

MEASURE FOR MEASURE



A talk by

Dr Richard Moore

Monday, 29 July 2019,

from 10-12 noon

William Elder Building,
Castlegate, Berwick,
TD15 1JT

Measure for Measure is one of Shakespeare's most intriguing and controversial plays. Probably written around 1603, it was originally listed as a comedy. The main themes are justice, morality and mercy and the dichotomy between corruption and purity. Though virtue ultimately prevails, some dark eddies remain. Why does the heroine not speak when offered marriage by the Duke? Is the Duke a flawed human being or a metaphor for God? Can there ever be a correlation between justice and mercy – particularly when the law-officers are as corrupt as the accused?

The story is kick-started when Vincentio, Duke of Vienna, announces that he intends to leave the city on a diplomatic mission. He leaves the government in the hands of a strict judge, Angelo, who is charged with enforcing an old law against fornication. This naturally upsets the brothel-keeper Mistress Overdone and her various pimps and bawds.

The central dilemma is that of Isabella, the novice nun. When her brother is sentenced to death for fornication, she is unwillingly brought to Angelo to plead for his life. Angelo, suddenly consumed by lust, offers to grant her request on condition that she herself will sleep with him. Meanwhile, the Duke has returned in disguise to see what effects his revived law has achieved.

What follows is a twisted tale of intrigue, moral dilemmas, betrayal and subterfuge, in which Shakespeare far exceeds his two source-works, *The Story of Epitia*, by Cinthio, and George Whetsone's *Promos and Cassandra*. It also surpasses later derivatives such as the romantic melodrama *The Sign of the Cross* (1895). This centres on Marcus Superbus, an old Roman patrician who lusts after Mercia, a Christian convert but ultimately joins her in sacrificing himself to the lions.

What makes *Measure for Measure* especially fascinating is the ambiguities within the treatment. Many critics have deplored Isabella's self-centred frigidity. They also dislike her almost busy-body eagerness to embrace the Duke's plot to save her chastity. "Where is her poetry?" one laments. "Once she can plot and bustle, all higher thinking goes out of the window". In this talk we shall examine this and other questions and consider whether the play is, as is often stated, a flawed masterpiece or just a masterpiece outright. We shall also view excerpts and relate the drama to Shakespeare's two other equally fascinating 'problem plays' written at about the same time.

This talk complements the RSC *Measure for Measure* Encore Broadcast, to be shown at the Maltings on Wednesday, 7 August at 7.00pm.

Tickets are £6, including refreshments.

All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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(*Measure for Measure*)

