# MEASURE FOR MEASURE

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
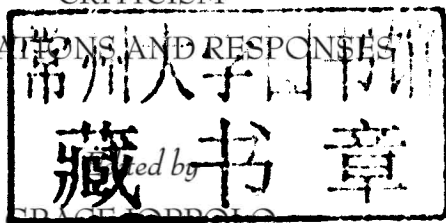
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William Shakespeare

# MEASURE FOR MEASURE

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT

SOURCES

CRITICISM

ADAPTATIONS AND RESPONSES

*Edited by*

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# Introduction

This is a play as full of genius as it is of wisdom.
—William Hazlitt

It is a hateful work, although Shakespearian throughout.
—S. T. Coleridge

Since its composition in 1604, *Measure for Measure* has divided readers and theatrical audiences as well as literary critics. For those who demand that their Shakespeare serve not just as artist and playwright but as moral guide and spiritual leader, the play's conclusion shows the failure of theater to educate and redeem society. For those who expect their Shakespeare to be complex, contradictory, and ultimately unknowable, the play's conclusion demonstrates the power of theater to challenge and change culture. Either way, Shakespeare succeeded at the midpoint of his career in producing a "magnificent" play, to use Algernon Swinburne's term, that questions traditional dramatic genres, characters, structures, and themes precisely because the conclusion fails definitively to resolve them.

In writing this play, Shakespeare may not have been concerned with the demands and expectations of future generations of audiences but with one particular audience member on December 26, 1604—King James I, who had become the financial patron of Shakespeare's acting company in 1603. As the official theatrical representatives of James's artistic vision, the King's Men were invited to perform plays at court to celebrate holidays, and in 1604 on St. Stephen's Day, traditionally associated with the rich giving alms to the poor, *Measure for Measure* was staged before James in the banqueting hall in Whitehall Palace in London. As J. W. Lever argues, Shakespeare closely recalled events at James's court in 1603 and 1604 in this play, including the king's displeasure at the "exuberance" of his subjects in greeting him on his processions through his kingdom. But in writing *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare also appears to have drawn heavily on James's own artistic composition, *Basilkon Doron* (Greek; The King's Gift), first published in 1599 and reissued in 1603. In Book 2 of this conduct manual, written to advise his oldest son and heir, Prince Henry, on the political and moral responsibilities of kingship, James focuses on how to ensure that his people have access to "justice and equitie."

The figure of Justice from Trevelyon's *Miscellany* (1608).

This concern with justice proceeds from James's belief that the ever-present potential of evil must be contained through laws, whether criminal, civil, or canonical. For example, the legal institution of marriage ensures that "fornication," erroneously "thought a light and veniall sine," does not breach "Gods lawe." Thus sexuality must be sanctioned and practiced within marriage only, and it is on this principle that Angelo will begin his tenure as ruler of Vienna.

Prince Henry must not found his kingdom on such a basic premise but broadly establish and execute "good" laws. Hence James advises: "By your behaviour in your owne person, and with your servants . . . teach your people by your example: for people are naturally inclined to counterfaite (like Apes) their Princes manners." Isabella's faint echo that man, proud man "like an angry ape / Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven / As makes the angels weep" (2.2.127–29) may be coincidental, yet in this play Shakespeare appears to flatter James by staging his words and precepts (whether or not the sometimes obtuse James recognized this direct flattery is another matter). Many of James's other recommendations in *Basilikon Doron* seem to

have been inserted verbatim in *Measure for Measure*, as in this warning: "Feare no uproars for doing of justice, since yee may assure your selfe, the most part of your people will ever naturally favour justice: providing always, that ye doe it onely for love to justice, and not for satisfying any particular passions of yours." Although Angelo fails spectacularly in the proviso to not satisfy any particular passion in doing justice, Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous as to whether the Duke succeeds in acting only "for love to justice," as the successive "uproars" in the trial scene throughout Act 5 demonstrate.

