

Shakespeare's
ambiguous message:
religion in
shakespeare's
"measure for
measure" ...



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Shakespeare's plays employ many allusions to religious stories and beliefs. Hamlet and Measure for Measure, for example, both address religious themes and incorporate religious imagery. However, Shakespeare's personal religious beliefs have never been clear. Some argue that his plays reflect Shakespeare's doctrine, but mere references to religion do not prove that the playwright himself was a follower of Catholic tradition. An analysis of Hamlet and Measure for Measure, along with consideration of typical religious beliefs in Shakespeare's time, shows that the messages in at least these two of Shakespeare's works neither condone nor condemn religious teachings. Though Shakespeare's Hamlet is classified as a revenge tragedy, it does include scenes and speeches that deal with religious beliefs. The idea of the afterlife is dealt with many times. In the opening scene we are presented with a ghost caught in purgatory, one who claims to be Hamlet's father and describes in detail the pain he suffers as a result of dying without having been cleansed of his sins: " I am thy father's spirit, / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,/ And for the day confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away" (I. v., 9-13). The effect of one's life deeds on his afterlife is a theme that runs throughout the play. In Hamlet's first soliloquy, we see that Hamlet refrains from committing suicide in order to avoid God's wrath: " O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew; Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon ' gainst self-slaughter. O God, God, How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (I. ii., 129-134) It is clear that Hamlet does not lament his suicidal thoughts because he feels guilty; rather, he refrains from " self-slaughter" only out of fear that he would go to hell or purgatory for doing so. The question of what

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one must do to ensure admittance to heaven permeates the play. Its opposite - how can Hamlet ensure that Claudius lives in eternal torment? - appears as well. Hamlet realizes that murdering Claudius would have the undesired effect of sending Claudius, who would die seeking forgiveness and purging his soul of sins, to heaven: "A villain kills my father, and for that/ I, his sole son, do this same villain send/to heaven./ Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge" (III. iii., 76-79). Hamlet uses his religious belief to "save" Claudius on earth and thereby - so Hamlet believes - send him to hell for killing Hamlet's father. During Ophelia's burial scene, religious beliefs are once again used to determine a character's placement in death. Act V, Scene i opens with a banter between two gravediggers who are discussing Ophelia's proper burial. Because of her possible suicide, they are unsure whether her body should be allowed in consecrated ground: "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should ahve been buried out o'Christian burial" (V. i., 23-25). Here we see that social standing takes precedence over what the gravediggers believe to be religious law. At the very end of the play, we see that Laertes confesses his guilt in the attempted murder of Hamlet and wishes to clear himself of his sins before he dies. "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet. Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,/ Nor thine on me!" (V. ii., 323-325) Hamlet grants him that forgiveness but, considering that this idea of what it takes to cleanse one's soul and ensure entry into Heaven, their confessions and forgiveness are rather short-winded and seemingly insincere. Once again, it would seem as though the two exchange 'forgiveness' not because they truly forgive one another, but because they are desperate to avoid the depths of hell once they have passed away. In none of these examples does Shakespeare take a stance on <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-ambiguous-message-religion-in-shakespeares-measure-for-measure-and-hamlet/>

what characters should do about their dilemmas. In the case of Laertes, Shakespeare even alludes to the folly of religion – if one may be forgiven so easily and with such little conviction, how meaningful can the religious doctrine really be? In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare addresses this question. In this play, a Duke disguises himself as a religious figure and Isabel is about to become a nun. Because one is only posing as religious and the other has not fully committed to enter the convent, neither character can be considered a truly religious figure; as critic Harper notes, “ In *Measure's* Vienna, Isabella is not a nun but a novice, the Duke is no real friar, and Angelo is certainly no angel” (p. 2-3) The Duke feels obligated to give power to Angelo because he, the Duke, has been lax in law enforcement and let his people become out of control. Angelo then arrests Claudio for premarital sex and sentences him to death. Claudio argues that he had planned to marry his lover but had not yet announced the engagement, and therefore deserves leniency. When asked why he has been arrested, Claudio responds: “ From too much liberty, my Lucio. Liberty, As surfeit, is the father of much fast; So every scope by the immoderate use Turns to restraint. Our natures do pursue, Like rats that ravin down their proper band, A thirsty evil; and when we drink, we die.” (I. ii. 118-122) Claudio's statement underscores the Duke's reason for giving the harsh Angelo responsibility for law enforcement – too much liberty causes problems, and Angelo is strict on laws affecting personal freedom. But how strict is too strict? Claudio does not deserve death for his crime. This question leads us to ask whether religious law should be enforced by the state or by God, who, presumably, has a more nuanced view than Angelo about when and how to punish – or forgive. The question of who is fit to administer justice becomes more complicated as the <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-ambiguous-message-religion-in-shakespeares-measure-for-measure-and-hamlet/>

play goes on, as we realize that both Angelo and the Duke act in morally dubious ways. Angelo's proposition towards Claudio's sister is inappropriate, and by marrying Isabella the Duke takes her away from the religious life - not exactly a sin, but hardly an endorsement of the religious life. As in Hamlet, Shakespeare remains neutral in Measure for Measure on the question of whether religious law is right or wrong; he simply uses the question to advance the story. A number of critics have argued that Measure for Measure "illustrates central concepts of Christian doctrine" (Gless p. 1) but that does not mean Shakespeare adhered to such a doctrine. In addition, if his goal were to promote Christianity why would Isabella abandon her plan to become a nun? As Gless states, "despite [Isabella's] once fervent commitment to virginity and to her impending vows, she tacitly but clearly agrees to marry [the Duke]" (p. 5). In the case of Hamlet, a play that promoted Christian doctrine would most likely allow characters make amends for their wrongdoings and receive God's forgiveness; instead, nearly all the characters die unredeemed. Shakespeare does reveal some of his own beliefs in these plays. He makes it evident that he believes in hell as a consequence for some actions, but does not say which actions lead one there. Similarly, he does not leave his audience with a clear notion of whether we should be governed by mortal law or God's; instead, he suggests that a merger between both types - as in the marriage between the 'soft' Duke and the disciplined Isabella - is probably optimal. If he was religiously indifferent, why would Shakespeare incorporate so many Christian references and themes? Most likely it was to suit the audience of his time, one that was so well acquainted with the Bible it may not even have noticed the plays' numerous allusions to Scripture (Bryant 1994). Through Biblical

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reference, Shakespeare ensured that his audience could relate to the characters. Just as writers now may use elements of our popular culture to help audiences understand a message, so did Shakespeare use the familiar cultural references of his time. Whether or not Shakespeare was himself a religious man is less important than his skillful use of religious themes to connect with the public at large. bWORKS CITED: Bryant, J. A. Jr. " Typology in Shakespeare." Shakespeare's Christian Dimension. Roy Battenhouse. Indiana University Press, 1994. Pp. 23 - 24. Cormican, L. A. " Medieval Idiom in Shakespeare." Shakespeare's Christian Dimension. Roy Battenhouse. Indiana University Press, 1994. Pp. 24 - 27. Gless, Darryl F. Measure for Measure: the Law and the Convent. Guilford: Princeton University Press, 1979. Harper, Carolyn. Twixt Will and Will Not: The Dilemma of Measure for Measure. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998. Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Ed. T. J. B. Spencer. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1980. Shakespeare, William. Measure for Measure. Ed. J. W. Lever. New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 1965.