

The prince and its relation to measure for measure



While the connection between Machiavelli and Marlowe is distinctly articulated in the preface to the latter's *Jew of Malta*, the parallels between Machiavelli's *Prince* and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* are less explicitly expressed, but certainly no less significant. One must, of course, be cautious in suggesting that Shakespeare was familiar with Machiavelli's *Prince* in its original form – it is most likely that he read one of the numerous English or French paraphrases that were circulating at the time. There is no doubt, however, that the great majority of characters in *Measure for Measure* – the Duke, Angelo, Claudio, Pompey and even Isabella – display Machiavellian qualities. An comparison of key passages, both of *The Prince* and *Measure for Measure*, will establish this very fact. A study of kingship, arguably the entire premise for *Measure for Measure*, is immediately introduced in the first scene, with the Duke's declaration "Of government the properties to unfold/ Would seem in me t' affect speech and discourse." It is not until the third scene of act one, however, that this political discussion becomes specific and, ultimately, linked to the Machiavellian notion of statecraft. In this scene, which details the exchange between Vincentio and the Friar, we learn the reasons for the former's deputising of Angelo. Both of the Duke's significant dialogues – I. iii. 20-33 and I. iii. 36-55 – reveal that, for the last fourteen years, the "strict statutes and most biting laws" (I. iii. 20) punishing pre-marital intercourse have slipped into disuse. Although this scene is by no means extensive, it furnishes the reader with much food for thought. Vincentio's Machiavellianism, as manifest in the above scene, is centred upon three main elements – his previous laxity, his present need to deflect responsibility and his use of Angelo as an instrument in effecting the enforcement of this "most biting law." Upon closer inspection, both of

Measure for Measure and The Prince, we discern that the neglect apparent in the Duke's initial non-enforcement of the law may not really be neglect at all, but rather a strategic choice. Immediately relevant are Machiavelli's remarks on the need to avoid contempt and hatred : a prince who wants to maintain his rule is often forced not to be good, because whenever that class of men on which you believe your continued rule depends is corrupt, whether it be the populace, or soldiers, or nobles, you have to satisfy it by adopting the same disposition; and then are good deeds your enemies. By not enforcing a law which the vast majority of citizens – the base and the noble – at some point transgress, Vincentio ensures the stability of his position. The appointment of Angelo as deputy is complex, to say the least, and can be variously interpreted. We could assume that the Duke's remarks display his awareness of the hypocrisy of personally enforcing the law – Sith 'twas my fault to give the people scope, 'Twould be my tyranny to strike and gall them For what I bid them do" (I. iii. 36-38). Of course, one may just as easily argue that the Duke's newfound 'morality' is a direct result of the realisation that he, like the "rod" of the law, is perhaps "more mocked than feared" (I. iii. 28). This interpretation is given credence when we consider the possibility that Lucio's remarks regarding the Duke may to some degree be representative of a general spirit of disdain rather than just a humorous product of his bawdy and irreverent nature. Neither must we forget the Duke's own avowal which is couched in very negative (and martial) terms: I have on Angelo imposed the office, Who may in th'ambush of my name strike home And yet my nature never in the fight To do in slander. (I. iii. 41-44) Clearly, Vincentio wishes to distance himself as far as he can from an act which will inevitably engender hatred, resentment and civic disturbance (if

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not defiance, as we see in the case of Pompey, who declares to Mistress Overdone in I. ii. 91, “ I’ll be your tapster still.”) Once again the Duke has clearly taken the advice of Machiavelli, who repeatedly argues that the wise prince’s best defence is the goodwill of his subjects: a wise prince who is more afraid of his own people than of foreigners builds fortresses; he who is more afraid of foreigners than of his own people rejects them [...] your best possible fortress is that your subjects do not hate you [...] I blame any prince who considers the hatred of his people unimportant. The substitution of Angelo for the Duke also recalls Machiavelli’s account of the Duke of Romagna: After the Duke had seized the Romagna and found it controlled by weak lords[...] the whole province was full of thefts, brawls, and every sort of excess[...] Hence he put in charge there Messer Remirro de Orco, a man cruel and ready, to whom he gave the most complete authority. This man in a short time rendered the province peaceful and united, gaining enormous prestige. Then the Duke decided there was no further need for such boundless power; so he set up a civil court in the midst of the province[...] And because he knew that past severities had made some men hate him, he determined to purge such men’s minds and win them over entirely by showing that any cruelty which had gone on did not originate with himself but with the harsh nature of his agent. So getting an opportunity for it, one morning at Cesena he had Messer Remirro laid in two pieces in the public square with a block of wood and a bloody sword near him. What Machiavelli alludes to in the above passage is the Duke’s realisation of Orco as a potential threat, “ gaining enormous prestige...boundless power.” Implicit in this is the Duke of Romagna’s awareness of the implications of his forceful capture of the province – he is perfectly aware of the possibility that Orco

