

“Tis one thing to be tempted... another thing to fall.” – A Critical Analysis of William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the philosophical leanings of the two principal characters in William Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*, namely the Duke and Angelo. Exploring the complex and contradictory dimensions of human nature itself, Shakespeare’s philosophical inclinations stem from the repercussions attributed to excessive liberty, as well as the consequences associated with ruling through brute force. This paper aims to expand on the political philosophies of the Duke and Angelo by drawing on Machiavellian and Draconian political thought in order to demonstrate how their respective, ideological stances reinforce the reader’s understanding of each leading character’s ideal mode of administration.

Key words: Shakespeare, Duke, Angelo, Machiavellian, Draconian, political thought, ideology.

Introduction

Often described as a problem-play, William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* exhibits an array of complimentary, but also conflicting themes. Ranging from notions of mercy and justice, morality and temptation, in addition to the significance of faith, the reader is able to discern the dichotomies of the most salient themes through each predicament that befalls the characters.

Shakespeare, through carefully contrasting his lead characters, provides the reader/audience with characters that appear as a foil of the other. Through utilizing this literary technique, Vincentio (the Duke of Vienna)'s character is used a foil for Angelo (the deputy who rules in the Duke's absence) in what makes for one of Shakespeare's most politically charged plays. The aim of this paper is to critically analyze how the philosophical thought of the stated characters align with the aforementioned themes. By putting these two characters as a foil of the other, the Duke's approach with regard to his form of governance will be analyzed from a Machiavellian perspective, whilst Angelo's approach will be scrutinized from a Draconian perspective.

Brief Overview and Historical/Critical commentary

Synopsis

A problem-play enthralled with questions of justice, mercy and morality, William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* revolves around the fate of a young man, Claudio, who has been arrested for pre-marital intercourse – thereby going against Viennese law. The man responsible for his arrest happens to be Lord Angelo, a fervent observer of the law and arguably, the play's most central character to prioritize the implementation of the law. Cognizant of the situation at hand, the audience witnesses Vincentio (the Duke) discuss the event with Escalus (a Lord), and brief him on his plans to pass responsibility of rule to Angelo, as he wishes to leave Vienna for a specific time-period.

The Duke, who (arguably superficially) symbolizes leniency and liberty, is replaced with the strict, morally upright and ascetic Angelo who is left to govern a morally depraved Vienna (with the societal decay of the city seen as a result of the Duke's leniency in implementation of the law). Given Claudio's case, Lucio (a friend of Claudio's) visits him in prison, with Claudio instructing him to seek help from Isabella (Claudio's sister) who is a practicing nun, but also an

eloquent speaker. Isabella represents virtue, chaste and purity because of her own unwavering faith and adherence to moral righteousness. Despite being critical of her brother's fornication, she decides to ask Angelo to have mercy on Claudio.

Angelo and Isabella's interaction is where the play's dramatic factor is most heightened. This is due to the audience witnessing a flinch in Angelo's distinctively austere nature. Despite initially rejecting Isabella's pleas, he decides to show mercy to Claudio if Isabella consents to having intercourse with him, given his attraction to her own chaste character and piety. The audience witnesses the compromise of principles in this otherwise, fervently moralistic leader which further builds in suspense given Isabella's predicament of choosing to save her brother over sacrificing her virginity.

Disguised as a wise friar, the Duke visits Claudio in prison along with Isabella and Lucio. With the audience fully aware of the Duke's prior understanding of the situation, a discussion is centered on employing a 'bedroom trick,' that is, substituting Isabella for Marianna with regard to Angelo's request. Marianna, interestingly, happens to be Angelo's ex-fiancée who Angelo left due to her losing her dowry. This piques the suspense towards the final few scenes where the Duke reappears as himself – this time fully acquainted with the details of all the unfolding situations. He proceeds to expose Angelo for his seeming hypocrisy, and attempts to grant justice to all the characters involved. However, at the conclusion of the play, despite the dramatic denouement, the audience is left to ponder over the subjective nature of justice, morality, mercy and the blurred lines with regard to the difference in opinion of each concept.

