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A Note on Francisco's Ancestry

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One evening in her late teens, in a Petrograd theater, sitting in a balcony seat that afforded a view of only half the stage, Ayn Rand saw her first play by Friedrich Schiller. The play was *Fiesco; or, the Genoese Conspiracy*, and she thought it was magnificent. She went to see it again the next evening.¹

Fiesco deals with a sixteenth-century republican revolt against Andrea Doria, the Duke of Genoa, and his nephew Gianettino. The hero is Fiesco, a Genoese count. He is described by his wife Leonora as “he who from the chisel of the exhaustless artist, Nature, sprang forth all-perfect, combining every greatness of his sex in the most perfect union.”² When she stood beside him at the altar, Leonora thought to herself: “thy Fiesco . . . will free Genoa from its tyrants!”³

But Leonora's hopes for her husband's political heroism are disappointed when Fiesco starts throwing decadent parties. He declares: “Let the floors swim with Cyprian nectar, soft strains of music rouse midnight from her leaden slumber, and a thousand burning lamps eclipse the morning sun. Pleasure shall reign supreme, and the Bacchanal dance so wildly beat the ground, that the dark kingdom of the shades below shall tremble at the uproar!”⁴ The play opens at one of these parties, where Fiesco, before his wife's eyes, courts another woman.

When a courtier tells Fiesco that he has “become a mere votary of pleasure” and that “[t]he great world has lost much in you,” Fiesco answers: “But [I have] lost nothing in giving up the world. To live is to dream, and to dream pleasantly is to be wise. Can this be done more certainly amid the thunders of a throne . . . than on the heaving bosom of an enamored woman? Let Gianettino rule over Genoa; Fiesco shall devote himself to love.”⁵

Fiesco's hedonism bitterly disappoints his wife. “Go now, and see this demigod of the Genoese amid the shameless circles of debauchery and lust! Hear the vile jests and wanton ribaldry with which he entertains his base companions! *That is Fiesco!* Ah, damsels, not only has Genoa lost its hero, but I have lost my husband!”⁶

Now consider the character of Francisco d'Anconia in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Like Fiesco, Francisco is an aristocrat stylized to perfection by nature. "It was as if the centuries had sifted the family's qualities through a fine mesh . . . and had let nothing through except pure talent; as if chance, for once, had achieved an entity devoid of the accidental" (93).

Like Fiesco, Francisco promises much for the future. When he inherits the family business, leaders of industry think that d'Anconia Copper "would sweep the world now, under what his management promised to become" (111).

Like Fiesco, Francisco disappoints all expectations when he starts throwing decadent parties. At an Algerian resort, "he built a pavilion of thin sheets of ice and presented every woman guest with an ermine wrap, as a gift to be worn for the occasion, on condition that they remove their wraps, then their evening gowns, then all the rest, in tempo with the melting of the walls" (115).

Like Fiesco, Francisco gives a hedonistic reason for his transformation. "Why should I wish to make money? I have enough to permit three generations of descendants to have as good a time as I am having" (116).

Like Fiesco, Francisco causes great pain to the woman who loves him—Dagny Taggart. "The boy she had known could not have become a useless coward. An incomparable mind could not turn its ingenuity to the invention of melting ballrooms. Yet he had and did, and there was no explanation to make it conceivable and to let her forget him in peace" (116).

Francisco's and Fiesco's transformations have an air of mystery and intrigue—for two reasons. First, as Schiller said in a different context, "the nobler a thing is, the more repulsive it is when it decays."⁷ Yet neither Francisco nor Fiesco elicits repugnance. Dagny tells Francisco: "The way you live is depraved. But the way you act is not. Even the way you speak of it, is not" (199). How does he speak of it? With a self-confident, nondefensive wit that is inconsistent with the assumption that he is a man of high purpose turned hedonist. The same is true of Fiesco.

