

Nature of Obsession: A comparison between Ferdinand and Angelo

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Abstract:

With their own weaknesses and hypocrisies, Angelo and Ferdinand are the two villains of the two contemporary plays, namely, Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare and The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster where they rule severely without any leniency and marginalize the life of two outstanding heroines of English theater, Isabella and the Duchess by name, through manipulating their stately positions. Our categorization of Angelo as villain is only half unjust. Though pinning him down to his erotic base, we can call him no less a villain. Ferdinand, however, is a villain complete, though again, compared to the Cardinal he appears to be the lesser one. Measure for Measure and The Duchess of Malfi are catalogued by the Wikipedia under the heading 'English Renaissance plays' which were written in England between 1576 and 1642 pointing out that the first one was written in 1603 and The Duchess of Malfi was first performed in 1614 at the Globe Theatre in London. The plots of these two plays revolve round these two characters so far as they instigate the evil powers, generate ill motives, and locates sexual obsession as one prime motive of villainy. This paper attempts to show resemblances in the two characters in villainy and sexual obsession towards the two central female characters of the aforementioned plays.

Keywords: Machiavellian, villainy, sexual, obsession, evil, erotic, madness

1. Socio-political Background

Far from England, the court life of the these two plays exposes the two corrupt societies in the foreign lands where "the streets are inhabited by madman, pimps, johns, and whores who live on the edge of the law, aware of its elasticity and essentially free to flout it at will" (Cohen, 1993, p. 107). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio has just returned from France and defines by contrast what is lacking in Malfi: "...that a prince's court/ Is like a common fountain, whence should flow/ Pure silver drops in general: but if't chance / Some curs'd example poison't near the head" (Webster, 1988 l.1. 11-4). The "cursed example", he indicates, is none but the top figures of Malfi's court, Ferdinand and the

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Cardinal, the pair of brothers whose corruption will spread death and disease throughout the land. In *Measure for Measure*, the Duke is apparently disappointed in not being able to maintain law and order and intends to leave Vienna by delegating his responsibilities to Angelo who is virtue incarnate. While Antonio's glorification of the French court suggests by contrast the vulgarity of the Malfi court, the Duke in *Measure for Measure* finds in Angelo the solution to remove a similar kind of vulgarity from the state of Vienna.

2. The Initial Postulate

The opening of *Measure for Measure* establishes the character of Angelo on an initial postulate that he is good, angel-like, and will be a better replacement for Vincentio. Escalus confidently recommends Angelo to the Duke that "If any in Vienna be of worth/To undergo such ample grace and honor,/ It is Lord Angelo (Shakespeare, 1991, l.1. 23-25), an image which is strengthened by Angelo's modest reluctance to take the city's highest post. To the Duke Angelo is a torch, which is lighted not for itself but for those around it: "Heaven doth with us as we with torches do, / Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues / Did not go forth of us,'twere all alike (Shakespeare, 1991, l.1. 33-5).

However, Ferdinand is drawn in altogether reversed way where Antonio portrays him with fewer words in *The Duchess of Malfi*: "a most perverse and turbulent nature" who laughs heartily "to laugh / All honesty out of fashion" (Webster, 1988, l.1. 171-72). The initial postulate about Ferdinand remains the same throughout the play- as he "lacks consistency with his outward appearance" (Male, 1986, p. 34). The Websterian characters, Bosola included, are in the end what they were at the outset. The naturally evil men and women remain evil; the good remain good" (Holdsworth, 1975, p. 69). On the other hand, Angelo's inconsistencies are the characteristics of his inner dualism, as Cedric Watts says:

Angelo's inconsistencies are consistent: psychologically the characterization has coherence, subtlety and power. His sexual Puritanism is not that of someone who lacks sexual drives but rather that of someone who possesses them but has sought to keep them in check... (Holdsworth, 1975, p. 96).

3. Comparison between Two Characters

Both are young, and probably too young for such posts; but it is Ferdinand who from the very beginning "uses his power in order to entrap, abusing justice" (Leech, 1986, p. 10). Law provides protection as well as subsistence to

Ferdinand, like a cobweb, which serves two purposes: dwelling and "a prison/ To entangle those shall feed him" (Webster, 1988, l.1. 178-9). Moreover, Ferdinand has a powerful and treacherous ally like the Cardinal and in Bosola he has found a tool servant, but Angelo is alone in his crafty machinations. However, compared to Angelo's versatility, Ferdinand's villainy is one track, for which critic C.V. Boyer refuses to recognize both Ferdinand and the Cardinal as villain heroes; "...they are simply villains. Though they conceive the wickedness that leads to their sister's death, they hire a tool to execute it. ...He [Bosola] therefore becomes the villain-hero..." (Holdsworth, 1975, p. 52).