Historical Analysis

Taking the historical context of the play into consideration, Shakespeare's conception of justice was arguably influenced by the laws of Elizabethan England. As Michael Jay Willson (1993) notes, "The concept of justice often became secondary in a system preoccupied by form rather than substance" (p. 700). The carefully cultivated exterior image of society is given greater priority rather than the social makeup that constitutes society – this gives the law as an institution rather superficial connotations. This is due to the superficially strict regulation of the law where criminal and civil matters were dealt with by law courts but, as Willson describes, the arduous task of truly seeking justice only complicated matters even more – thereby reinforcing the ostensible and internally flawed demonstration of law. Viennese society, characterized by prostitution, alcoholism and the like, as described in the play, may also be argued to be a reference to the state of London's suburbs during Shakespeare's time as described by Stephen Porter in his thought-provoking read *Shakespeare's London: Everyday Life in London 1580-1616*. Porter (2009) quotes the chaplain to the Venetian ambassador Orazio Busino who states:

Around the liberties of London there is such a patchwork of suburbs that they look like so many monsters who have been converted after being lured by the goddess Circe, the greater part being inhabited by an inept population of the lowest description (p. 89).

The chapter goes on to describe the moral corruption that was rampant at the time, drawing conspicuous parallels to Viennese society in *Measure for Measure*.

Duke Vincentio: the ultimate Machiavellian ruler

Embodying a number of contrasting attributes which make it difficult to decipher whether he may be categorized as the antagonist or the protagonist, the Duke Vincentio's character is enveloped in enigma.

The Duke is often recognized for the parallels drawn between his character and King James I. Taking the religious and political doctrine used to legitimate and consolidate monarchist rule – the ‘Divine Right of Kings’ notion – into consideration, a philosophical and religious subtext may be analyzed through the Duke meting out justice to who he deems fit, and defining morality on his own terms. King James I’s political treatise *The True Law of Free Monarchies* emphasized the significance of the ‘Divine Right of Kings,’ which hints at how instrumental it was for his own reign. This is noticeably reflected in the Duke as well, as he exhibits almost god-like characteristics with regard to demonstrating justice. The notion that the monarchy was seen as divine representation is reinforced in the discourse throughout the course of the play, particularly by Angelo as he refers to the Duke as “power divine” (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.1.361).

Christian symbolism, as suggested in the title, is another important aspect by which to analyze the Duke. Taken from the New Testament, the verse: “With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2, The King James Version) follows in line with the resolution of the play, as the Duke states in a mirrored philosophy, “Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure:” (Shakespeare, 2009, 5.1.437-439). The Biblical references add to the notions of ‘divine grace,’ giving the Duke not just god-like, but rather a Christ-like image. This is also partly due to the disguise he opts for (that of the Friar), which in itself has religious connotations, but also because of the act of listening to the confessions of the other characters. This makes for an incredibly omnipotent image of the Duke.

Philosophical Outlook

The dilemma concerning whether the Duke is indeed a deceptive hypocrite or whether he is a representation of a new form of justice being implemented in Vienna is another subject of debate.

This discussion would involve analyzing the philosophical doctrine of the Duke, by observing his management of the predicaments spread out over the course of the play. It may be pertinent to discuss traits exhibited by the Duke that would conform to Machiavellianism, when it comes to matters of governance. For this, it is imperative to define Machiavellianism and its surrounding connotations.

Machiavellianism – a term attributed to the political treatise of Niccolò Machiavelli – espouses duplicitous and or deceptive notions which in turn, breaches ethical or moral considerations and staunchly places the stability of the state as the utmost priority. The methods Machiavelli proposes on how to effectively govern a state offer a glaring illustration of the connotations of what this ideology entails. Machiavelli's methods, which include swiftly crushing rebellious activity, inculcating fear in one's subjects, blurring the lines with regard to virtue and vice, and emphasizing the significance of military prowess, are among his most recognized techniques.

