

### The neglect of the dukedom

By his own confession, the Duke's studiousness has damaged his fourteen-year reign. Specifically, it seems, his dukedom's sex-laws have gone unenforced. He speaks to Friar Thomas of his failure to enforce these 'most biting laws', and while not actually specifying the neglected statutes as sex-laws here, his simile of the 'needful bits and curbs to headstrong jades' ('jades' is a better reading than the Penguin edition's 'weeds') seems to imply that the kind of crimes involved are those of youth and wilfulness rather than viciousness. Likewise, the mention in the same speech [I.iii.19–30] of 'liberty pluck[ing] justice by the nose' seems to indicate nothing more than sins of libertinism or impudence.

His attitude to these laws and his subjects now that he feels it is time for sterner measures is intriguingly revealed in this same speech's metaphors. He speaks of the birch standing unused in the corner or of the baby beating the nurse; he compares the law to an 'o'ergrown lion in a cave,/ That goes not out to prey'. As to the first two analogies, the idea of subjects as the 'children' of their ruler is a commonplace of paternalistic government, but Vincentio's 'baby' analogy implies a more-than-usually patronising or belittling attitude in the ruler. As to the overgrown lion simile, it seems to imply that the law is a predator rather than a force of discipline.

Both of these attitudes would be consistent with a man who is about to embark on an experiment. His disrespect for his people is at least the equal of what he believes to be their disrespect for his laws. He will accordingly unleash the lion, and see the birch used on his errant children.

### Vincentio's experiment

His motive for suddenly enforcing the laws could be that he has finally decided that something drastic needs to be done for his subjects' good. Also, we might take at its face value his explanation that his motive for nominating Angelo to act for him is the scruple that a Duke could not punish offences that he had so long winked at.

What makes his decision evidently experimental, rather than