Barnardine or Death as an Option

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to research the meaning of the presence in the play Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare of a character which apparently doesn’t fulfill any dramatic function. Although the drunkard Barnardine seems to be brought into the scene in order to make possible the salvation of Claudio, the brother of the main feminine character, through the dramatic mechanism of replacing one man sentenced to death with another, Shakespeare surprisingly quits this solution. Barnardine is spared because he has strongly drunk all night long and, as a consequence, he doesn’t feel prepared to die. In this manner, this minor character approaches, during only one page of text, some fundamental themes of Shakespearian writing: preparation for death, and sleep and inebriation as paradoxal states of the conscience. Barnardine floats in three dimensions: inebriation, dream, and reality. This state of chiaroscuro of the conscience reveals the negative of the being, it opens the gate to the realm of the shadow. In this state, Barnardine chooses not to die and the Duke, the demiurge of the play, spares his life. Barnardine exists in a dimension where the laws of the real loosen their rigidity and death can be an option, not a necessity.

Key words: death as an option, secondary characters in Shakespeare, inebriation in Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s sources of inspiration

Measure for measure is one of those plays in which Shakespeare made use of the identifiable sources – novella number 5 from 9th Decade of the

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Hecatommithi corpus, written by G.B. Giraldi Cinthio, the theatre play Epitia, written by the same Cinthio after his own novella and, at last, the play Promos and Cassandra by George Whetstone – sources that, somewhat under the aspect of the flow of action, were followed with some sort of fidelity. We do not intend to analyse the correlation between the inspiration sources and the dramatic masterpiece that resulted – it would be too vast an attempt, which would by far exceed the size of a magazine article. Considering to be relevant what an author such as Shakespeare keeps from the pieces which inspired him, as well as what he omits, we will only touch upon one small detail, comparing the solutions proposed by Cinthio and Whetstone to the one that Shakespeare arrived at.

The detail that undergoes our analysis is the following: to save the heroine’s brother who is condemned to death, Cinthio as well as Whetstone, use similar dramatic mechanisms – the former, in Epitia makes it so that a fratricidal criminal is executed in Vico’s stead, Epitia’s brother (in the novella, the capital punishment is successfully seen through, and Vico actually dies), and the latter substitutes Andrugio’s head, the brother of Cassandra, with that of a killer who was executed a few days prior.¹

In Measure for Measure, Shakespeare uses not only one, but both mechanisms in a fascinating way: to save Claudio, Isabelle’s brother, another convict is brought on the scene, called Barnardine. In the Duke’s initial plan, he was meant to be executed in Claudio’s stead, so that the unjust second-in-command may receive, at dawn, the head of Barnardine and not the one of the

heroine’s brother. But, in an odd manner, this plan is withered on the vine –by Shakespeare himself – and to Angelo is delivered the head of a third convict, by the name of Ragozine, “One Ragozine, a most notorious Pirate, / A man of Claudio’s years: his beard, and head / Just of his colour.”

And thus, there results a character with no use in the dramatic economy of the play: Barnardine. He contributes with nothing to the flow of action, and rightfully speaking, Shakespeare could have done without him, even more, he had every motive to do so, considering that the only purpose of existence for this secondary character was to die in place of one of the main characters. So then, what made the English dramatist neither follow the Cinthio design nor the distinct and logic method of Whetstone, who saved his hero through simple initiative of the guardian to expedite to the second-in-command Promos, instead of his head, the head of another convict, executed “earlier that day”, but to use both, and to keep within the play a character that has become useless, whose dramatic function had ceased to another?

Barnardine seems to fulfil all the conditions of the convenient solutions to cheat on Angelo and to replace Claudio in front of the executioner with him: he has been in jail for nine years, his crime (nothing short of murder, as we find out from the Warden’s words) has just been proven, he’s a juice head, insofar has he been estranged with freedom and has familiarized with the dungeon, such as “he hath evermore had the liberty of the prison: give him leave to escape hence, hee would not”, his name stands on the same execution