Second, both men drop hints that suggest a hidden purpose. Fiesco tells a young man: "It is not for the eye of the youthful artist to comprehend at once the master's vast design. Retire . . . and take time to weigh the motives of Fiesco's conduct."⁸ By "the master's vast design," Fiesco means God's purpose. His point is that the universe, as created by God, holds no contradictions—and one would see the logic of everything if only one knew the totality. Apart from the religious aspect, Francisco makes the same point to a bewildered Dagny when he tells her: "Whenever you think that

you are facing a contradiction, check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong” (199).

The character of Francisco d’Anconia, I believe, is directly inspired by Schiller’s Fiesco.

In a broad sense, Francisco is the culmination of a long line of literary heroes, like the Scarlet Pimpernel and Zorro, who affect what we may loosely call a playboy persona in order to mask some more serious purpose. But Fiesco is (to my knowledge) the first of this line, and the one most similar to Francisco in the details. We know that Ayn Rand admired Schiller’s play. And it is worth noting that she originally thought of Francisco as more typically Italian than Spanish (or Latin American) and wanted to name him “Francesco.”⁹ For these reasons, it is plausible to conclude that she created Francisco with Fiesco as her model.

Yet Francisco is not simply a copy of Fiesco. To see the difference between the two characters, and its significance, consider first the *theme of Fiesco*.

Schiller writes in his preface to the play that “it becomes necessary to lay aside the feelings of a man in order to become a political hero.”¹⁰ He expresses the same general idea in his *Letters on Don Carlos*, where he writes that “the capacity for sacrifice is the essence of all republican virtue.”¹¹ Leonard Peikoff formulated the theme of *Don Carlos* as “the primacy of freedom over selfishness.”¹² Each of these formulations expresses a slightly different angle on the idea (dear to Schiller) that in order to fight for and institute political freedom (a republic), men must sacrifice their selfish emotions and passions.

This is the meaning openly embodied in the character and actions of Fiesco. As the republicans in the play bemoan, a Fiesco who pursues his every sensualistic whim cannot lead the fight for Genoa’s freedom. Or as the tyrannical Andrea Doria says complacently: “Fiesco, wearied with his rioting, sleeps and has no time to think of Doria.”¹³

The meaning embodied in the character of Francisco is different. The theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is “the role of the mind in man’s existence.”¹⁴ This theme is dramatized by showing what happens to society when the mind is absent—when the men of the mind go on strike. And what happens when the mind is absent—what happens to a man who stops thinking, and to the industrial company he runs—is precisely what is illustrated by Francisco’s turning into a playboy. It does not matter, from this perspective, whether he is *really* a playboy, or is one of the strikers. As he tells Dagny after he wastes part of his fortune: “Whether I did it on purpose, or through neglect, or through stupidity, don’t you understand that that doesn’t make any difference? The same element was missing” (124). He means the element of the mind.

Both Schiller and Ayn Rand present a man of exceptional nobility of mind who turns (seemingly) into a decadent playboy. Yet if Fiesco and Francisco are meant to concretize different abstract meanings, one would expect them to differ concretely as well. And so they do. First and foremost, they differ in what their new, playboy personas are a change *from*.

Francisco embodies the essence of “the mind’s role in man’s existence” because he is *a man of the mind*—an expected genius of reason-guided production—who becomes a playboy. Fiesco embodies the essence of “the opposition of selfishness and freedom” because he is an expected *hero of liberty*, of republican revolt, who becomes a playboy.

It is telling that both Schiller and Ayn Rand stress the nature of their hero’s youthful ambition, political or productive. Schiller has Leonora recall her husband in youth: “Such was his noble and majestic deportment, as if the illustrious state of Genoa rested alone upon his youthful shoulders.”¹⁵ Ayn Rand includes the flashback to Dagny and Francisco’s childhood, which illustrates that “[t]he d’Anconia heirs had been men of unusual ability, but none of them could match what Francisco d’Anconia promised to become” (93).

It is not their playboy personas as such that differentiate Francisco and Fiesco, but the respective natures of the youthful destinies that those personas betray.

Or, rather, seemingly betray. Of course, the two men have not really become playboys.

