message is carried to the Gentlewoman with her husband’s body, the Judge speaks in what appear to be deliberately equivocal terms: “and whereas your husband should have been executed tomorrow in the morning, I will dispatch him and send him home tomorrow unto you before noon at the furthest, if it be not before. . . . The time is not long; tomorrow you shall have him safe and sound with you” (Bullough, 520). The Gentlewoman’s husband is, of course, “dispatched” by the hangman.

Shakespeare omits this sadistic joke from his play—perhaps to spare the audience some horror, but more likely to make Angelo less evil and more forgivable. But the underlying irony of the joke is inherent to a more serious tradition: the de contemptu mundi view of life itself as a prison and death as a release. A motif running through both Catholic and Protestant Arts of Dying, it is most forcefully stated by Pope Innocent III in De Miseria Conditionis Humane:

“Infelix homo, quis me liberabit de corpore mortis huius?” Certe non vult exire de carcere qui non vult exire de corpore, nam carcer anime corpus est.

[“Unhappy man that I am, who will release me from the body of this death?” Surely, no man wishes to escape from prison who does not wish to escape from the body, for the body is a prison to the soul.]

And again, of the just man Innocent says: “Sustinet seculum tanquam exilium, clausus in corpore tanquam in carcere” [“He endures the world as though he were in exile, locked up in his body as in a prison”] (2: 18). The 1576 translator of Innocent’s treatise, H. Kirton, indeed editorializes further on the theme: “Beholde the lamentation of the silly soule, which would fayne be discharged out of prison. Whereof the Psalmist sayth thus. O lorde bring my soule out of captiuitie. There is no rest nor quietnesse in anye place heere in this world.” And the translator of Petrus Luccensis’s Dialogue of Dying Well (trans. 1603) carries the analogy still closer to Claudio’s own case: “When an imprisoned malefactor
hath receaued sentence of death and knoweth he cannot escape, oh how many waylings, and how many lamentings maketh the wretche in that time, seeing that assuredly he must foorthwith be put to death. In this case are all men liuing found to bee, against whome as soone as euer they be borne, in this miserable and transitorie lyfe, the seuerre sentence of death is pronounced."  

That such a motif had become almost a commonplace by the time of Measure for Measure is evident not only from its appearance in treatises, poems, and broadsides, but also from the sardonic remark made by Sir Charles Mountford on his release from prison in Thomas Heywood's A Woman Killed with Kindness (ca. 1603), a play whose subplot also requires that a sister sacrifice her honor for her brother's well-being:

Keeper: Knight, be of comfort, for I bring thee freedom
From all thy troubles.

Sir Charles: Then I am doom'd to die;
Death is th' end of all calamity. 

And in this sense of death as a release from prison, the famous act 3 prison scene of Measure for Measure may be considered as a series of attempts by the Duke and Isabella to offer Claudio every possible escape route out of his prison, while Claudio obdurately refuses them all.

Shakespeare's audience would certainly have understood the Duke's "Be absolute for death" speech (3.1.5-41) as a compendium of many traditional Christian exhortations on the vanities of life; and if, as some critics have maintained, the speech contains allusions to pagan philosophers such as Lucretius, it is Lucretius filtered through Christian homiletics. Pope Innocent himself had used many of the figures and analogies that the Duke uses: the baseness of the flesh; the revolt of the organs of the body; and the afflictions that torment all living creatures regardless of age, class, or virtue. Treatise after treatise had echoed Innocent in employing these figures, and had echoed as well his comparison of death to a welcome sleep, just as does the Duke:
The Kindly Summons

_Duke:_ Thy best of rest is sleep,
And that thou oft provokest, yet grossly fear'st
Thy death, which is no more.

(3.1.17-19)

But in order to welcome sleep, one must first be weary, and Claudio is by no means weary of his life. Consequently, the Duke, like the preachers before him, must first evoke in Claudio a sense of the frustrations of life:

_Duke:_ Reason thus with life:
If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
That none but fools would keep. A breath thou art,
Servile to all the skye influences
That dost this habitation where thou keep'st
Hourly afflict. . . .

Thou art not certain,
For thy complexion shifts to strange effects,
After the moon.

