

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20
William Shakespeare
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE LIBRARY COLLECTION

Books of enduring scholarly value

Literary studies

This series provides a high-quality selection of early printings of literary works, textual editions, anthologies and literary criticism which are of lasting scholarly interest. Ranging from Old English to Shakespeare to early twentieth-century work from around the world, these books offer a valuable resource for scholars in reception history, textual editing, and literary studies.

Measure for Measure

John Dover Wilson's New Shakespeare, published between 1921 and 1966, became the classic Cambridge edition of Shakespeare's plays and poems until the 1980s. The series, long since out-of-print, is now reissued. Each work is available both individually and as part of a set, and each contains a lengthy and lively introduction, main text, and substantial notes and glossary printed at the back. The edition, which began with *The Tempest* and ended with *The Sonnets*, put into practice the techniques and theories that had evolved under the 'New Bibliography'. Remarkably by today's standards, although it took the best part of half a century to produce, the New Shakespeare involved only a small band of editors besides Dover Wilson himself. As the volumes took shape, many of Dover Wilson's textual methods acquired general acceptance and became an established part of later editorial practice, for example in the *Arden* and *New Cambridge Shakespeares*. The reissue of this series in the Cambridge Library Collection complements the other historic editions also now made available.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press has long been a pioneer in the reissuing of out-of-print titles from its own backlist, producing digital reprints of books that are still sought after by scholars and students but could not be reprinted economically using traditional technology. The Cambridge Library Collection extends this activity to a wider range of books which are still of importance to researchers and professionals, either for the source material they contain, or as landmarks in the history of their academic discipline.

Drawing from the world-renowned collections in the Cambridge University Library, and guided by the advice of experts in each subject area, Cambridge University Press is using state-of-the-art scanning machines in its own Printing House to capture the content of each book selected for inclusion. The files are processed to give a consistently clear, crisp image, and the books finished to the high quality standard for which the Press is recognised around the world. The latest print-on-demand technology ensures that the books will remain available indefinitely, and that orders for single or multiple copies can quickly be supplied.

The Cambridge Library Collection will bring back to life books of enduring scholarly value across a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and in science and technology.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Measure for Measure

The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 20

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20
William Shakespeare
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paulo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108005920

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1922, 1950

This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00592-0

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BY

SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH
AND JOHN DOVER WILSON

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MEASURE FOR MEASURE



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1969

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20
William Shakespeare
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521094870

© Cambridge University Press 1922, 1950, 2008

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1922
*Reprinted 1950, 1961
First paperback edition 1969
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

* Places where slight editorial changes or additions
introduce variants from the first edition are, where
possible, marked by a date [1950] in square brackets.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-07544-2 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-09487-0 paperback

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	PAGE vii
TO THE READER	xliv
MEASURE FOR MEASURE	i
THE COPY FOR THE TEXT OF 1623	97
NOTES	115
TIME-ANALYSIS	157
THE STAGE-HISTORY	160
GLOSSARY	166

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

I

We have no reason to suppose that *Measure for Measure* ever saw print until it appeared in the 1623 Folio which gives us our text. Most critics agree, however, that in some form or other it dates from twenty years earlier, and accept the entry of the Revels Accounts (confirming a note among Malone's papers in the Bodleian Library) that it was performed at Court before King James I on December 26, 1604¹. In our note on the Copy (pp. 101–3) we offer some new evidence supporting this date.

The source of the plot stands even less in dispute. It derives originally from Italy, where Giraldi Cinthio (d. 1573) had told the tale in a tragedy, *Epitia*, and repeated it in a collection of prose tales, *Hecatommithii*, published in Sicily in 1565. In 1578 George Whetstone, working apparently on the prose version, Englished it into a double play, entitled²:

The Right Excellent and Famous | History | of Promos
and Cassandra; | divided into two Comical Discourses. | In
the first part is shown, | the unsufferable abuse of a lewd
Magistrate, | the virtuous behaviour of a chaste Lady: | the
uncontrolled lewdness of a favoured Courtesan, | and the
undeserved estimation of a pernicious Parasite. | In the
second part is discoursed | the perfect magnanimity of a
noble King | in checking Vice and favouring Virtue: |

¹ The entry runs:

By his Ma^{ties} | On St Stiuen's Night in the |
plaies | Hall A Play cald *Mesur for Mesur* | *Shaxberd*.

² The curious reader may consult Collier's and W. Carew Hazlitt's several reconstructions of *Shakespeare's Library*. Nichols reprinted Whetstone's play in 1779. So far as is known it was never acted.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii MEASURE FOR MEASURE

wherein is shown | the Ruin and Overthrow of dishonest practices, | with the advancement of upright dealing.

