

## Discussion Questions for William Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure"

December 17, 2022

1. The action of the play hinges on a Jacobean concept that premarital sex was punishable death, even if the parties intended to get married. Did you find this extinct legal concept hard to follow?
2. Some critics claim that the "comedy" is a "Problem Play;" problem plays include comedy and some light-hearted treatment, but also confront dark and weighty issues, such as corruption and coercion. Would you classify "Measure for Measure" as a comedy? Why doesn't it fit the definition of a tragedy?
3. What does the Duke observe about Angelo? How does Angelo abuse his power? Would you describe him as Machiavellian? Does his morality change?
4. The first recorded performance of "Measure for Measure" was at the court of King James I. Some critics suggest that Shakespeare mirrored some aspects of the Duke's character on King James I. For example, King James disliked the propensity for some rulers to revel in public spectacle. The King was also very sensitive to slander. Do you see parallels between King James and the Duke? In what ways does Shakespeare set up the debate about the responsibilities of a ruler? And is the Duke a good ruler? Why does the Duke wait until the last possible minute to set in motion several "happy endings?"
5. The title of the play comes from Matthew 7:1-2 (King James Bible):  
*Judge not, that ye be not judged.  
For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.*
  - a. Do you see this moral lesson woven into the play? Is justice served at the end? What sorts of justice does the text criticize?
6. How does the economy of Vienna's sex industry affect the rulers' decisions?
7. The women in "Measure for Measure" lack independence more than many other Shakespeare plays and are presented as prospective nuns, jilted lovers, prostitutes, or women whose reputation has been damaged. Why does Shakespeare frame women in this way?
8. Is any character in the play able to rise above human nature in the form of "natural guiltiness" or original sin, including those in power? What is the author saying about human nature?
9. Isabella is a symbol of chastity and mercy in the play. What are the contradictions in her character? What do you think of her decision to decline Angelo's offer to free her brother?
10. Appearance vs. reality is another theme of the play. How are hidden identities used in the play? Why does the Duke lie to Isabella about her brother's death?
11. The end of the play concludes with four likely marriages. Why is marriage a punishment for many of the characters? How do you interpret Isabella's silence after the Duke proposes to her?

### Question Sources:

Introductory analysis from The Oxford Shakespeare "Measure for Measure"  
BrightSummaries.com Book Analysis of "Measure for Measure"  
SparkNotes for "Measure for Measure"