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Angelo's Measure: Corruption Capable of Virtue

Popular fiction often has villains that are villains through and through. Jafar from *Aladdin*, President Snow from *The Hunger Games*, and Voldemort from the Harry Potter series are some that come to mind immediately. Shakespeare, on the other hand, adds greater nuance to his villains. Yes, there are still some plays in which the villains seem to be nothing other than evil and do not appear to have redeeming qualities, such as Iago from *Othello* or Don John from *Much Ado About Nothing*, but these tend to be the exception in Shakespeare's plays rather than the rule. The two characters that this paper focuses on, Edmund from *King Lear* and Angelo from *Measure for Measure*, are a part of the nuanced class of villain and prove true to Shakespeare's ability to humanize even those that appear the most despicable.

One of the characters, Edmund, seems like he would fall into the category of a "plain-dealing villain" and never emerge from it (*Much Ado* 1.3.29-30). His final act—when he attempts to save King Lear's and Cordelia's lives—however, shows a different side of him that is likely to blindside readers who fail to pick up on certain details in the play. Richard Matthews in his article "Edmund's Redemption in *King Lear*" outlines four steps that Edmund went through in order to show how this act truly does fit Edmund's character. The other character, and the main focus of this paper, is Angelo from *Measure for Measure*. Both of these characters ultimately display redeeming traits that not only create sympathy for them and some measure of understanding about them, but also give evidence of how even the worst of humanity is capable

of virtue. This understanding of a villain's potential for good in turn leads to the conclusion that all of humanity has the potential for great virtue.

Among the many critics of *King Lear* (which I shall refer to as *Lear*) and *Measure for Measure* (which I shall refer to as just *Measure*), there are those that prefer to read a bleaker meaning into the plays. Many critics view Angelo as corrupt from the start; as Mary Lascelles notes, there are those that think of Angelo as a "confirmed and cunning hypocrite" (72). And Matthews points out that some critics believe that Shakespeare purposefully frustrated Edmund's act of redemption at the end of the play "with the death of Cordelia to achieve a bleaker despair" (25-26). However, this grim view of the overall meaning in *Lear* and the disregard for the good aspects of Angelo ignores Shakespeare's ability to coax forth beauty from tragedy. As Cheryl Rogers says, "Shakespeare's humanistic interpretation of theology on stage illustrates that there is the possibility of redemption for the most unlikely individuals." Throughout Shakespeare's plays there is an abundance of meaning that the views I mentioned earlier in this paragraph ignore.

Some critics have attempted to prove the same point that I endeavor to prove, but they go about this using the reverse of the methods I am using. Rather than looking for the good in the villains, some critics have sought out the bad in the heroes. Richard A. Levin is one such critic. Although Levin also believes that "the play insists that we are all a mixture of good and evil" (258), he draws out the questionable actions of the heroes of *Measure*, Isabella and the duke, in order to show the complexity of human nature. He uses the faults in these heroes to show, for instance, how "Isabella's example . . . teaches us to know our own limitations before judging others" (258). In addition, Levin softens Angelo's wickedness by drawing a comparison between Angelo and the duke and then states near the end of his paper that the duke pardoning Angelo "is

both more and less than Angelo deserves. He has abused authority; still, the duke pushed him into office” (268).

Levin’s view of the duke and Isabella is in stark contrast to critics such as Paul Toscano, who portrays the duke as practically perfect. This paper will neither endeavor to color Edmund and Angelo as completely bad, like Toscano’s paper colors the duke as completely good, nor make them appear heroes by fantasizing about virtues they do not possess or by tearing down the heroes of the plays. Because the purpose of this paper is not to argue that Edmund and Angelo are actually heroic, their faults—of which there are many—will be frankly acknowledged. That they have grievous faults is actually necessary to proving that there is the possibility for good in the wicked because without faults there can be no contrast to show the good.

