This play can be dated any time between the early 1580s, when all the main sources were available, and 1604, when it was performed at court.

**Publication Date**

*Measure for Measure* is one of eighteen plays in F1 which had not previously been published. It was entered into the Stationers’ Register on 8 November 1623 alongside other plays as “not formerly entred to other men”:


It occupies the fourth position in the Comedies, coming after *Merry Wives of Windsor* and before *The Comedy of Errors*. Chambers states that the F1 text was based on a transcript prepared by Ralph Crane, a reliable scrivener, connected with the King’s Men in the 1620s.

**Performance Date**

The earliest recorded performance was on 26 December 1604, according to the account book of the Office of the Revels which states:

> On S Stiuens night in the Hall A play caled Mesur for Mesur Shaxberd.

The hall was the Banqueting Hall in the palace at Whitehall. While Chambers (WS II, 330–2) had some doubts about the authenticity of this document, editors tend to accept it as genuine (e.g. Gibbons, 2006:21). Most scholars believe this entry to reflect a newly composed play.¹ Bawcutt, however, points out that during this season, there were fourteen plays presented at court, including *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Comedy of Errors*, which were written earlier. Bawcutt also believes that the players would have been unlikely to risk a newly composed play at court.

**Sources**

Geoffrey Bullough identifies three major sources for the main plot – a variation on the traditional tale of the corrupt magistrate. The principal source was an Italian novella in Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* (1565) decade 8, tale 5. This collection of 100 stories was published in Venice in 1565 and again in 1575; The work was published in a French translation by Gabriel Chappuys in 1584, but there was no English version until the eighteenth century; Cinthio’s text in both the Italian and the French versions was used for *Othello*. Secondary sources for *Measure for Measure* were Cinthio’s *Epitia* (1583), a posthumous play, which introduces the role played by Mariana, and George Whetstone’s play, *The Right Excellent and Famous Historye of Promos and Cassandra*, registered and published in 1578 (Chambers, ES, III, 512), which added a low-life, comic sub-plot.
Brian Gibbons sees links between the puritan outlook of Angelo and pamphlets such as Philip Stubbes’s *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583). Stubbes’s pamphlet was answered by Nashe’s *Anatomie of Absurditie* (1589).  

**Orthodox Date**

Most scholars accept a date 1603–05. Chambers suggests 1604–5; Lever and Nosworthy propose the summer of 1604; Wells & Taylor concur with 1604; others, such as Halliday, have argued for 1603. Gibbons is much more circumspect in his consideration of a date and, while suggesting links with the 1580s, tentatively accepts a date 1603–4. Bawcutt does not commit to a specific date. Wiggins dates this play to 1603 or possibly 1604, citing its dependence for plot of the disguised duke on John Marston’s *The Malcontent* (1603–4). However, the direction of influence is by no means clear. Anyway, the motives for disguise are very different: in *The Malcontent*, the duke has been deposed and makes many satirical comments against the Duke; in *Measure*, the duke seems to disguise himself because he is either bored or lonely in his authority.

**Possible Parallels between the Duke and James I**

Most scholars suggest that the character, interests, attitudes and actions of the Duke closely resemble those of James I. Schanzer quotes much from previous writers on this topic:

> The character of the Duke is a very accurate delineation of that of King James, which Shakespeare appears to have caught, with great felicity, and to have sketched, with much truth. (G. Chalmers, 1799; quoted by Schanzer, 1971: 121).

Schanzer summarises, although he elsewhere disparages, the argument of the doctoral thesis of L. Albrecht:

> The Duke is intended to be recognised as an idealised portrait of James I. (L. Albrecht, 1914; Schanzer, 1971: 121).

Shakespeare’s motives are said to range from paying “homage”, through “flattery” to “anxiously courting” the new king. Passages relevant to this view are:

**Duke:** We have strict statutes and most biting laws,  
> The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds,  
> Which, for these fourteen years, we have let slip …  
> *Measure*, 1.3.19–21.

James confessed in *Basilikon Doron* (1599), his tract on ‘the properties of government’, that he was over-lax in punishing offenders at the start of his reign in Scotland. In the same document, he denounced the popular desire for novelties; and in 3.2.217–9 the Duke complains: “Novelty is only in request, and it is as dangerous to be aged in any kind of course. . . .” In 1603, a further Scottish edition and two English editions of *Basilikon Doron* were published. Some commentators, such as Schanzer (1971: 122–3), are persuaded that it is “inherently probable” that Shakespeare had read – even “carefully mined” – the tract before writing the play.  