To his play Whetstone prefixed a brief 'Argument of the Whole Historye'; and again, in 1582, he published in his *Heptameron of Civil Discourses* a prose version of the tale—in which he must evidently have found a fund of enjoyment. We confess to inheriting a very small share in this: but holding as we do that the true difficulty of *Measure for Measure* is an aesthetic one—yet not excluding thereby the pleasure we all take in recognising right moral judgment—we shall give from Whetstone a bare sketch of *Promos and Cassandra*, with an addition or two where his 'argument' omits a detail relevant to our play. We shall thus see what Shakespeare (and others?) had, or chose, to work upon.

In the Cytte of Julio (sometimes vnder the dominion of *Coruinus*, King of *Hungarie* and *Boemia*) there was a law that what man so euer committed Adultery [*sc.* fornication] should lose his head, and the woman offender should weare some disguised Apparell during her life, to make her infamously noted. This seuere law by the fauour of some mercifull magistrate became little regarded, vntil the time of Lord *Promos* aucturity: who conuicting a young Gentleman named *Andrugio* of incontineny, condemned both him and his minion to the execution of this statute. *Andrugio* had a very vertuous and beawtiful Gentlewoman to his Sister, named *Cassandra*; *Cassandra* to enlarge her brother's life, submitted an humble petition to the Lord *Promos*....

Here be it noted that *Andrugio's* offence, like *Claudio's* (cf. 1. 2. 141–151), was committed in love, not in lechery. *Cassandra* can plead:

Way [weigh] his yong yeares, the force of loue which forced
his amis,

Way, way that marriage works amends for what committed
is.

He hath defilde no nuptiall bed, nor forced rape hath moued;
He fel through loue who neuer ment but wiue the wight he
loued.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

ix

To continue:

Promos regarding her good behauiours, and fantasizing her great beawtie, was much delighted with the sweete order of her talke: and doing good, that euill might come thereof: for a time he repryued her brother; but wicked man, tounring his liking into vnlawfull lust, he set downe the spoile of her honour raunsome for her Brothers life: chaste *Cassandra*, abhorring both him and his sute, by no persuasion would yeald to this raunsome. But in fine, wonne with the importunitie of hir Brother (pleading for life) vpon these conditions she agreede to *Promos*. First that he should pardon her brother, and after marry her. *Promos*, as fearless in promise as carelesse in performance, with solemne vowe sygned her conditions: but worse than any Infydel, his will satisfied, he performed neither the one nor the other: for to keepe his authoritie vnspotted with fauour, and to prevent *Cassandraes* clamours, he commanded the Gayler secretly to present *Cassandra* with her brothers head¹. The Gayler, with the outcryes of *Andrugio*, abhorring *Promos* lewdenes, by the prouidence of God prouyded thus for his safety. He presented *Cassandra* with a Felons head newly executed, who (being mangled, knew it not from her brothers, by the Gayler who was set at libertie)² was so agreede at this trecherye that at the pointe to kyl her selfe she spared that stroke to be auenged of *Promos*. And devisying a way, she concluded, to make her fortunes knowne vnto the kinge. She (executinge this resolution) was so highly fauoured of the king that forthwith he hasted to do justice on *Promos*, whose judgment was to marrye *Cassandra*, to repaire her crased Honour: which donne, for his hainous offence he should lose his head. This marriage solempnized, *Cassandra*, tyed in the greatest bondes of affection to her husband, became an earnest sutor for his life: the Kinge (tendringe the generall benefit of the common weale before her speciall case, although he fauoured her much) would not graunt her sute. *Andrugio* (disguised amonge the company) sorrowing the grieve of his sister, bewrayde his safetie, and craued pardon². The Kinge, to

¹ A barbarity softened in *Measure for Measure*.

² The 'Gayler,' merciful as the Provost in *Measure for Measure*, looses *Andrugio*: who, hiding in a wood in out-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x MEASURE FOR MEASURE

renowne the vertues of *Cassandra*, pardoned both him and *Promos*. The circumstances of this rare Historye in action lyvelye foloweth.