If, for inconceivable reasons, someone stopped reading or watching *Lear* after Edmund gave the order for Cordelia and King Lear to be murdered, he or she would be extremely confused about how Edmund could ever be thought of in a good light. It seems as if there could be nothing good about Edmund. Our first introduction to his thoughts shows us his disregard for his father and brother and his desire for power (*Lear* 1.2.1-22), then at the end of the same scene after Edmund began to turn his father and brother against each other, he mocks Edgar because Edgar’s “nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none” (186-85). His wicked acts grow as the play progresses. He accomplishes having Edgar disowned and hunted, he turns his father in for treason which results in Gloucester being blinded and hunted, and he seduces both Goneril and Regan. Then he orders the cold-blooded murders of Cordelia and Lear. His acts are all self-serving and evil until he attempts to prevent the deaths of Cordelia and Lear.

This sudden change of heart is evidence of just that—a change in Edmund. Matthews explains this change by using four steps: being aware of “one’s mortality,” having “compassion

for the suffering of others,” recognizing “the justice of one’s punishment,” and experiencing “the power of love” (27). The first step came when Edgar defeated Edmund. It was after Edmund received his mortal wound that he confessed his crimes, but since this was the beginning of change, this confession is “riddled with blindness and pride” (Matthews 26). The second step came after Edgar recounted the hardships that their father went through and Edmund stated, “This speech of yours hath moved me” (*Lear* 5.3.203). Rather than taking pleasure in Gloucester’s misfortune like he had earlier in the play, Edmund is moved to compassion. The third step took place when Edmund learned of the suffering that Kent went through and the deaths of Goneril and Regan. Matthews understands Edmund’s remark, “I was contracted to them both. All three now marry in an instant” (5.3.32-33), to show Edmund’s acceptance of the justice of his fate (27). The fourth step, which led to Edmund’s attempt to stop the murders he had commanded, took place when Edmund realized that Goneril and Regan had loved him. Granted, their fashion of love is not something that most people would want in their lives. However, for Edmund, who grew up in a home with a father that would say such things as “the whoreson must be acknowledged” (1.1.23-24), it was possibly the first time he felt loved.

One might say that Angelo is now put in a worse light compared to Edmund because Edmund was missing all four steps in his life and Angelo was only missing two. Angelo always had a very well-developed sense of justice (step three) and he was loved by Mariana as well as by the duke (step four). The problem for Angelo is that because he did not move through steps one and two, he had nothing to help guide him on how to apply what he did have. He was not able to recognize his own weaknesses and therefore could not understand the need for compassion or even really *how* to have compassion for others.

This inability to comprehend his own weaknesses and understand love could easily be the cause of Angelo being “a man whose blood is very snow broth” (*Measure* 1.4.57-58). Without any direction on how to apply his heightened sense of justice, it became warped until it reached abnormal proportions. Instead of enforcing just punishments for crimes, he used the law to inflict extreme, though technically legal, punishments. Without being able to understand love, the feelings of attraction that Isabella awoke in him sickened and turned to lust. Angelo’s lack of the foundational steps can also explain his casting aside of Mariana. W. M. T. Dodds said of their betrothal that it was easy to see why Angelo “should have broken off the negotiations for a marriage of convenience which had ceased to offer the conveniences for whose sake it was first contemplated” (254-55). Angelo had no understanding of love and therefore had none to give. However, this does not mean that he was incapable of working through the steps and learning how to love. With Edmund we witnessed a pre-formed villain well on his way to the height of his wickedness and then all of the steps to his redemption, but with Angelo we have the opportunity to witness the making of a villain and then the beginning of his redemption.

