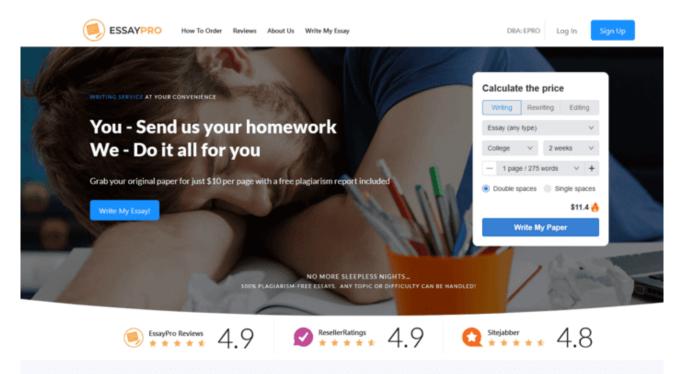
Shakespeare's Measure for Measure



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This reading of Measure for Measure will try to do more than draw attention to the extent to which Shakespeare goes beyond the conventional happy ending in this play. There are indications that the conclusions of many of the comedies are not really meant to bear up to close scrutiny; in Jaques¹ words, their loving voyages are not victual¹d for very long. In Measure for Measure we are openly challenged to question the adequacy of attaching a happy ending to a deeply troubling play. It seems that a stern question, regarding human nature and the adequacy of the comic resolution, cannot be deferred any longer. How do we preserve a community that will sustain and encourage the virtues after every Jaques gets his Jill? These were the fears that Jaques voiced, with bad timing but better perspicacity in As You Like It. The attempt to flee civilization and seek refuge in the imagination was undertaken because the prevalent state of civil society placed human integrity and virtue in grave jeopardy. Appropriate political measures are necessary to ensure that the human renewals and fresh beginnings celebrated in the comedies can be preserved and fostered when we leave Arden to resume our places in the workaday world. This reading will suggest that Measure for Measure is not a celebration of family values, The play points towards both the political virtuosity which sustains the comic oikos, and the humbler self-knowledge that preserves the integrity of the virtuoso. Human virtue can only be chosen in freedom, but we need not deny ourselves the opportunity of ensuring that this choice is not stifled by the subtly related powers of abstract intellectualism and <u>carnal</u> necessity. It is thus desirable that the moderate pleasures of humanity are revealed to their best advantage; the statesman¹s task is to direct the erotic energies of his subjects towards their true fruition. In this essay, we shall concern ourselves with Shakespeare¹s suggestively incomplete account of the process through which a self-professed philosopher-king forsakes contemplation to rescue his carnally en-mired dukedom.

While the subject matter of this play is unequivocally political, Shakespeare is not offering political blueprints. We must learn from his unequalled ability to depict and illustrate the workings of the human soul. Poetry is a tool at the disposal of the statesman and Shakespeare pleads convincingly for the respectability of his art. However, the imagination cannot create virtue in the real world; only individuals can do this and they are influenced by other factors that reside outside the purview of the imagination.

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