Francisco is on strike. Like the other strikers, he wants to remove from the altruist-collectivist society the benefits of the rational mind—in his particular case, the benefits both of his *own* mind and of the minds of his ancestors, who built his copper company. To prevent the company from being taken over by the looters, he must destroy it. His playboy persona, he says, “was a part that I had to play in order not to let the looters suspect me while I was destroying d’Anconia Copper in plain sight of the whole world” (765).

Fiesco, too, has a secret purpose: he wants to overthrow the Dorias. To do so, he must amass armaments and troops. His playboy persona is a cover for such activities. As he tells a group of republicans, who are to be his fellow conspirators: “All Genoa was indignant at the effeminate Fiesco; all Genoa cursed the profligate Fiesco. Genoese! my amours have blinded the cunning despot. . . . Concealed beneath the cloak of luxury, the infant plot grew up.”¹⁶

The “real” motives of Fiesco and Francisco seem superficially similar: both men seek the destruction of political tyranny. But a closer look reveals crucial differences.

Observe first that the conspirators in *Fiesco* want to topple the Dorias by force, seize control of the government of Genoa, and institute a republic. They want to bring freedom to their state by means of a personnel change at the top. This poses a problem. As Fiesco's wife, Leonora, says when she learns about the conspiracy: "Seldom do angels ascend the throne—still seldomer do they descend it such."¹⁷ In other words, given the opportunity to wield arbitrary power, even the most idealistic and freedom-loving man is in danger of giving way to his selfish passions. Thomas Jefferson would later express the same general idea in his first inaugural address: "Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him?"

Fiesco proves no angel. When he has cast aside his playboy act and taken lead of the republican conspiracy, he finds it in his reach to become the tyrant of Genoa. "To obey! or to command! To be, or not to be! . . . To tame the stubborn passions of the people, and curb them with a playful rein, as the skilful horseman guides the fiery steed! With a breath—one single breath—to quell the rising pride of vassals, whilst the prince, with the motion of his sceptre, can embody even his wildest dreams of fancy! . . . I am resolved."¹⁸

Like Fiesco the sensualist playboy, Fiesco the power-luster embodies the theme of "selfishness versus freedom." Nothing has changed except the particular selfish passion that sidetracks him from the pursuit of liberty.

Observe next that Francisco and the other strikers in *Atlas Shrugged* do *not* want to replace the altruist-collectivist rulers and hand freedom to the people as an altruistic gift from above. Relevant here is John Galt's answer to Mr. Thompson, "the Head of the State," when Mr. Thompson offers him the job of Economic Dictator of the nation. "If you want a free economy," Mr. Thompson says, "order people to be free!" (1100). Galt replies: "I don't want to be an Economic Dictator, not even long enough to issue that order for people to be free—which any rational human being would throw back in my face, because he'd know that his rights are not to be held, given or received by your permission or mine" (1101).

John Galt knows that man survives by the use of his mind—and that the mind does not function by *permission*, only by *right*. This is why it is useless for Galt to order men to be free, or to think. They won't—not so long as they know that Galt, or Mr. Thompson, has it in his power to order the opposite tomorrow.

Just as Galt refuses power for the altruistic end of setting people free, so he refuses power for "selfish" ends—to Mr.

Thompson's befuddlement. As Mr. Thompson sees it, he is offering Galt everything that the most rapacious egoist could possibly desire. "If it's money that you want—you couldn't make in three lifetimes what I can hand over to you in a minute, this minute, cash on the barrel. . . . [I]f it's power that you're after, I'll guarantee you that every man, woman and child in this country will obey your orders and do whatever you wish" (1101–2). Yet Galt turns him down, and Mr. Thompson can't understand it. He says: "I thought you were an egoist" (1101).

Galt *is* an egoist—but he is a special kind of egoist. Historically, it has been taken for granted that it *would* be in a man's self-interest to "quell the rising pride of vassals" or have every man, woman, and child obey his orders. But Galt knows that enslaved men, women, and children have nothing of value to offer *him*, the man of the mind.

What *is* in a man's self-interest, in a social system based on the rule of brute force (provided no foundation has been laid for a mass rebellion)? To pursue such values as he can, out of sight of the rulers—and to hasten their collapse by withdrawing the service of his mind. Or, in other words, *to go on strike*.

