

# The Quill

The Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival Newsletter • Summer 2013

## SUMMER 2013



### Oklahoma!

June 12 – June 30



### The 39 Steps

June 19 – July 14



### The Importance of Being Earnest

July 10 – August 4



### Measure for Measure

July 18 – August 4



### Henry VIII

July 24 – August 4

#### Children's Shows:

#### Beauty and the Beast

May 31 – August 3

#### Shakespeare for Kids

July 24 – August 3



## A Wilde Woman: Lady Bracknell Revealed

By Peter E. Danelski

**“ I put all my genius into my life,  
and only my talent into my works. ”**

Despite this proclamation, Oscar Wilde created a comic masterpiece with *The Importance of Being Earnest*—along with a character truly deserving to be called genius.

Lady Bracknell, Wilde's symbol of the rigid Victorian ethic, embodies much of the play's humor. She delivers some of Wilde's most dazzling epigrams—"Thirty-five is a very attractive age. London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained thirty-five for years." While the play otherwise features couples—Jack pursues Gwendolyn, Algernon loves Cecily, and the Reverend Chasuble woos Miss Prism—Lady Bracknell stands alone.

Mother to Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell seems the head of her household, only occasionally referencing her husband Lord Bracknell. She makes no apologies in admitting her

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# Measures, Marriages, and Mirrors: The World of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*

By Isabel Smith-Bernstein  
and Heather Helinsky

The fame of King James and William Shakespeare ascended together. After Queen Elizabeth died with no heir, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. Shakespeare benefited directly from James's coronation as his theater troupe became "The King's Men" with the new king as their patron.

Theater was a competitive business in 17th century England, and royal patronage positioned Shakespeare's troupe for increased popularity and profit. At the premiere of *Measure for Measure* on St. Stephen's Night on December 26, 1604, Shakespeare, with boundless imagination intact, would have also been shrewd enough to use a little flattery towards his royal audience.

Queen Elizabeth I's death ended a 44-year period of monarchical stability, but King James I determined it was time for a change. England was still embroiled in wars with Spain, the bubonic plague killed 30,000 Londoners in 1603, and lax laws led to conflicting interpretations. One unique early decree of King James was to standardize the universal English length of a foot—the size of his foot. At first glance, *Measure for Measure* could be read as a five-act flattery of the new King. But the play transcends mere flattery to give us a mirror world of King James's London in the Duke Vincentio's Vienna.

The front page of *Measure for Measure* states "The setting: Vienna." However, the characters, including Vincentio, Angelo, Claudio, Isabella, and Lucio, have Italian-sounding names. Shakespeare, like many of his day, likely never traveled to the European continent, nor do we think of his plays as being focused principally on historical accuracy. *Measure for Measure* depicts a corrupt city being "reformed" by the Duke Vincentio's chosen replacement: his deputy Angelo, a man of whom the Duke claims, "If any in Vienna be of worth/To undergo such ample grace and honour/It is Lord Angelo." Yet while Angelo's new laws seem



unduly harsh, it's likely that Britons had similar feelings about the new laws rapidly changing under James I after the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603.

To establish "Vienna" as a city with social problems, Shakespeare lets us listen to conversations between members of the highest and lowest social classes. In Act 1, Scene 1, the Duke and his trusted advisor are within the safe walls of a monastery discussing the rampant immorality of the city and what should be done. Conversely, Act I, Scene 2 occurs in a public place, where we learn the issues of the day from Mistress Overdone, a prostitute, and her friends. They discuss wars, plague, sensational trials, and overwhelming poverty—mirrors of Jacobean England with resonance in our own time as well.

But now Angelo has taken over temporarily for the Duke and has authorized the demolition of the areas of the city where there are brothels. His first measures to clean up society seek to put Mistress Overdone and her kind out of business. But the sharp-witted, offending characters see weakness in this new law and declare that Angelo can do nothing to change the behavior of the city. Instead of a linear world where one measure will lead to another, Shakespeare presents a world of chaos.

Legally, marriage was a promise followed by a ritual, but Jacobean often conflated the two by disregarding one or the other. Subjectivity reigned. Claudio, a young lover, believes that he is as good as married to his love, Juliet, yet Angelo condemns him to death for fornication. Claudio is imprisoned and will be made an example in Angelo's new hyper-moral Vienna. It may seem odd to modern audiences that a marriage could be so disputed. The

English marriage laws during this period were confusing. There were no marriage licenses, so marriage could be difficult to prove. Adding to that confusion was a layer of tension created by the ongoing religious conflict between the Catholic Church and the Tudor-established Church of England, which had differing views on what a marriage ceremony needed to be.

What constituted a binding marriage often boiled down to semantics: a promise to marry someone in the future was not binding and a promise to marry someone in the present was a legal marriage. What we think of as a proposal today would be legally binding as marriage. It was preferred that a marriage

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be accepted by the families of the couple as well as by their larger community, not only because marriage was a social institution, but also because it made the marriage easier to prove. Of course, private matters of the heart did not often follow the laws and secret marriages abounded in England. Clandestine nuptials created further drama in that they were legally binding but often impossible to verify. To complicate this further, a 17th century book on marriage laws declared: “Naked consent is sufficient to make spouses.” The act of sexual intercourse could also bind two people in marriage.

