

Sovereignty and lycanthropy in the duchess of malfi



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' As one judge said to the other, " Be just, and if you can't be just, be arbitrary."' - William Burroughs

Agamben's Homo Sacer begins thus: ' The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.' This liminal space of sovereignty is diagnosed by Carl Schmitt: '

Authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.'

Agamben's case in Homo Sacer is that the ' inclusive exclusion' that constitutes the sovereign's legal status bears a striking similarity to a figure in Roman law who ' may be killed and yet not sacrificed ', the homo sacer, or as he appears in Germanic law, the Wolf-Man: ' The sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially homines sacri, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.' It is with respect to Agamben's theory of sovereignty that this essay will attempt to analyze the Wolf-Man of Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, Ferdinand, whilst also attempting to map Webster's critique of aristocracy by comparison with Nick Land's analysis of the 15th century child murderer and noble, Gilles de Rais.

' The foundation of sovereign power is to be sought not in the subjects' free renunciation of their natural right but in the sovereigns preservation of his natural right to do anything to anyone.' The natural right to which Agamben refers here is nothing less than sovereignty itself, which Agamben claims finds its origin in the Hobbesian state of nature, the war of all against all in which ' man is a wolf to men'. Ferdinand reflects this in the curious

lycanthropic analogy he draws between himself and his victims: ' Bosola:

Alas, how have these [the Duchess' children] offended? / Ferdinand: The

death of young wolves is never to be pitied'. Here we see Ferdinand, by his

<https://assignbuster.com/sovereignty-and-lycanthropy-in-the-duchess-of-malfi/>

abuse of sovereignty, producing his own inhumanity in the dehumanization he inflicts, culminating in his total lycanthropisation and, ultimately, in his bringing about a microcosm of the Hobbesian state of nature through his mass-production of homines sacri in the chaotic free-for-all of Act V.

The only character in Act V who does not, in fact, employ either violence or deceit to achieve their ends is Antonio, who is killed by Bosola when Bosola immediately assumes he is an enemy (an almost reasonable assumption in the war of all against all). The following scene of mutual slaughter becomes almost farcically Hobbesian when Ferdinand attacks the Cardinal, assuming, unprovoked, that he is betrayed; 'Ferdinand: The devil! My brother fight upon the adverse party! [He wounds the CARDINAL]'

The end of the play, however, seems to curiously diverge from this fervent critique of sovereignty when Delio announces that, by the installation of Antonio's son as Duke, the social order is restored by bourgeois sovereignty: 'Delio: These wretched eminent things leave no more fame behind 'em... Integrity of life is fame's best friend, which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.' Webster's case here seems to be not against sovereignty as such, but rather against the aristocratic juridical system alone. Whether Webster's optimism towards bourgeois sovereignty is misguided is a matter we will return to later, but Webster's distinction between the moral psychology of aristocratic and bourgeois sovereignty does, however, present us with another lens to view the lupine tendencies of our Duke through: the lens of Medieval warfare.

In his essay 'After the Law' Nick Land seeks to present the case of Gilles de Rais through the fundamental disjunction between the bourgeois 'relentless refusal of sumptuary consumption' and the pre-modern 'reckless militarism of the French aristocracy'. De Rais' sumptuary habits aligned him firmly, even anachronistically, with his aristocratic heritage ('Even by the standards of his times and rank, de Rais dissipated vast tranches of his wealth with abnormal extravagance'), which Land connects to the aristocratic concept of sovereignty, quoting from Bataille: 'Accumulated wealth has nothing but subordinate value, but wealth that is wasted or destroyed has, to the eyes of those who waste it, or destroy it, sovereign value'. We must focus on the dual meaning of the word 'sovereign' here as not only representing voluptuousness as the sacred purpose of wealth, but also the sense in which voluptuousness is the act of a sovereign, one who may waste the production of others through their thirst for destruction, their 'wolfish desire'.

A connection between aristocratic militarism and this wolfish desire pervades The Duchess of Malfi. When Castruccio expresses a bourgeois, utilitarian attitude to the idea of warrior nobles ('It is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a captain... He were far better to do it by deputy.') Ferdinand responds with total disdain for what is 'necessary', or indeed 'better' by these measured standards, saying: 'Why should he not as well sleep or eat by a deputy? This might take idle, offensive, and base office from him, whereas the other deprives him of honour.' The similarities to de Rais continue here: 'To the eyes of Gilles war is a game' and 'neither intelligence nor calculation is noble'. In short, 'war

exceeds judgement' , both in the sense of utilitarian value judgement and moral juridical judgement.

But, despite the clear differences between the aristocratic and the bourgeois attitude to voluptation, what we see is not merely an aristocratic wolfish desire coincident with sovereignty, but rather a sovereignty which produces wolfish desire. While Webster expresses optimism at the new bourgeois order and exalts in the just downfall of aristocracy, Land instead sees the case of damned aristocrats as a tragedy of dates: ' The tragedy of de Rais... was that of living the transition from sumptuary to rational sociality.' In light of this it makes sense to ask whether it is aristocracy which should be on trial, or sovereignty itself.

Webster's ' trial' of Ferdinand, through the presentation of his downfall, effectively presents the case of aristocratic sovereignty on trial in the court of bourgeois sovereignty. Seeming to predict Charles I legal defense at Westminster Hall (' I would know by what power I am called hither, by what lawful authority?') Ferdinand's apology of himself consists not in arguing the facts of his crimes - those are incontestable - but rather the legitimacy of the sovereignty that calls him into question: ' What I have done, I have done: I'll confess nothing', and this is for good reason; Ferdinand's crimes stem entirely from his sovereignty. His bloodlust, like de Rais', is merely the expression of the purpose of feudal sovereignty vis-a-vis the sovereign value of wealth: voluptuousness. Additionally, in Duchess we see sovereignty only ever mobilized in its capacity to lupinize both the wielder and the victim: sovereignty is not only the tool by which Ferdinand enacts his wolfish desire, but the engine of its production. His crimes are therefore, in a sense, not his

<https://assignbuster.com/sovereignty-and-lycanthropy-in-the-duchess-of-malfi/>

own, since they are only enacted through him by sovereignty, the same power which, in its bourgeois manifestation, now accuses him. It is for this reason that Land refers to Ferdinand's counterpart, de Rais, as 'the pale criminal', referencing Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The pale criminal is driven to murder by an engine of desire beyond his control: 'his soul wanted blood, not robbery.', and thus he stands accused of a crime which exceeds him. Similarly, Webster does not put sovereignty on trial in *The Duchess of Malfi*, but by exalting in the victory of the bourgeois order over the aristocratic, instead celebrates a new form of sovereignty. It seems Webster hears, but does not appreciate Nietzsche's warning about the changeability of sovereign ideologies: 'there have been other ages and another evil and good'

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998)

Burroughs, William, *Naked Lunch*, (New York: Grove Press, 2002)

Carlton, Charles, *Charles I: The Personal Monarch*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995)

Land, Nick, 'After the Law', *Fanged Noumena*, ed. by Robin Mackay & Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2018)

Webster, John, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th edn, 6 vols (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), II

<https://assignbuster.com/sovereignty-and-lycanthropy-in-the-duchess-of-malfi/>