The evil pair of the brothers is complementary to each other: "in a sense they are church and state" (Leech, 1986, p. 33), and they destroy the Duchess by a two-pronged attack. In contrast, Angelo is alone in planning to defile Isabella, but Duke Vincentio is around, as he has not actually gone to Poland, but has disguised himself as a friar to go unrecognized among his citizens, to the great relief of the audience, which indirectly weakens Angelo's villainous stratagem. If the Duke ensures that Angelo's villainy is subverted, it helps to save Isabella from her virginity, but the Duchess, on the other hand, wants to embrace life but cannot avoid death.

We see "a most perverse, and turbulent" (Webster, 1988, l.1. 169) Ferdinand in a corrupt court where no initiative for improvement is visible but Angelo takes the duty to clean up the morally corrupt Vienna. Duke eulogizes him and the public image he has created is noteworthy: "a man whose blood/ is very snow-broth; one who never feels/ The wanton stings and motions of the sense (Shakespeare, 1991, l.5. 57-59). What goes up must come down but he realizes that remaining at the top is a strenuous job. Having discovered the lust for Isabella, he questions himself: What's this? Is this her fault, or mine? The tempter, or the tempted, who sins most, ha?" (Shakespeare, 1991, ll.2. 66-7). Being apprehensive that he might betray his feelings, he keeps an angelic facade to hide his internal crisis. The lust for Isabella is so overwhelming that he makes a candid confession:

"When I would pray and think, I think and pray.
To several subjects: Heaven hath my empty words.
Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue.
Anchors on Isabel: Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name,
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil".
(Shakespeare, 1991, ll.4. 1-6)

He succumbs to 'the strong and swelling evil' not without a fight, as "Angelo is not a conscious hypocrite: rather a man whose chief faults are self-deception and pride in his own righteousness - an unused and delicate instrument quite useless under the test of active trial" (Stead, 1971, p. 106).

But his sentence on Claudio, though taken within the purview of the state law, can yet be judged excessive, as Claudio says, "surely for a name" (Shakespeare, 1991, 1.1. 167). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, both brothers make their intention clear that their widowed sister should not remarry and directly tell her about their resentment of her remarriage. The Cardinal terrorizes her by saying "The marriage night/ Is the entrance into some prison" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 323-4) and Ferdinand frightens her even more against thinking of it: "Your darkest actions-nay, your privat'st thoughts- / Will come to light" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 336-7). Ferdinand wields a dagger in front of her and coarsely suggests that women are attracted to that human organ which is "like lamprey, / Hath ne'er a bone in't" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 336-7). The reference of the boneless eel reasonably irritated the Duchess and at her objection he modifies: "I mean the tongue" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 338). Jenia Geraghty (2002) comments that; "this double-entendre shows Ferdinand's dark side. His persistent sexual innuendo aimed at his sister throughout the play shows that he has an abrasive temperament and unbalanced emotions" (<http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/webster.html>). Replying to Bosola's query why Ferdinand "would not have her marry again" he obstinately says: "Do not ask me the reason: but be satisfied,/I say I would not" (Webster, 1988,1.1. 257-8). Critic William Archer, disapproving the hostile opposition of the brothers comments: "No motive is assigned in the earlier part of the play for brothers virulent and almost monomaniac opposition to the very idea of their sister's marrying again" (Holdsworth, 1975, p. 47).

4. The Stratagem Employed by Angelo and Ferdinand

While Ferdinand employs spy on his twin sister, Angelo corners another sister who rushes to him to save her brother. What Isabella pleads to Angelo for can be imagined as language constituted to appeal to Ferdinand too, though it never happens: "Go to your bosom, / Knock there and ask your heart what it doth know/ That it is like my brother's fault" (Shakespeare, 1991, 2.2. 138-40). The man who is supposed to eliminate sexual decadence from Vienna, tragically fails at the first knocking; "I have begun, / And now I give my sensual race the rein, / Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite, / Lay aside all nicety and prolixious blushes / That banish what they sue for" (Shakespeare, 1991, 2.2.

160-63). Angelo discovers the repressed desire, the “sharp appetite” but it is Ferdinand who suppresses it to the point of a volcanic explosion: “I would have their bodies/ Burnt in a coal-pit, with the ventage stopp’d, / That their curs'd might smoke not ascend to heaven: Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur, / Wrap them in't and then light them like a match (Webster, 1988, 2.5. 66-70). Even the Cardinal is stunned to see his temper and questions him at this point: “are you stark mad?” (Webster, 1988, 2.5. 65) James L. Calderwood (1962) points out that there is a debate among the scholars regarding Ferdinand's flat refusal to Bosola. In the essay “*The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony*” he says:

From Ferdinand's ‘Do not ask the reason’ - certainly an answer that makes us want to ask the reason - we can assume either that he does not understand the grounds of his behaviour or that he prefers not to state them (p. 105).

