

The Judging of 'Measure for Measure'

By David Hlavsa

Rarely is a work so harshly judged, rarely so strenuously defended, as *Measure for Measure*.

At its American premiere in 1888, critics called it a "hazardous experiment" and "essentially repulsive to the best taste of our time." One gentleman of the press wrote that the play might "be read in the closet with profit and pleasure," but was "not altogether savory when partaken of in mixed company at a public performance."

Measure for Measure's defenders were just as strident. They vehemently stressed the play's biblical parallels and references. Often, their pleas sounded more like they were trying to save Saint Joan from the stake than Shakespeare from a bit of verbal abuse. The critic for *The New York Times*, for example, called *Measure for Measure* "one of the most distinctly moral plays ever written."

Modern critics generally refer to *Measure for Measure* as a "problem" play: it still polarizes audiences, still gets people hot under the collar.

Why? Certainly, the play's outspoken treatment of sex and its undercurrent of violence are somewhat to blame. But almost *all* of Shakespeare's plays are rife with sex and violence. Critics tend to reason that *Measure for Measure* must either be too flagrantly immoral or too excruciatingly moral for audiences to accept without heated debate.

But Shakespeare was neither a libertine nor a moralist. *Measure for Measure* is so divisive not because he raised controversial ethical and political issues, but because he refused to answer them, to take a stand.

Behavior in *Measure for Measure* is just as maddeningly complex and contradictory as behavior in life. Good people do evil, and bad people have their virtuous side.

As Mariana argues in the play's last scene, the "best men" are not woven out of moral fiber but "moulded out of faults." This makes a lot of work for us as audience. As the 19th-century critic Hazlitt noted, the viewer's "affections are at a stand; our sympathies are repulsed and defeated in all directions." We are ambivalent, challenged, disturbed.

The upshot, unfortunately, is that critics and producers often relegate this problem play, like a problem child, to the realm of the seen and not heard. Fearing that productions of problem plays like *Measure for Measure* will be judged harshly, they keep them confined to quartos.

As the modern critic, Walter Raleigh, observes,

The everlasting difficulty of Shakespeare criticism is that the critics are so much more moral than Shakespeare himself, and so much less experienced. He makes his appeal to thought, and they respond to the appeal by a display of delicate taste....

Of course, when the viewer feels that a character has patently done wrong, refraining from making a dismissive moral judgment is extremely difficult and takes a measure of patience. But, as Raleigh maintains, "the work of experience, in those who are capable of experience," is to "teach tolerance, or at least suspense of judgment."

Further, as the title of the play (borrowed from the Sermon on the Mount) implies, we judge others at our peril.

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. (*Matthew 7:1-2*)

David Hlavsa heads the theatre department at Saint Martin's College in Lacey.