*Basilkon Doron* may at first appear to offer a series of traditional platitudes, especially in such statements as: "Cherish no man more than a good Pastor, hate no man more than a proude Puritan." In *Measure for Measure*, it is the pseudo-pastor, the Duke, who exposes the evils of the proud Puritan, Angelo, even as both come to learn that they, like Isabella, profess a moral absolutism that hides emotional and psychological frailties. But if Shakespeare mocks such simplistic statements, he seems to have recognized James's political



The figure of Chastity from Trevelyon's *Miscellany* (1608).

acumen as well as his understanding of how rulers and their sub-jects constantly test the boundaries of acceptable behavior. As the new deputy, Angelo, seems to imply, the Duke has for many years acted as a "cipher" or empty symbol of a ruler, who condemned a "fault" or crime and not "the actor of it" (2.2.40–42). This sort of lenience is socially and politically reckless, as James knows. If people expect clemency from a ruler, "Offences would soone come to such heapes, and the contempt of you growe so great, that when yee would fall to punish, the number of them to be punished would exceed the innocent," with the result that "ye would be troubled to resolve whom-at to begin: and against your nature would bee com-pelled then to wracke many, whome the chastisement of few in the beginning might have preserved." This is, in fact, what the Duke learns far too late, for he tells Friar Thomas that just as when the rod of punishment is displayed but not used, "so our decrees, / Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead, / And liberty plucks justice by the nose (1.4.27–29).

Shakespeare appears to follow James in arguing that justice is a relative and not a fixed concept, as is the clemency or punishment applied to it. Prince Henry must decide to punish or spare as he "shall find the crime to have beene wilfully or rashly committed, and accord-ing to the by-past behaviour of the committer," as the Duke eventually does in relation to the crimes of Claudio, Angelo, and Lucio. Ulti-mately, Henry must accept James's dictum: "When ye have by the severity of justice once settled your counties, and made them knowe that yee can strike, then may yee thereafter all the dayes of your life mixe justice with mercie." In appearing to endow the Duke by the end of Act 5 with the correct measures of justice and mercy, Shake-speare also appears to balance political and social order with moral order, even if such order varies from subject to subject.

Should Shakespeare's audiences wonder how the Duke can have the audacity, or cruelty, to use the principles of justice and equity to spy on his subjects, they need only consider James's recommendation to Henry: "Delight to haunt your [public court] Session and spie carefullie their proceedings; taking good heed, if any briberie may be tried among them, which cannot over-severely be punished. Spare not to goe there, for gracing that farre any that ye favour, by your presence to procure them expedition of Justice." Above all, such court sessions allow the ruler to let "everie partie tell his owne tale himself and wearie not to hear the complaints of the oppressed." But as the Duke learns in the long trial in Act 5, each "party" demands a justice that seems relative in relation to every other party. Although Isabella claims that "truth is truth / To th'end of reck'ning" (5.1.47–48), every-one offers his or her own renderings of the truth, and each truth is as changeable as the nature of justice.

*Measure for Measure* is far more than a staged version of *Basilikon Doron,* and Shakespeare's necessary flattery of his new patron is only one small part of the play's foundation. As seems to have been his pattern, Shakespeare drew on a variety of sources in writing this play, demonstrating that he continually reworked basic genres, plots, structures, characters, and themes until he could shape *Measure for Measure* into a coherent whole that would not allow strict boundaries or interpretations. The play's most obvious source is George Whetstone's 1578 play *The History of Promos and Cassandra,* in which the magistrate Promos, of the dominions of Hungary and Bohemia, uses a "severe" but "little regarded" law to prosecute Andrugio and his willing lover for fornication. Andrugio's sister, the virtuous Cassandra, unsuccessfully pleads to Promos for Andrugio's release and eventually agrees to sleep with Promos to save her brother's life. After Promos has, he thinks, had Andrugio executed, he commands his jailer to send Andrugio's head to Cassandra. Devastated by the loss of her brother and her virginity, she appeals to the king, who, horrified by her tale, forces Promos to marry Cassandra and afterward sentences him to execution. Cassandra, now "tyed in the greatest bondes of affection to her husband," pleads for Promos's life, which is granted once Andrugio, whose life had secretly been spared by the Jailer, reveals himself to his sister and all those assembled, including the king. Promos and Andrugio are forgiven their crimes and, presumably, go on to live happily with their wives.