(3.1.6-11; 23-25)

This idea of the insubstantiality of human existence is certainly not contrary to Christian belief, as J. W. Lever has claimed;¹⁰ it does not deny the divine origin of the soul, but rather contrasts the soul's heavenly importance with the laughably frail earthly shell in which the soul resides. E. Hutchins, in his popular religious handbook, _David’s Sling Against Goliath_ (1598), had made many such comparisons about human life on earth:

Now therefore reason with me. Shal we feare death for the losse of a shadow: shall wee by sighs and sobs storme againste the Lorde for the losse of a vapour? . . . So yt our life is like a ruinous house, alwayes readie to fall: like a thin thred, alwaies readie to rotte: like a running cloude, whereof we are vncertaine, where and when it falleth.¹¹

Considering the downfall of Claudio's expectations, he should certainly be receptive to such preaching.

But unfortunately, weak mortal creatures seldom respond as they should and, when subjected to uncertainties in life, usually
assume that they can find compensating certainties in that same life. Such was Everyman’s assumption; such is Claudio’s. At first, it is true, he seems to have resigned himself to death, and to be giving the theologically proper response: “To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And, seeking death, find life. Let it come on” (3.1.42-43). Sutton’s Disce Mori had said much the same thing: “That which we call life, is a kinde of death, because it makes us to die: but that which we count death, is in the sequele a very life: for that in deedle it makes us to live.” Or, in Kirton’s translation of De Miseria: “We then are dying whiles we liue, and then doe we cease from dying, when we cease to liue. Therefore it is better to dye, alwayes to liue, than to liue to dye euer. For the mortall lyfe of man is but a liuing death.”

For Claudio, so far, so good. But he and the audience know something that the Duke does not know: Isabella has been to see Angelo about Claudio’s pardon, and is even now on her way to the prison—to open, as Claudio thinks, an exit for him other than Death. As long as he retains this hope for another escape, he cannot “be absolute for death.”

There is, furthermore, another element missing from Claudio’s apparent preparation for death: repentance. The de contemptu mundi sermon that the Duke has given him was traditionally only the first step toward readying the dying man; it forms the first of three parts in Innocent’s De Miseria, the other two of which deal with the deadly sins and the pains of hell; and it serves primarily as an introduction to the serious business of death in all the Arts of Dying. But the Duke does not have a chance to proceed to the second step of his deathbed counseling; he is interrupted by the arrival of Isabella. And from the moment Isabella enters, we know that Claudio has not really accepted the fact of death.

Claudio’s first question—“Now, sister, what’s the comfort?” (3.1.53)—is much like Everyman’s questioning, in that it is posed in temporal rather than eternal terms; his “comfort,” at this point, should be the ghostly comfort that the Duke has given, but Claudio speaks only in terms of life on earth. Isabella apparently senses his weakness and his excessive attachment to life at any
cost; although she has earlier assured herself that her brother would gladly die “On twenty bloody blocks” to save his soul and hers (2.4.176-82), his plea for “comfort” seems to frighten her into a circumlocution. Instead of blurting out Angelo’s perfidy and the choice that Claudio must make, she spins an elaborate conceit on Claudio’s coming journey to heaven, where he will be an “everlasting lieger,” an ambassador in the court of God (3.1.56-60). It is noteworthy that she omits any mention of the words die and death, and inverts the traditional figure of the Summons as messenger, making Claudio the messenger instead.

But Claudio, like Everyman, is still looking for a way out and, like Everyman, by a series of more and more insistent questions forces his sister into telling him what he does not want to know:

Claudio: Is there no remedy?
Isabella: None but such remedy as, to save a head,
   To cleave a heart in twain.
Claudio: But is there any?

(3.1.60-62)

The audience may be reminded, at this point, of parts of the first debate between Angelo and Isabella, in which earthly and heavenly “remedies” were compared:

Isabella: Must he needs die?
Angelo: Maiden, no remedy.

Angelo: Your brother is a forfeit of the law,
   And you but waste your words.
Isabella: Alas, alas!
   Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,
   And He that might the vantage best have took
   Found out the remedy.

(2.4.48; 71-75)

Why does Isabella not point out this heavenly “remedy” to Claudio? Perhaps because his mode of questioning has already
indicated to her, as it has to us, that he is not open to heavenly comfort yet, that he is still too concerned with earthly comforts.

