

“Slip” in *Measure for Measure*

The word “slip,” though it appears only a few times, plays an interesting role in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. Spoken by a several different characters in a variety of contexts throughout the play, “slip” suggests double meaning in certain lines and foreshadows an important aspect of the play’s outcome. But what is the full purpose of the word’s subtle implications? “Slip” is used in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* to illustrate that a laxity toward immorality prevails in the conclusion of the play despite motions to implement more severe consequences for wrongdoing.

According to the *OED*, “slip” had many different meanings during Shakespeare’s era. In the four times that Shakespeare uses the word in *Measure for Measure*, it takes on three different *OED* definitions. First, in a dialogue between the Duke and the Friar at the outset of the play, “slip” refers to failing to punish or permitting to escape (definitions I 20b and 26b, *OED*). In discussing the present condition of the penal system, the Duke says, “We have strict statutes and most biting laws...Which for this fourteen years we have let slip” (1.3.19-21). Here “slips” are instances where offenders have been spared the just consequences of their wrongdoing. Secondly, in two scenes of the play, “slip” refers to misconduct or a transgression (definition III 10a *OED*). Isabella, in her plea to Angelo for Claudio’s life, asserts “If he had been as you, and you as he, you would have slipped like him” (2.2.64-65). She tells Angelo that if he had been in Claudio’s position he would have committed the same sin--“slipped” or sinfully given in to desire. “Slip” also refers to misconduct or transgression in scene five. Escalus addresses Angelo after his hidden hypocrisy is revealed saying, “I am sorry...you, Lord Angelo...should slip so grossly...” (5.1.468-470). Again, “slip” paired with “grossly” indicates a fall into serious error. Finally, in Isabella’s conversation with Claudio in the jail, “slip” is used to mean

an “offshoot or outgrowth” of something (definition I 1d). After he requests that she save his life by yielding to Angelo, she berates him as “a warped slip of wilderness” (3.1.141). Because he asks her to give up her virginity, she accuses him of being a “slip,” something foreign, unnatural, and shameful to their family, metaphorically, the rotten branch of the family tree.

Shakespeare’s use of the word “slip” as a noun and verb in *Measure for Measure* may seem to be rather random and unimportant. However, “slip,” particularly its use in reference to immoral acts and a failure to prosecute wrongdoing, bears a great significance in the play. These two different meanings of the word “slip” highlight an important theme that surfaces in Act I and continues throughout the rest of the plot.

Using “slip” in reference to transgressions not only implies the difficulty in maintaining moral footholds on the slick slopes of iniquity, but also hints at the future treatment of characters’ immoral acts. Early in the play, several characters discuss the need for a long overdue crackdown on rampant wrongdoing in their domain. As the play unfolds, “slips” such as adultery, prostitution, and gross hypocrisy are brought to light, but, in the end, they do not receive the long overdue castigation that is promised at the beginning of the play. While a few characters have some responsibility for their actions imposed upon them at the conclusion of the play, many of them, chiefly Angelo, Pompey, Claudio, and Juliet, do not receive just punishment for their wrongs.

Shakespeare uses “slip” in reference to his characters’ moral mistakes to make a connection between their moral “slips” and the initial meaning of the word “slip” in the play---that of making a getaway or escaping without prosecution. With the subtle connection, he delicately indicates before the end of the play that his characters’

transgressions (slips) will evade (slip) their proper punishment. “Slips” continue to “slip” and the planned effort to reverse the penal system’s trend of allowing wrongdoing to go unpunished fails.

The word “slip,” used in its different contexts, illustrates an apathy toward misdeeds within the penal system of Shakespeare’s play that contributes to ultimate injustice. In one sense, evil deeds triumph because they do not receive their due punishment. The play’s title, “Measure for Measure,” seems contradictory since no single character receives an exact measure for the measure he commits. Even Isabella for all her emphatic demands never gets her “justice, justice, justice, justice” (5.1.25). Yet the glaring inconsistency of “slips” being allowed to “slip” does not dominate the conclusion. In the style of the word that indicates it, the persisting problem of punitive leniency slips past the reader’s notice while a final liberal distribution of mercy creates a pleasing diversion.