So we have to depend on the evidence that supports the view that Webster would like his audience to view Ferdinand's rage against his sister's remarriage stemming from a feeling of incest that even he himself may not recognize (Leech, 1986, p. 57).

Having been empowered, Angelo makes it clear that he will be a strict deputy during the duke's absence. He has revitalized laws governing sexual morality that have not been enforced for nearly two decades. Claudio, an apparently young gentleman becomes the first victim of his death penalty for impregnating Julietta. Despite Angelo's fiery arguments, Claudio's recognizable relationship with Julietta and their looking forward to marriage makes his judgment controversial. As the English Common Law approved of marriage by consent, Claudio and Julietta's marriage could have been accepted, but Angelo ignores it and thus throws the unborn child's future into quandary, more importantly, abandoning Mariana, Angelo disregards the very idea of family. On the other hand, Ferdinand fails to comprehend the absolutely vulnerable situation of the Duchess. Throughout the play, she bears the title “the Duchess”, which she would not have had were it not for her now-deceased first husband. To Ferdinand she emerges audacious and passionate, but:

they [Ferdinand & the Cardinal] have nearly universally failed to recognize that these traits were not simply desirable facets of her character, but were integral to her very survival. She is a completely isolated character, utterly alone in the world, associated with no female companions of her own rank. She is young, has lost her husband, has been left with a young son and daughter to raise, and has been forbidden by her brothers to remarry. (Roider, 2006)

Ignoring the public function they are given to accomplish, Angelo and Ferdinand along with the Cardinal can be blamed for working to advance their personal agenda. In other words, crisis related to their private lives supplies the central substance of the both plays. Angelo does not show equal interest in all the cases brought to him, and in Act II, when Elbow enters with pimp Pompey and Froth where Elbow charges the two for some villainy, soon it appears so tiresome and irrational to Angelo that he leaves the affairs to Escalus with disgust. Brian Mark Weber (2006) rightly points out:

If Angelo were a just ruler interested in seeing the law applied appropriately to his people, he most certainly would have wanted to protect the reputation of the law by exploring the details of this case in order to see if it is based on true guilt or merely unfounded accusation. (<http://www.Academic>)

Besides, he further argues, the only reason Angelo even considers Isabella's plea for her brother's life is based on the possibility that she will sleep with him (Weber). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, to prevent the Duchess from her remarrying, Ferdinand and the Cardinal irrationally generalize and build argument on a common female fault that women are all preoccupied by lust, widows who remarry are no less than prostitutes. They do not see that nothing supports:

the Duchess uses her sexuality to further her political position. Rather the Duchess uses her sexuality in order to distinguish a clear separation between her body natural and her body politic; a need for a private life separate from the political realm, a separation her corrupt brothers are unable to recognize (Weber, 2006, p. 66).

5. Comparison of Angelo and Ferdinand's Sexual Obsession

Angelo first meets Isabella when she comes to plead for Claudio but her looks and speech both at once rouse his eros, while for Ferdinand, we get the impression that it is more innate, though he is incestuous, and thereby a taboo. It is noteworthy, while she identifies herself as "a young widow" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 457), he sees her as a "lusty widow". The more Angelo is charmed by Isabella's personality, her pride and piety, the stronger his passion becomes, but As a Duke's deputy, Angelo is empowered unexpectedly and it appears as a test for the seemingly perfect Angelo. Quickly he discovers that he too is capable of being tempted. A villain of the play, Angelo rules strictly and without leniency. He has his own flaws but he is detestable more for his hypocrisy than for any other offense he commits. He self-consciously tries to resist his desires before

there is no such gradual development in Ferdinand. Many critics blame Isabella for making subtle sexual suggestions in her arguments where she defiantly says: "The impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies, / And strip myself to death as to a bed/ That longing have been sick for" (Shakespeare, 1991, 2.1. 101-03). She asks him to examine his own nature, tells him that women are fragile "as the glasses where they view themselves" (Shakespeare, 1991, 2.4. 126), which, arguably stimulates Angelo's lust towards her. Unknown to herself, she precisely describes the reversal, where Angelo aiming at committing the same crime. But it is Angelo himself who alerts us about the dividing line: "'Tis one thing to be tempted [and] Another thing to fall" (Shakespeare, 1991, 2.1. 17-8). Conversely, the Duchess is also in question for her speedy remarriage; for choosing someone below her own status, but it is not her virginity, rather her widowed state that Ferdinand wants to keep intact. While the Duchess thinks, she has "youth/And a little beauty" (Webster, 1988, 3.2. 139-40), Ferdinand counters, "You are a widow: You know already what man is" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 293-4).