Isabella, then, becomes a shrewder comforter than the Duke has been—although she, too, will temporarily fail. Taking her cue from Claudio's questions, she turns not to the *de contemptu mundi* (which her brother will not believe) but to the Christian humanist's approach to death: the appeal to heroism and the integrity of the human spirit. She begins in the negative vein, evincing doubt about Claudio's courage—perhaps as a natural expression of her new fear, but also as a plea for Claudio to prove her wrong:

*Isabella:* Oh, I do fear thee, Claudio, and I quake
Lest thou a feverous life shouldst entertain,
And six or seven winters more respect
Than a perpetual honor. Darest thou die?
The sense of death is most in apprehension,
And the poor beetle that we tread upon
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies.

(3.1.73-80)

This is much like two of the arguments used by Lupset: first, that it is just as foolish to haggle over a few years of life as it would be for a condemned felon to demand to approach the scaffold last in line; and second, that the pain of dying is of necessity a short one, feared more by beasts than by men (*Dieyng Well*, 280-81). Lupset, too, had described with scorn the shameful death of a contemporary malefactor, in order to draw his readers into rejecting such a manner of dying. And this ploy, for the moment, seems to work on Claudio. Flushed with resentment, he demands hotly, “Why give you me this shame?” (3.1.80). And just as he has echoed the religious tone of the *de contemptu mundi* in his reply to the Duke, so he echoes the heroic tone of Lupset's valorous man in reply to Isabella: “If I must die, / I will encounter darkness as a bride, / And hug it in mine arms” (3.1.82-84).

Alas, alas, as Isabella would say. The sexual imagery and conditional “if” bode no good. But since Claudio has apparently
responded to the call to honor, Isabella reinforces her appeal in
the positive vein, congratulating him on his nobility and adding
a confirmatory appeal to family as well as to individual honor:
"There spake my brother, there my father's grave / Did utter forth
a voice" (3.1.85-86). Claudio, after all, as the eldest male in the
family, should be willing to lay down his life to protect his sister's
honor. But can there be some subliminal warning bell that causes
her, even in the midst of her approving speech, to answer
Claudio's if with such a positive yes? "Yes," she says, "you must
die" (3.1.86).

Claudio is still bargaining. To be sure, he can expect more
than the "six or seven winters" that Isabella has predicted for
him, and for a man still too firmly attached to this world to see
things in terms of the next, even six or seven years seem better
than six or seven hours. Perhaps he may even find a way, during
those years, to redeem his honor—and his soul. But he is in the
position, now, of Lupset's convict, merely dropping back a place
in line each time the line moves toward the hangman; and every
time he drops back, he makes death harder for himself.

Both the Duke and Isabella may indeed have misjudged the
nature of Claudio's fear, or at least the nature of his worldly at­
tachment. He is not merely clinging to the outward trappings
of fashion, as the Duke has imagined; nor is he merely flying from
the fear of corporal pain, as Isabella has thought. Claudio is more
pagan than either of his comforters realizes; he fears and half
believes in the total annihilation of self. The first words of his
last desperate appeal for life are a cry of horror at self-disintegra­
tion, a cry couched solely in terms of the body, the only self he
knows:

Claudio: Aye, but to die, and go we know not where,
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot,
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod. . . .

(3.1.117-20)

The very words of the Legend have become, for Claudio, not
a reason to prepare for death but a reason to dread it.
When Claudio turns his mind to the possibility of an afterlife, he is perhaps not quite pagan, but not quite an ideal Christian either. He gives no thought to Heaven, but pictures in turn the fires of the preachers’ Hell and the torments of Dante’s Inferno: the “thick-ribb’d ice” of the traitors and the windblown, eternal motion of the uncommitted and the lustful. All his thoughts are of dissolution, agony, and damnation; he has succumbed at once to the deathbed temptations of infidelity, impatience, and despair.