\[\text{2} \quad \text{William Shakespeare – Measure for Measure, A. IV, sc. 3.}\]
\[\text{3} \quad \text{George Whetstone – Promos and Cassandra, P. I, A. 4, sc. 5.}\]
\[\text{4} \quad \text{William Shakespeare – Measure for Measure, A. IV, sc. 2.}\]
order as Claudio’s, he’s introduced into the play just when the Duke seeks for a way to save Isabella’s brother – and such is everything built that Barnardine seems to be the solution. Surprisingly, however, he is not late to appear: Barnardine is spared because… of the fact that he drank like a mad man all night, he isn’t deemed ready for the eternal, and the story made short, he does not consent to die! Of course, the scene has a lot of humour: the warden, the executioner and the Duke himself beg the convict to go to his execution, and he outright refuses violently, under the circumstances that, being hungover, he doesn’t feel ready for a job as serious as death (the comic of the dialogue and the undeniable charm of Barnardine have urged Walter Raleigh to consider that these are the exact motives for which Shakespeare decided to spare his life in the fourth act, as well as in the final act, when the almighty Duke Vincentio offers the deserved punishment after all the amazing facts he had found out disguised as monk Lodovic⁵). This is more than humorous – it is not only surprising to the reader or spectator of today, but also, more than surely, for the one in Shakespeare’s era, because the English dramatist uses the well-known dramatic mechanism of substituting a death row convict with another as a false lead, deceiving the public expectations. Thus, might the comic impact and the element of surprise be the motives for which Barnardine the drunkard has won a place (modest, truly, but well defined) in the universe of Shakespearean characters? Or is it that, given the comedy status of the play, Shakespeare decided that, in spite of the fact that many of the characters were in proximity of death, none were to die, after all?

Our answer is: no. More than in the case of any other author, Shakespeare’s comedy is never just comedy. There’s always a deeper meaning, as well as hidden meanings, nothing and no one is (just) what it seems to be.

First of all, a theme that is extremely important to the Shakespearean dramaturgy is that of the repeated actions. As Cedric Watts mentions, the English dramatist uses in most of his plays – if not in all of them – the technique of repeating the main intrigue in a series of parallel mirrors. For instance, in *Measure for Measure*, Mariane’s sin, who sleeps with her fiancé, Angelo, becomes the mirrored image of Claudio’s sin, who sleeps with his fiancée, and, for this reason, is sentenced to death by Angelo himself. Therefore, the Duke and Isabella lead Angelo right to the crime he seeks to punish with the death sentence. More than that, Shakespeare uses a series of similar events, challenging his spectators to compare the different effects which they produce. Therefore, we witness not only one interrupted marriage, but three: Juliette’s, Marianne’s and Kate’s. We are introduced not only to one example of pregnant woman outside of marriage, but two: Juliette and Kate. And finally, there is not only one character facing imminent execution, but four: Claudio in act I, Barnardine in act III, and Angelo and Lucio in act V. So, if we look at the entire edifice of the play with the help of the parallel mirrors technique which, undoubtedly, if it doesn’t represent the cornerstone of the construction, then at least an extremely important gearing, Barnardine’s importance becomes more than a raise of laugh, he becomes an opportunity to

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depict a different attitude in front of death than the one Claudio has, with only an act before, the fear of death had ripped him a terrible monologue, comparable in intensity with that of Hamlet, but haunted by more frightening images (“I, but to die, and go we know not where, / To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot, / This sensible warme motion, to become / A kneaded clod; And the delighted spirit / To bath in fierie floods, or to recide / In thrilling Region of thicke-ribbed Ice, / To be imprison’d in the viewlesse windes / And blowne with restlesse violence round about / The pendant world: or to be worse then worst”)\(^7\), and it made him, forgetting of any trace of honour, push her in accepting the deal proposed by Angelo, which, no matter how monstrous, was meant to save his life. From this point of view, the categorical, but simple refuse of Barnardine before death is a counterpoint of Claudio’s attempt to escape, by any means, alive. Donald Stauffer considers that, in the context in which “of all the counterpointing themes of this play, none of them is treated with more complexity than the attitude towards death, […] Barnardine doesn’t fulfil his only function that he has throughout the intrigue of the play, because he excellently fulfils the motive of insensitivity that Shakespeare doesn’t endure to kill him.”\(^8\) From our point of view however, what is amazing is not Barnardine’s insensitivity, but the simple, rapid, and paradoxical way in which this character succeeds to skirt an imminent execution, as imminent as Claudio’s. However, to save Claudio, the dramatist conceives, throughout four acts, complicated plans in the brewing and realising of which there are

\(^7\) William Shakespeare – *Measure for Measure*, A. III, sc. 1.

basically involved all of the other characters, while in Barnardine’s case it was sufficient enough to say that “I am sleepie. [...] I have bin drinking all night, I am not fitted for’t. [...] I will not consent to die this day, that’s certaine”\(^9\), and he’s spared in the dungeon as well as in the final scene, when the Duke, far from forgetting the bold character, decides to forgive his “Earthly faults”\(^10\).

If his insensible attitude owes Barnardine his presence in the play, then how is it that he gets away from the punishment befit for his deed (let’s not forget, a proven murder, a severe deed and much less discussable than Claudio’s) not only once, but twice?

