

More Shakespeare “Off the Page”: *Measure for Measure*

“*Measure for Measure* always been controversial, exciting a great deal of critical and directorial puzzlement.” (M. Garber) Coleridge found it “the most painful...part of [Shakespeare's] genuine works... the single exception to the delightfulness of [his] plays.” Actors find the characters endlessly fascinating challenges. As with Shakespeare's other best creations, they are infinitely interesting with so many ways to approach motivation and resolve ambiguity. (We'll look at comments by actors as we try to form our own interpretations.)

This is a play that centers on issues of lust, prostitution, disease, tyranny, betrayal, and death. Modern responses to *Measure for Measure* indicate how a play deeply informed by a past culture can become as deeply informed by a modern one: for example; the role of government in shaping the morality of its citizens, sexual harassment of women by men in power, the right of a woman to control her own body, how power can corrupt, what exactly constitutes justice.

If *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is wide open in a forest, *Measure for Measure* is in a city, Vienna. Here we have no fresh air, but a close disease-filled space. Shakespeare makes us feel the choking environment of the prison and of the brothel, and lets us in on the struggles of its people to deal with the problems that beset them.

It has been called a “problem play” (along with *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*) because it does not fit neatly into any of the first folio's categories. It is neither tragedy, though it comes very close; nor comedy, though it has many comic characters and some very funny scenes. However, I see it as a “problem play” because it raises so many questions and so many “problems” as to how the characters should be played, which I think we will find very interesting. As Daniel Massey, who played the Duke in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1983 production said, “...it is precisely these imponderables that give the play its extraordinary energy, that give it the power to make one want to return to it again and again. It is like a prism from which you extract a thousand meanings.”

As is usual with the “off the page” courses, this is not about literary criticism or a sit-around-the-table discussion. We will attempt to put the play “on its feet”, not with the intention to produce it, but simply to get the words in our mouths and to

see what the playwright tells us to do. So prepare to get out of your seats as we attempt to enter the world of the Globe Theatre, which we will try to replicate, and hope in some small way to enter the incredibly beautiful, rarefied world of one of Shakespeare's most intriguing plays.

Text: *Measure for Measure*, Folger Shakespeare Library Mass Market, (paperback), Simon and Schuster, ISBN: 978 0 743 48490 9 ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. (On Amazon for about \$5.99, or at Labyrinth Books.)

Please have Act One read by the first class, and be thinking about which character you'll want to play in that act.

Leader: Barbara Herzberg has an extensive theatre background, has taught English and drama, and directed plays for many years. She has been a course leader for Evergreen since its inception.

Fridays: 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., 10 weeks: March 16 through May 18 (no class on 3/30)

Location: Witherspoon Hall