In such a state of mind, Claudio may well cry out, with Lydgate’s ploughman—and with Hamlet—that the suffering of life may be preferable to the sleep of death, that “the dread of something after death” (in Claudio’s case, perhaps, the dread of Nothing after death) “makes us rather bear the ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of” (Hamlet, 3.1.78-82):

\[
\text{Claudio: } \text{The weariest and most loathed worldly life} \\
\quad \text{That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment} \\
\quad \text{Can lay on nature, is a paradise} \\
\quad \text{To what we fear of death.}
\]

\[(3.1.128-31)\]

He cannot, now, believe the preachers who have tried to tell him the opposite: “Yea, this case of the soule is such a cage of filth, as a man of God hath said, that no Bocardo, no dungeon, no sinke, no puddle, no pitte is in any respect so evil a prison for this bodie, as the bodie is of the soule.”

This is not to suggest that Claudio is wrong to fear death; no preacher or poet would have claimed that such fear is unnatural. But all would have remarked upon Claudio’s failure to overcome his fear, whether by faith or by reason, and would especially have pointed out that to bargain for life at the expense of one’s soul is a grievous sin: “Saynt Austyn sayth: More greate is the dommage of one soule the which is loste and deed by dampnacyon than it is of ye dethe of a thousande bodyes deed of the dethe corporall and by putryfaccyon.” How much worse, then, to bargain for life at the expense of someone else: a deed that will encompass the “dampnacyon” of not one, but two immortal souls.
Claudio, however, is beyond the reach of traditional appeals. He is a Worldly Man in a sense undreamed of by Wager and the other sixteenth-century moralists: the man who sees nothing beyond the limits of his own consciousness, the quasi solipsist who in his own demise sees the disappearance of the universe. Both the medieval and the Renaissance Christian formulas are therefore meaningless to him, since both posit a universe independent of his own being; for him to accept death, he must be convinced of the existence of things outside himself, of a continuity of Being once he is gone. And Isabella, whose impulsiveness so often bursts forth in wild and whirling words, in her own desperation hits upon the right cure for her brother:

_isabella:_

O you beast!
O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice? . . .
. . . Take my defiance!

Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed.
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

(3.1.135–37; 142–46)

It is an angry speech, a furious speech, a violent rush of words from a young woman at the end of her rope. And almost from the earliest performances of _Measure for Measure_, critics have either denounced the speech or made tortuous excuses for it.17 But, ironically, the one thing that both Isabella’s detractors and her champions have glossed over too quickly in their analyses of her words is the most important thing about them: they work where all else has failed.

Up to now, Claudio has managed to control his universe, despite the sentence of death, and has thus managed to maintain his sense of being the universe. He has sent for his sister, and his sister has arrived. He has tossed off the correct response to the Duke’s sermons, and the Duke has been satisfied. He has juggled with the seven deadly sins to make Angelo’s proposition seem sinless, and he has convinced himself and fully expects to
convince his sister. Even the apparent coincidence that the "precise" Angelo should suddenly act out of character in a way that may save Claudio's life is proof that Claudio's will makes and remakes the universe. How, then, should he die?

The only answer is Isabella's. Her defiance, her thrusting of death in his face when he has it least in mind, her very refusal to listen to his repeated cries of "Oh, hear me, Isabella!" are all concrete evidences of a world outside Claudio's control. And Claudio, who has delcared himself unafraid of "age, ache, penury, and imprisonment," is shocked back to reality by something far worse than any of them: a sister's contempt.

To be sure, his immediate response to Isabella's outburst is no more promising than was his response to the Duke's sermon or Isabella's first appeal: "I am so out of love with life that I will sue to be rid of it" (3.1.170–71). We have heard these words before, and then have heard Claudio retract them. But his preface to them, this time, is promising: "Let me ask my sister pardon." Theologically, he has taken the first step toward repentance, and psychologically, he has taken the first step toward acceptance; he has admitted that there is Being outside himself, and at least one human being, if not a divine one, more important than himself.

The results of Isabella's shock treatment become most evident later in the play, when Claudio and Barnardine are served their death warrants. Claudio now evinces a calm acceptance of his mortality, and when asked about Barnardine, uses a simile that links his past with Barnardine's present: "As fast locked up in sleep as guiltless labor / When it lies starkly in the traveler's bones" (4.2.64–65). Despite the implicit irony of the word guiltless (Claudio is not above a bit of sarcasm himself), this is not the traditional metaphor of sleep as a type of corporeal death, but rather a metaphor that the Duke has introduced earlier: sleep as a type of spiritual death—an insensitivity to the meanings of life and death alike: "Thou hast nor youth nor age, / But, as it were, an after-dinner's sleep, / Dreaming on both" (3.1.32–34). The Provost himself sees Barnardine in these terms; "A man that apprehends death no more dreadfully but as a drunken sleep"
And when Barnardine receives the Summons, he flatly refuses to die.