II

Here, then, we have all—or almost all—of the plot of *Measure for Measure*: in what Pater calls ‘one of that numerous class of Italian stories, like Boccaccio’s *Tancred of Salerno*, in which the mere energy of southern passion has everything its own way, and which, though they may repel many a northern reader by a certain crudity in their colouring, seem to have been full of fascination for the Elizabethan age.’ Now Pater had a superlative gift of sympathy with old and beautiful work in all the arts, and specially with old and beautiful Italianate work. It may have been most at home in Renaissance Italy: but it reached forward, and it reached back also—through Giotto and Cimabue, across the ‘dark ages,’ to the *Pervigilium Veneris*, and yet farther back to the primitive ‘religion of Numa’ which he pictures for us in *Marius* as still, in the age of the Antonines, keeping its rural ritual ‘beating the bounds,’ worshipping the Lar and breathing household laws in and around a quiet Etrurian manor. So when Pater talks of Whetstone’s translation of Cinthio’s story as ‘a genuine piece, with touches of undesigned poetry, a quaint field-flower here and there of diction or sentiment, the whole strung up to an effective brevity, and with the fragrance of that admirable age of literature all about it,’ we accept this appreciation on the word of a critic who recognised the Italian spirit wherever, and in what guise soever, he met it. But we are concerned

lawry, learns from a peasant that Promos having been married to his sister has been condemned to the further expiation of dying for his death, returns to the city, and risks declaring himself alive. In our play Claudio is given no such chance to rehabilitate his character by his courage.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xi

here with Shakespeare: and Shakespeare's feeling for Italy was not diffuse like Pater's and genially polite; but sharply practical rather, and concentrated upon a phase, a period, a passing hour, the Renaissance: an interest infinitely less learned than Pater's yet infinitely livelier, Italy being for him and his contemporaries almost the breath of their nostrils. There was, of course, nothing pious about it; no conscious seeking back to the Ancient Mother and the wells of Clitumnus. The Englishman, like any other European, craved food for his spirit, sustenance for his inventions; and Italy supplied both. As Croce observes, 'Shakespeare got from Italy not only a great part both of his form and of his material, but what is of greater moment, many thoughts that went to form his vision of reality. In addition to this he obtained from Italy that literary education to which all English writers of his time submitted.'

To say this is not to suggest that Italy supplied the one thing which makes him magical—his Poetry. *That* he could only find—as every other man ever born can only find it—by looking into his own heart and writing. None the less, to understand the Elizabethan dramatists we have to recognise that they derived—the working theatre-men no less than the University wits—the matter of their trade from Italian scholarship, and accepted, or were bound by, its high aristocratic tradition¹. It was, for a while at least, all they had to go upon; and among the writers of his age we find no one more cautiously conservative on this point than Shakespeare. To Ben Jonson rather than to him belongs the bravery of making the humour of the theatre frankly native to London and contemporary. Jonson breaks new ground: under cover of his

¹ A grasp on this simple truth will save any man his labour who inclines to spend it on proving that Shakespeare was a snob, an anti-democrat; that he despised crowds, the populace; and so on.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii MEASURE FOR MEASURE

pedantry he is pioneering—from the London version of *Every Man in his Humour* on to *Bartholomew Fair*—pioneering on a theory¹. Shakespeare hangs back. Shakespeare, *nostras* at his most English and most humorous, is always careful to remove his humour to a fair distance of place or of time. His Falstaff lived a long while ago: nay has been these two hundred years or so in Arthur's bosom; and Oldcastle (let us be careful to explain) 'died a martyr, and this is not the man.' Young Gobbo belongs to Venice, Dogberry to Messina, Autolycus to Bohemia; Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are knights of Illyria; and even Christopher Sly, tinker of Burton-heath, is fetched up for no more important business than a prologue. Always—save in some historical plays where he could not avoid being tied to fact—Shakespeare is constant to remove his most English humour if not from England, at least from the passing certifiable hour. We see no reason to suspect pusillanimity in this, or over-cautious fear to offend: but it cannot be accidental, and we attribute it to the same romantic instinct which (it has been noted) sets Falstaff philosophising on occasion like a very Hamlet and Hamlet at whiles like a very Falstaff,—with one gift of utterance that universalises them—the voice of a prince of romance! We shall speak by-and-by of his other great gift by which he keeps them separate. For the moment we are concerned with that which so often to our mind carries him past romantic peril—the gift of a romantic utterance that, always adequate, can at will be made superb, let Brutus or Cleopatra speak it. But we submit that, in reliance upon it, Shakespeare often shows a magnificent indolence; that in particular he was careless in handling his plots; that 'something out of Italy' too often sufficed for him—genius would pull it through. And we raise

¹ In another line—in his masques and his scenic experiments with Inigo Jones—Jonson was equally a pioneer.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xiii

this question here because in *Measure for Measure*, striking play though it be, genius does *not* manage to pull it through.