While Shakespeare drew heavily on Whetstone's play, he also seems to have kept in mind an episode in Cinthio's prose romance *Hecatommithi* (1565) and his adaptation of it in the play *The Tragedy of Epitia* (1583), which relate the story of Epitia's agreement to sleep with the Austrian magistrate Juriste, who has prosecuted her brother Vico for raping an unwilling virgin. Nonetheless, Juriste has Vico executed, and Epitia complains to the emperor, who orders Juriste to marry Epitia, who then pleads for her husband's life to be spared, and the emperor agrees. Cinthio's play adds a number of extra characters and also has Vico's life secretly spared, as becomes apparent at the end. Thus, between the two versions of his story, Cinthio reworked the degree, consequences, and relative value of Juriste's crimes, possibly because the genre of drama required a more appealing and less culpable villain than a prose romance. While Whetstone probably used Cinthio's works to write his play, it is not clear if Shakespeare did the same or had Cinthio's stories filtered through Whetstone's texts. However, Shakespeare did use stories in *Hecatommithi* as sources for *Othello* and possibly other plays.

At least two analogues, both prose texts, of the basic *Measure for Measure* plot exist. The first is Thomas Lupton's *The Second Part of Too Good to Be True* (1581), which presents the story of "a notorious

example of a detestable Judge," in which a wife, lamenting the imminent execution of her husband for murdering his best friend (who attempted to woo the wife), agrees to sleep with the judge to save her husband. After the judge breaks his promise and executes her husband, she is so satisfied with the magistrates' "worthy" execution of the judge that she exclaims, "The death of my firste husband did not make mee so wofull a Widowe, but the death of my seconde husband dothe make me as joyful a Widow" (this is the type of proto-feminist, and just, ending that many of Shakespeare's audiences over the centuries would evidently have preferred). In the second analogue, Barnaby Rich's *The Adventures of Brusanus* (1592), King Leonarchus fakes his death and disguises himself as Corynus so that he can travel among his people and spy on his son Dorestus, who has succeeded to the throne. Corynus's experiences with a variety of his deceitful subjects, including the fantastical Gloriosus (a more treacherous version of Shakespeare's Lucio), allow him to counsel Dorestus, who must learn how to ensure that severe justice is tempered with clemency. Once suitably instructed, Dorestus is delighted to recognize his father in Corynus, who himself has learned that "to know then the causes of evils, is the readiest way to cure them."

These two stories of the disguised ruler and of the virtuous woman who is forced to sleep with a wicked official to save a man she loves have their basis in western European folktale and myth, as does the "bed trick," in which one of two lovers has been fooled as to the identity of a sexual partner. A medieval bed trick even produced England's legendary monarch King Arthur, whose father disguised himself as another king to sleep with a chaste wife. While Shakespeare was not particularly inventive in making use of such cultural motifs he was innovative in the ways in which he mixed such simple stories with complex dissections of mercy, justice, and sexuality in language that seems impenetrable at times. The Duke, Angelo, and Isabella particularly display their anxieties in trying to use awkward rhetoric to rationalize the irrational. But Shakespeare deliberately uses here a more mature linguistic style in which words cannot contain or express concepts that are irresolvable and immeasurable. This is most obvious in Elbow's "mistaking" of words and Pompey's inability to get to the point in Act 2, Scene 1, but such obfuscation does not pertain only to the lower-class and uneducated characters in the play. Some of the Duke's long speeches in Act 1, Scene 4, and Act 3, Scene 2, are difficult to follow because they use so many dependent clauses ("such a dependency of thing on thing," as the Duke puts it at 5.1.64) that the original reference is lost. Isabella's formal rhetoric in Act 2, Scenes 2 and 4, is so matched by Angelo that each depends on the other's arguments in order to be understood (thus they share a number of split

