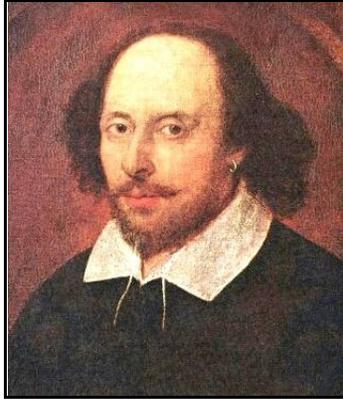


# MEASURE FOR MEASURE

by William Shakespeare



## THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

*Measure for Measure*, written in 1604, is among the darkest of Shakespeare's comedies. The basic plot is taken from Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatombithi*. The play deals with themes of mercy and justice, and thus is similar in some ways to *The Merchant of Venice*. The famous "bed trick" scene made the play unpalatable to Victorian audiences, though the twentieth century has viewed it much more positively. The title itself is taken from Matthew 7:2, and is suitable for a story that deals with the theme of an eye for an eye and the need to hold oneself to the standards to which one holds others. Like *The Merchant of Venice*, however, justice is trumped by mercy, and all escape happily at the end of the story.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Duke Vincentio - The Duke of Vienna, he pretends to leave the city and puts his deputy Angelo in charge of administering justice. He returns in disguise, sees the injustices being wrought in his absence, and manipulates a satisfactory conclusion as he reveals himself in the last scene.
- Angelo - Deputy of the Duke, he is a strict and unyielding man who condemns Claudio to death for impregnating Juliet, who had pledged herself to him, before they were able to marry. He then offers to pardon Claudio if his sister Isabella is willing to sleep with him. At the end, he is forced to marry Mariana, to whom he had been engaged five years before.
- Mariana - Betrothed to Angelo and unjustly rejected by him five years before the action begins, she takes Isabella's place in his bed and is rewarded by being given to him in marriage at the end of the play.
- Escalus - A nobleman of Vienna who helps Angelo in his administration of the city.
- Claudio - After impregnating his fiancée Juliet, he is sentenced to death by Angelo, but delivered at the end of the story.
- Juliet - Claudio's beloved, she is pregnant with his child; at the end, the two marry.
- Isabella - Claudio's sister who is about to enter a convent, she comes to Angelo to plead for her brother's life. Angelo propositions her instead, though when the tryst comes, Mariana takes her place. In the end, she marries the Duke.
- Lucio - A foolish gentleman who provides comic relief throughout the play.
- Elbow - A foolish constable who provides comic relief.
- Pompey - The clown, and a procurer for Mistress Overdone.
- Mistress Overdone - A bordello owner, she too is a comic figure in the play.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Now, as fond fathers,  
Having bound up the threat'ning twigs of birch,  
Only to stick it in their children's sight  
For terror, not to use, in time the rod  
Becomes more mocked than feared; so our decrees,  
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead,  
And Liberty plucks Justice by the nose;  
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart  
Goes all decorum.” (Duke, Iiii, 23-31)

“I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted,  
By your renouncement an immortal spirit,  
And to be talked with in sincerity,  
As with a saint.” (Lucio, Iiv, 34-37)

“Our doubts are traitors  
And make us lose the good we oft might win,  
By fearing to attempt.” (Lucio, Iiv, 77-79)

“You may not so extenuate his offense  
For I have had such faults; but rather tell me,  
When I that censure him do so offend,  
Let mine own judgment pattern out my death  
And nothing come in partial. Sir, he must die.” (Angelo, Ii, 27-31)

“No ceremony that to great ones ‘longs  
Not the king’s crown, nor the deputed sword,  
The marshal’s truncheon, not the judge’s robe,  
Become them with one half so good a grace  
As mercy does;  
If he had been as you, and you as he,  
You would have slipped like him; but he, like you,  
Would not have been so stern.” (Isabella, Iiii, 59-66)

“Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,  
And He that might the vantage best have took,  
Found out the remedy. How would you be,  
If He, which is the top of judgment, should  
But judge you as you are? O think on that,  
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man new made.” (Isabella, Iiii, 73-79)

“Go to your bosom,  
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know  
That’s like my brother’s fault; if it confess  
A natural guiltiness such as is his,  
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue  
Against my brother’s life.” (Isabella, Iiii, 136-141)

“More than our brother is our chastity.” (Isabella, Iiiv, 185)