In the old Morality plays, and even in the new secular tragedies, Barnardine would have no choice. The King of Life and Everyman at first refused to die; Moros, Worldly Man, and Fortunatus refused to die; Tamburlaine and Macbeth refused to die; and all of them died. Why Barnardine is allowed his refusal we shall see later; but the refusal itself, at this point, serves as an almost allegorized extension of Claudio’s previous denial and bargaining, and thus throws his present acceptance into sharper relief. Indeed, the connection between the two men is reinforced by the nature of Barnardine’s imprisonment, a form of transitional half-life similar to his “drunken sleep.” He is the prisoner who cannot and will not be released to life or death; he has gained stay after stay of execution, and, the Provost says, if he were offered a chance to escape, he would not go. Like Claudio, he prefers the circumscribed prison of his own ordering, where, by denying the power of forces outside himself, he may maintain the semblance of control. Does he not have “the liberty of the prison” (4.2.145–46)? But it is a prison after all.

The Duke’s evaluation of Barnardine’s insensibility—“Unfit to live or die. O gravel heart!” (4.3.63)—is, then, a commentary on Claudio’s earlier behavior as well. But as always in this play where people say much more than they think they mean, the Duke is speaking not just of Barnardine and Claudio, but of all the major figures who move around him in prisons of their own making—including himself.

Like Claudio in his physical and mental prison, Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke begin by thinking that they can order the universe to their own requirements. Angelo, in particular, is the Puritan mind carried to its coldest extremes; he is a man who has mentally segregated humankind into the all-good and the all-bad, with no room in his world for the mixed creature who can sin, repent, and sin and repent again. But although—or perhaps because—he so easily sends the reprobate to a literal prison, he does not see that he is creating a separate but equal figurative prison for the elect.
Raymond Southall has postulated Angelo as an extreme type of post-Reformation Catholic who relies too much on outward signs of grace, and Isabella as an extreme Protestant who relies too much on inward, individual signs; both, says Southall, must recombine into "Medieval Christianity." But such an interpretation seems curiously perverse—or, at least, makes Shakespeare seem curiously perverse in his methods. Why, after all, clothe a symbol of radical Protestantism in a nun's habit unless to confuse the audience needlessly? And why refer to a Catholic as "precise" (1.3.50), a term used almost exclusively of Puritans in Shakespeare's day? Indeed, Shakespeare's audience might have recognized Angelo as a Puritan even without references to his "precision," and would certainly have recognized the dangerous nature of his Puritanism: the frighteningly sincere distinction between good and evil that allows for no compromise and will make no exceptions, even for oneself.

To speak of Angelo's sincerity may sound as contradictory as to speak of Iago's honesty. But Isabella is only partly correct, during the judgment scene, when she says, "I partly think / A due sincerity govern'd his deeds / Till he did look on me" (5.1.443-45). A due, if warped, sincerity has governed Angelo's deeds even after he has looked on Isabella; he is as sincere in his sin as he was in his virtue. It is especially interesting to watch him chart his moral regression throughout the play, and to match the chart against William Perkins's outline of the progress of sin:

Actuall sinne in the first degree of tentation, is, when the mind upon some sudden motion, is drawne away to thinke evill, and withall is tickled with some delight thereof. For a bad motion cast into the mind, by the flesh and the devill, is like unto the baite cast into the water, that allureth and delighteth the fish, and causeth it to bite. Sinne in conception, is when with the delight of the mind, there goes consent of the will to do the evill thought on. Sinne in birth, is when it comes forth into an action or execution. Sinne in perfection, is when men are growne to a custome and habite in sinne, upon long practice. . . . And sinne thus made perfect, brings foorth death.
In Angelo’s first stage, temptation, he does indeed use the image of the bait and fish: “O cunning enemy, that to catch a saint / With saints dost bait thy hook!” (2.2.180–81). And when he has failed to master his temptation, he speaks of his “conception”:

Angelo: Heaven in my mouth,
         As if I did but only chew His name,
         And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
         Of my conception.