Words are the dress of thought and much of Ferdinand- Angelo's mind revealed through their speeches where the later appears unparallel in arguments. Richard Gill (1998) says, "his [Angelo's] language shows that he's aware of important distinctions. When he's arguing, no one can keep up" (p. 173). In contrast to him, a salamander lives in's [Ferdinand] eye, / To mock the eager violence of fire" (Webster, 1988, 3.3. 49-50) and Delio says he explodes like "a deadly cannon that lightens ere it smokes" (Webster, 1988, 3.3. 54-5). What infuriates him to such a point? Centuries later, an explanation of his hysterical behavior can be traced in Freud, a Viennese physician, who "held that there is a constant tension between man and his surroundings. In particular, a tension or conflict between his drives and needs and the demands of society" (Gaarder, 1991, p. 358). According to Freud, "unconscious" is what is repressed for being "unpleasant", "improper", or "nasty" (Gaarder, 1991, p. 361) and it exists in layers where thoughts are occurring "below the surface". Ferdinand's relentless sexual suggestions hint at the Duchess, tempestuous rage and visualizing her in the shameful act of sin (Webster, 1988, 2.5. 41) manifest his subconscious mind. At its extremity, when it turns to 'lycanthopia' he becomes an "uncooperative patient" (Sims, 2003, p. 58).

Though Ferdinand's heart is at his mouth, he bears remarkable Machiavellian traits not very different from Angelo. The Italian born pragmatic lawyer, a contemporary of Shakespeare and Webster, "Machiavelli envisioned a double standard of behaviour, one for the rulers other for the people"

(Stumpf, 1966, p. 220) and emphasized that it is not necessary for the rulers to have all the virtues, but it is very necessary to seem to have them (Stumpf, 1966, p. 220). Ferdinand shows the treachery in appointing a spy in his twin sister's household, and when she dies, he blames Bosola for literally carrying out his instruction but remains silent regarding the Cardinal's irreligious extra marital relationship. The Duchess rightly suspects her brothers, when they warn her about her remarriage: "I think this speech between you both was studied, / it came so roundly off" (Webster, 1988, 1.1. 328-9). On the other hand Angelo creates a dilemma for Isabella: can she save her brother by still not consenting to Angelo's proposal, or should she accuse him [Angelo] openly, which will be a difficult thing to prove for his super human public image. His deceitfulness multiplies having the delusion of sleeping with Isabella, he denies the pledged pardon and orders the provost to execute Claudio four hours earlier than his scheduled time and to produce the head to him. He, as usual, justifies his reason through contemplation: "He should have lived, / Save that his riotous youth with dangerous sense/ Might in the times to come have ta'en revenge" (Shakespeare, 1991, 4.4. 26-8). His sense of guilt is expressed for deflowering the maid with 'sharp appetite' which "makes [him] unpregnant / And dull to all proceedings" (Shakespeare, 1991, 4.4. 18-9). Still the critics demanded the justice, which he thought is wounded in Angelo's escape but it must be noted twice he begs the full measure of the law; "I should be guiltier than my guiltiness / To think I can be discernible" (Shakespeare, 1991, 5.1. 368-9) moreover, there is Mariana who still loves him.

6. Conclusion

Restoring Angelo to a humane position, in a society where good and evil co-exist side by side, *Measure for Measure* ends with a fairy tale note as appears in Charles Lamb's retold version: "And the mercy-loving duke long reigned with his beloved Isabel, the happiest of husbands and of princes" (<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/lambtales/LTM4M.HTM>). In contrast, Ferdinand's retribution comes through first madness then a violent death; his suppressed desire, which he can neither specify nor control, cannot be materialized in the world: "I do account this world but a dog-kennel: / I will vault credit, and affect high pleasure. Beyond death" (Webster, 1988, 5.5. 67-9). With the hope of seeking 'high pleasure beyond death' he makes the last dialogue, precisely explaining the motive, which in the beginning he has refused to disclose: "My sister! O! my sister! there's the cause on't/ Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust /Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust" (Webster, 1988, 5.5. 71-3).

giving way to wicked hypocrisy. At the end of the play, Angelo is aptly punished for his hypocrisy. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand says that he wishes to inherit her wealth if she dies a widow. He does not have any plans to murder her though her death would be the only way to inherit her property. He advances when she has disobeyed his orders to stay single and chaste. Dreadfully ill tempered, Ferdinand is greedy, licentious with an unhealthy obsession for his sister. His doctor appropriately points out Ferdinand's difference with a wolf. While a wolf has hairy skin outside, Ferdinand has it inside. As a wolf man, Ferdinand is all alone and remains exclusively untouchable.

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