“Sweet sister, let me live.  
What sin you do to save a brother’s life,  
Nature dispenses with the deed so far  
That it becomes a virtue.” (Claudio, Iiii, 133-136)

“He who the sword of heaven will bear  
Should be as holy as severe;  
Pattern in himself to know,  
Grace to stand, and virtue go;  
More nor less to others paying  
Than by self-offenses weighing.  
Shame to him whose cruel striking  
Kills for faults of his own liking.  
Twice treble shame on Angelo,  
To weed my vice and let his grow.” (Duke, IIIi, 244-253)

“Then, good prince,  
No longer session hold upon my shame,  
But let my trial be mine own confession.  
Immediate sentence, then, and sequent death  
Is all the grace I beg.” (Angelo, Vi, 366-370)

“Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure,  
Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.” (Duke, Vi, 406-407)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - The first scene takes place in the palace of Vincentio, duke of Vienna. The Duke is about to take a journey, and intends to leave his deputy, Angelo, in charge of the administration of justice in the city. Angelo pleads unworthiness, but the Duke insists he has the virtue to undertake the task, and departs.

**Act I, scene 2** - On a street in Vienna, Lucio and two gentlemen banter, then Mistress Overdone arrives and announces that Claudio has been arrested and sentenced to death for getting Juliet pregnant out of wedlock. Pompey the clown then tells Mistress Overdone that, by official decree, all the houses of prostitution are to be pulled down. Claudio then appears, being led to prison by the Provost, and explains to Lucio that he and Juliet had made private agreement to marry, but lacked only the public ceremony because they were waiting for a dowry. Claudio suspects that Angelo is making an example of him in order to demonstrate his power. He has appealed to the Duke, who is gone, and now implores Lucio to find his sister Isabella, who is about to enter a convent, and ask her to beg for his life before the deputy.

**Act I, scene 3** - The Duke, in a friar's cell, explains that he has failed to enforce Vienna's laws, and, rather than suddenly becoming harsh, had entrusted enforcement to Angelo, known to be strict. He intends to return to Vienna in friar's garb and observe how enforcement of the laws affects the people, and how power affects Angelo himself.

**Act I, scene 4** - The scene now shifts to a convent, where Isabella is about to be received. Lucio arrives and tells her of Claudio's plight, begging her to intercede for him. She agrees to try.

**Act II, scene 1** - The scene takes place in a courtroom in Vienna. Escalus, an old nobleman, is begging Angelo to be merciful to Claudio, asking if he indeed might not have faced the same

temptation in his youth. Angelo differentiates between temptation and sin, and insists that, had he committed the same offense, he would have deserved the same punishment; he then sentences Claudio to die at nine the following morning. Elbow the constable enters with Pompey and Froth in tow, and much nonsense ensues. Escalus then bemoans the fate of Claudio, but admits that he can do nothing about it.

**Act II, scene 2** - The Provost arrives at Angelo's house and again asks for mercy for Claudio. Angelo refuses and sends him on his way to do his duty, telling him to make quiet arrangements for Juliet to bear her child. Isabella then arrives, begging for her brother's life; Angelo repeatedly refuses, and Lucio eggs her on to be more ardent in her entreaties. Angelo repeatedly refuses to yield, but finally softens and asks her to come back again the next day, promising to think about what she has said. Isabella promises to pray for him, but after she leaves, Angelo admits that he is sorely tempted by her virtue.

**Act II, scene 3** - The Duke, disguised as a friar, visits the prison and speaks with Juliet, finding that she loves Claudio and repents of her deeds. He tells her of Claudio's death sentence.

**Act II, scene 4** - Back at Angelo's house, Angelo has not slept well, being increasingly obsessed with Isabella. When she arrives to plead her brother's case, he propositions her, asking if she would be willing to relinquish her virtue in order to save her brother. She refuses, then he asks if she is not as cruel as he, unwilling to show mercy to her brother when it is within her power. He professes his love, and again asks her to share his bed. She threatens to proclaim his perfidy to all who will listen, but he tells her that no one will believe her. He stays the execution one more day to give her time to make her decision. She then determines to go to Claudio and explain the situation, confident that he will be willing to die in order to protect her virtue.