In 1.1.67–8, the Duke confesses “I love the people / But do not like to stage me to their eyes.” This may reflect James’s attitude during his 1603 progress to London, and the incident at the Exchange on or about 15 March 1604, when he attempted a secret visit. The dedicatory epistle to the only extant report was written by a member of Shakespeare’s company.  

> The Duke’s comment on Lucio: “Back-wounding calumny … slanderous tongue.” (3.1.445–7), and his later punishment of him: “Here’s one in place I cannot pardon” (5.1.498–9.), are typical of James, who was notoriously sensitive to slander. A Scottish Act of 1585 made slander of the king treasonable, and several people were executed under it – one, in 1596, for calling James “ane bastarde.” In 4.2.134–6, the disguised Duke asks about his real self: “How came it that the absent Duke had not either delivered him to his liberty or executed him? I have heard it was ever his manner to do so.” On 25 April 1603, at Newark, James had a cutpurse, taken in the act, hanged at once without trial, while at the same time he commanded all prisoners in the castle to be freed. Watts remarks that in the winter of 1603–4 James reprieved condemned conspirators who were already on the scaffold at Winchester.
Not all editors are convinced by Shanzer’s arguments but consider the parallels “too commonplace” to prove indebtedness. Bawcutt (6) finds it “inherently implausible that a mere playwright would have the impertinence to act as a schoolmaster to the king.”

**Possible Parallels between the Play and Political Events in 1604**

Taking the performance on St Stephen’s Night as a first performance of a newly finished play, evidence has been gathered from specific phrases in the play to reflect current events and concerns. In 1.2.1–5, Lucio and two gentlemen wonder whether “the Duke, with other dukes” will come to “composition with the King of Hungary”, and hope for peace. Lever (intro, xxxi) takes this to refer to King James’s negotiations with Spain from autumn 1603 and the Hampton Court conference, 20 May – 19 August 1604. Later in the same scene (1.2 80–2), Mistress Overdone complains about the effects on her business of “war ... sweat ... gallows, and ...poverty”. Lever (intro, xxxii) assumes that this reflects events in 1603–4: war with Spain, plague (theatres were closed in 1603, re-opening on 09 April 1604), and treason trials at Winchester. Almost immediately (86–89) Pompey tells her of a proclamation: “All houses in the suburbs of Vienna must be plucked down.” Lever identifies this with the proclamation of 16 September 1603, which called for the pulling down of suburban houses in London to limit the spread of the plague; it especially affected brothels and gaming houses. Finally, Lever suggests that “Master Starve-Lackey the rapier and dagger man ... Master Forthright the tilter ... and wild Half-can that stabbed pots”, who feature in Pompey’s comic catalogue of prisoners (4.3.1–20), are allusions to the Statute of Stabbing, passed by Parliament between March and July 1604 to deal with brawling in the streets of London, not least between feuding Englishmen and Scots! Not all commentators have found these allusions convincing.

**Oxfordian Date**

Oxfordians in general do not find the 1604 date very convincing and prefer a date up to twenty years earlier. Clark proposes 1581, a date with which Ogburn agrees; Holland prefers 1588; in Hess’s general re-dating, 1592 is favoured. Anderson, however, (341–2) argues that Oxford wrote or at least revised the play as late as 1603–4.

**Internal Oxfordian Evidence**

Mistress Overdone’s complaint about war, sweat, gallows and poverty (1.2.80–2), used by orthodox scholars to date the writing of the play in 1603–4, can equally apply to 1580–1, when there was a ‘Papal invasion’ of Ireland, at Smerwick Bay, by Italian troops under a Spanish general (1580), plague in London, and the trials and executions of Edmund Campion and other Jesuits. In 1.3.19–21, the Duke refers to “strict statutes and most biting laws ... which for these fourteen years we have let slip”. From 12th January 1582, laws against Catholics were vigorously enforced after a period of leniency: monthly fines for non-attendance at church were raised, and it became a felony to harbour Jesuits. Gibbons (3) similarly shows how the puritan outlook in the play was opposed by the Duke. Oxfordians (such as Anderson) point to events in the play which closely parallel events in Oxford’s personal life in the early 1580s.