(2.4.4–7)

Even his shocking double entendre to Isabella, “Plainly conceive, I love you” (2.4.140), may carry more than double meaning in this sense; he is inviting Isabella to give consent of her will to sin. And by the time he tells her, in no uncertain terms, “Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite” (2.4.160), he has looked ahead to the next stages of his sin: “I have begun, / And now I give my sensual race the rein” (2.4.158–59). He is predicting, here, not merely the birth, or action, of the sin of fornication, but perfection in sin, the next sin that he will “perform in the necke of” the first—lying to cover his tracks: “Say what you can, my false o’erweighs your true” (2.4.169).

Having charted his course so accurately, he must now expect that his “sinne thus made perfect, brings forth death.” And indeed, when we next see him alone, he explains in soliloquy that his reason for ordering Claudio’s execution, in violation of his promise, was not gratuitous villainy, but an attempt to stave off retribution for a while:

Angelo: He should have liv’d,
        Save that his riotous youth, with dangerous sense,
        Might in the times to come have ta’en revenge
        By so receiving a dishonor’d life
        With ransom of such shame. Would yet he had liv’d.

(4.4.26–30)
That last phrase is a telling one. Angelo, knowing that he deserves death, half craves the punishment but fears the consequences. For him, in his state of sin, death means hell.

From the beginning of the play, Angelo has served as his own prosecutor, judge, and jury. He sincerely believes what he tells Escalus:

Angelo: When I that censure him do so offend,
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death,
And nothing come in partial.

(2.1.29–31)

When he does “so offend,” he convicts himself utterly, leaving no room for a repentance that he, as a reprobate, cannot expect to be granted. Consequently, although he dreads the damnation that he knows will follow death, when his sins are exposed during the judgment scene he twice demands his right to die—almost, we feel, with a touch of relief that the flight from death is over:

Angelo: Immediate sentence then, and sequent death
Is all the grace I beg.

.............

I am sorry that such sorrow I procure.
And so deep sticks it in my penitent heart
That I crave death more willingly than mercy.
'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it.

(5.1.371–72; 472–75)

Before we applaud Angelo’s self-judgment, however, we must remember that a “penitent heart” does not refuse grace, mercy, or a chance to amend. This is not acceptance of death, but something uglier, something that we have seen many times before—despair. Isabella may forgive him; Mariana may forgive him; the Duke and all the laws of man and God may forgive him; but unless something drastic happens, Angelo will never forgive himself. Like Barnardine refusing to escape from jail, Angelo is locked into the prison of his rigid Puritan belief: once a sinner, forever damned.
Isabella herself, who stands in opposition to Angelo throughout the play, opposes him only in the sense that a mirror-image opposes the thing that it reflects. She, too, wants to order the universe. Her idea of order, however, leans more toward an ideal of neatness than a system of rectitude; she is far more willing than Angelo to make moral exceptions for other people, and is not above a bit of special pleading for a cause that she does not wholeheartedly espouse. It is especially noteworthy that when she learns that her brother has impregnated Juliet, her immediate response is not moral revulsion but commonsense practicality: “Oh, let him marry her” (1.4.49). But although she grants human society its right to go to hell happily on the road of its own choosing (something that Angelo cannot allow), she herself wants a divorce from that society, and would choose for herself, instead, a martyr’s crown—and a martyr’s isolation.

There is no need to condemn the whole system of monasticism, or to assume, as Darryl F. Gless has recently done, that Shakespeare is condemning it, in order to see the self-imprisoning nature of Isabella’s choices. She is not content with the already severe restrictions placed on the Poor Clares, whom she seeks to join, but would have the whole order translated into an ideal society of martyrs, one that probably cannot exist among fallible human creatures:

_isabella_: And have you nuns no farther privileges?
_Francisca_: Are not these large enough?
_isabella_: Yes, truly. I speak not as desiring more, 
_But rather wishing a more strict restraint_ 
_Upon the [sisterhood], the votarists of Saint Clare._

