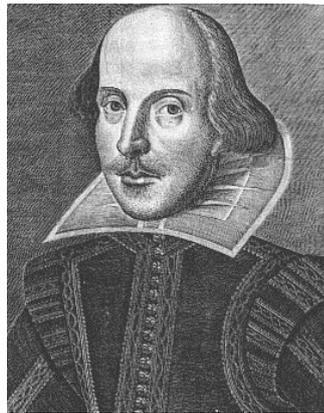


Measure for Measure

by E.D.M. Woodhouse



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks
No. 2

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A director who decides to prepare for a production of *Measure for Measure* will quickly discover why it is often called a problem play. Who is the main character? What is a twenty-first century audience to make of the rather stiff heroine? How does one present those old, and potentially very unfunny, Elizabethan theatrical gags: the disguised ruler, the bed trick? Why do the two halves of the play seem so different in tone? What on earth is the play "about"? While a student of literature has the luxury of changing his or her mind a dozen times or even holding contradictory views simultaneously, actors (and audiences) today expect reasonably clear "motivation". The director will have to take a very firm line, particularly on the interpretation of the Duke, and this means that the play, more than any other in the canon, is intriguingly different in each production. *Measure for Measure* has swung in and out of favour during the last two hundred years; however, at the beginning of a new millennium, its startling ambiguities and subtle exploration of the murky connections between sex and death make it absolutely a play for our time.

We are in Vienna: a city with a reputation for self-indulgence and naughty behaviour of all kinds. It is ruled over by a Duke, Vincentio, who has made a significant decision. He has been ruler for fourteen years and the place is a shambles: riddled with prostitution, syphilis, hedonism, broken promises. Something must be done. He is therefore going to leave Vienna (ostensibly to make a trip to Poland) abrogate his responsibilities and leave the government in the hands of a deputy, the apparently incorruptible Angelo, *a man whose blood / is very snow-broth*. In fact, Vincentio is not going to leave Vienna at all; he is going to disguise himself as a friar and wander around the city watching what happens. Why is he going to do this? Here the director – and the student – confronts his first and most crucial problem, for surely on the interpretation of the Duke rests the interpretation of the whole play.

At one simple level, the Duke does this because otherwise there would not be a play. He is not Lear, abandoning his moral and political responsibilities out of blind selfishness; neither is he the usurped Prospero (although Vincentio's fondness for *the life remov'd* does suggest he may be a prototype for Prospero). He walks out to get the play going. A modern audience will not settle for this and we must try to find some sort of explanation. Although the Duke's part is a very large one, he has little in the way of soliloquy to help us understand him. Nonetheless, here and there, there are clues. His opening speech is opaque but there are some phrases that stand out: *Of government...The nature of our people...Our city's institutions...Our commission*. One reading of the Duke is that he is an absolute ruler who wishes to explore the nature of his city and the effects of power. He is setting up an experiment, perhaps well aware that Angelo is not to be trusted. He represents the *demi-god, Authority* and his control over the situation he creates may well remind us again of how Prospero controls the occupants of his island. Manipulative and, on occasions, mendacious, he is the consummate politician. This interpretation may help us to understand his perplexing behaviour in the latter part of the play.

On the other hand, he may simply be having a nervous breakdown. Unable to cope with the chaotic underbelly of Vienna, he opts out. He does not enjoy the trappings of power:

*I love the people,
But do not like to stage me to their eyes.*

He would prefer to observe the vagaries of human behaviour from under the safety of a friar's hood; *one that*, as Escalus describes him, *above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself*. The unfolding of the plot comes as a series of alarming surprises; he must

think very quickly, improvising, hoping for the best. Like other characters in the play, he acquires self-knowledge and eventually returns to his rightful position with a renewed sense of authority and possibly even with a wife. This interpretation will certainly produce a funnier play.

Another critical interpretation, particularly popular in the first half of the twentieth century, before theatre audiences - battered by history and coached by Beckett and Pinter - learnt to accept uncertainty, is that the play is a religious, specifically Christian, fable. It is not a coincidence that the Duke adopts the disguise of a friar. His purpose is to restore his dukedom to a properly Christian path. The play's title is a reference to an idea that occurs several times in the New Testament, for example, in St Matthew's Gospel:

*Judge not, that ye be not judged.
For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.*^[1]

Angelo's system of justice seems more reminiscent of an Old Testament attitude:

*And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,
Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*^[2]

Against this is set the venerable figure of the Duke who sees death as the entry to a higher and more blessed form of life and whose instruction to Pompey *Go mend! Go mend!* - recalling Christ's injunction to the woman taken in adultery^[3] - can be applied to all his subjects. The play is full of Biblical references; when the Duke does speak in soliloquy his tone is that of a sermon:

*Peace be with you.

