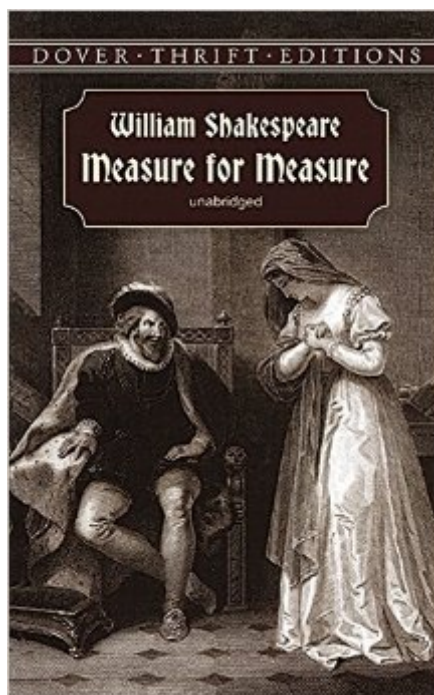


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Measure For Measure: Unabridged (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

One of Shakespeare's "dark comedies," *Measure for Measure* is as noteworthy for its fascinating political and social implications as for its compelling characters: a duke masquerading as a monk, a would-be nun ordered to sacrifice her chastity to save her brother's life, and a self-righteous courtier, professing his incorruptibility while concealing a depraved private life. In this engrossing drama set in 16th-century Vienna, Duke Vincentio attempts to enforce the city's long-ignored morality laws, which results in a death sentence for Claudio, a young man accused of seducing and impregnating his fiancée. Isabella, his sister, attempts to gain a pardon for him, but refuses when she is asked to exchange her virtue for her brother's life. Claudio eventually is freed and utter tragedy is averted, as Shakespeare explores with force and sensitivity the basis of good government, public and private morality, and the balancing of justice and mercy, among other themes.

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Customer Reviews

Measure for Measure is seldom read, and not often performed in the United States. Why? Although many of Shakespeare's plays deal bluntly with sexual issues, *Measure for Measure* does so in an unusually ugly and disgusting way for Shakespeare. This play is probably best suited for adults, as a result. I see *Measure for Measure* as closest to *The Merchant of Venice* in its themes. Of the two plays, I prefer *Measure for Measure* for its unremitting look at the arbitrariness of laws, public hypocrisy and private venality, support for virtue, and encouragement of tempering public justice

with common sense and mercy. The play opens with Duke Vincentio turning over his authority to his deputy, Angelo. But while the duke says he is leaving for Poland, he in fact remains in Vienna posing as a friar. Angelo begins meting out justice according to the letter of the law. His first act is to condemn Claudio to death for impregnating Juliet. The two are willing to marry, but Angelo is not interested in finding a solution. In despair, Claudio gets word to his sister, the beautiful Isabella, that he is to be executed and prays that she will beg for mercy. Despite knowing that Isabella is a virgin novice who is about to take her vows, Angelo cruelly offers to release Claudio if Isabella will make herself sexually available to Angelo. The Duke works his influence behind the scenes to help create justice. Although this play is a "comedy" in Shakespearean terms, the tension throughout is much more like a tragedy. In fact, there are powerful scenes where Shakespeare draws on foolish servants of the law to make his points clear. These serve a similar role of lessening the darkness to that of the gravediggers in Hamlet.

Written amidst Shakespeare's tragedies, "Measure For Measure" is the Bard's last comedy and perhaps his darkest. In all Shakespearean comedy, conflict, villainy, or immorality disrupt the moral order, but harmony ultimately prevails. Not so with this comedy. As one critic has it, "Measure" leaves playgoers with many questions and few answers. Or does it? More about that in a moment. First, about the title. It's from the Bible. In the Old Testament there's "breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Leviticus 24). And, from the New Testament, "what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Mathew 5). It's the theme of the play, but, as we shall see, it never gets the results hoped for, until the very end, when, to quote from another of Shakespeare's plays, "mercy seasons justice." The good Duke of Vienna, Vincentio, is concerned with the morals of his city. He enacts a number of reforms, then takes a sabbatical, and tells his deputy governor, Angelo, to see that the reforms are enforced. But Angelo goes too far: he enforces the law to the letter and shows no mercy for violators. Claudio is a victim of Angelo's strict enforcement policy. He's betrothed to Juliet, who is pregnant with his child. Because they are not yet married, he's arrested for fornication and sentenced to death by decapitation. Enter Isabella, Claudio's sister and the play's heroine. She's a young novice preparing to become a nun on the very day of his execution, and makes an appeal to Angelo for leniency. Her plea is reminiscent of Portia's words to Shylock in "The Merchant of Venice."

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