

# Measure for Measure

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## INTRODUCTION

*Measure for Measure*, first printed in the 1623 Folio, was performed at court on 26 December 1604. Plague had caused London's theatres to be closed from May 1603 to April 1604; the play was probably written and first acted during 1604. Dislocations and other features of the text as printed suggest that it may have undergone adaptation after Shakespeare's death. Someone—perhaps Thomas Middleton, to judge by the style—seems to have supplied a new, seedy opening to Act 1, Scene 2; and an adapter seems also to have altered 3.1.517–4.1.63 by transposing the Duke's two soliloquies, by introducing a stanza from a popular song, and by supplying dialogue to follow it. We print the text in what we believe to be its adapted form; a conjectured reconstruction of Shakespeare's original version of the adapted sections is given in the Additional Passages.

The story of a woman who, in seeking to save the life of a male relative, arouses the lust of a man in authority was an ancient one that reached literary form in the mid sixteenth century. Shakespeare may have known the prose version in Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi's *Gli Ecatommiti* (1565, translated into French in 1583) and the same author's play *Epitia* (1573, published in 1583), but his main source was George Whetstone's unsuccessful, unperformed two-part tragicomedy *Promos and Cassandra*, published in 1578.

Shakespeare's title comes from Saint Matthew's account of Christ's Sermon on the Mount: 'with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again'. The title is not expressive of the play's morality, but it alerts the spectator to Shakespeare's exploration of moral issues. His heroine, Isabella, is not merely, as in Whetstone, a virtuous young maiden: she is about to enter a nunnery. Her brother, Claudio, has not, as in Whetstone, been accused (however unjustly) of rape: his union with the girl (Juliet) he has made pregnant has been ratified by a betrothal ceremony, and lacks only the church's formal blessing. So Angelo, deputizing for the absent Duke of Vienna, seems peculiarly harsh in attempting to enforce the city's

laws against fornication by insisting on Claudio's execution; and Angelo's hypocrisy in demanding Isabella's chastity in return for her brother's life seems correspondingly greater. By adding the character of Mariana, to whom Angelo himself had once been betrothed, and by employing the traditional motif of the 'bed-trick', by which Mariana substitutes for Isabella in Angelo's bed, Shakespeare permits Isabella both to retain her virtue and to forgive Angelo without marrying him.

Although *Measure for Measure*, like *The Merchant of Venice*, is much concerned with justice and mercy, its more explicit concern with sex and death along with the intense emotional reality, at least in the earlier part of the play, of its portrayal of Angelo, Isabella, and Claudio, creates a deeper seriousness of tone which takes it out of the world of romantic comedy into that of tragicomedy or, as the twentieth-century label has it, 'problem play'. Its low-life characters inhabit a diseased world of brothels and prisons, but there is a life-enhancing quality in their frank acknowledgement of sexuality; and the Duke's manipulation of events casts a tinge of romance over the play's later scenes.

*Measure for Measure*'s subtle and passionate exploration of issues of sexual morality, of the uses and abuses of power, has given it a special appeal in the later part of the twentieth century. Each of the 'good' characters fails in some respect; none of the 'bad' ones lacks some redeeming quality; all are, in the last analysis, 'desperately mortal' (4.2.148).