He who the sword of heaven will bear
Should be as holy as severe...*

In a famous essay published in 1930^[4], the critic G.Wilson Knight argued:

[The Duke] controls the action from start to finish, he allots, as it were, praise and blame, he is lit at moments with divine suggestion comparable with his almost divine power of fore-knowledge and wisdom. There is an enigmatic, other worldly, mystery suffusing his figure and the meaning of his acts: their result, however, in each case justifies their initiation – wherein we see the allegorical nature of the play, since the plot is so arranged that each person receives his deserts in the light of the Duke's – which is really the Gospel – ethic.

This reading of the play has fallen out of fashion in recent years but there is plenty of evidence in the text to support it.

Whatever "motivation" the director and the actor find for the Duke's action in scene one, the fact remains that there must be one, it must be clear and that whatever it is, the tone of the whole play will be established by it.

So the Duke departs and Angelo is left in charge. Almost immediately, it becomes clear that Angelo is not an angel at all but a dreadful character, *a kind of puritan*, as *Twelfth Night's* Maria says of Malvolio with a shudder, a character with whom Angelo has much in common. Angelo decides that Vienna must be cleaned up; no more hanky-panky; zero tolerance.

*We must not make a scarecrow of the law,
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it
Their perch and not their terror.*

All of the brothels (there are many) must be closed; the madams and prostitutes, represented by the exuberant Mistress Overdone, are to be put out of work. Moreover, a young man named Claudio is to be executed for making his fiancée pregnant. Claudio has a sister, Isabella, who is intending to become a nun, and he asks her to plead with Angelo for his life. She agrees and off she goes to try her best. Although Claudio implies that Isabella's powers of persuasion lie in her demeanour and moral integrity (*in her youth/ There is a prone and speechless dialect/ Such as move men...*^[51]) she is extraordinarily articulate. Her red-blooded, feisty way of putting things is a touch surprising, given her vocation:

*Spare him, spare him!
He's not prepared for death. Even for our kitchens
We kill the fowl of season: shall we serve heaven
With less respect than we do minister
To our gross selves? Good, good my lord, bethink you;
Who is it that hath died for this offence?
There's many have committed it.*

At first Angelo will not be budged, but then an extraordinary thing happens. The straight-laced, humourless deputy finds himself completely overwhelmed by sexual desire for Isabella:

*She speaks, and 'tis
Such sense, that my sense breeds with it.*

And a little later:

*When I would pray and think, I think and pray
To several subjects. Heaven hath my empty words;
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
Anchors on Isabel: Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name;
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception.*

He will pardon Claudio but only if Isabella sleeps with him. What is she to do? Her response is one that encapsulates the second great problem for our director: can Isabella be presented in a sympathetic light? Her line - *more than our brother is our chastity* - is, as Robert Speight has commented, *the stiffest hurdle that any actress has to face*^[61].

It is useful to remember that the Isabella-figure is not a nun in any of the recognized sources for the play. Clearly, this is something that Shakespeare felt was important. Technically, she is not a proper nun because she has not taken her final vows, just as Juliet and Mariana have not taken theirs. However, if she is dressed as a postulant (although not looking too like Fraulein Maria in the early scenes of *The Sound of Music*) there will be a visual reminder for the audience that this is a girl who desires to become the bride of Christ. There are a number of ways in which this issue can be exploited to help the actress.

First, we may see Isabella as a young girl who has fallen in love with religion, rather as that other Juliet has fallen in love with Romeo. When we first see her in conversation with Sister Francisca, she seems disappointed that her holy order does not have *more strict restraint*. Curiously, she seems to share with Angelo a fondness for rules and regulations. In her debates with Angelo she demonstrates an ability to engage passionately in theological argument, drawing on Biblical references and deferring ultimately to the judgment of Christ.

It is precisely this passionate engagement that Angelo finds so erotic. Emphasising the significance of her vocation will also help the director to deal with her rather rebarbative response to Claudio's wonderful, but terrifying vision of death.

*Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thought
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!*

To her, the sacrifice of Christ offers the certainty of eternal life and she is furious at Claudio's repudiation of it. Perhaps Isabella too is on a journey of self-discovery; she knows little of the ways of the world and she is invited to consider at the end of the play whether her passionate nature would be more suited to a temporal role as the wife of the ruler of Vienna. Isabella's capacity for intense, if perhaps misguided, feeling makes her an attractive part for an actress.

Another aspect of her character that ought to be particularly appealing to a twenty-first century audience is that what is sexy about Isabella is her intelligence. Although Lucio calls her *pretty Isabella*, not much is made of her beauty. What strikes us is the astonishing way in which she can hold her own in debate. Entering a convent in the early seventeenth century was one of the few ways an upper class girl could avoid the marriage market and the perils of child-bearing. It might offer a woman her only chance of a life of study, contemplation, intellectual development. A feminist reading of the play might see Isabella helping Mariana to outwit the men and end up with exactly what Mariana wants – even if we do not quite understand why she wants it.