III

What is wrong with this play? Evidently *something* is wrong, since the critics so tangle themselves in apologies and interpretations. Some have taken offence at its bawdry: others—dashing blades in revolt—would have us enjoy it for its realism; and these talk of youth, lustiness, fecundity; both parties being preoccupied with the bawdry and, under that preoccupation, judging this tragi-comedy at a squint. To Johnson, ‘of this play the light or comick part is very natural and pleasing, but the grave scenes, if a few passages be excepted, have more labour than elegance. The plot is rather intricate than artful.’ Again:

There is perhaps not one of *Shakespeare’s* plays more darkened than this by the peculiarities of its Authour, and the unskilfulness of its Editors, by distortion of phrase, or negligence of transcription.

Coleridge found *Measure for Measure* the only ‘painful’ play among Shakespeare’s dramas. Swinburne calls it a ‘great indefinable poem or unclassifiable play,’ while opining that it ‘stands too high by right of might in tragic impression to be seriously impaired or vitiated even by the moral flaw [of dismissing Angelo at the end scot-free], which induced even Coleridge to blaspheme.’ Swinburne stands directly opposed to Johnson in preferring the tragic scenes to the comic: yet equally with Johnson, in the words ‘indefinable’ and ‘unclassifiable,’ he acknowledges the puzzle. To instance but two others out of many,—Gervinus is driven to evolve *more suo* a sinuous analysis of the ‘psychological connection’ between the motions of the plot and their discoverable motives in character and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv MEASURE FOR MEASURE

passion; while Barrett Wendell (usually to be trusted to say the common-sensical) drops explanation with the remark that the general effect of *Measure for Measure*—the mood in which it leaves us—is unique. But a stage-play that requires an intricate psychological analysis to explain it is *ipso facto* a failure: the man who attempts such an analysis thereby proclaims that *for him* the piece has missed fire. Nor will a critic who can explain a play to himself quarrel with it because he finds it painful or because the mood produced by it is unique. He quarrels with that which he cannot explain, or else with himself because he cannot explain it: and he does so upon an instinctive feeling common to all men, that a work of art, to be perfect, should be pellucidly clear.

Is there, then, some lurking dishonesty in this play—something artistically or morally untrue—that vexes the critics? *L'écueil particulier du genre romantique, c'est le faux*, pronounced Sainte-Beuve. As a rule Shakespeare, with his swell of poetic canvas and his trick of the helm, skirts this reef audaciously, defiantly. But has his confident mastery betrayed him for once and run him ashore?

Well, the first thing to be said by way of answer, and in mere justice, is that, if the author of *Measure for Measure* has run his play on a reef, the reef is of his own raising, or at any rate not chargeable upon Cinthio or Whetstone. Their story is, if we will, extravagant and unlikely; but it runs straightforwardly enough within the bounds of the 'probable possible,' and Shakespeare leaves it no likelier, no less factitious, than he found it. Its conclusion is stagey, but coherent; Shakespeare's still stagier, and less coherent. Does the trouble then lie with the additions and alterations made by Shakespeare upon his original? Here are the most important:

(1) In Cinthio-Whetstone the heroine Cassandra does actually sacrifice her honour to save her brother's

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xv

life. In *Measure for Measure* this sacrifice is averted by substituting the rightful bride for the supposed bed-fellow. There is no Mariana in the original story. Apparently Shakespeare found no moral difficulty in this trick: he makes Helena play it, upon a better excuse, in *All's Well that Ends Well*. He prepares our mood for it, he preludes it exquisitely up to a point: then of a sudden he thrusts it upon us, in a minute or two of intrigue, with a harshness that offends our sense of love as a delicate ceremony and has almost the effect of a rape, since the hands he uses to thrust it are those of holy Isabel. Anyhow, it remains a trick, and it dodges an extremity of decision which the Italian story fairly faces and, in its own way, solves. It saves Isabella, but at a price. We shall presently discuss that price and how it is paid.

(2) In Cinthio-Whetstone the King is merely a Judge of Appeal. He neither plays Haroun al Raschid in the underworld of Vienna, nor pulls the strings like a not-too-expert showman of marionettes.

(3) Cassandra is married to the man who has wronged her, pleads for his life, and secures it. In *Measure for Measure* the affronted Isabella after marrying up Mariana to her affronter, is easily claimed in marriage by the Duke, and by her silence as easily gives consent. In the original again, the free pardon of Angelo—so heinous in Swinburne's eyes—has at least an excuse good enough for a story-teller, and one that incidentally shows Andrugio (Claudio) in a better light than our play allows him to stand in. For whereas our Duke condemns Angelo:

An Angelo for Claudio, death for death...

well knowing Claudio to be alive, and pardons him upon a mere afterthought or caprice of mercy, thus cheapening that prerogative 'likest God's' of which so many fine things have been so truly said in the course

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi MEASURE FOR MEASURE

of the drama¹ (for it has cheapened Justice, to which Mercy is as salt to meat—the grace, the ‘seasoning,’ not the solid sustenance of man in this world), in *Promos and Cassandra* the King does not know that Andrugio, for whose death he has condemned Promos, is still alive: and so, as we have seen [foot-note p. ix], Andrugio, for love of his sister, saves Promos’ life at the hazard of his own.