may resort to the same tactics to consolidate and enforce his power. Shakespeare's Duke Vincentio betrays a similar concern regarding Angelo. While he needs his services, he does not entirely trust him, and so stays behind to "visit both prince and people" (I. iii. 46) and ascertain "If power change purpose" (I. iii. 55). Other than this last reference to the tendency of power to corrupt, Shakespeare uses allusion and suggestion rather than explicit reference to explore the play's Machiavellian possibilities, and even these are nowhere near as violent as those we find in *The Prince* itself. A truly Machiavellian play would result in Vincentio killing Angelo and reasserting his power, or Angelo killing the Duke. The most likely of both these possibilities, of course, is the latter – throughout the play, Angelo continually reaffirms his Machiavellian qualities. Firstly, he uses his position for personal gain, realising that "[his] false o'erweighs [Isabella's] true" (II. iv. 171) and that he is one of those princes "against whom charges cannot be brought in court." Secondly, he refuses to rescind Claudio's death sentence even after (according to his knowledge) Isabella had fulfilled their agreement – Claudio's continued existence means the continued probability of his vengeance. Angelo has obviously taken Machiavelli's advice regarding the keeping of promises: By no means can a prudent ruler keep his word – and he does not – when to keep it works against himself and when the reasons that made him promise are annulled. What is perhaps a less well documented aspect of *Measure for Measure* is Isabella's own (albeit subtle) Machiavellianism. In her first exchange with Angelo (II. ii), which details the failure of the rhetoric for which she is so famous, Isabella is the one who introduces the notion of bribery which leads to Angelo's proposal. One also wonders whether it is mere coincidence that the language she uses to signify

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her religious fervour and purity is so overtly erotic, entrancing and arousing Angelo: Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies, And strip myself to death as to a bed That longing have been sick for... (II. ii. 101-103). Not only do these remarks display a kind of masochistic pleasure in self-flagellation (which is of particular relevance considering Angelo's austere attitude to religion), they more importantly provoke the association of violence with power, and power with wealth. This is surely a combination designed to affect Angelo in the most profound manner and make him even more determined to have his way. The ultimate expression of Angelo's corruption, however, is prevented by another profoundly Machiavellian concept – Fortune – who ensures that Vincentio is present at the jail when Isabella visits Claudio to tell him of the terrible bargain she must consider.

Sidestepping the conflict inherent in the Medieval fatalist world-view of predestination and the Humanist belief in the power of the individual, Machiavelli proposes a moderate view of Fortune. In chapter XVI of *The Prince*, this view is very succinctly articulated: Machiavelli asserts that “fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half to be controlled by ourselves.” This latter “half” is governed by another key Machiavellian concept, *virtù*, which signifies intellectual prowess. The prince of *virtù* must ensure he is as prepared as possible for the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (for she can be thwarted by diligence) and modify his behaviour to suit the circumstances. The Duke's obvious lack of control, the constant setbacks he experiences, do not signify inadequacy on his part – they represent the obstacles Fortune throws in his path. Vincentio's frequent revision of plans is exactly the kind of behaviour Machiavelli praises in *The Prince*: the one who adapts his policy to the times prospers, and likewise the

one whose policy clashes with the demands of the times does not. Fortune, however, does assist the Duke – Mariana just happens to love Angelo still, as well as being receptive to the substitution of herself for Isabella, and Vincentio is fortunately present at the jail when Angelo's order for Claudio's execution (despite Isabella/Mariana's compliance) is received. Likewise, the death of Ragozine the pirate, whose head is substituted for Claudio's, is highly fortuitous. This is, of course, all necessary to the resolution that occurs in the final act. Shakespeare's comic intent subverts the tragic potential of Measure for Measure, and the denouement (while primarily characterised by the reinstatement of just reign and the conventional pairing of couples) is profoundly Machiavellian. Not only does Vincentio conceal his knowledge of Claudio's safety from Isabella, he uses it in an impressive display of stagecraft, specifically designed to evoke a sort of mystical awe in all onlookers (including Isabella, who he later asks to marry him). The Duke has clearly enhanced his reputation by the "spectacular deeds" Machiavelli writes of in his Prince, "[finding] a way for punishing or rewarding[...] that is sure to be much talked about." BIBLIOGRAPHY Shakespeare, William: Measure for Measure, ed. Brian Gibbons, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Machiavelli, Niccolò: The Prince in Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others, vol. 1, trans. Allan Gilbert, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989 Machiavelli, Niccolò: The Prince, trans. George Bull, London: Penguin, 1995.