

Politics of Reality in *Measure for Measure*: Duke Vincentio as a Machiavellian

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Abstract

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's depiction of Duke Vincentio is often viewed through the lens of moral judgment and ideal leadership. However, upon closer inspection, the Duke's actions reveal a Machiavellian political philosophy that subordinates morality to political expediency. By analyzing Vincentio's behavior — such as his dissimulation, his manipulation of Angelo, and his use of deceptive tactics like the bed trick — this paper demonstrates that the Duke's approach to governance aligns closely with Machiavelli's core principles of realism, thereby, positions *Measure for Measure* as not only a morality play but also a sophisticated political commentary, reflecting the complexities of governance and leadership as shown in Shakespeare's political world.

Keywords

Measure for Measure; Duke Vincentio; Machiavellianism; political realism; governance

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1. Introduction: From Morality Play to Political Reading

Traditionally, *Measure for Measure* has been regarded as a morality play, its title echoing the Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not, that ye be not judged ... for with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matt. 7:1–2). The play has thus been read as dramatizing divine justice and ethical proportion. Yet, from its opening dialogue on "the properties of government," Shakespeare also signals a political agenda. Duke Vincentio emerges not merely as a moral arbiter but as a political strategist, manipulating his subjects with a dramaturgical control that recalls Machiavelli's prince^[1-3].

Norman Holland^[4] aptly observed that the Duke "manipulated the other characters much the same as a dramatist would." Such manipulation, however, undermines any simple alignment with Christian morality. Instead, Vincentio often appears closer to a schemer than a saint, a ruler who values expediency over virtue. His recourse to dissimulation, his instrumental use of deputies, and his prioritization of the state's security over ethical considerations all place him, as Holland remarked, "on Machiavelli's side." This essay seeks to move beyond surface analogies and argue that Vincentio embodies Machiavelli's central political doctrine: realism.

2. The Duke and The Prince: A Machiavellian Analogy

One of the earliest and most persistent comparisons has been between Vincentio's delegation of authority to Angelo and Cesare Borgia's notorious use of Remirro de Orco, described by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Like Borgia, who empowered Remirro to enforce harsh reforms before having him executed to appease the populace, Vincentio employs Angelo to revive strict statutes, only to expose and condemn him once public resentment has grown. Zdravko Planinc goes so far as to suggest that "Duke Vincentio was Shakespeare's Duke Valentino."

While the parallel is suggestive, it risks remaining superficial, vulnerable to the charge of coincidence. What matters is not isolated analogy but the Duke's systematic adherence to Machiavellian realism: his view of human nature, his manipulation of deputies, and his subordination of morality to necessity. On these grounds, Vincentio reveals himself as a profoundly Machiavellian ruler.

3. Realism and Human Nature: The Duke as "Seemer"

Machiavelli's anthropology is famously pessimistic: humans are self-interested, cowardly, and untrustworthy. "It is not necessary for a prince to possess all the good qualities," Machiavelli writes, "but it is necessary to appear to have them." What matters is not substance but semblance. The prince must master the arts of feigning and dissembling.

Duke Vincentio is precisely such a "seemer." Publicly revered as a model of justice and mercy, he conceals a harsher reality. The substitution of another prisoner's head for Claudio's reveals the disjunction between his reputation and his practice. By ordering an execution under false pretenses, he violates his professed principles. His chilling remark that "death is a great disguiser" further exposes a cold familiarity with executions, suggesting that his reputation for leniency has long masked a record of mercilessness. As Planinc notes, Vincentio does "what people criticized in Angelo, perhaps even worse—but he does so more skilfully and under masks."

In short, Vincentio's true nature is cloaked beneath carefully maintained appearances. Despite his cruelties, he remains beloved, demonstrating his mastery of Machiavelli's dictum that seeming matters more than being. He is the quintessential Machiavellian "seemer."

4. Government and Deputies: To Be Both Loved and Feared

In line with this realistic view of human nature, another distinctive thinking of Machiavelli should be his corresponding idea about the desired relationship between them — the prince and his subjects. When dealing with people, is clemency a more preferable policy than that of cruelty? Is it better to be loved than feared? In accordance with his realistic view which sees an innate mixture of virtue and vice in human nature, the best scenario Machiavelli anticipated also embraces both sides — "use force and fraud, and the appearance of virtue and vice, as necessary, to make oneself loved and feared". As for fulfillment of this requirement, a Machiavellian use of "deputies" offers an ideal choice, that is, to borrow Machiavelli's words, "to afford rare examples of civil administration" through picking "a spectacular exhibition of rewarding or punishing". This way, on one hand, good actions, be that of the prince himself or his subjects, get invested with a character of greatness, serving as valuable guidance for others and a publicity stunt for the prince himself. While on the other hand, by means of appointing a deputy to carry out the necessary rule of force and the latter's actual practicing of them, desired political ends get met, so is the much needed effect of deterrence. And, with his deliberate distancing from such rule and the ensuing open trial of the then unpopular deputy, the prince artfully stands himself with the public, making it clear that if any cruelty has been committed, it has not come from him but from the harsh nature of his deputy. As such, cruelty well used becomes mercy. The prince succeeds in making himself both loved and feared, but not hated. Naturally, people follow him in peace and in war. Coming to this, in view of many of his shrewd manipulations of "deputies", it's safe to claim Duke Vincentio a real expert.