In short, if we were to set forth the two plots in *précis*, it might very easily be argued that Whetstone’s is the more rational story—as it is—and therefore the better—as it is not. It is, on the contrary, tedious, flat, stale and unprofitable; whereas *Measure for Measure*, for all its flaws, is alive, interesting, exciting, in parts powerfully—even terrifically—moving; and the secret of its difference lies in its poetry—in that and in nothing else.

IV

Where, then, lurks the main flaw, the secret of that dissatisfaction of which we are all conscious as we close the book or come away from the theatre? It would seem, to judge from their preoccupation with it—whether they condemn or justify or even profess to enjoy it—that most critics suspect the mischief to lie somewhere or somehow in the bawdry. We do not. But since *Measure for Measure* has come to be the *locus classicus* for Shakespearian bawdry, a few plain words on this subject will not be out of place here.

¹ It is an attribute to God himself,
And earthly power doth then show likest God’s
When mercy seasons justice. (Portia in Court.)

No ceremony that to great ones ’longs,
Not the king’s crown...nor the deputed sword,
The marshal’s truncheon, nor the judge’s robe,
Become them with one half so good a grace
As mercy does. (Isabella before Angelo.)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xvii

‘While men remain men and women remain women, there will surely be trouble’; and there is plenty of it in Vienna. But while men remain men and women remain women, there will be plenty of fun in the trouble, and especially when the duel becomes triangular. It is as old as the hills, too: the situation of Abram and Sarai in Pharaoh’s court (*Genesis* xii) as easily might lend itself, then or now, to broad farce as to serious chronicle. Now beyond a doubt Shakespeare had a full and very free sense of this fun of sex as well as a very poignant sense of its trouble, of its tragedy. This very patent fact offends a number of critics, who would fain therefore dodge it, explain it away, or, when honest, allow and deprecate it: just because it does not suit with their ideal construction of what a mighty poet ought to be.

The evidence, however, is all against them. We lay no stress on the biographies, with their scraps of tradition: for gossip as a rule bears hardly on the morals of anyone ‘connected with the stage,’ and local reminiscence—especially of the sort retailed in bar-parlours—ever tends to ascribe ‘wildness’ to a genius born within its ambit. It accounts for the prodigy somehow. ‘Will Shakespeare?’—runs the formula—‘Why, God bless you, I knew him when he was *so* high!’ *Rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno*—and so we proceed to blacken our Swan of Avon; which makes him the rarer, and us the more likelier reflections of his lustre. Even discounting this, we for our part find the intolerable deal of sculduddery, the proportion it bears to the rest of the legend, not insignificant. To oblige the moralists, however, we will score it out: the more readily because ‘the play’s the thing,’ and we prefer to seek in the plays for the real Shakespeare, the only Shakespeare that really concerns us.

But the plays themselves contain an amount of sculduddery that altogether confounds our Puritans.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii MEASURE FOR MEASURE

To shut one's eyes to it is foolish; to deny its existence is worse; to allow its existence, even the amount of print it claims in any genuine text, and to account for these by a theory that Shakespeare wrote the plays and someone else inserted the lubricities, is mere caprice. In our notes, as editors, we draw no more attention than we need to the salacious lines, and comment only where their meaning turns upon a pun, a quibble, or an innuendo, the point of which has been so blunted by change of slang or of fashion that we have to re-indicate it to restore sense to the passage. But these passages are frequent; those we pass over, innumerable. Swinburne, who turned to austerity in his later age and always kept loyal to the friends of his early youth, has left us a panegyric upon Mr Bowdler, whose work indeed served a useful purpose. It may serve another, albeit a secondary one, if our critics will compare it with the full text of Shakespeare and, after a simple sum in subtraction, contemplate the remainder. We do not suggest their treating it after the fashion of the Delphin editors, but merely that they contemplate and realise its bulk.