The ambiguity of marriage laws presents many dilemmas in *Measure for Measure*. We have to wonder: if Claudio is married to Juliet, is Angelo then married to Mariana? And if physical intimacy indicates marriage, then what about the libertine Lucio or Mistress Overdone? The law is subject to interpretation, no one is ever strictly wrong—despite Duke Vincentio’s assertions.

Similarly foreign to us in *Measure for Measure* are what may be reflections of King James I’s views of the ideal wife. A best seller of 1603 was the *Basilicon Doron*, or “Kingly Gift,” which was framed as a letter to James’s son who was left to rule Scotland. The *Basilicon Doron* expounds on James’s convictions of the proper conduct and beliefs of a king. Shakespeare probably would have read this, and it is possible it influenced the play. Notably, James advised his son to mix “justice with mercie,” which manifests as conflict between merciful principles and unprincipled mercy in *Measure for Measure*.

The King addresses the topic of marriage in the *Basilicon Doron* by detailing the sort of woman he wishes his son would marry. James by no means thinks a wife should be equal to her husband—“Yee are the head, she is your bodie: it is your office to command, and hers to obey”—but does think it is important to marry a woman who is pious, devoid of lust, and “a helper like himselfe.” Those were the three most important features to James, but he also believed in three “accessories:” beauty, riches and friendship—but he cautions against: “beautie without bountie, wealth without wisdom, and great friendship without grace and honestie.”

The character of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* has all of these qualities. She so completely embodies these traits that it is easy to see how Angelo is attracted to her almost against his will.

Fontaine Syer, who directed PSF’s productions of *King Lear* (2008) and *Othello* (2006), returns to direct *Measure for Measure*. Syer acknowledges that sometimes Shakespeare’s characters wittily debate the current events changing the social landscape of London with a vocabulary different than our own. *Measure for Measure* illuminates the human truths underneath the history lesson. Syer intends to “work really hard with the splendid actors at PSF to make the story of *Measure for Measure* clear. I go into rehearsals with a whole lot of questions to ask of the play and the collaborative nature of theatre provides the answers.”



Fontaine Syer

“Throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when, as in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act.”

In *Measure for Measure*, this application of the word problem is complicated by the attention paid to the scenes between Isabella—the chaste sister of the unjustly condemned Claudio—and the newly empowered ruler Angelo. These major scenes, famously performed through the centuries by great actors, have added to the

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### *Measure for Measure*...leads audiences to excitement, fascination, perplexity, and satisfaction.

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Syer debunks the misnomer of this being a “problem play.” In 1896, the illustrious scholar F.S. Boas classified three of Shakespeare’s plays—*Measure for Measure*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and *Troilus and Cressida*—as “problem plays” to distinguish them from comedies, tragedies, and histories. These three plays were all written around the transitional period of the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign and the beginning of James I. Boas thought Shakespeare’s style was also transitioning and the plays provoked questions about the definition of a comic or tragic ending. Does the final scene of *Measure for Measure* fully satisfy as a happy or tragic ending? What Boas and others after him struggle with is how to categorize and interpret the resolution of the play.

The issue is that the word “problem” came into a more popular usage as implying that the plays themselves are problematic, that there is something dramaturgically wrong with them that contemporary productions have to solve. At the time that Boas was writing, Henrik Ibsen and the 19th century problem play that dealt with contemporary social issues were popular. One can call Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* a problem play because the protagonist, Nora, is trapped by the strictures of middle-class life and at the end defies social conventions to solve her problem. Boas writes:

play’s reputation as Isabella is presented with a dilemma to potentially free her brother from what seems like an unjust law.

Syer hopes to open up these scenes so it’s not a one-sided argument—there are more complex social and moral themes in these great scenes, and neither Angelo nor Isabella are squarely in the right when they make their decisions. A cohesive work of playwriting, *Measure for Measure* also dramatizes a larger world beyond these two characters that does, in Boas’ words, lead audiences to excitement, fascination, perplexity, and satisfaction.

If we see *Measure for Measure* as a static reflection of Shakespeare’s England, frozen in time with its attendant historical legal issues and social problems, we miss the play’s ultimate power. *Measure for Measure* illuminates human experience “not for an age but for all time” and shows how little has really changed. To be confronted with moral and ethical conundrums is to be human, as Isabella is when her brother Claudio begs her to choose his life over her values and her soul. While *Measure for Measure* may be a mirror of Jacobean England, it is also equally so of our time and our natures. ■

Isabel Smith-Bernstein has a BHA in dramaturgy and history from Carnegie Mellon University. She is an intern at the Folger Shakespeare Library and the dramaturg for *Julius Caesar* at the Lean and Hungry Theatre in Washington, D.C.