Taking this definition into consideration, one may apply it to the case of the Duke who, throughout the course of the play, dupes and manipulates his subjects; taking complete advantage of their ignorance. One of the first instances where the audience witnesses this demonstration of deceptiveness is his substitution of Angelo with himself in a very short time-span. Vienna, already in a down-trodden state of affairs given the inefficient method of implementing the law by the Duke, faces two profound forms of radicalism: the lack of decisive measures taken by the Duke, as opposed to strict adherence of the law by Angelo. Zdravko Planinc, in his work concerning Shakespearean critique of Machiavellian force, discusses the parallels observed between the Duke and Machiavelli's discussion of Cesare Borgia employing Remirro de Orco for his own ulterior motives. Planinc (2010) quotes Norman Holland with regard to these similarities, saying, "interpretations of Measure for Measure that treat the Duke as a symbol of

divine grace or the like must take into account his probable descent from Cesare Borgia” (p. 147). It may be understood that just as Borgia wanted to absolve himself of the repercussions attributed to quelling rebellious activity in Romagna, the Duke would rather Angelo take the fall for his own inefficiencies in enforcing the law. This may align with chapter 15 of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (2000), where he states, and “a prince who wants to keep his power must learn how to act immorally, using or not using this skill according to necessity” (p. 33). The Duke’s arguably immoral actions, which involve deception, engaging in duplicitous activity and harboring divine-like characteristics also draw parallels to Pope Alexander VI, who Machiavelli (2000) describes as “deceptive in everything he did—used deception as a matter of course—and always found victims” (p. 38). As this chapter discusses whether it may be better to be feared as opposed to loved, it may be contested that for Duke Vincentio, it was indeed better to be feared, given his method of distribution of justice to his subjects.

Angelo: a representation of Draconian law enforcement

Carrying a name which gives strictly virtuous connotations, Angelo is a character who the audience witnesses transition from being the almost infallibly depicted defender of justice at the beginning, to the painfully flawed man towards the conclusion. Grant Smith (2014) describes the choice of names as pointing to “...the ambiguity of moral principles for which the character stands” (p. 2). This ambiguity may be further explored through analyzing the contrasts which characterize Angelo, similar to the Duke; that of his public persona (the infallible, morally upright, overseer of the law) with his private one (the mortal, fallible man who is as prone to temptation as the subjects he reprimands).

Described as “a man whose blood is very snow-broth; one who never feels the wanton stings and motions of the sense” (Shakespeare, 2009, pp. 1.4.61-63) leads the audience to believe the

narrative concerning the unflinching devotion to principles Angelo has. This imagery employed by Shakespeare with regard to character description aptly fit the traits of the public persona which he is trying to consolidate. This can be contrasted with the Duke who acknowledged his preference of exercising leniency of the law.

Philosophical Outlook

Seeking to make an example of Claudio by revising the law, Angelo is adamant on standing firmly by his principles towards the beginning of the play. The audience is lured into believing the discussed infallibility of his character, particularly during his conversation with Escalus concerning relaxing Claudio's sentence. Angelo pointedly states,

“We must not make a scarecrow of the law setting it up for fear the birds of prey and let it keep one shape till custom make it their perch and not their terror” (Shakespeare, 2009, pp. 2.1.1-4).

Angelo's conception of justice stands in stark contrast to the Duke's, who sought to demonstrate the significance of mercy with regard to seeking justice. This approach, which harbors extremity of fervent observance, compared to the excessive liberty of the Duke, remain especially significant with regard to the connotations they carry for Viennese society.

Angelo's method of implementing the law may be described as Draconian. The term Draconian was derived from the first recorded legislator of Athens, Draco, who was characterized for this notorious harshness and strict implementation of the written law code. Plutarch of Athens, who was remembered for challenging the severity and brutality associated with Draconian law enforcement, stated in his work that Draco, “once asked why he made death the punishment of most offences, replied, ‘Small ones deserve that, and I have no higher for the greater crimes’” (Plutarch and Dryden, 1895, p. 185). These minor crimes included theft or sleeping in public

places. Parallels may be drawn towards Claudio's act of consensual, pre-marital intercourse considered punishable by death for Angelo.

