



William Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* education notes.

Synopsis.

Measure For Measure is set in Vienna where a nineteen year old law forbidding sex outside of marriage has long been ignored. The ruler of Vienna, Duke Vincentio, steps down and hands over to his deputy, Angelo, with instructions to enforce the law. He then disguises himself as a friar to observe what happens.

Under the new law, the brothels are shut down, including one run by Mistress Overdone, and her pimp, Pompey, is arrested. A young pregnant woman, Juliet, and her fiancé Claudio, are both arrested and Claudio is sentenced to death.

Claudio's sister, Isabella, pleads with Angelo to free her brother, aided by Claudio's friend, Lucio. Angelo offers to pardon Claudio if Isabella will have sex with him, which she refuses to do. The disguised Duke tells Isabella to agree to it and they send Angelo's former fiancée, Mariana, in her place.

In spite of believing that Isabella has completed her side of the bargain, Angelo brings forward Claudio's death sentence and demands to see his severed head as evidence. The Duke tells the provost to send the head of Ragozine, a prisoner who has recently died, instead.

The Duke stages a return to Vienna. Isabella denounces Angelo in public and demands justice. The Duke forces Angelo to marry Mariana, Claudio is reunited with Juliet, Lucio is told he must marry Kate Keepdown, the mother of his child, and the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella.

The text.

Measure For Measure was written in 1604. It is Shakespeare's first Jacobean play and he wrote it during or shortly after an outbreak of the plague. There was no Quarto edition published during Shakespeare's lifetime, we only have the Folio which was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death.

Scholars generally agree that Thomas Middleton added to or rewrote parts of the play for publication but no-one can be sure how much of it is Shakespeare and how much is Middleton.

The play is based on a story by the Italian writer, Giovanni Battista Giraldis Cinthio, which was published in 1565 in a collection of stories called the *Hecatommithi*, or *The Hundred Stories*. Cinthio set his story in Innsbruck but all the characters have Italianate names and some academics think Shakespeare might have originally set *Measure For Measure* in Ferrara, Italy, Cinthio's birthplace. 'Vienna' and 'Ferrara' have the same number of syllables so Middleton could have changed the town without disrupting Shakespeare's iambic pentameters.

The editors of the First Folio edition, John Heminge and Henry Condell, classified all of Shakespeare's plays as either histories, tragedies or comedies. The histories dramatise the lives of English monarchs, the tragedies end in deaths and the comedies end in marriages. Under this classification, *Measure For Measure* is a comedy but the marriages are, for the most part, far from a happy ending. Angelo is shamed into marrying Mariana, Lucio doesn't want to marry Kate Keepdown - he says "I beseech your highness, do not marry me to a whore" - and the Duke's proposal of marriage to Isabella is left unanswered.

This ambiguity led the 19th century academic, Frederick S Boas, to describe *Measure For Measure* as one of Shakespeare's 'problem plays'. In his book, *Shakespeare And His Predecessors*, he groups it with *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus And Cressida* and *Hamlet*, all of which, "introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilisation is ripe unto rottenness". While *Hamlet* might more easily fit into the category of tragedy, all four plays, Boas argues, leave the audience feeling neither "simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed".

Themes.

The title of the play comes from a key expression of Christian theology, The Sermon On The Mount, in Matthew 7 in the New Testament, "Judge not that ye be not judged. For with what judgement ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again".

Isabella wants to become a Poor Clare nun so Shakespeare sets her a series of moral dilemmas to test her faith. Is her chastity worth more than her brother's life? Is it more important to punish the sin or to forgive the sinner? And the final, unanswered question: which is more virtuous; a life of sexual abstinence as a nun or to be a loving wife to your husband and mother to your children?

For Peter Brook, *Measure For Measure* is a play about "justice, mercy, honesty, forgiveness, virtue, virginity, sex and death". In his book, *The Empty Space*, he says it is a combination of Holy and Rough Theatre. Holy Theatre is based on ritual, like Ancient Greek theatre, it's where we consider what it is to be human and examine "the invisible currents that rule our lives". Rough Theatre, on the other hand, is rude, crude and fun; it's where "filth and vulgarity are natural, obscenity is joyous". He goes on to say that in *Measure For Measure*, Shakespeare "shows these two elements, Holy and Rough, almost schematically, side by side. They are opposed and they co-exist."

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