But could a human being that strives towards something so profound as preparing for death be guilty of the accusation of insensibility which Stauffer cast upon Barnardine? Or is this accusation just a consequence of the conclusion that the Duke draws, after a brief meeting with the convict (“Unfit to live, or die: oh gravell heart”, he says). We think it’s the second option, for such a need to prepare derives from the awareness of the fact that death is a shocking and fundamental experience, which should be welcomed only in certain conditions of, let’s say, bodily and spiritual cleanliness. As for the Duke’s words, we consider them to be the fruit of stupefaction in front of the turbulence of the convict, the outrage at the sight of the convict’s insobriety, or his pride hurt by the priest (even if only disguised), whose help is not required to purify the soul (not fully believing the characters is an impulse not strange to any student at the art of acting…).

\(^9\) William Shakespeare – *Measure for Measure*, A. IV, sc. 3.

For that matter, Barnardine, with one of the fewest lines given by the author, touches what we call a hot spot of the Shakespearean dramaturgy thematic. Preparing for death is an important subject both in the general context of the English dramatist’s play (Hamlet himself gives up killing Claudius because he seemed to be praying, even though the moment is favourable, just because “for death he’s ripe and ready”\(^\text{11}\), in other words he’s going to Heaven, which his father, old King Hamlet, hasn’t reached, because his death was “miserable” and “up to here”\(^\text{12}\), in other words, unready), as well as in the play Measure for Measure: the main argument and the biggest fear of Isabelle’s, the moment in which she finds out her brother was to be killed the second day, is the fact that he’s not ready to die. And if this argument of being ready – or better said, if the unreadiness to die of Claudio has no value in front of the second-in-command Angelo, he functions perfectly in front of the Duke disguised as a monk, who spontaneously decides to spare Barnardine.

From this point of view, the British critic Cedric Watts, thrilled by the uselessness of this Barnardine in the dramatic economy of the play, claims that his only role is an ethical one, meaning he’s only there for the Duke to shed his mercy upon him and forgive him.\(^\text{13}\) It’s true, the Christian virtue of mercy plays an important role in the unravelling of Measure for Measure’s epilogue: Isabella, right before she finds out that her brother, in fact, survives, persuaded by Marianne’s request, pleads for sparing the life of the corrupt and unjust

\(^{11}\) William Shakespeare – *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, A. III, sc. 3.

\(^{12}\) *Idem*.

\(^{13}\) Cedric Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
second-in-command. And the Duke decides to forgive not only Angelo, but, despite everything else, also the chatty Lucio and Barnardine, the killer. The first two are only punished with the obligation to marry the women whom they don’t respect (punishment which, to Lucio, seems harder to endure than death itself). The third is left under the care and advice of the monk called Peter. Cedric Watts sees in this peacemaker type of epilogue a possible plead against the capital punishment. We are inclined to believe that rather than the social militarism, which highly concerned Shakespeare, there was the idea of differentiating between the thought sin and the enacted one. So, we agree with Hans Sachs, who considers that the primary message of the play was that only the enacted crimes are fit to be punished because, from the thinking point of view, it makes us all guilty and only mercy can be of help to calm down the guilt-troubled conscience of man.\textsuperscript{14}

From this perspective, Barnardine’s character seems as amazing from the play’s dramatical structure, because, unlike the other convicts, whose crimes take place only in their intentions, he’s a proven murderer – in other words, crime was not only thought, but enacted!

Lo and behold, this secondary character, this role of only one page, has the gift to incite and raise much more than laughter (and we can’t deny that he hasn’t been absent in any of the performances of \textit{Measure for Measure} that are known to us\textsuperscript{15}, despite the intentions of the directors to eliminate a part of


\textsuperscript{15} The ones used by Siviu Purcărete at the Craiova National Theatre, by Yuri Butusov at Vaghtangov Theatre in Moskow and by Declan Donnellan at the Pushkin Theatre in Moskow.
the secondary characters to weave their way in the text, it’s true, stuffed and at times contradictory).

The aspect that we find shocking and symbolic of Barnardine – and, weirdly, the least noted by the commentators – is the following: threatened by sleep and the steam of alcohol, the convict vehemently refuses to go to his execution, insomuch as the warden, the executioner, and the Duke decide to spare him. But the Duke, through his omnipresence provided by disguise, through the ability to interfere in the course of action and steer it after his own will, through the capacity of knowing, through confession, the deeds of his subjects and to guide them, as a supreme moral instance, on the right path, he’s a character with demiurgic nature, closely related, from this point of view, to Prospero; he’s the personification of the Freudian concept of Super-ego, which in fact means approximately the same thing. And along this line of thinking, the drunkard Barnardine stops being a simple comic character, and gains a metaphysical aura of the human who rebels against his Creator, against his human and mortal condition. And the Creator decides to suspend his mortality!

