

Foucault's Descending Individuation: The Unprivileged Under Panoptic Gaze in Shakespeare and Godwin

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents new critical insights into two selected literary works from the English literature, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, in light of Michel Foucault's "descending individuation" in *Discipline and Punishment*. Through the lens of this theory, this study illumines these writers' scathing critique of "descending individuation" in their cultures in which surveillance of individuals goes in an inverse relationship with their socio-economic statuses—namely, the lower one's social and economic station is, the more liable s/he becomes to panoptic gaze. This paper shows these authors' dissatisfaction with the flawed justice system of their culture, because surveillance, usually a disciplinary law-enforcement strategy, could backfire if enforced in a descending, prejudiced fashion.

Keywords: Foucault, Descending, Individuation, Disciplinary, Surveillance, Godwin, Shakespeare.

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's Panoptic gaze is a disciplinary mechanism that aims at getting individuals to interiorize the accepted norms of the gazers. Originating in prison systems, panoptic gaze strategies engender an internal fear that deters any unacceptable behaviors. This "system of surveillance" works as "an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself" (Foucault, 155). While this system of individualization has been used as a disciplinary strategy, during the feudal era "only the celebrated and noble were individualized" (Smart, 87). In this context, Foucault differentiates between 'ascending individuation,' and 'descending individuation.' During the feudal era, individuation was ascending. That is, powerful people who stood high in the social hierarchy were more individuated than those lower in the socioeconomic scale (Honneth 1994, 168). In other words, the higher one's socioeconomic status the more s/he was individuated. of course, individuation at the time did not serve as a

disciplinary strategy; rather, it worked as a way of elevating those in power and displaying and celebrating their authority. On the top of this 'ascending individuation,' of course, was the monarch whose power and authority were meant to be made visible to the citizens. Shumway (131) opines that "power had always made itself visible; the monarch himself and the symbols that represented him were displayed to establish and maintain his rule, while his subjects remained unseen." However, later on, individuation became descending and has since been used as a disciplinary strategy. 'Descending individuation' came to mean that the lower one's social station was, the more she became the object of the disciplinary gaze. That is, poor and unprivileged individuals become the focus of the gaze whereas those powerful and privileged individuals have the power to avoid this gaze. Sumway (132) maintains:

Foucault argues that discipline marks as a reversal of the politics of individualization. Under regimes such as those of Feudal Europe, those with the greatest sovereignty were most individualized. The king was more often than anyone else pictured or written about. Under disciplinary regimes, however, power becomes more anonymous and functional. As a result, the least powerful becomes the most individualized.

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Since the primary purpose of the panoptic gaze is to discipline bad subjects, it makes its focus those individuals who are more likely to violate the accepted social norms. That is, authorities differentiate between good individuals and bad ones; the good are those who conform to the norms of their cultures. These individuals are classified as good because they know and accept the established rules of their societies; therefore, they fit into the accepted norm. Because such individuals are viewed as virtuous, they are not considered as a threat to their societies' normal way of life. Hence, such individuals stay away from the disciplinary gaze. Bad individuals, however, are those who do not conform to the rules; therefore, they are viewed as having subversive thinking. Such individuals are made the object of the disciplinary gaze because they threaten society's normal way of life; therefore, they do not fit into the accepted norm.

Thus, as a result of the aristocrats' power, dominance, and authority, I suggest, it has been assumed by some that such individuals are reliable, honest, intelligent, educated, and unthreatening to the normal way of life; therefore, it is sometimes claimed, they are not likely to violate the accepted cultural norms and rules. Accordingly, based on such assumptions, it can be argued that one's socioeconomic status could function as a shield from the disciplinary gaze. One's socioeconomic status, then, becomes the sole determiner of his/her reputation, and thus, the primary factor for classifying him/her as good or bad. If one's social station is what determines her reputation, then one can be classified as good based on external factors, regardless of whether she/he is inherently good or evil. By the same token, those individuals who are lower in the socioeconomic scale are viewed as the ones who were not favored by God because they are evil, unreliable, and dishonest; therefore, they are deemed threatening to the normal way of life. Hence, such individuals, it is believed, must be made the focus of the disciplinary gaze.