lines). Because of these linguistic difficulties, some critics have suggested that the text of *Measure for Measure* was mangled in its first printing in the 1623 First Folio, either because it had suffered cuts or because a later adapter had misjudged where to insert alterations. However, as this distraction in language brilliantly mirrors the distraction in thought of many of the characters, Shakespeare may have more closely succeeded in transmitting into print the words that he composed in manuscript than has been previously recognized.

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare pushed beyond the usual limits not just of language but of religion. His sympathetic reconsideration and reinstitution of the old religion, Catholicism, in a post-Reformation age suggests recklessness, for the play insists on the goodness of Catholic friars and nuns and depends on the emotional consolation offered by their precepts and institutions. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who quashed numerous conspiracies to overthrow her by Catholics, including her cousin Mary Queen of Scots, nostalgic representations of the old religion on stage would have provoked a great deal of controversy. But by 1604, Mary's son and heir James I had begun to explore the reconciliation of the two religions, allowing clergy to debate such questions as whether grace (or religious mercy) is grace, despite of all controversy, and which types and degrees of sin grace could pardon or alleviate. Whether Shakespeare was sentimentally looking back at his youth in Stratford (where there remained some practice of the old faith in the 1560s and 1570s) or agitating for the primacy of Catholicism in his adulthood is impossible to know for certain. Instead the play offers scope for a variety of interpretations. At the very least, Shakespeare's reconsideration of St. Matthew's maxim to "judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again" demands that Christianity prove its relevance to early modern England.

The play's genre, unfortunately labeled first a "dark comedy" by eighteenth-century critics and then a "problem comedy" by the respected critic Frederick S. Boas in 1896, seems designed stubbornly to resist any type of definition or labeling. A further problem is Shakespeare's apparent refusal to place an obvious climax in the third act, as the classical five-act structure dictates. But *Measure for Measure* marks the point in Shakespeare's career when he had abandoned patriotic English history plays based on chronicles and tragedies deriving from Greek, and outdated, formulas. By 1603, the beginning of the Jacobean age marked by James's ascension to the throne, Shakespeare also seemed to have become bored with traditional "festive" comedies such as *The Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which one

The figure of a Strumpet with a young man from Trevelyon's *Miscellany.*

couple has the leisure, and the wit, to test their relationships before marriage, while another denies themselves such opportunities but marry happily anyway.

In *Measure for Measure*, two of the couples, Claudio and Juliet and Angelo and Mariana, have already contracted "clandestine marriages," recognized as legally binding even though they were not celebrated in formal civil or religious ceremonies. Hence Angelo must depend on a very strict and absolute interpretation of the law to prosecute Claudio and to abandon Mariana. Lucio and Kate Keepdown, a "punk," or prostitute, are in effect also married and have produced a child, as have Elbow and his wife, who is defamed as a prostitute by Pompey. Like Angelo, Lucio and the linguistically challenged Elbow deny having had sexual intercourse with these women when questioned by the Duke or his deputies. Elbow even claims that "the time is yet to come" that his wife was "ever respected [i.e. suspected to have had intercourse] with man, woman, or child" (2.1.155–56). Lucio's complaint that "marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging" (5.1.517–18) is ignored by the Duke, who seems so exhilarated in commanding the formal marriages of three of these couples that he orders his own marriage to Isabella, who is not given a voice by Shakespeare to accept or decline this command. As with *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare uses *Measure for Measure* to question

the success of such theatrically forced marriages. But if the Duke seems outrageous in matching couples who are ill-suited, unwilling, or unbalanced in measures of love, kindness, or goodness, how outrageous must Shakespeare himself look when he has thus far made a career of doing the same in his "festive comedies." If audiences feel uncomfortable with the play's ending, as the three centuries of critics included in this volume claim, Shakespeare succeeds in emphasizing that audiences must not be passive but active and complicit. Shakespeare provides the interpretations but his audiences must provide the judgments, measure for measure.

