The religious context

Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare

Teaching notes

These activities focus particularly on improving students’ abilities in:

AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

1. For task two, you could allocate the sections of the play to smaller groups of students, and share their findings.

2. After completing the activities, students could further consider the title of the play, looking at all meanings of the word ‘measure’ e.g. a course or plan; a legal ‘measure’; being measured and not exceeding limits; a dance (used in Romeo and Juliet) and using these meanings to inform different readings of the play.

3. It has been suggested by Steven Marx in his book Shakespeare and the Bible, (Oxford University Press, 2000) that Measure for Measure has a lot in common, structurally, with parables from the Bible. Students could research the parable of the talents and the parable of the vineyard, and draw connections between these two and the plot of Measure for Measure. Lower ability students might benefit from focusing specifically on the Duke when looking at the former parable and Angelo for the latter.

4. A religious allegorical reading of the play sees the characters as ‘types’ rather than individuals. Many of Measure for Measure’s characters have names which suggest an aspect of their personality. Students could consider how this allegorical reading would work by examining these meanings.

Vincentio (The Duke): conqueror

Angelo: deputy or messenger of God; also an angel was a ten shilling gold coin of the time

Escalus: possibly a pun on scales (of justice)

Lucio: Italian for light; maybe a pun on the two meanings of the word (bright and wanton)

Isabella: consecrated to God; also possibly named after Isabella, sister of St Louis of France who founded the convent of the Poor Clares

Mariana: means bitterness of suffering

5. Students could research common marriage law in Jacobean England and consider how knowledge of this system would affect the way a Shakespearean audience would respond to Angelo, Marianna and Claudio and Juliet’s situation. Students should look for ‘Sponsalia per verba de praesenti’ and ‘sponsalia per verba de futuro’. Which of the two unions would be seen as more sinful in Shakespeare’s time? Which would be more sinful now?
6. A level students’ note-taking ability often requires practice. In order to practise this skill, students could be given this article: http://hudsonshakespeare.org/Shakespeare%20Library/Commentaries/comm_measure.htm and asked to make notes on the ideas in it. You could break this down by asking your students to focus on one subject e.g. religious ideas, specific ideas about Isabella, Angelo or the Duke. Students could then present these notes to each other.

7. With a mature and sensible class you could consider the problems associated with religious denial today e.g. celibacy in the church www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21654663 (be warned - this is quite an adult article) or www.patheos.com/blogs/christianpiatt/2013/02/why-are-priests-celibate-and-will-it-change-with-a-new-pope/ (less graphic although slightly out of date).

8. Students could then link these ideas to Shakespeare’s possible moral messages in the play. Concentrating particularly on Angelo’s character, what does Shakespeare seem to be saying about adhering to religious rules about sex? Claudio’s speech in Act 1 Scene 2 would be a good starting point, or Isabella in Act 1 Scene 4.

9. Students could consider the presentation of Divine Right in the play. Focusing on the Duke’s speech in Act 1 Scene 1 (26-47), students could look at how he justifies his argument with religious imagery. Less able students could first identify all the words relating to religion before considering them in context.

NB Text references relate to the Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury (2013) edition.
Biblical echoes and religion in Jacobean England

Shakespeare’s audiences were well educated in the Bible and its teachings in a way that modern audiences are not. The following sections from the New Testament are all relevant to understanding Shakespeare’s plot in *Measure for Measure*. Use the questions to consider how Shakespeare uses the Bible to inform his play.

Task one

The following quotes are both from the book of Matthew in the New Testament. Is there any character in the play that follows the two teachings below? Who and in what situation?

“No when Jesus saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them saying: You have heard that it was said ‘Eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other one also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” (38-42)

“You have heard it said ‘Love thy neighbour and hate thy enemy.’ But I tell you ‘love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you.” (43-45)

Task two

The next passage is thought to be the source of Shakespeare’s title. Does it sum up the action in the play or not? Justify your answer.

“No not judge, or you too will be judged, for the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the same measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (1-2)

Look at the following passages in the play. What points are being made in these sections about those who judge others?

- Act 1 Scene 2, from line 126 (Claudio discusses his sentence)
- Act 2 Scene 2 from line 68 (Isabella pleads with Angelo about her brother)
- Angelo’s soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 3 from line 77
- Act 3 Scene 1 (Duke tells Marianna’s story)
- Act 5 Scene 1 (the final judgement).

Task three

This final passage again is useful to consider when thinking about the way characters act in the play. Does anyone follow this last teaching in the play? Who and when?
“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law.”

Task four

Religion was a sensitive issue at the time and a royal proclamation of May 1559 had prohibited stage plays from dealing with ‘either matters of religion or of governance of the estate of the common weale’.

How does Shakespeare’s setting of the play in Vienna, and his presentation of the religious characters as being Catholic, help him silence critics worried about the religious ideas presented in the play?

Task five

In the sixteenth century Puritans (extreme Protestants) were agitating for change. The pamphleteer Philip Stubbs published a manifesto ‘Anatomy of Abuses’ in 1583 which laid out his proposals for ridding England of its problems which he ascribed to a lack of religion and individual weakness.

Consider Stubbs’s ideas below. What are the echoes of these opinions in Measure for Measure? How does Shakespeare show his dislike of these Puritan views?

- Those who commit whoredom, adultery, incest and prostitution should ‘tast of present death’
- If death is seen to be too harsh then those convicted of sexual crimes should at least ‘be cauterized and seared with a hote yron on the cheeke, forehead or some other parte’
- Magistrates at the time are too lax ‘they wincke at fornication or els as looking thorowe their fingers, they see it, and will not see it’