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Measure for Measure

William Shakespeare · *1604 · original English text*

The Duke of Vienna leaves his city in the hands of Angelo, a man of ice-cold reputation, and then stays to watch in a friar's habit. Angelo revives an old death-statute against Claudio, then offers Claudio's sister, the novice Isabella, a monstrous bargain. Shakespeare's 'problem play' is about justice, mercy, and a bed-trick that must be taught with care.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is measure for measure when a judge falls into the crime he condemns, and can mercy be just if it is arranged by a hidden duke?

"Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure."

the Duke · Act V, sentencing Angelo

Isabella's plea is right: a giant's strength is tyrannous when used like a giant, and 'man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority' is Angelo to the life. Yet the Duke's cure—disguises, a substituted bride, a substituted head, a public unmasking, and proposed marriages—raises its own questions. Claudio is saved; Angelo is made to marry Mariana and is spared at Isabella's petition. The play will not let justice be only the letter, and it will not make the letter simply nothing. 'Be absolute for death' is counsel spoken in a prison; the ending is a measured, uneasy pardon.

KEY CHARACTERS

Isabella
A novice of conscience, whose plea for mercy is tested by a corrupt bargain and, later, by a request to pardon her enemy.

Angelo
The deputy of ice and hidden desire, who would enforce a law he himself breaks.

the Duke (Vincentio)
The ruler who watches in disguise and scripts the remedy, a Providence and a problem.

Claudio and Juliet
The young couple whose informal union starts the letter of the law.

Mariana
The jilted betrothed whose place in the dark is the Duke's device and her own claim.

A GIANT'S STRENGTH

> *"it is excellent To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant."*
> **Isabella** · Act II

> *"Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure."*
> **the Duke** · Act V

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
A City Lent to Angelo
ACT I

The Duke withdraws. Angelo, deputy, will enforce the unused statute. Claudio is sentenced for his unformalized union with Juliet; Isabella leaves the convent door to plead.

- The city's license is real; so is the sudden rigor.
- Lucio, the talker, is already a dangerous friend.
- Isabella's vocation and her brother's life are set in conflict at once.

02
A Bargain Proposed
ACT II

Isabella pleads. Angelo, surprising himself, offers Claudio's life at the price of her chastity. She refuses, and will tell her brother to prepare for death.

- 'O, it is excellent / To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant.'
- Angelo's fall is the play's central hypocrisy.
- Isabella's refusal is a moral stand, not hardness only.

> *"it is excellent To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant."*
> **Isabella** · Act II, pleading with Angelo

03
The Prison, and a Friar
ACT III

Claudio, afraid, begs his sister to yield. The disguised Duke comforts him—'Be absolute for death'—and then proposes a remedy: Mariana, once betrothed to Angelo, will take Isabella's place in the dark.

- The prison scene is one of Shakespeare's hardest family quarrels.
- The Duke's bed-trick is a plot device with a real moral weight; name it plainly, without sensationalism.
- Mariana's long fidelity is the humane center of the device.

04
A Head for a Head
ACT IV

Angelo, still intending Claudio's death, is fooled with another prisoner's head. The Duke prepares a public return. Isabella is allowed to think her brother dead.

- The deputy's bad faith continues after the bargain he thought he had won.
- The substitution of Barnardine and Ragozine is grim comedy.
- Isabella's grief is real, even if the Duke knows more than she.

05
The Gate, and a Measure
ACT V

The Duke, revealed, hears Isabella's charge, unmasks Angelo, and first pronounces 'an Angelo for Claudio, death for death.' Isabella, kneeling, asks mercy for him. Marriages are commanded; the Duke offers himself to Isabella, whose answer is not spoken.

- 'Measure still for measure' is spoken as sentence before it becomes pardon.
- Isabella's intercession is the play's last moral action.
- The Duke's proposal is left open in the text; do not invent a yes the page does not give.

> *"man, proud man, Dressed in a little brief authority,"*
> **Isabella** · Act II

Justice and Mercy · Hypocrisy · Authority · Chastity and Conscience · Pardon

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The hosted text is the original English of Project Gutenberg #1530. This is often called a problem play: the ending's arranged marriages and the Duke's methods are meant to be thought about, not only applauded.
2. Exact: "it is excellent / To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous / To use it like a giant." This text has "man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority," (Dressed, not Drest).
3. The Duke's sentence-line is "Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; / Like doth quit like, and measure still for measure." Also: "Be absolute for death." "An Angelo for Claudio, death for death."
4. The plot turns on a sexual bargain and a bed-trick (Mariana takes Isabella's place). Teach this plainly and gravely, for older students; do not sensationalize it, and do not skip the moral questions.
5. Isabella's last response to the Duke's offer of marriage is not written. Do not invent her answer.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1530, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/measure-for-measure/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.