There are some who, realising this, would excuse it on the ground that the patrons of the Elizabethan stage (as of other stages at other periods) demanded bawdry; and that Shakespeare had to supply it, though he might modify it to suit the slightly different taste of Whitehall, the Inns of Court, or the Pickt-Hatch. This plea might impress us if we could find evidence that Shakespeare's poverty, and not his will, consented; that he supplied the demand at all reluctantly. On the contrary—in his earlier plays, at any rate—he supplies it profusely and with an evident gusto: and when we come to *King Henry IV*, if any critic deny that in Falstaff, Dame Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, Shakespeare's invention was working joyously, at the top of its bent, we can only pass on and leave him denying it.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xix

Other critics of late have suggested a wider excuse; appealing beyond the theatre to the custom of the age, and telling us confidently that women in Elizabethan times were by habit sensuously wooed for their ‘charms,’ *leurs appas*: that, in any contention of love, lovely woman figured as a prize merely to be handed over, like a box of sweets, to the winner. But these theorists, when they come to Shakespeare, find themselves in face of two obstacles, the one of which cannot be dodged honestly while the other cannot be dodged at all. They may argue that Shakespeare’s men view women merely as objects of the chase: they cannot possibly, with any pretence of reason, argue that Shakespeare’s women—that Beatrice, Miranda, Marina, or Brutus’ Portia, or Lady Macbeth, or (to hark back to the beginning) the group of ladies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*—view themselves in any such light. Now in the nature of things there never was, and there never could be, any common ground of understanding, any workable pact or social contract, in any nation where the women think as Shakespeare’s women think and the men as these critics feign—and feign upon a hasty generalisation, which would summarise the Middle Ages and leave Dante and Petrarch out of account! Shakespeare’s women have far too much to say about the business of life, and in saying it exhibit far too much of the serpent’s wisdom, to pass for doves or allow their men to be mistaken for falcons.

But indeed his men themselves give the lie to this ‘convention’ theory. Bertram, Iago, Iachimo may be birds of this feather. But we recall Romeo’s

A grave? O no, a lantern...

Othello’s

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul...

Macbeth’s

She should have died hereafter...

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Antony's

Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done...

(Now whatever illusion we may cherish about Desdemona, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra were not doves.) We recall Brutus under news of Portia's death, Ferdinand's wooing of Miranda. And, recalling these, we *know* that, when Shakespeare imagined a man of noble nature, to that man love was, for good or ill, a 'marriage of true minds.'

From these high scenes, then, we hark back to the *aselgeia* (say) of fair Katharine's catechism, or of the Mistress Overdone business in our play, and have to admit that, if by no means equally true to his best, Shakespeare was equally at home to himself, and familiar, in both styles.

V

For our part we find no monstrosity in this, believing that many writers have allowed themselves to be cajoled somewhat by Coleridge's phrase 'a myriad-minded man.' Shakespeare was a complete man, rather: an extraordinary man, to be sure; but in great part extraordinary as an ordinary man raised to the n th power. He wrote for all of us: which is to say that he wrote for an audience of ordinary men; and he wrote so that an ordinary man follows almost every one of his plots with anxiety and interest. This explains why our ordinary man so often shows himself so much sounder a critic of Shakespeare than the 'philologists.' Johnson might have said with more striking application of Shakespeare what he said of Gray's *Elegy*—that he 'abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every heart returns an echo.'

We would not fall into that sin of hasty generalisation which we have just been rebuking; and therefore

xxi

—will have become Lucios in short—recognisable among us by a certain bulge of the eye with a certain hard white glitter of the eyeball. That Shakespeare understood these, and now and then sold hours of dross in writing down to them, is likely enough: since we need not go to school to Gosson to surmise that patrons of this sort frequented the Bankside in numbers out of proportion to their numbers in the commonwealth.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxii MEASURE FOR MEASURE

The point is that he never became as they: for their hall-mark is insensibility; and he, our poet—

That can sing both high and low—

keeps his soul sensitive throughout to every sting of love; from *Venus and Adonis* to the *Sonnets*, from Orsino to Othello, from Juliet to the ‘serpent of old Nile,’ or to Imogen. He ranges from the simplicity of ‘It was a lover and his lass’ to the subtlety of

Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts

Which I by lacking have supposed dead....

But he never refines away the passion by intellectualising it: always his purest maidens are frank-eyed and, as in Juliet’s invocation of night, the tender animal knows its quarry. As Henry James once wrote of Anthony Trollope, an ordinary writer for ordinary men and women:

He writes, he feels, he judges like a man, talking plainly and frankly about many things, *and is by no means destitute of a certain saving grace of coarseness*. But he has kept the purity of his imagination and held fast to old-fashioned reverences and preferences.

Shakespeare, then, endowed with this saving grace of coarseness, could laugh grossly

broad as ten thousand beeves

At pasture...

Thunders of laughter, clearing air and heart.

Yet, as Portia warns—

Tarry a little: there is something else.