Claudio is imprisoned for “getting Madam Julietta with child” (1.2.70–1). Oxford was imprisoned in the Tower in March 1581, when Anne Vavasor, his mistress, gave birth to a son, baptized Edward; like Juliet, she too was imprisoned (Nelson, 266–75). Angelo deserted Mariana (before marriage) “five years since”, chiefly because “her reputation was disvalued in levity” (5.1.215–20). Oxford was estranged from his wife, Anne, from 1576–83 (Nelson, 141–54). While he was in Paris in March 1576, he heard speculation about his wife’s unfaithfulness and the paternity of the baby (Elizabeth, later Countess of Derby) born on 2 July 1575. In a letter to Burghley (27 April 1576), Oxford refers to the situation as “the fable of the world”, and to his wife as “disgraced” (Nelson, 145–6).

Angelo is reunited with Mariana by the device of the ‘bed-trick’: she takes Isabella’s place in the sexual assignation devised by Angelo (2.1.250ff.; 4.1.228ff). Oxford, according to two separate accounts, was the victim of a similar trick: Francis Osborne (1593–1659), writing about Philip Herbert in *Traditional Memoirs of the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I*, refers to “that last great
Earl of Oxford, whose lady was brought to his bed under the notion of his mistress and from such a virtuous deceit she, the Countess of Montgomery (i.e. Susan Vere, Herbert’s first wife) is said to proceed” (Ogburn, 527–8). Morant and Wright state of Oxford, in *The Histories of Essex* (1836):

He forsook his lady’s bed, [but] the father of Lady Anne by stratagem, contrived that her husband should unknowingly sleep with her, believing her to be another woman, and she bore a son to him in consequence of this meeting.

The research of Georges Lambin give further topical weight in favour of a date in the early 1580s. Lambin (not an Oxfordian) shows that major and minor events in the play, as well as names and characteristics of many persons and places in the text, had their historical counterparts in the Paris of 1582–5. The key events – the arrest and trial of Claude (note the name) Tonart for seduction – occurred in August and September 1582.7 The French king, Henri III, was even more like the ambiguous Duke of the play than James I, and (in the words of a contemporary) “leads the life of a monk more than he maintains the state of a king.” 8

If the play were originally penned in the early 1580s, it would bring its genesis much closer not only to the dates when its major written sources were newly available, but also to events in Oxford’s own life. It is reasonable to suggest that all these factors influenced the author’s choice of subject matter, and therefore the writing of *Measure for Measure*, by the mid-1580s.

**Conclusion**

The play can be dated any time between the early 1580s, when all the main sources were available and 1604, when it was performed at court. There is no contemporary evidence that the play was newly composed in 1604. While many references can be linked to events in 1604, they can equally well apply to the early 1580s. They might also be topical interpolations in an earlier play-text adapted for the 1604 performance – or, indeed many other performances. The real-life events alluded to – war, plague, law-enforcement – were common enough at any time. One must wonder, also, whether James would feel flattered by the supposed portrait of himself in the questionable Duke.

**Notes**

3. Schanzer quotes from the influential article by David L. Stevenson (1959). The quotation in full reads: “One is forced to think that Shakespeare carefully mined the *Basilikon Doron* in order to be able to dramatize the intellectual interests of his new patron in his comedy” (1959: 196).
4. Lever (Intro, xxxiv) states that the only report of the incident is contained in a tract called *The Time Triumphant* (published in 1604 and attributed to Gilbert Dugdale). The dedicatory epistle was written by Robert Armin, a member of the King’s Men.
5. Shanzer quotes Craigie’s note in his edition of *Basilikon Doron* (1950), vol 2, page 208. The guilty speaker was an Englishman, John Dickson. In an anecdote, Dickson was said to have called James “ane bastard king not worthy to be obeyed” after being requested to move his ship by royal officers. He was later hanged in Edinburgh.
7. Lambin, 126 states: “En septembre 1582, à Paris, Claude (Tonart) est condamné à mort pour mariage clandestin. Il n’échappe à la sentence que grâce à l’indignation publique.”
**Other Cited Works**

Anderson, Mark, *Shakespeare by Another Name*, New York: Gotham, 2005