Amidst this discussion arises the question of justice: if the disciplinary gaze is focused on the poor and less privileged citizens, then the aristocrats remain impenetrable under the shield their reputation provides. This means that there is ample opportunity for the wealthy to break the law without being seen, which leads to chaos in the legal system. Under such partial laws, the guilty might come out innocent and the innocent guilty. Many English authors have critiqued this phenomenon in their cultures. Shakespeare and Godwin are among the

many writers who criticize their prejudiced cultures which give too much power to the aristocratic and wealthy individuals and victimize individuals who belong to lower socioeconomic statuses.

Discussion

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare criticizes his culture's justice system where those in positions of power remain unseen and the poor are victimized. Angelo, who is appointed as a ruler by the Duke, enjoys a good reputation among the public; he is known for his moral integrity and ethical uprightness. He is viewed as a person who respects the laws, especially those which prohibit premarital relationships, more than anybody else. In the Elizabethan culture, premarital sexual relationships were prohibited; therefore, such crimes were punishable by the law. In *Measure for Measure*, the State is intensely and seriously concerned with imposing its restrictive laws against premarital sexual relations because it wants "clear kinship structures and orderly means of transferring property to legitimate members of a new generation" (Greenblatt 2008, 2040). In addition, premarital sex was believed to be the primary cause of venereal diseases and illegal trade in prostitution, and the chief reason for moral social decline. However, even though premarital sex is perceived as a serious crime, not all those who commit this crime are punished: poor Claudio is detained and sentenced to death for sleeping with Juliet, whereas Angelo, who commits the same crime, remains unseen.

Among the noteworthy issues in the play is Angelo's insistence that Claudio be punished for his crime. On the surface, one might argue that Angelo is the ruler and that it is his duty to enforce the law, or that he is committed to the Duke to maintain order in Vienna; thus, Angelo's insistence on enforcing the law might be motivated by his fear of the Duke's surveillance, because the Duke entrusts him with the throne. However, his insistence on having Claudio punished for his crime is unwarranted by many characters in the play, including Isabella, the Duke, Lucio and even Escalus, who all believe that Angelo is strangely insistent on law enforcement. Angelo "follows close the rigour of the statute, / To make him [Claudio] an example" (1.4.66-67). Angelo wants to impose the law on individuals by making of Claudio's punishment a disciplinary example for the public in order to create in individuals self-regulation. He tells Escalus, "We must not make a scarecrow of the law, / Setting it up to fear the birds of prey, / And let it keep one shape, till custom

make it/ Their perch and not their terror” (2.1.1-4).

If one closely scrutinizes Angelo’s conversation with Isabella in the fourth scene of Act Two, she/he recognizes that he—Angelo—cares too much about his reputation, for it works as a shield against any suspicions or accusations. Based on this, one can argue that his unwarrantable insistence on punishing Claudio might be perceived as a way of consolidating his position and reinforcing his reputation as a “man[, Lucio tells Isabella] whose blood / Is very snow-broth; one who never feels / The wanton stings and motions of the sense” (1.4.56-58). Hence, by insisting on enforcing the law, Angelo’s crime remains safe from any suspicion.

Thus, it is Angelo’s reputation, which is brought by the position he holds, of course, that works as a shield against any suspicions towards his ostensible moral integrity. In Act II Scene II, Isabella tells Angelo that his insistence on punishing her brother is unwarrantable: “Who is it that hath died for this offence? / There’s many have committed it” (90-91). Ironically, in their conversation, it turns out that he is willing to commit a crime similar to Claudio’s for the second time. Even though Angelo does not act upon what he preaches, yet his reputation lets his hypocrisy and corruption go unnoticed. Isabella tells Angelo, “Because authority, though it err like others, / Hath yet a kind of medicine in itself, / That skins the vice o’ the top” (2.2.137-39). Isabella becomes aware of his hypocrisy, for her brother is to be punished for the same crime that he asks of her; she tells Angelo, “I know your virtue hath a licence in’t, / Which seems a little fouler than it is, / To pluck on others” (2.4. 145-47). He appears to be a good man, but in reality he is corrupt because he uses his position of power to serve his personal end.

