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Notes on Measure for Measure

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Shakespeare and the Problem Play Genre
- Chapter 2: The Historical and Social Context of Measure for Measure
- Chapter 3: Plot Overview and Structure
- Chapter 4: The Character of Duke Vincentio
- Chapter 5: Angelo: The Complex Villain
- Chapter 6: Isabella: Virtue, Agency, and Silence
- Chapter 7: Claudio and Juliet: Love, Law, and Punishment
- Chapter 8: Lucio, Comic Elements, and Social Commentary
- Chapter 9: Mariana and the Bed-Trick
- Chapter 10: Escalus and the Voice of Reason
- Chapter 11: Mistress Overdone, Pompey, and the Underworld
- Chapter 12: Setting and the Symbolism of Vienna
- Chapter 13: Law, Justice, and Mercy
- Chapter 14: Power, Authority, and Governance
- Chapter 15: Sexuality, Chastity, and Gender Politics
- Chapter 16: Hypocrisy and Public Morality
- Chapter 17: Appearance Versus Reality
- Chapter 18: The Use of Disguise and Deception
- Chapter 19: The Theme of Forgiveness and Redemption
- Chapter 20: Religious and Biblical References
- Chapter 21: Sources and Literary Influences
- Chapter 22: Major Critical Interpretations
- Chapter 23: Key Passages and Quotations
- Chapter 24: Performance History and Adaptations
- Chapter 25: Approaching Measure for Measure in Examination and Coursework

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* stands apart within the playwright's immense body of work, both for its striking relevance to contemporary questions of justice and morality and its refusal to fit comfortably into any one genre. Often grouped with Shakespeare's "problem plays," it straddles the line between dark comedy and probing social drama, oscillating between scenes of levity and passages of intense psychological and ethical challenge. The complexity of its characters, the ambiguity of its resolution, and the depth of its themes have made *Measure for Measure* a source of fascination and debate for students, scholars, and audiences alike for over four centuries.

At its core, *Measure for Measure* is a play that grapples with the tensions between public law and private desire, mercy and justice, appearance and reality. Set in Vienna—a city beset by moral laxity, corruption, and hypocrisy—the drama unfolds as power changes hands from the lenient Duke Vincentio to the severe and self-righteous deputy, Angelo. Through these central figures, Shakespeare explores not only the exercise and abuse of authority but also the profound complexities of conscience, temptation, and redemption.

For the English literature student, *Measure for Measure* invites close attention to issues that remain pertinent today: the responsibilities of those who wield power, the potential for corruption in legal and social systems, and the precarious status of women within a patriarchal world. Isabella, torn between familial duty and personal conviction, emerges as one of Shakespeare's most challenging heroines, her actions and fate subject to a multitude of interpretations—particularly given her ambiguous silence at the play's close.

This guide aims to provide students with clear, accessible commentary on the play's key elements. Each chapter will unfold essential context—biographical, historical, literary—while offering close analysis of major characters, thematic strands, critical perspectives, and the play's unique structure. Important moments and quotations are explained and contextualized, supporting both examinations of the text and broader understanding of its enduring significance.

Attention is given not only to the written word but also to *Measure for Measure's* diverse performance history, tracing how productions through the centuries have brought out new dimensions and sparked fresh debate. The play's layered ambiguities allow it to speak to each age in different ways; as such, this guide also encourages you to consider the evolving interpretations and adaptations that keep Shakespeare's work alive on stage and in the classroom.

In examining *Measure for Measure* with an open and critical mind, students will find a play that resists simple answers but rewards patient, thoughtful study—one that continues to challenge its audiences to reflect on the nature of justice, the possibility of forgiveness, and the contradictions at the heart of human behavior.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shakespeare and the Problem Play Genre

Categorizing the works of an artistic genius like William Shakespeare often feels like trying to fit the vast, shifting sea into neatly labelled bottles. While the First Folio of 1623 helpfully divided his plays into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, generations of readers, scholars, and theatre practitioners have found that some plays simply refuse to sit comfortably in these conventional boxes. There are plays that seem to have comedic structures but leave the audience with a sense of unease rather than celebratory joy. Others touch upon potentially tragic scenarios but swerve away from the typical downfall of a tragic hero.

This difficulty in classification led to the coining of a term borrowed from later dramatic movements: the "problem play." Originally applied in the late 19th century by critic F.S. Boas, who drew an analogy to the social problem plays of Henrik Ibsen, the term was used to describe a group of Shakespeare's works that seemed to grapple with complex ethical dilemmas and social issues without offering simple answers or cathartic resolutions. Boas initially identified three plays as belonging to this category: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and, significantly for our purposes, *Measure for Measure*.

What precisely defines a Shakespearean problem play is, perhaps fittingly, a bit of a problem in itself, and scholars have debated its exact parameters and usefulness ever since Boas first proposed it. However, several common characteristics are generally associated with these plays. They often exhibit a complex and ambiguous tone, shifting unpredictably between moments of dark, psychological drama and more conventional comic material. This tonal inconsistency can leave audiences feeling uncertain about how to react or interpret the events unfolding on stage.