In many ways, the transition of Angelo’s character from fair to bad makes it easier to see how Angelo’s attributes could be turned to virtuous purposes rather than the twisted purposes that he seeks after in the play. Angelo felt untested and unprepared for the task that the duke presented him with (*Measure* 1.1.49-51), and unfortunately for him and those that suffered because of him, he was correct. He had not been tested and when he was, he gave in despite telling Escalus that it was “one thing to be tempted . . . another thing to fall” (2.1.17-18). Ironically, it was virtue that tempted his virtue. In a way, this makes us better able to relate to him because some of the hardest decisions we have to make come not from deciding against doing bad but from refusing something that is not necessarily bad for everyone but is bad for us

or bad at that specific time. We can clearly see Angelo's struggle with temptation in his soliloquy during scene 2 of act 2. To Angelo's credit, as Levin draws our attention to, Angelo attempts to leave Isabella—and thus leave the temptation—after he begins to realize the affect she has on him (Levin 262; *Measure* 2.2.147-49).

When Angelo realized that he was just as susceptible as Claudio to temptation, he saw his mortal, or human, weakness (step one) and moved forward toward compassion (step two) with his wish to let Claudio live (2.2.182-84). Then came the opportunity to become a man of virtue. He could have continued to progress. He could have taken the next step and adjusted his sense of justice back to a reasonable proportion, but the idea of “betraying his conception of justice” was too difficult for him and he instead continued on to warp his “love” for Isabella (Dodds 250). Despite Angelo's descent into depravity, he still retained some virtues from before his trial of temptation. After the duke returned, the power Angelo was loath to accept at the beginning of the play had not grown so much upon him that he had difficulty giving it up. John D. Cox, who did not have a high opinion of Angelo, notes as a virtue that “Angelo surrender[ed] his power to the duke at the end of the play without any evident hesitation” (157).

Not only was Angelo able to accept and even desire justice to be done to him—showing his lack of hypocrisy—his views of justice had been tempered by his experiences throughout the play. It is true that Angelo attempted to hide his faults behind his reputation as shown by his speech after Isabella threatened to “tell the world aloud” about Angelo's proposition (*Measure* 2.4.154), but he had stated early on in the play that he believed only in punishing that which was “open made to justice” (*Measure* 2.1.21). When his crime was brought to the attention of the duke, the only person who had greater authority than him, Angelo willingly accepted and even pleaded for justice rather than mercy (5.10.485-88). Angelo thought he had meted out death to

Claudio, so he was willing to accept death as his own punishment. When Claudio was not actually dead, he offered no more objections to the duke allowing him to live. Presumably, since Angelo's former opinion had been that Claudio deserved to die for Claudio's crime, Angelo would still have thought that his own crime also deserved death. The lack of objection from Angelo shows that the humanizing effect of his own weakness and his new-found compassion for others helped to balance his thoughts on justice. He is able to change and accept mercy as a viable option.

One critic, David L. Stevenson, stated that "the final twist, whereby Angelo is brought back into a livable relationship with humanity, comes as a result of his own self-judgment" (20). I agree to a point but would argue that there is one more step Angelo needs to take, and we are not shown Angelo taking this step in the play. Similar to how Edmund needed to realize that he was loved, Angelo needs to recognize the worth of the love that he is offered. The last line the duke says to Angelo is about Mariana's worthiness for Angelo's love (5.1.508), so readers are left with the hope that, now that Angelo has been able to progress to the point of tempering his justice, he will be able to move on to accepting and reciprocating love. However, just like we did not see the beginning of Edmund becoming a villain, we do not see the ending of Angelo becoming a good man.

That we do not see the ending of Angelo's change is actually appropriate for my argument; Angelo shows that all of humankind has the potential for good, and leaving open-ended the question of whether he completely changes emphasizes that potential rather than detracts from it. Just as we wonder at the beginning of *Measure* whether or not Angelo is as righteous as he and everyone else seems to think he is, at the end of the play we are left to wonder if he's really as bad as he now thinks he is. Along with the awakening of unrighteous

impulses in Angelo came the foundation for good. He is now able to look at himself as a person with weaknesses—an essential step for everyone in order to then overcome those weaknesses.

He can feel compassion for others. And his ideas of justice have been tempered by his weaknesses and compassion. All that remains is for him to open himself up to understanding and reciprocating worthy love. He, like all of us, must continually seek to improve himself by building on the virtue already within him.

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