It may be argued that there are implicit messages given at the beginning of the play that Angelo has a more human or more fallible side to him. One such instance was where the Duke says, "Hence shall we see / If power change purpose, what our seemers be" (Shakespeare, 2009, pp. 1.3.50-54).

This suggests an impending implication of what's to come that will put Angelo's character and his adherence to his own, arguably rigid form of justice to the test. His fallibility, exposed upon conversing with Isabella, lead the audience to question the nature of justice itself, where even the most fervent adherents experience their own shortcomings with regard to complete observance. It makes one reminisce one of Angelo's frequently quoted remarks to Escalus, "Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus, another thing to fall:" (Shakespeare, 2009, 2.1.17).

Taking the previously discussed Machiavellian notions into consideration, it may be argued that Angelo as a representation of Draconian law enforcement is observed to be at odds in an otherwise, seemingly Machiavellian world which Shakespeare seems to depict through the nature of the Duke. Machiavelli's insistence on employing a fine balance between inculcating fear and hatred in subjects with respect to stricture – in *The Prince*, he states, "what brought down each of the emperors was hatred or contempt..." (Machiavelli, 2000, p. 43) and this essentially, proved to be Angelo's weakness as well, with respect to the animosity directed towards him due to his strict nature.

The dilemma of private justice and public mercy

Borrowing the title from Stacy Magedanz's work, *Public Justice and Private Mercy in Measure for Measure*, the themes of justice and mercy of this Shakespearean work are crucial for the way they are understood by each character, or observed through each sub-plot.

The Duke's omnipresent attributes, bordering on a divine form of omniscience, which he exploits throughout the play are the subject of much criticism. This pertains to his prior knowledge of Angelo's misgivings with Marianna, yet entrusting him with this position. Lying to him about his own whereabouts or reasons for temporarily vacating is another instance. The difference between earthly and divine rule is another factor which influences the way both characters choose to categorize their form of governance. Duke Vincentio, especially during the final resolution, exhibits an almost god-like method of meting justice, fully aware of all the dilemmas in the room. In an interesting philosophical perspective, this reiterates the parallels between the Duke and James I, where the latter was quoted as saying: "by virtue of his heritage and responsibilities, the reflection of God..." (Hausarbeit, n.d, p.7) in his treatise with regard to his rule. The concluding scene represents the culmination of his Machiavellian approach which he was employed throughout the play in order to consolidate his rule, as well as his support.

Angelo similarly also arouses a polarizing reception, given his strict nature, apparent hypocrisy, but also his unwavering commitment to justice as well as acknowledgement of his fallings in the concluding scene. The latter point may be emphasized as he states, "No longer session hold upon my shame, but let my trial be mine own confession. Immediate sentence then and sequent death is all the grace I beg." (Shakespeare, 2009, [pp. 5.1.376-379](#))

This comes as a stark contrast to the Duke's conception of justice, which he sees through his seemingly omnipotent perspective. Angelo's honesty, particularly with regard to his own fallibility, leaves the reader conflicted upon whether to empathize with him, or to berate him for

his harshness. This ambivalence generates questions on mercy with regard to justice, as Shakespeare offers a conclusion which harkens back to Christian philosophical allegories of salvation and redemption. By accepting his fallibility, Shakespeare directs Angelo's predicament to follow a redemptive pattern where he may be offered the possibility of salvation. This however, may be argued to be a result of the 'divine grace' inculcated by the Christ-like yet Machiavellian tactician, which is the Duke.

Conclusion

Combining Christian values with Machiavellian strategizing, the conclusion of *Measure for Measure* leaves the audience in a largely puzzled state. Those guilty are pardoned, tragedy is replaced with salvation and justice appears to have been distributed. One may also contemplate on Shakespeare's implicit hints with regard to the triumph of Machiavellian political philosophy (that of the Duke), over the dogmatic Draconian position (represented through Angelo's dramatic fall). Taking the title of the play into consideration, the readers are left to ponder over the incredibly complex and subjective nature of justice with regard to mercy within the perimeter of the each predicament.

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