

# Measure For Measure on the Stage

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## Measure For Measure on the Stage

Near the end of his well known treatment of transgression and surveillance in *Measure for Measure*, Jonathan Dollimore makes an observation about the world of the play that deserves further consideration by feminist scholars:

the prostitutes, the most exploited group in the society which the play represents, are absent from it. Virtually everything that happens presupposes them yet they have no voice, no presence. And those who speak for them do so as exploitatively as those who want to eliminate them. (85-86)

Although Dollimore's comment about the absence of the prostitutes holds true for the written text of the play, twentieth century theatrical productions of *Measure for Measure* have largely tended to fill this [void](#) by granting the prostitutes a concrete physical presence on the stage. It might be argued that, by giving this neglected and exploited female population a theatrical incarnation, a performance of the play draws attention to the plight of these women and thereby accomplishes some aspects of a feminist agenda. However, a detailed review of the recent [Anglo](#)-American stage history of *Measure for Measure*

reveals that the specific way in which prostitutes are embodied and employed in a given production determines the extent to which the production constitutes a feminist appropriation of the text.

The treatment of prostitution in performances of Measure for Measure usually falls into one of three categories, which I will refer to as the conventional, lascivious, and adverse portrayals. A conventional presentation depicts the prostitutes as a generally ragged, vulgar, but appealing crew, the routine comic tarts of theatrical tradition, long-suffering but relatively untroubled in their lives of sexual debauchery. By contrast, a lascivious portrayal features an exhibition of the bodies of the prostitutes, offering the [spectacle](#) of their seductive sexuality for the consumption of audience members. Finally, an adverse treatment emphasizes the degrading and brutal aspects of the sex trade in an attempt to foreground the exploitation of women (and sometimes children) reduced to the bartering of their bodies by economic necessity. This adverse portrayal most nearly approaches a feminist appropriation of Measure for Measure, but it also tends to sacrifice the comic tone of the play's underworld. Can a feminist appropriation of Measure for Measure highlight the demeaning quality of prostitution without forfeiting the option of a comic interpretation of the lowlife of Vienna? This paper will address this question by concluding with a study of one particular production directed by a feminist, Joan Robbins of the University of Scranton, and her employment of prostitutes on stage at several key moments in the play's action.

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