(1.4.1-5)

Whether Lucio is indeed “mocking” her when he calls her “a thing enskied and sainted” (1.4.34) is a moot point; the important point is that Isabella would like to see her chosen world in these terms, and that she finds it difficult to accept the existence of her own noble thoughts in the mind—or on the lips—of an ignoble creature from outside her world.
There is no reason, then, to doubt Isabella's word when she twice offers to lay down her life for her brother; it is the heroic thing to do, and Isabella yearns to be a saintly hero. The very words she uses about her voluntary martyrdom show that she has adopted her ideas about sacrifice from the luridly detailed martyrologies of the time, as well as from the combined sensual and spiritual imagery of Loyolan meditation and the new poetry:

*Isabella*: [W]ere I under the terms of death,
Th' 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.

(2.4.100-05)

But Isabella is not at this moment in the ideal world of the martyrlogies, and her imagery only whets Angelo's sensual appetite. Furthermore, not even the audience is allowed to retain Isabella's romantic view; we are made too vividly aware of the fact that those "keen whips" are in the hands of the rough-hewn Abhorson and the bumbling Pompey, an ex-pimp.

Nothing goes the way Isabella expects. Angelo turns her brilliant logic-chopping against her; the noble Law makes illicit propositions; her glorious martyrdom must be traded for a sordid tumble; and her valiant brother, who should rush to her protection, turns out to be a sniveling coward. It is small wonder that when the Duke greets her, after her disastrous interview with Claudio, she can hardly wait to get back to her nice, safe convent. "I have no superfluous leisure," she says. "My stay must be stolen out of other affairs, but I will attend you awhile" (3.1.156-58). This is no mere social excuse; Isabella has found the world too disappointing—yes, even too messy—and wants only to return as soon as possible to her ideal world where there are (she thinks) no loose ends and no human frailties.

It is exactly at this point that the Duke steps in and begins arranging the "happy" denouement. As Rosalind Miles, who perhaps unconsciously uses the prison metaphor in her analysis, points out: "With this structure of character and plot involving
Isabella, Angelo, and Claudio, the audience comes to realize that there is no help for these three from each other. Shakespeare has closed the trap of the plot upon them, and it is a trap which can only be opened from the outside. They must have external help, and that help must be the Duke's" (Problem, 260). It is true; we do feel that there is, at this point, no way out but a guilty life or death for the three. But the “trap” of which Miles speaks is Shakespeare's only at second remove, and each of the characters has come to the trap through the mental trap that each has built for himself or herself. Furthermore, the Duke's “external help” is itself a product of his own mental prison.

Miles's observation that the Duke's “outside intervention is bound to be artificial and unreal” (260) is a good one; but again it focuses too much on Shakespeare's plot-making at the expense of the Duke's. The Duke, after all, could just as easily have revealed himself at this point and saved the three in a more straightforward manner. But he, too, is circumscribed by a need to order the universe—a need that combines the active meddling impulse of Angelo with the passive withdrawal impulse of Isabella. From such a mixture can come only disaster.

From the beginning of the play, it is obvious that the Duke has been an anti-Machiavel, a ruler who wants to be loved more than feared by his subjects, and who has consequently been both too removed from and too permissive toward the people of Vienna. He has “ever loved the life removed,” he tells Friar Thomas (1.3.8), but his failure to become more involved with the punitive aspects of his ducal responsibility has caused sin to run riot in Vienna. Friar Thomas's commonsense reply to this—“It rested in your Grace / To unloose this tied-up justice when you pleased” (1.3.31-32)—is not, however, to the Duke's liking. He pleads that it will seem “tyranny” in him to enforce the laws that he has previously ignored and, in a revealing bit of rationalization, explains why he has given that chore to Angelo:

**Duke:** I have on Angelo impos'd the office,

Who may, in th' ambush of my name, strike home,
And yet my nature never in the fight
To do in slander.

(1.3.40-43)

We may recognize here the sentiments of every official, major or minor, down to the present day: the desire to be loved as a beneficent figure and as a source of recourse against one's own rigorous enforcement agencies.