**Act III, scene 1** - Back in the prison, we find the Duke (still in disguise) speaking to Claudio, advising him to welcome death, which delivers him from life's troubles. Isabella then arrives, and the Duke withdraws to overhear their conversation. She tells him of Angelo's terrible bargain, but, much to her surprise and disgust, Claudio asks her to yield her virginity in order to save his life. She tells him that he deserves to die for suggesting such a thing, and prepares to leave. At this point, the Duke emerges from hiding, tells Claudio that Angelo was merely testing his sister, then sends the Provost away so he can speak to Isabella alone. He then tells Isabella of a woman named Mariana, who had been espoused to Angelo. Her brother went down with a ship carrying her dowry, and Angelo then refused to marry her, claiming that she had been unfaithful. The Duke proposes that Isabella agree to Angelo's bargain, but insist their tryst be brief, in a private place, in silence, and in the dark. Mariana will then fill Isabella's place, thus avenging her mistreatment and saving both Isabella's honor and Claudio's life. Isabella readily agrees to enact the ruse.

**Act III, scene 2** - Elbow then enters with Pompey, imprisoned as a pimp, and banter follows. Lucio then enters, and speaks to the disguised Duke about the Duke's virtues, describing him as a lenient and good-natured fellow who enjoys many vices of his own. Escalus and the Provost then enter with Mistress Overdone, arrested for running a house of prostitution. Escalus then discusses Claudio's impending death with the Duke. The Duke then speaks of his intention to use Mariana to bring Angelo to justice.

**Act IV, scene 1** - This scene takes place in the grange where Mariana is hiding. The Duke (still disguised) arrives and speaks with her, then she retreats as Isabella comes onto the scene. She tells the Duke about her arrangement with Angelo, then Mariana returns. The two women go aside and discuss the plan, to which Mariana readily accedes after the Duke assures her that she will not be sinning because she is already bound to Angelo by law.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Back in the prison, the Provost offers Pompey release from his sentence if he will help the executioner do his duty. Banter follows. The Duke then arrives and asks if Claudio has yet received a reprieve. A messenger then comes in with a message from Angelo, to the effect that Claudio is to be executed and his head brought to the deputy. The Duke convinces the Provost to postpone the execution, beheading the murderer Barnardine instead and bearing his head to Angelo. The Provost is reluctant to disobey his superior, but the disguised Duke convinces him that the Duke is soon to return, and desires the stay of execution.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Pompey and the executioner prepare to behead Barnardine, but the prisoner is drunk and insists that they will have to wait for a more convenient time. The Duke is reluctant to execute him in such a state and condemn him to perdition. The Provost then says that a certain Ragozine, who coincidentally much resembled Claudio, had died that morning of a fever. The Duke orders his head to be used instead. Isabella then arrives and asks if Angelo sent Claudio's pardon; the Duke tells her that he ordered him executed instead, and that the deed was done. She is distraught, but the Duke comforts her and tells her to have faith until the Duke's return the following day.

**Act IV, scene 4** - At Angelo's house, he and Escalus discuss the Duke's letters. He has ordered them to meet him at the gates of the city to turn over their authority, and has also decreed that a proclamation be made that all who have been wronged should appear at the gate also to air their grievances. Angelo fears what may come of this, and regrets his decision to have Claudio executed, though he justifies it because of the need to keep him from avenging the dishonoring of his sister.

**Act IV, scene 5** - Outside the city, the Duke, now in his own clothing, gathers his friends about him in preparation for the return.

**Act IV, scene 6** - On a street in Vienna, Isabella and Mariana discuss the disguised Duke's strange request - that Isabella rather than Mariana should air their grievance against Angelo. They hear of the Duke's arrival, and advance toward the gate of the city.

**Act V, scene 1** - The Duke arrives at the city gate and praises Angelo and Escalus for their administration of justice in his absence. Isabella then throws herself on her knees before him and voices her complaint against Angelo. The deputy claims that she is mad, and the Duke pretends to go along with his judgment. Isabella persists, and the Duke allows her to tell her story, which she does, omitting the substitution of Mariana for herself. He professes not to believe her and orders her taken to the prison as a mad woman. Friar Peter insists that Isabella's story is false, that Angelo never violated her, then brings out Mariana, who refuses to show her face until her husband orders her to do so. She tells of sleeping in her husband's arms without his knowledge, then reveals herself to Angelo, who insists he has not seen her for five years. The Duke again pretends to believe

Angelo, and gives him and Escalus the power to punish the liars. He then excuses himself. As Escalus prepares to question Isabella, the Duke returns in his friar's habit. Escalus and Lucio abuse him for encouraging the women to lie about Angelo, but in the course of the abuse, Lucio pulls off his hood and reveals the Duke. Angelo immediately confesses and admits that he deserves to die, but the Duke instead insists that he go and marry Mariana. He then turns to Isabella and advises her to accept her brother's death, apologizing that the execution had occurred too quickly for him to prevent it. He then orders that the newly-married Angelo be executed for the death of Claudio, and gives all his goods to Mariana, who pleads with him to spare her husband. She then solicits Isabella's aid, and the wronged woman also begs for Angelo's life. The Duke then brings out Claudio, much to the joy of all concerned. He sentences the fool Lucio to marry a prostitute he impregnated, pardons Angelo, and proposes marriage to Isabella, and all live happily ever after.

### ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Evaluate the arguments used by Isabella to try to deliver her brother from the death sentence in Act II, scene 2 of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Are the arguments logical? Are they biblical? Support your answers from the play and from Scripture.
2. In William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Isabella is given the choice of losing her virtue or condemning her brother to his death. Evaluate her choice. Does she do the right thing? Use Scripture to support your assessment of her decision.
3. William Shakespeare often addresses the issue of the qualities of a good ruler in his plays. In *Measure for Measure*, the Duke is presented as a wise and kindly ruler with one exception - his inability to keep order in Vienna. Do you agree that the Duke is a good ruler? Why or why not? Be sure to evaluate his actions in the play in forming your conclusion, and give scriptural support for your assessment.
4. The title of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is taken from Matthew 7:2. Discuss how the play serves as a commentary on the opening verses of this chapter in the Bible. Are Shakespeare's conclusions on moral behavior the same as those of Jesus? Why or why not?
5. Discuss the treatment of marriage in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. At the end of the play, Claudio is permitted to marry Juliet, Lucio is forced to marry a prostitute, Angelo is made to marry Mariana, and we are left with the impression that Isabella will forsake the convent in order to marry the Duke. Do you find these "happy" endings satisfactory? Evaluate the view of marriage these events imply from the standpoint of Scripture.
6. At the end of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella. Will she accept his proposal? Do you think she should? Why or why not?

7. When William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* was written in 1604, the king of England was James I, a strong advocate of the divine right of kings. Since a king was believed to rule by divine right, it would be monstrous for a king to lay aside his power voluntarily - a theme developed in a much more serious way by Shakespeare in *King Lear*, and the action could do nothing but lead to bad consequences. To what extent does the plot of *Measure for Measure* support the notion of divine right? Support your arguments with specifics from the script.
8. According to William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, which is worse in a ruler, too much leniency or too much strictness? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
9. Compare and contrast the treatments of the theme of mercy in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Both plays are somewhat uncomfortable comedies, yet both speak strongly of the need for mercy. Are their conclusions on the subject biblical? Why or why not?
10. Aristotle argued that all virtues are at the midpoint between two extreme vices, so that virtue consisted of seeking moderation in all things. To what extent does William Shakespeare support this idea in *Measure for Measure*? What are the extremes of behavior against which he warns, and the path of moderation that he advocates? Support your answers with details from the play.
11. Discuss the role of temptation in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Which characters face temptation, and how do they handle it? What is Shakespeare saying about the nature of temptation and the appropriate response to it? Evaluate his treatment of the subject on the basis of Scripture.
12. In William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, discuss the morality of the "bed trick" proposed by the Duke to preserve Isabella's virginity while gaining justice for Mariana. Is this a situation where the end justifies the means? If not, how would you have proposed handling the problem?
13. To what extent is the Duke in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* a Machiavellian ruler? Compare and contrast his behavior to the precepts set forth by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Be specific.
14. To what extent is Angelo in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* a Machiavellian ruler? Compare and contrast his behavior to the precepts set forth by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Be specific.
15. From the very beginning of William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio undertakes the task of playing God by designing tests and manipulating people and events in order to ascertain the true character of Angelo and others. What does the play communicate about the danger of playing God? Does the happy ending undermine this message, or simply underscore it? How? Be sure to use specifics from the play to support your arguments.

16. Lord Acton once famously said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Discuss the extent to which William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* supports Lord Acton’s dictum. Support your argument with details from the play.
17. Compare and contrast the characters of Sir William Thornhill in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Duke Vincentio in William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, paying attention to the traits of the two men as well as the use of concealed identity as a plot device and a means of bringing about a satisfactory denouement.
18. Compare and contrast the bed tricks in William Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Both pieces of deception are intended to preserve the virginity of virtuous women while forcing immoral men to sleep with those who rightly deserve their favors. Are these tricks justifiable? Why or why not?