Speaking of Vincentio's Machiavellian "deputies", the most representative one should be Angelo, whose appointment as the Duke's substitute was fairly known

across the state. To quote Vincentio's phrases, Angelo was "elected our absence to supply", "lent our terror, dressed with our love", and authorized "in our remove at full ourself". At first sight, Angelo seemed entitled to an elaborately planned internship as a future successor. Difficulties due to ensue were merely for the effect of moral testing, to see "if power changes purpose, what our seemer (would) be". Everything appeared so natural and well-meant. Yet, far from the ideal appearance of such an accession process, the essence of this act was rather realistic, at least for the Duke. From his secret confession to the friar — "Therefore indeed, my father, I have on Angelo imposed the office, who may in th'ambush of my name strike (evil deeds) home, and yet may nature never in the fight to do in slander" — it turned out quite obvious that Angelo was merely Duke Vincentio's Remirro de Orco: first used as a deputy for ferocious rectification, including selection of exemplary transgressors and spectacular castigation of them; then, in the Duke's posturing of reward and permission for petitions, (utilized as) a tool to show off the Duke's justice and contrasting benevolence; and finally, once Angelo's purpose served and people's dissatisfaction perverse, forsaken as a typical deputy of vice and punished in a deterrent manner. Throughout the scheme, for all the cruelties and force the Duke actually utilized, Vincentio himself shrewdly sheltered behind the screen, thereby, retained people's love, ensured their reverence, and avoided their hatred as well^[5].

To conclude, according to his realistic treatment of both means — law and force, vice and virtue, as well as his clever manipulation of "deputies", it's quite easy to see a Machiavellian nature in Duke Vincentio's political philosophy. And from his achievement in getting himself both loved and feared, it turns out still easier to confirm not only this Machiavellian tendency, but his proficiency in practicing it.

5. Morality and Necessity: The End Justifies the Means

On the basis of the introduction above, one knows that in Machiavelli's politics of reality, a wise prince is supposed to give the appearance of being virtuous so as to facilitate his governing; and when the situation requires, he could also utilize force and fraud, as long as he can well

mask it, like handing it over to a certain deputy. But the problem is, what if there is no way of dodging? Does the influence of morality still have a bigger say? According to Machiavelli, the answer is definitely "NO".

In revolt against ancient and medieval theorists, for whom political behaviour must be guided by the highest ideals, Machiavelli vetoed the existence of any moral imperative in politics. As he understood it, the actions of princes should be governed solely by necessity. When conditions require it, "a prince should not shrink from encountering some blame on account of vices that are important to the support of his states"; for politics was not the pursuit of moral virtue but the pursuit of the state's security and well-being. Once the prince's policy proves successful, his ruthlessness will be forgiven and forgotten. Anyway, as he put it, "in the actions of men, especially of princes, the end justifies the means". As for this opinion, one can find a strong echo in the actions of the Duke under discussion.

When it comes to the demonstration of Duke Vincentio's realistic view of morality — his prioritizing of political ends to moral values, the first proof one may think of should be the Duke's composed justification for his ignominious bed trick. His "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof" was as almost saying "the benefits of my strategy justifies my immoral deceit". The same also applied to the incitation he gave to Mariana, "sith that the justice of your title to him doth flourish the deceit." If these and other lies the Duke told while directing this trick were only minor moral transgressions and therefore still not enough to constitute a persuasive proof, then the Duke's unabashed breach of faith to all his subjects should serve as a conclusive factor. When readers engage themselves in arguing whether it was right for the Duke to carry out such a scheme or, how successful he was in doing so, one critical question remained — where on earth did the cause of the scheme come from? In other words, why did the normally indulgent prince suddenly want a severe law which may incur public dissatisfaction? What's for? Though there was no direct explanation offered, changes of social background as reflected in people's daily conversation — "If the Duke, with the other dukes, come not to composition with the King of Hungary, why then all the dukes fall upon the King" offered an

important clue: the nation was expecting a war. While in peace as the nation previously witnessed, the Duke could still allow people enjoyments they craved while himself be repaid with a reputation for being generous, urgent needs of the coming war — disciplined foot soldiers and officers that could command them — asked for a change of people's ways, which, at the moment, were generally made soft, indifferent, contemptuous, and, in a word, not fit for soldiers. Therefore, strict statutes and most biting laws became paramount — to the degree that it could almost determine the survival of the state, making concerns for morality a luxury. Duke Vincentio saw this, and responded to this necessity of time. Finally, for all his breach of faith and fraudulent use of Angelo, crying needs of state got met — justice served, people used to discipline and the sight of blood. All things prepared for war^[6].

6. Conclusion

As shown in discussions above, apart from being a morality play about ethical judgments, the work *Measure for Measure* also makes a perfect political reading, demonstrating the superb statecraft of Duke Vincentio throughout the event. Once given scrupulous examination, it turns out that, be its the preface in which amazing similarities between Duke Vincentio and another typical Machiavellian figure abound; or the three elucidative parts consisting of the Duke's shrewd manipulation of appearances, his adept utilization of force and fraud, and his prompt response to the needs of the state; all serve as a footnote for one thing — Duke Vincentio's belief in Machiavelli's politics of reality and his being a Machiavellian figure himself.

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