Vienna is teeming with sexual excess and resulting disease. Although the city is located in Austria, many of the citizens identified in Measure for Measure bear Italian or Roman names. (Perhaps a mass emigration from Venice took place after the Shylock v. Antonio trial.) Laws are harsh, but enforcement has been lax. The ruler of the city, Duke Vincentio, is generally highly respected and admired, but his overly permissive stewardship has unwittingly promoted corruption among citizens. The glory of individual freedom has amplified and then burst into the anarchy of unfettered license; general lawlessness has ensued. The Duke is aware of the problem and must fashion a solution.

1. The Delegation of Authority

The Duke is convinced that a temporary change of leadership is the remedy. He will go off on an executive sabbatical; in his stead, he will deputize Angelo as supreme authority and appoint Escalus as Angelo’s counselor. The moral rectitude and logical precision of Angelo are well known. In the words of Escalus: “If any in Vienna be of worth/ To undergo such ample grace and honour, / It is Lord Angelo” (1.1.22-24). The Duke describes Angelo as “A man of stricture and firm abstinence” (1.3.12).

The Duke accepts responsibility for the deterioration of social conditions in Vienna: he recognizes that he has been excessively merciful for fourteen years. The result has been the collapse of respect for law, the trumping of justice by anarchy, and the corrosion of the social order. After deputizing Angelo, he confides to Friar Thomas at a monastery:

We have strict statutes and most biting laws,
The needful bits and curbs for headstrong steeds,
Which for this fourteen years we have let sleep;
Even like an o’ergrown lion in a cave,
That goes not out to prey. Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threat’ning twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children’s sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
Becomes more mock’d than fear’d; so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead;
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum (1.3.19-31).

But why does the Duke not simply assert his power, reverse his overly permissive policies, and reinstate the rule of law? Vincentio is firmly convinced that if he is the architect of a radical reversal of city policies, he will be viewed as a tyrant and thereby lose his sterling reputation. Better that a new, temporary executive, such as Angelo, wield power and do what must be done.

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. Therefore indeed, my father,
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 it slander (1.3.35-43).

But the Duke will not go to Poland on a holiday, as he has told Angelo and Escalus. Instead, he asks Friar Thomas for a monk’s habit and instructions on how to impersonate a friar. Duke Vincentio cannot trust law and order in Vienna to chance. As a false friar, he will lurk within the city, monitor the actions of the primary agents, and manipulate events behind the scenes as necessary. Surreptitious surveillance will replace permissive law enforcement in Vienna.

2. Philosophical Interlude: The Art of Delegation

The classical example in philosophical literature of delegating political power is found in Machiavelli’s Prince. Convinced that ineffective nobles had exploited their subjects, and that internal corruption and destructive conflict—led by hordes of robbers, bandits, and criminals—were pervasive in Romagna, Duke Cesare Borgia acted decisively. He bestowed complete power over the region to the cruel, effective, Remiro d’Orco: “He was a man of some fifty years of age, violent and domineering, feared by all, and the dispenser of a harsh justice which had at least the merit of an impartiality that took no account of persons.”

D’Orco, then, adopted Shylock’s theory of jurisprudence: simple decoding of statutory language and mechanical application of the results. Also, he was not above going outside the law when he concluded that the ends justified the means. Unsurprisingly, d’Orco’s moral and political calculus rarely had trouble arriving at that conclusion.

Quickly, d’Orco established order through pitiless legal and extralegal means. Fearing that the inhabitants were coming to hate d’Orco, Borgia named a civil court of justice to investigate complaints against him. The people received