Coleridge and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics called the play "hateful" for its sometimes explicit rendering of sexuality, as in the obscene comments of Pompey and Lucio and the lascivious behavior of Angelo, and for the lack of severe punishment for so many criminals. In the twentieth century, critics complained instead about the play's problematic portrayals of the Duke, Angelo, and Isabella but excused them, as G. Wilson Knight did, by strictly framing them within the Christian gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke. In expanding *Measure for Measure* beyond a simple Christian allegory and praising its "wonderful vitality," critics such as Rosalind Miles still believed in 1970 that *Measure for Measure* "remains only partially successful" because it deprives audiences of "the sense of harmony and completeness," as Swinburne and A. C. Bradley had argued. Now labeled by such critics as Kathleen McLuskie and Jonathan Dollimore as the "patriarchal," if not the misogynistic, bard, Shakespeare's faulty gender constructions and the disorder they create are seen as the source of early- and mid-twentieth-century commentators' judgments of Isabella as "cold," "selfish," and "sexually frigid" for her failure to save her brother by sleeping with Angelo. With the rise of feminist and new historical approaches to the play, Isabella has been more sympathetically interpreted as the victim of sexual harassment. Yet Isabella's willingness to act as bawd to Mariana and as assistant to the pimp-like Duke in setting up the bed trick suggests that she is no feminist icon; nor is the Duke, who forces Juliet to confess that her sin of fornication is "heavier" than Claudio's but later advises Mariana that " 'tis no sin" for her to consummate her relationship with Angelo. Like the Duke and Angelo, Isabella is incapable of weighing others with herself; all three see themselves as living in an exclusive and cloistered world of the mind (and "complete" or closed bosom) in which Mistress Overdone's employees and customers do not exist, rather than in a communal, physical world of the body and the senses, in which bawds, prostitutes, and tapsters make a tidy income.

Whether Isabella silently accepts the Duke's hasty proposal depends on a number of factors, including if the audience is made to see the

central love story as that of Isabella and the Duke, rather than of Isabella and Angelo or Isabella and Claudio. Since the 1960s, directors have frequently focused on Isabella and Angelo as the central couple, evenly matched in age, intensity, and unconscious eroticism. In such productions, the Duke has been played by an actor much older than the actress playing Isabella, so that his proposal of marriage causes her to squirm, shudder, or, most famously, retch off-stage, as in a production directed by Jonathan Miller in the early 1970s. But as Daniel Massey explains in his discussion (excerpted in this edition) of playing the Duke in a 1983 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production, more conventional productions have shifted the coupling squarely back to Isabella and the Duke, as was the case in the 1979 BBC Shakespeare television film of the play, so that her acceptance of his proposal is justified by their increasing emotional intimacy in Acts 3 and 4.

No matter who remains as Isabella's partner at the play's conclusion, their relationship "smacks," to use a term of the Provost, of incest, for her sisterly relationships with all three men suggest that the real bonds in the play are between men, not between women and men. The Duke's encounters with Angelo, the Provost, Claudio, and even Lucio seem tinged with more eroticism and intimacy than his, or theirs, with Isabella. Women such as Juliet, Kate Keepdown, and Elbow's wife produce children, but they have no real function in the play except to threaten or oppress the men they love. This "duke of dark corners" only comes to know himself when illuminated by Lucio (whose name puns both on *lux*, the Latin word for "light," and the name of the devil, Lucifer). Lucio's mocking of the absent Duke to the Friar may be slanderous but proves true in many respects: it is the degree of truth, not truth itself, which becomes important, otherwise truth and slander become synonymous. Lucio's remark that the Duke is not "much detected for women, he was not inclined that way" proves especially truthful in his dukedom, in which women such as Kate Keepdown and Elbow's wife are much discussed but never appear on stage, and the women who do appear on stage keep silent as their marriages are arranged. Even Mariana's sexual encounter with Angelo is in complete, and unnatural, silence.