VI

In all Shakespeare’s work of the period to which *Measure for Measure* belongs we find him—and, as it were, of a sudden—concerned with bawdry in quite a new way, and especially concerned with lechery in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xxiii

woman; possessed or constantly haunted by the thought of it; biting upon it as upon a wound, railing, raging upon it; laughing sometimes, but savagely, on the wrong side of the mouth.

To this period¹ belong the 'great tragedies'—of which we shall here say little or nothing—and three so-called comedies, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well that Ends Well* (in its final form) and *Measure for Measure*; concerning all three of which we feel that, however little importance we attach to division by category, if they arrive at being comedies it is through fire; while we confess moreover that they worry us and, if we are honest, that they worry us because we understand them imperfectly. What we note for the moment is that a certain new strain of thinking—call it rather of brooding, betwixt repulsion and fascination—persists through 'tragedies' and 'comedies' alike—and through the *Sonnets*, if we assign them to this period. The fitchew, or the scent of the fitchew, is everywhere; from 'Thersites'

Nothing but lechery! All incontinent varlets.... Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery—nothing else holds fashion, to Lear's

To't, luxury, pell-mell! for I lack soldiers.
Behold yon simp'ring dame, etc.

It is at this point that a student of Shakespeare meets with his strongest temptation to turn aside from the actual poetry and follow alluring clues of biography to be disentangled from the *Sonnets* and traced back to serve as clues to the plays. The temptation allures us the more, too, as our knowledge of other men tells us that only through the deepest waters of sorrow and

¹ Roughly, it covers the years 1601–8. When we reach the second date, the trouble has been pretty thoroughly purged.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxiv MEASURE FOR MEASURE

disillusionment do the greatest among us win to such strength, and afterwards to such serenity of soul as Shakespeare attained: that whoso has not wetted and salted a crust with bitter tears,

He knows you not, ye heavenly Powers.

But we resist the temptation, because (1) the biographies are all gossip and conjecture, and (2) if they were anything better, they could but cloud the man's poetry for us with phenomena which explain nothing. *Something* happened to our poet just then or a little before, to torture his mind. Let us suppose him enamoured of a wanton, who betrayed him. What can it profit us to discover her name or her complexion? If, or when, we have made sure that her name was Mary Fitton and her complexion dusky, by what inch are we further advanced? There is nothing of distinction in the trouble itself; a trouble as old as the race, afflicting *N* or *M* among its afflicted millions. The distinction never lay, nor could lie, in the detail of a detective story. As a fact we know nothing about the secret. But if we knew all about it, as likely as not we should find the story itself an ordinary tale of a jilt, and as common as the dropping of a lucifer-match. The effect alone concerns us; the conflagration it awoke in Shakespeare, and the resultant poetry.

This result we have, under our eyes: and, studying it, we find that whenever Shakespeare attempts tragedy during this period he succeeds superbly, but that when he attempts comedy, in spite of magnificent passages, he leaves us—as in the earlier comedies he never left us—at a loss. When the curtain falls upon *Hamlet*, a plain man—even though acquainted with much that the critics have written upon *Hamlet*—knows well what the play has been about, and can applaud heartily. He will enjoy *Measure for Measure*, at best, with an afterthought of perplexity. Up to a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

xxv

point he has followed and read its meaning easily: beyond this, it has been driving at something he does not see. As Croce well puts it:

This play, which oscillates between the tragic and the comic, and has a happy ending instead of forming a drama of the sarcastic-sorrowful-horrible sort, fails to persuade us that it should have been thus developed and thus ended.

A work of art which leaves this perplexity has missed success. Somewhere the author has allowed his thought to be confused, or his insight has undergone a cloud. We have, then, to ask if Shakespeare's judgment was perchance unhinged during this while, knowing that

Such things *are*,

And overcome us like a summer's cloud—

or, if we can, to fetch a likelier explanation from a study of the text.

VII

For they err, at any rate, who leave the story in the scales, telling us that 'Shakespeare never judges.' Like every other dramatist who knows his business, Shakespeare is always judging. His characters start to judge one another from the moment his curtain lifts, and continue doing so until it falls. Indeed this sustained interchange of judgment—in speech, or in silence precluding action,—is the essence of all drama, but specially and ostensibly of a play which our dramatist has been at pains to label *Measure for Measure*—'for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.' Angelo judges Claudio, Claudio and Lucio judge Isabella: Escalus judges Pompey, and so does Abhorson, from their different professional angles. But Pompey has also his profession with *its* point of view, and judges society from that; as Barnardine weighs human life by his own morose philosophy; while the Duke

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi MEASURE FOR MEASURE

bustles around judging all and sundry—with the amount of success that usually attends one in a sweat to overtake his neglected business.