During the Elizabethan era, one’s socioeconomic status determined his/her credibility in the public eye. A poor and unprivileged lady like Isabella would not be viewed as an equal to a powerful and wealthy man like Angelo, for his reputation and position are superior to Isabella’s. Therefore, when Isabella confronts him with disclosing his sexual advances to her, he confidently disregards her threat and even mocks her because she is not likely to find ears for her claims:

ISABELLA. I will proclaim thee, Angelo; look for't:
Sign me a present pardon for my brother,
Or with an outstretch'd throat I'll tell the world aloud
What man thou art.

ANGELO. Who will believe thee, Isabel?
My unsoil'd name, the austereness of my life,
My vouch against you, and my place i' the state,
Will so your accusation outweigh,
That you shall stifle in your own report
And smell of calumny. (2.4.152-61)

Angelo is not worried about her threats to expose him because he is sure that no one will believe her, given the shining reputation he has among the public and the superior position he holds. His awareness that his reputation is very vital for his survival is reinforced in his soliloquy in act IV scene IV:

How might she tongue me! Yet reason dares her no;
For my authority bears of a credent bulk,
That no particular scandal once can touch
But it confounds the breather (4.4.24-27)

Notwithstanding that Angelo—till this juncture in the play—thinks about whether Isabella’s accusations will be taken seriously or not, he is somewhat certain that they are not to be taken seriously, for his fame and position guarantee immunity against any accusations.

In the same way as the unprivileged are prejudicially surveiled in *Measure for Measure*, so too in *Caleb Williams* Godwin exposes the double-standards by which his culture operates. He criticizes a flawed justice system that gives too much power to the aristocrats and overlooks the rights of the poor. Caleb is victimized by a legal system that sides with the aristocrats against the less privileged people. When Mr. Falkland accuses Caleb of stealing his jewels, his allegations are taken seriously by the law, not because his accusations are valid, but because his reputation and social status eliminate any suspicions about his claims. When Falkland presents his accusations, Caleb is immediately summoned for investigation. Due to his social standing and reputation, Falkland’s accusations are not questioned. The trial scene is a perfect example of a corrupt legal system that focuses its gaze on the poor, but deems the wealthy as upright and trustworthy. Even though Caleb presents valid evidences confirming his innocence, he is met with disbelief by Mr. Forester, the judge. Caleb is viewed as untrustworthy only because he is socio-economically inferior to Falkland. This scene is reminiscent of *Measure for Measure* when the one who preaches justice, Angelo, turns out to be the actual villain. Angelo is viewed by the

public as the good, honorable man, but in reality he is a hypocrite because he insists on enforcing the law by having poor Claudio punished for his unserious crime when he himself is guilty of the same act; thus, social status is the chief determiner of who is guilty and who is innocent. Similarly, Caleb's alleged theft is taken seriously by the law, whereas Falkland manages to get away with his horrendous crime. Indeed, socioeconomic status determines the degree to which one is scrutinized. Caleb is a poor person; therefore, he is viewed as liable to commit illegal acts, whereas privileged individuals like Falkland do not get suspected for violating the law. Justice systems operating by such criterion are definitely flawed because they give too much power to the wealthy to oppress the poor.

In the trial scene, Caleb's destiny seems to be determined before even the trial starts, for he is not a match for an aristocrat like Falkland. In the court, not only is the judge hostile to Caleb, but also the courtroom audience as well. When Caleb dismisses Falkland's accusations as lies, his self-defense is perceived as a humiliation to Falkland. He says, "I had no sooner uttered these words, than an involuntary cry of indignation burst from every person in the room. Mr. Forester turned to me with a look of extreme severity" (Godwin, 253). The judge, thus, perceives Caleb's bold defense as a kind of insolence. Further, when Caleb asserts that the accusations are "of Mr. Falkland's contrivance," he is met with hostility and repugnance from everybody: "I no sooner said this, than I was again interrupted by an involuntary exclamation from every one present. They looked at me with furious glances[—which shiningly manifest how the unprivileged are surveiled, as can be seen in Foucault's theory—], as if they could have torn me to pieces" (Godwin, 254).