As Marliss C. Desens argues, Shakespeare's use of the stage convention of the bed trick is less brutal than that of his contemporaries because both in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* the bed trick does not involve female rape, as is common in early modern drama. But Angelo's failure to recognize a particular woman while making love to her suggests that women are easily interchangeable objects, lacking individual traits, not to mention voices. In all respects, marriage in *Measure for Measure* proves to be fundamentally unnatural and irredeemably destructive: even at its most

basic, it produces confusion about male and female identity, as Elbow, the symbol of inept justice, amply testifies. If Shakespeare began to question in *Measure for Measure* whether marriage was designed not to sanction sexuality between men and women but to prevent sexuality between men and between women, he further explored this topic in the plays that he wrote shortly afterward, including *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*. This may explain why Coleridge found the play "hateful" but "Shakespearean" throughout.

With such dangerous subconscious desires lurking beneath the conscious surface of "decorum," to use the Duke's word in Act 1, Scene 4, it is not surprising that Restoration audiences preferred adaptations of *Measure for Measure* to the original. The first was *The Law against Lovers* (1662), William D'Avenant's lighthearted combination of this play and *Much Ado about Nothing*, in which Angelo wishes only to test Isabella's virtue and not to force her into bed, thereby earning her love and her hand in marriage. The second was Charles Gildon's less drastic redaction, *Measure for Measure, or, Beauty the Best Advocate* (1700), which offers Isabella more opportunity to fall in love with the Duke before his proposal. However, Shakespeare's text, purged of its seeming vulgarities, was staged repeatedly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with such celebrated actors as John Philip Kemble, Sarah Siddons, and W. C. Macready, and throughout the twentieth century, with the text largely restored, with Charles Laughton, John Gielgud (in a memorable production directed by Peter Brook), Ian Richardson, and Judi Dench, among many others. Charles Marowitz, known for his savage, postmodern adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, is not totally convincing in his version of *Measure for Measure* (1975) in portraying Isabella's rape by Angelo as an abhorrent event, especially as that scene and the closing scene in which the "Bishop" and "Angelo" joke about abuse provide a level of titillation and voyeurism that would make many uncomfortable. But perhaps this is Marowitz's point: the original play is much less obvious in making men and women confront the probability that their sexual fears are in fact their sexual desires but eventually forces them to do so.

There is no record of *Measure for Measure's* performance between that on December 26, 1604, and the close of the theaters in 1642, although it almost certainly was in the King's Men repertory for some years and performed both at the outdoor, public Globe theater and the indoor, private Blackfriars theater, where dimmable lighting could emphasize the play's insistence on physical, and moral, "shadows," "darkness," and "lightness." No matter the venue, if the play finally fails to deliver an absolute moral message, Shakespeare, who exposes the follies of moral absolutism throughout *Measure for Measure*, has

certainly succeeded. In a sense, all that James offered his son in *Basilkon Doron* also came to nothing: Henry, considered the most noble, gifted, and charismatic prince of his age, died of typhoid at the age of eighteen in 1612 and could never put into practice his father's recommendations. Instead, James's successor became his much less competent son, who as King Charles I was deposed and eventually executed in 1649 by the Puritans (moral absolutes like Angelo), resulting in a devastating civil war. If his sons did not heed his advice in *Basilikon Doron*, neither did James, especially as he surrounded himself with counselors who corrupted his concepts of justice and equity and male courtiers who encouraged his sexual infatuations for their own gain. As James demonstrates, it is easier to dispense advice than to follow it. As Shakespeare shows, it is quite natural to give advice but also quite natural to ignore it. Ultimately this wisdom about basic human nature is the "genius," to use Hazlitt's term, of *Measure for Measure* and what makes the play, to use Coleridge's terms, "Shakespearean throughout."