But a dramatist cannot start his characters judging one another in this fashion unless he has his own idea of their several moral values; that is, unless he has a clear idea of his own verdict, though he may withhold and hide it up his sleeve. Walter Pater accurately divines and has, to our thinking, expressed better than any other critic, the underlying verdict—the *idea* of the play—which, working deep in Shakespeare's mind, not seldom comes up to the surface: so often, indeed, that by a collection of stray passages, the idea can be shown as convincingly evident. This idea, according to Pater, is Poetical Justice:

The action of the play, like the action of life itself for the keener observer, develops in us the conception of this poetical justice, and the yearning to realise it, the true justice of which Angelo knows nothing, because it lies for the most part beyond the limits of any acknowledged law. The idea of justice involves the idea of rights. But at bottom rights are equivalent to that which really is, to facts; and the recognition of his rights therefore, the justice he requires of our hands, or our thoughts, is the recognition of that which the person, in his inmost nature, really is; and as sympathy alone can discover that which really is in matters of feeling and thought, true justice is in its essence a finer knowledge through love.

'Tis very pregnant:

The jewel that we find we stoop and take it,
Because we see it; but what we do not see
We tread upon, and never think of it.

It is for this finer justice, a justice based on a more delicate appreciation of the true conditions of men and things, a true respect of persons in our estimate of actions, that the people in *Measure for Measure* cry out as they pass before us; and as the poetry of this play is full of the peculiarities of Shakespeare's poetry, so in its ethics it is an epitome of Shakespeare's moral judgments.

INTRODUCTION

xxvii

VIII

Pater says well: and Shakespeare no doubt has the understanding, the capacity for this ‘finer justice.’ We have many another play for evidence; and in this one not a few flashes that show us the wrong-doer justifying himself to himself and under the law’s frowning presence putting up an excuse to exist—as when Pompey pleads ‘Truly, sir, I am a poor fellow that would live.’

Nevertheless an anthology of scattered passages and a solid play are two different things, and may produce a vastly different conviction: and Pater may accurately report what was working in Shakespeare’s mind without convincing us that Shakespeare succeeded in expressing it: and if the total play does not clearly express this, then and to that extent it has failed, and the idea has not emerged, because in the author’s mind it never attained to being thoroughly clear.

We submit that in *Measure for Measure*, as we have it, the idea is not thoroughly clear, has not been thoroughly realised. We take as our test Isabella; the ‘heroine’ and mainspring of the whole action. Isabella, more than any other character in the play, should carry our sympathy with her, or, at the least, our understanding. But does she? On the contrary the critics can make nothing of her or—which is worse—they make two opposite women of her, and praise or blame her accordingly. We pass Lucio’s obeisance—

I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted—

because sensualists like Lucio habitually divide women into two classes; the one comprising their animal prey, the other set apart as angels for the sentimental homage which vice pays to virtue. Shakespeare knew better than *that*. We take, rather, the opinions of two of her own sex upon this woman faced with the alternatives of

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00592-0 - Measure for Measure, Volume 20

William Shakespeare

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxviii MEASURE FOR MEASURE

sacrificing either her chastity or her brother's life, and upon the line of her decision. Mrs Jameson, in her *Characteristics of Women* (1832), drew a comparison, often quoted, between Isabella and the Portia of *The Merchant of Venice*. They are equally wise, gracious, fair and young; yet

Isabella is distinguished from Portia and strongly individualised by a certain moral grandeur, a saintly grace, something of vestal dignity and purity which render her less attractive and more imposing.

By Mrs Jameson's admission, then, she is less attractive than Portia: but Mrs Charlotte Lennox (still remembered as the Author of *The Female Quixote*), in her *Shakspear Illustrated*, published in 1753, can scarcely pardon Isabella at all, and indeed goes so far as to call her a 'vixen,' having her eye on the passage wherein she repels her brother—poor devil condemned to die—

O, you beast,
O, faithless coward, O, dishonest wretch,
Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?
Is't not a kind of incest, to take life
From thine own sister's shame? What should I think?
Heaven shield my mother played my father fair...
For such a warped slip of wilderness
Ne'er issued from his blood....Take my defiance,
Die, perish...Might but my bending down
Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed....
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.

Mrs Lennox comments:

From her character, her profession, and degree of relation to the unhappy youth, one might have expected mild expostulations, wise reasonings, and gentle rebukes; his desire of life, though purchased by methods he could not approve, was a natural frailty which a sister might have pitied and excused, and have made use of her superior understanding to reason down his fears, recall nobler ideas