Goethe observes, in an admirable way, that, while what differentiates the Greek tragedy from the modern one is the fact that “the old tragedy bases upon the inevitable notion of ‘having to do’, which the will, that acts against it, does nothing but to intensify and accelerate it”\(^\text{16}\), meanwhile “the notion of ‘to will’ […] is the God of the recent times”\(^\text{17}\) the genius of Shakespeare “ties


\(^{17}\) *Ibidem*. 

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the old and the new in an inexhaustible way”, because “notions of ‘to will’ and ‘to have to’ seek to be balanced in his plays.” On the other hand, “to will” and “to have to” oppose each other in the “individual character” giving birth to the interior conflict of the character, and, then again, the opposition between the two also determines, in some cases, an exterior conflict, in the sense that “a will weak enough can be strengthened to ‘have to’”, as it happens with Hamlet who, in order to act, needs the impulse given to him by the ghostly apparition, or with Macbeth, who is pushed towards his deed by witchcraft.

Barnardine transcends the limits of the relation between “to will” and to “have to”. His will acts freely in the empire of necessity; death, which, for any other human being represents the inevitable, is for him a matter of choice. Nobody wants to die, and yet everybody dies. Barnardine defies death’s blade and seems to inevitably glide towards a simple “don’t want to”. And, in the face of his clear refusal, the blade goes away. With no other motivation. Only because Barnardine doesn’t want to die.

A paradox, surely. But Shakespeare is no fool; this paradox has an explanation, this mystery has an access gate. And this we consider to be the special state in which the character is during his only scene. Barnardine drank all night, and death knocks on the door at dawn, the execution scheduled to take place at four in the morning. Barnardine sleeps and, of course, he is still drunk. And thus, two other important themes of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy make their way into the scene: sleep and drunkenness. Both of these being access gates towards other forms of reality, in which other rules apply.

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18 Idem, p. 315 (our translation).
19 Ibidem (our translation).
Sleep, which, due to its resemblance with death, on one hand, and the existence of dreams on the other, is a mysterious alteration of reality. Because Shakespeare’s characters never know who will be the one to wake up from their dreams; the one before the dream is never the same as the one who wakes up from it – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* clearly tells us this exact thing. And this eternal other is always the preferred of the tight dungeon of the eternal same. Macbeth has killed sleep and has remained a prisoner of it, while the same redemptive nocturnal dream is replaced with the harmful apparition of the night watch.

Drunkenness gives way to the dark self, opens wide the door of the dungeon in which the diurnal self, conscious, has locked the ancestral impulses and hidden wishes. The wine is a magical drink (the ancient men knew this fact too well), the force of which is nothing less than the bewitched herbal tincture which Puck drips on the eyelids of the poor sleeping mortals, because one, as well as the other, have the power to change. The kind Cassio gets drunk and he transforms into a violent brawler; Caliban, the cowardly monster, drinks from Stephano’s bottle and dares to conduct a plan against the almighty Prospero. The alcohol, akin to the dream, can fulfil wishes; a God whose force nobody denies, but whose nature is contested: “O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!”\(^{20}\), exhales Cassio, becoming sober. “You must kiss it then”\(^{21}\), Stephano urges Trinculo, passing him the wine bottle. “I’le shew thee every fertile inch i’th’

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Isle, and kiss thy foot: I prithee be my God, and let me drink”\(^{22}\), exclaims Caliban, prey of the euphoria of the first contact with wine.

Just like sleep, alcohol urges the other self, brings him to light. “I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial”\(^{23}\), cries Cassio; and the animal is violent and eaten by pride, akin to how Cassio is not. Or better said, alike to how Cassio wishes not to be. Drunkenness reveals the negative part of our being, opens up the gate towards the Shadow’s realm. But the animal isn’t the only one who rules this dark realm; alcohol augments the self, revealing its unknown sides, but also amplifies its power. Being drunk, Caliban finds power (which he did not have awake) to brew a plan through which his most burning of wishes, to kill Prospero and to be the ruler of the island again, could be accomplished. Such as in the nocturnal dream, the fate of which is to be negated by the diurnal self, the self becomes lucid again to cast away the shadow summoned by the alcohol’s steam. “Most carefully. I will be wise hereafter. / What a dull fool was I to take those Drunkards / For Gods, when such as these were in the world?”\(^{24}\), cries Caliban when he wakes up from his drunkenness. The cowardly slave has reappeared, and the brave usurper has disappeared without a trace…

In the recent attempt of Shakespeare’s biography that he wrote, Anthony Burgess insists that Shakespeare didn’t like to drink. And we have no motives to contradict him. Perhaps, however, alcohol had upon his soul the lucid effect which music had over Socrates’ natural logic. Nietzsche mentions

\(^{22}\) Idem.