Furthermore, problem plays typically delve into perplexing moral issues and controversial social problems with a notable seriousness. The situations presented often involve intricate cases of conscience and challenge the established social or legal norms of the play's world. Unlike typical comedies that resolve all conflicts neatly with marriages and celebrations, the resolutions in problem plays can feel forced, unsatisfying, or morally ambiguous.

The characters in these plays are frequently complex and difficult to understand or sympathize with entirely. Protagonists might exhibit morally questionable behaviour, or their motivations might remain opaque. Antagonists, like Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, can be figures of stark hypocrisy, whose outward virtue masks disturbing

inner desires, challenging the audience's perception of good and evil. The ethical questions raised are often open-ended, allowing for multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations from the audience.

The term "problem play" thus reflects not only the subject matter and tone of these works but also the critical "problem" they pose for those attempting to classify them within traditional genre definitions. They defy the straightforward structures of classical tragedy, which typically follows a hero's fall due to a fatal flaw, and conventional comedy, which generally moves towards social integration and harmonious conclusions, often symbolized by marriage.

While the initial list of problem plays included *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, the category has sometimes expanded to include other plays that share some of these characteristics. *The Merchant of Venice*, with its complex portrayal of justice, mercy, and religious intolerance, is sometimes included. *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*, with their shifts from dark drama to seemingly miraculous resolution, also occasionally find themselves in discussions of this genre.

However, the core trio identified by Boas remains the most consistently discussed group when exploring the problem play concept. These plays, written in close proximity to each other around the turn of the 17th century, seem to represent a particular phase in Shakespeare's career where he was experimenting with dramatic form and delving into more ethically challenging territory. This period coincides with the transition from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I to King James I, a time of changing social and political landscapes that may have influenced Shakespeare's exploration of governance, morality, and authority.

For many critics, *Measure for Measure* is the quintessential problem play, embodying many of the genre's defining features. Its blend of serious ethical questions about justice, mercy, and sexual morality with low comedy involving bawds and fools creates a jarring and ambiguous tone. The central dilemma faced by Isabella – whether to sacrifice her chastity to save her brother's life – is a profound moral problem with no easy answer, reflecting the kind of "perplexing and distressing complication in human life" that defines the genre according to some scholars.

The characters, particularly Angelo, Isabella, and the Duke himself, are morally complex and have been subject to vastly different interpretations over the centuries. Angelo's sudden fall from apparent virtue into corrupt hypocrisy is unsettling, while Isabella's rigid adherence to her principles has sometimes alienated audiences. The Duke's manipulative plotting, though ultimately leading to a form of restoration, raises questions about his own moral standing and the ethics of his methods.

Furthermore, the play's ending, while superficially resolving conflicts with multiple marriages, feels far from the joyous celebrations of plays like *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream or Twelfth Night. Angelo is forced into marriage with Mariana, Lucio is similarly compelled to marry the mother of his child, and the Duke's unexpected proposal to Isabella is met with silence, leaving her fate uncertain. This lack of clear emotional closure and the unresolved moral questions contribute significantly to its classification as a problem play.

Some scholars argue that the term "problem play" is less about a specific genre and more about how audiences and critics have historically reacted to plays that don't conform to expectations or that tackle subjects that are uncomfortable or controversial for their time. The "problem" might lie more with our attempts to categorize Shakespeare's multifaceted genius than with inherent structural flaws in the plays themselves. Nevertheless, understanding the concept of the problem play provides a valuable lens through which to approach *Measure for Measure*.

Viewing *Measure for Measure* as a problem play encourages us to embrace its ambiguities and complexities rather than seeking to force it into a rigid generic mould. It prepares us for a play that will challenge our assumptions, provoke thought about difficult moral questions, and leave us debating its characters' motivations and the effectiveness of its resolution. It is a play designed not necessarily to entertain with simple answers, but to engage the audience in wrestling with the messy realities of justice, power, and human nature.

Approaching *Measure for Measure* as a problem play means recognizing that its unsettling elements are not necessarily flaws but rather integral parts of its dramatic effect. Shakespeare seems to deliberately frustrate conventional expectations, blending comic and tragic elements, presenting morally ambiguous characters, and offering a resolution that feels more like a complex compromise than a clear triumph of good over evil. This deliberate departure from formula is precisely what makes the play so compelling and enduringly relevant.

The term also highlights the play's focus on contemporary social issues, much like the modern problem plays that inspired Boas's term. While the specific social problems of Jacobean Vienna differ from those of late 19th-century Europe, the underlying concerns about governance, law enforcement, sexual morality, and hypocrisy resonate across time. *Measure for Measure* uses its fictional setting to probe real-world anxieties and ethical dilemmas.

Ultimately, whether one fully embraces the term "problem play" or views it as a convenient label for certain difficult works, its application to *Measure for Measure* points to the play's unique character. It signifies a play that requires its audience to think, to question, and to grapple with uncomfortable truths. It is a play that offers no easy answers, inviting continuous interpretation and debate, making it a rich and rewarding text for serious study. This context of critical ambiguity and thematic complexity forms the essential backdrop for our deeper exploration of *Measure for*

Measure in the chapters that follow.

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