**Measure for Measure: a “problem” play?**



The National Theatre’s poster for their 2006 production

**For discussion:**

Below are listed a number of arguments/opinions that individual characters express in *Measure for*

*Measure*. They are listed in scene order. A quotation is also given.

a) **I.i**

The Duke declares that even though he is the head of state he prefers to live his life privately:

‘I love the people,

But do not like to stage me in their eyes.’

What does the Duke mean? Do you think this is a strange attitude? Is it appropriate for a leader?

b) **I.iii**

The Duke declares that as it was he who let the immorality laws lapse, he cannot restore them.

‘Sith ’twas my fault to give the people scope,

’Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them?’

Do you consider this to be a reasonable argument?

c) **II.i**

Escalus defends Claudio, and asks Angelo whether he might not have offended in the same way? He replies:

‘’Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,

Another thing to fall.’

Is this an adequate response?

d) **II.ii**

Isabella argues that rulers should show mercy because God is merciful to all sinners, and all men are sinners. She asks if Angelo is so much better

than Claudio?

‘Go to your bosom

Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know,

That’s like my brother’s fault.’

Can society really be governed in this way?

e) **II.iv**

Claudio has broken the law by making Juliet pregnant. Isabella is willing to admit that someoffences are more serious than others. Would her sin – of sex outside marriage – be diminished since her motivation is to save Claudio’s life?

Might there not be charity in sin

To save this brother’s life?

What do you think of this statement? Remember that Isabella has taken a vow of chastity.

f) **III.i**

Claudio suggests that Isabella should save his life by sleeping with Angelo. Isabella disagrees.

*Claudio* Death is a fearful thing.

*Isabella* And shamed life a hateful.

Does Claudio have any right to ask Isabella to break her vow of chastity for his sake? Do you think Isabella should oblige?

g) V.ii

The Duke argues ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’:

Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;

Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.’

What would happen if this was how we governed society? Would the death penalty be restored, for example?

3. It is generally thought that the play’s title comes from St Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount: “With what measure ye mete,/it shall be measured to you again”. The title suggests that this is a play that discusses morality. Unlike Jesus on the mount, it does not ‘preach’, but invites us to discuss the concept of justice. Various arguments about morality and justice are put forward:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,

Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues

Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike

As if we had them not. (I.i)

That we were all, as some would seem to be,

Free from our faults, as faults from seeming free!

(III.ii)

He who the sword of heaven will bear

Should be as holy as severe. (III.ii)

Why all 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 top of judgement, should

But judge you as you are? (II.ii)

**Task: Using these quotations as starting points, discuss the meaning of the title. You may wish to ask the following questions:**

* What do you think is the play’s message? It may be ambiguous.
* What does *Measure for Measure* teach us about the nature of justice and mercy?
* Does the play advocate a certain kind of justice?