\(^{23}\) William Shakespeare – Othello, Act II, sc. 2.

that, although estranged to the irrational spirit of this art, Socrates told a story in the dungeon to his friends that he “often had dreams in which the same apparition repeated the same words over and over: ‘Socrates, practice music!’”

And to clear his consciousness and to avoid the danger of “sinning against a divinity through his failure to understand”, Socrates, in prison, dedicates himself to music. However, Shakespeare, the poet and dramatist, had a different relation with the deities of hidden realms, irrational unlike Socrates’. And because of his art, Shakespeare needn’t have fallen into the grasp of alcohol to understand the nature of this freeing experience; his characters have done it. We have to notice that, for a dramatist foreign to Bacchic pleasures, his plays bring to the scene an impressive array of drunkards! It’s true that drunkenness is the appanage of the comic characters – but, as we said, there’s nothing that’s just comic to Shakespeare, everything has more than one meaning, and also, a profound underlayer. The deeper significance of drunkenness is what the *Twelfth Night* is about. The Twelfth Night is Saint John’s night, the night in which the Christmas parties come to an end (for this occasion was the play commissioned by Queen Elizabeth herself). Sir Toby Belch is the only drunkard out of all the characters – and, for that matter, more than drunkenness, *Twelfth Night* is about what happens when drunkenness clears, about the melancholic hangover which keeps drunken stupor’s limits mobile and undefined accounts. Because meeting with the other self always leaves traces behind, because there’s always this doubt

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26 *Ibidem* (our translation).
that what we think is not what we really are. “Sot, didst see Dick surgeon, sot?”, asks Sir Toby. “O, he’s drunk, Sir Toby, an hour agone”\textsuperscript{27}, replies the jester. Alcohol, like sleep, opens gateways to other worlds. But the echoes of the happenings in those parallel realities can be felt even after the dream has crumbled, or after the alcohol’s steam has cleared.

Barnardine is drunk, he sleeps and he wakes up from his dream to be executed. In other words, his self walks between three dimensions: drunkenness, dream and reality. Drunk like Caliban, in this ambiguous state he rebels against the demiurge – Caliban redeems his inheritance, and Barnardine redeems his immortality. The endeavours of these two are successfully met: Prospero goes back to Milan, therefore Caliban escapes slavery. The Duke spares not only in the clear-obscurc trickiness of dawn, but also during the light of mid-day, in his full authority. The illusive lights leave their fingerprints all over reality. The dream is fulfilled – and this is about the most burning and impossible desire of humans: immortality, the choice of not dying. The real is the continuation of the dream. This is what we believe to be the secret morality of Bernardine, his deep meaning profoundly hidden in the play’s context.

Using this method of interpreting dreams in order to decipher the deep meanings of literature, Freud has reduced the motive of choice from the play \textit{The Merchant of Venice} to three women (because, inside the dream, the baskets symbolize the women), which is worked on by Shakespeare in \textit{King Lear}. Just like the valuable box always looks like the least precious, the option

\textsuperscript{27} William Shakespeare – \textit{Twelfth Night or As You Like It}, Act V, sc. 1.
of the three women always stops at the third, characterised through beauty, kindness, and unapparent (Cordelia is quiet and grey alike to the lead from which Portia’s box was made out of). Inside the dream, muteness symbolizes death, the third sister is death herself, Atropos the unforgiving, the third of the Goddesses of Destiny. And the fact that she is chosen is due to her deforming intervention of her consciousness, the censorship which uses the replacement procedure of a thing with its contrary.

Thus, “the goddess of death is replaced with the goddess of love or the human beings approached by her”28, and the necessity of death is out of free will!29

Lear, the dying old man, purposelessly seeks to avoid the inevitable, for only “the third of the daughters of destiny, the quiet goddess of death, will hug him in her arms.”30 Barnardine, however, in front of the interflow of the three worlds – sleep, dream and reality – has the privilege of truly having a say in the matter, for the dimension in which he exists is an unknown one, in which the strict rules of reality are not applied and death can become an option. And from this point of view, this small role, this apparent comic effect, occupies a unique place in the Shakespearean dramaturgy.

Bibliography


30 Sigmund Freud, op. cit., p. 181 (our translation).
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