But things do not go according to plan for the Duke any more than they do for Angelo, Isabella, or Claudio. Like the eavesdropping kings and queens of Shakespeare's history plays before him, the Duke discovers that his people do not universally applaud him, and he must listen to some unpleasant truths about himself even from the most slanderous tongues. Lucio, in the midst of his calumnies, actually says what the Duke himself has been saying about the effects of his rule:

Lucio: Would the Duke that is absent have done this? Ere he would have hanged a man for the getting a hundred bastards, he would have paid for the nursing a thousand.... The Duke yet would have dark deeds darkly answered, he would never bring them to light. Would he were returned!

(3.2.123-26; 186-89)

Significantly, the next person whom the Duke asks about his "absent" self is Escalus, a man who can be depended upon to give a good report; but even so, the audience cannot help thinking for a moment that the Duke is playing with fire, and that eavesdroppers deserve what they hear.

And what of the famous bed-trick? It is indeed "artificial and unreal," as Miles has said, and so flimsy that we can hardly imagine Isabella agreeing to it if it had not been endorsed by a friar. Furthermore, at the introduction of the bed-trick, the play begins to change with an audible creaking of machinery. But there is one thing about it that has been consistently overlooked by critics who condemn it: the bed-trick does not work.

In the tales and plays that used the trick before Measure for Measure, the ploy does what it is supposed to do: it brings about
recognition, reconciliation, or revenge. Even in Shakespeare's own *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena gets the man she wants through a bed-trick (regardless of what we think about the scoundrel that she gets). But in *Measure for Measure*, the trick makes everything worse: it hastens the order for Claudio's execution, temporarily blackens the reputations of both Isabella and Mariana, and throws Angelo into a dangerous state of despair. The Duke himself is placed in a quandary by Angelo's response to the trick; he must suddenly change all his plans, must find a new way to save Claudio's life and Barnardine's soul, must very nearly reveal himself to the Provost ahead of schedule, and must later subject himself and the two women to public scorn. What has gone wrong?

The living men and women of *Measure for Measure*, when they assemble at the judgment scene, have wrought havoc with their own lives, with the lives of others, and with the storybook ending that we expect of a comedy. There have been too many playwrights at work within the play, each working from a script that the others have not seen. Even after the final revelations and pardons, many of them seem only to have left one prison for another. Mariana has come out of her moated grange to be tied for life to the puritanical Angelo. Angelo himself is in a state of despair that leads only to hell. Isabella, after what she has undergone, is as firmly locked out of her convent as she was once locked in. The Duke must abandon his own quasi-monastic dreams to undertake marriage and resume his rule of Vienna. Pompey has moved from the whorehouse to the executioner's shed. Barnardine, in or out of prison, remains in his "drunken sleep." And Lucio is married to a prostitute. Nothing, it seems, has changed, except possibly for the worse. Or has it?

The falling-off that so many audiences have seen in the second part of Shakespeare's play is a reflection of the falling-off that his characters have seen in their ideal worlds as they learn to accept both death and life—their own and others'. And, as in many of the Arts of Dying, the central event of Claudio's death sentence has taught the lesson. Death, far from being the glorious martyrdom of Isabella's dreams, the comfortable sleep of the Duke's dreams, the nuisance of Barnardine's, the punishment of
Angelo's, or the horror of Claudio's, is in fact simply a part of life, to be accepted on its own terms and neither fled from nor sought after. The readiness, as Hamlet would say, is all; and the readiness itself casts a steadier light on life, revealing that it cannot be perfect but must not therefore be scorned. If life, in fact, is second best to heaven or whatever perfection each person imagines as his or her ideal, second best to perfection is not a lowly status after all.  

This, then, is why Angelo and Barnardine must not be allowed to die. Theologically, they have not achieved repentance; and, psychologically, they have not yet learned to live. In the end, what Mariana has said of Angelo is the lesson that all the great but fallible human creatures of Measure for Measure are in the process of learning about existence as they leave us:

Mariana: They say best men are molded out of faults,  
And, for the most, become much more the better  
For being a little bad. So may my husband.  

(5.1.444-46)

Death, as Sir Charles Mountford has said, is the end of all calamity; but in the words of the old Jewish proverb, "You don't die so easy; you live with all your aches and pains." The universe itself is a compromise of warring elements, and it is only through a truce with death that we may begin to negotiate with life.