Our director's problems do not end with the roles of the Duke and Isabella. The first half of the play creates a tone of intense and potentially tragic drama. The ethical issues of government, justice, faith are presented through a series of thrilling debates. Apart from the battle of wits between Isabella and Angelo, we see Angelo's debate with himself. Unlike the Duke, he has revealing soliloquies that, like those of Claudius or even Macbeth, range over ambition, deviousness, self-disgust, terror:

*The state whereon I studied
Is, like a good thing being often read,
Grown sere and tedious; yea, my gravity,
Wherein – let no man hear me – I take pride,
Could I with boot change for an idle plume
Which the air beats for vain. O place, O form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
Wrench awe from fools, and tie the wiser souls
To thy false seeming!*

The bizarre physicality, self-awareness and sense of torment make Angelo much more than just a disgusting hypocrite.

There are other types of debate in the first half of the play. Two exquisite views of death, the Duke's and Claudio's, in Act III scene 1 may remind us of Hamlet's vacillating perceptions of the afterlife. Moreover, as so often in Shakespeare, the "low" characters provide a sort of parody of the main goings on with Froth, Pompey and Elbow providing a mildly funny

commentary on the intricacies of legal debate. Mrs Elbow is another pregnant woman who has been badly treated, although what exactly it is that Froth has done to her remains wonderfully obscure. Throughout the first half of the play we are mesmerized by complicated decisions, complex issues, horrifying alternatives. Will Claudio live? How will Isabella extricate herself from this appalling situation? Do we feel any pity for Angelo?

Then, to some extent, it all goes wrong and our director must confront a third great problem. The second half of the play, written largely in prose, offers us the preposterous and rather revolting idea that Mariana^[7], instead of Isabella, will go to bed with Angelo (actually, there does not seem to be a bed involved at all – just a rather chilly assignation in a summer-house.) Angelo won't notice, Mariana will get her man back and Claudio will be saved without Isabella's virtue being sullied. However, there are wonderful theatrical elements in the later part of the play and they support the main themes very effectively. One of these elements is the dark humour of the prison and particularly the role of Barnadine, whose refusal to cooperate with the authorities: *I am not fitted for't* (i.e. death) curiously echoes Isabella's speech to Angelo quoted earlier. As Hamlet says, *the readiness is all*. We will probably notice how the idea of substitution is developed too: Angelo was a substitute for the Duke, now Mariana is a substitute for Isabella and poor old Ragozine is a substitute for Claudio. We ought to enjoy the familiar, but nonetheless delightful, machinations of Lucio (whose name means 'light' and who offers many insights into the real character of Vienna.) We may also admire the dramatic tension created by the last scene of the play. Quite why the Duke puts Isabella through this misery is puzzling and the explanation will depend on our understanding of his character, but it is certainly very tense in the theatre. Finally, there is that brilliant silence as Isabella confronts...what? Betrayal of her ideals? The unassailable authority of men? Recognition of a kindred spirit? The possibility of happiness? What infinite variety Shakespeare offers the fortunate director and student.

So can we, in the end, say what this play is "about"? Often the key to understanding a play is to explore the imagery, but we are not given very much help here either. Caroline Spurgeon calls the images *vivid, quaint or grotesque*^[8]. Angelo's are, unsurprisingly, rather cold and metallic. The imagery tends to support the bleaker readings of the play. One way or another, control seems to be the issue. Can you control other people? Can you control a state? Can you control yourself? *All's Well That Ends Well* is a companion piece to *Measure for Measure*, written about the same time; the rogue Parolles, in that play, has a good line:

Simply the thing I am shall make me live.

Here, Pompey, servant to a brothel-keeper, clown and all-purpose nobody, says something similar:

Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live.

Perhaps this response to the concept of zero-tolerance is what Shakespeare is getting at.

Further Reading:

All's Well That Ends Well: William Shakespeare
Mariana: Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Shakespeare's Language: Frank Kermode
The Genius of Shakespeare: Jonathan Bate (Picador 1997)

^[1] St. Matthew Ch 7 vv 1-3.

^[2] Exodus. Ch.21 vv 23-25

^[3] See St.John Ch 8

^[4] *Measure for Measure and the Gospels*: G.Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire* 1930

^[5] Frank Kermode is very interesting about these lines and about the language of the play as a whole in *Shakespeare's Language* (Penguin Books 2000)

^[6] Robert Speight: *Essays by Divers Hands* (RSL 1976)

^[7] Tennyson wrote a poem about Mariana in her moated grange. It is well worth reading.

^[8] See *Shakespeare's Imagery*: Caroline Spurgeon (CUP 1935)