Indeed, the trial is a mere artificial show, for it is devoid of all meaning. Had Caleb been an aristocrat, the judge's attitude would have been positive. While Falkland commits a more serious crime than Caleb's alleged crime, the legal system remains blind to the right suspect. Social standing is the sole determiner of one's guiltiness or innocence. Even though Caleb tries to present rational evidences against Falkland's accusations, Mr. Forester is totally irresponsive to whatever Caleb says—he takes every word Falkland says seriously, but he dismisses as lies everything Caleb says. The judge, in fact, views Caleb as a dangerous criminal: "this monster of ingratitude, who first robs his benefactor, and then

reviles him. Vile calumniator! you are the abhorrence of nature, the opprobrium of the human species" (Godwin, 258). He calls Caleb a monstrous villain, but views Falkland as a good-hearted and generous master who has helped and shown all gentleness to his unappreciative servant.

Caleb finds himself alone in an indifferent universe where the wealthy aristocrats survive and the poor are victimized. Addressing the audience in the courtroom, Caleb expresses his bitterness and agony because of the injustice that he is subjected to: "Fellow-servants! Mr. Falkland is a man of rank and fortune; he is your master. I am a poor country lad, without a friend in the world. That is a ground of real difference to a certain extent; but it is not a sufficient ground for the subversion of justice" (Godwin, 255). Caleb is well aware of the fact that the primary reason for his unjust trial is that his accuser is not his equal in the eyes of the court of justice. He feels the bitterness of being convicted for a crime he never committed when the real criminals are viewed as good and respectable citizens.

Conclusion

Foucault's theory of "descending individuation," indeed, adds new insights into Shakespeare's and Godwin's deep visions about the ills of their cultures, particularly those concerning law enforcement, and opens the way for further exploration of other literary figures — not only during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also in the twenty first century as well— whose literary works represent invaluable historical records of their cultures' concerns. Indeed, Shakespeare and Godwin, as they are studied here, pose as early cultural and legal critics who came to notice and expose the serious flaws of their cultures' law enforcement practices, for what they detected long ago transferred over the centuries into the Western culture of today, where officials in positions of power and wealthy individuals occupy impenetrable spaces and the disciplinary gaze is focused rather on the unprivileged people: "The poor are monitored through numerous government surveys into their living conditions, moral habits, and work history" (Danaher et al, 58), and "populist newspapers and television programs devote coverage to suspected cases of welfare fraud among the poor [...], while ignoring the more costly fraudulent activities of very wealthy groups and people" (Danaher et al, 58)..

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تشخيص فوكو الإنداري: المتدون اجتماعياً تحت النظر الرقابي عند شكسبير وغودوين

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ملخص

يقدم هذا البحث دراسة نقدية لمسرحية "الصاع بالصاع لشكسبير"، ورواية "كالب وليامز" لوليام غودوين، وذلك في ضوء نظرية التشخيص الإنداري للفيلسوف ميشيل فوكو في كتابه "التأديب والعقاب". يظهر البحث نقد هذين الأدبيين للتشخيص الإنداري في ثقافتهما والتي يتناسب فيها نظام المراقبة السلوكية للأفراد عكسياً مع المنزلة الاجتماعية والوظيفية لهم، فكلما انحدرت منزلة الفرد الاجتماعية والوظيفية زاد عليه الضغط الرقابي. يسلط البحث الضوء على انتقاد هذين الأدبيين لانحدر العدالة في مجتمعها الناتج عن هذا الخلل في النظام الرقابي لأنه يفتح المجال لإستثراء الفساد ومخالفة النظام لدى الأفراد ذوي المنزلة الاجتماعية العالية أو أصحاب المناصب الرفيعة. يثبت البحث كيف أن هذا النظام الرقابي، والذي وجد أصلاً كأداة لتأديب الأفراد وتحقيق العدل يعطي عكس النتائج المرجوة إذا طُبّق على أساس التشخيص الإنداري المنحاز لصالح أفراد الطبقات العليا والمنازل الرفيعة.

الكلمات الدالة: فوكو، إنداري، التشخيص، تأديبي، مراقبة، غودوين، شكسبير.

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