This is what John Galt does—and what Francisco does. Francisco destroys his entire copper company, except the small mine he operates in "the valley," out of the looters' grasp. As he tells Dagny,

It may be that at the end of my life, I shall have established nothing but this single mine—
d'Anconia Copper No. 1, Galt's Gulch, Colorado,
U.S.A. But, Dagny, do you remember that my
ambition was to double my father's production of
copper? Dagny, if at the end of my life, I produce
but one pound of copper a year, I will be richer than
my father, richer than all my ancestors with all their
thousands of tons—because that one pound will be
mine by right and will be used to maintain a world
that knows it! (771)

Francisco d'Anconia's real purpose—the purpose he disguises by affecting the playboy persona—is to go on strike against the altruist-collectivist society, for his own selfish benefit. He neither tries to be a benevolent, altruistic dictator, nor a selfish, tyrannical one. In this, he differs from Schiller's Fiesco, who plans and plots to grant mankind the gift of liberty—and then changes his mind out of selfishness.

Just as the "real" Fiesco, the man behind the playboy façade, embodies the theme of *Fiesco*, so the "real" Francisco embodies the *full* theme of *Atlas Shrugged*: "the role of the mind in

man's existence—and, as corollary, the demonstration of a new moral philosophy: the morality of rational self-interest.”¹⁹

In a 1946 journal entry, “Philosophical Notes on the Creative Process,” Ayn Rand wrote:

[I]f creative fiction writing is a process of translating an abstraction into the concrete, there are three possible grades of such writing: translating an old abstraction (known theme) through the medium of old fiction means, i.e., through characters, events, or situations used before for that same purpose (this is most of the popular trash); translating an old abstraction through new, original fiction means (this is most of the good literature); or creating a new, original abstraction and translating it through new, original means. This last, as far as I know, is only *me*—my kind of fiction writing. May God forgive me (metaphor!) if this is mistaken conceit. As near as I can now see it, it isn't. (A fourth possibility—translating a new abstraction through old means—is impossible; if the abstraction is new, there can be no means used by anyone else before to translate it.)²⁰

Schiller falls in the second category: he translates an old abstraction through new, original fiction means. The idea that liberty requires the self-sacrifice of the best and noblest is not new with Schiller. For instance, it is a constant theme in the writings of the Ancient Romans.²¹ (It is also popular among modern conservatives.) By contrast, Schiller's *means*—the portrayal of a hero who fakes a playboy persona to mask a strike against tyranny—is new with him.

Ayn Rand is a different case. The abstraction she translates into the concrete—man's radical dependence on his mind, and the morality of rational self-interest—is new with her. Being so, the abstraction cannot be translated through old fiction means. But such means can be *adapted* to fit her purpose. Ayn Rand can take old fiction means and change, not merely some surface details, but that which makes the concrete in question speak to the essence of an abstract idea; and so doing, she can turn old means into new.

She can take Schiller's character of Fiesco as her model and create a Francisco who embodies a new, original abstraction through new, original means.

And this is why Ayn Rand does not need God's forgiveness for any mistaken conceit.²²

NOTES

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1. Biographical interviews (Ayn Rand Archives).
 2. Friedrich Schiller, *Fiesco; or, the Genoese Conspiracy: A Tragedy*, trans. by Henry G. Bohn, in *The Works of Frederick Schiller*, vol. IV (London: Bell & Daldy, 1871), 135.
 3. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 135.
 4. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 140.
 5. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 142.
 6. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 136.
 7. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 27.
 8. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 145.
 9. See David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 390.
 10. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 132.
 11. Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on Don Carlos*, trans. by Jeanne R. Willson, in Friedrich Schiller, *Plays*, Walter Hinderer, ed. (New York, Continuum, 1983), 311.
 12. Leonard Peikoff, “Eight Great Plays as Literature and as Philosophy,” (Ayn Rand Bookstore, 1993), lecture 4, “Don Carlos.”
 13. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 216.
 14. Ayn Rand, “Basic Principles of Literature,” *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 85.
 15. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 135.
 16. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 180.
 17. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 214.
 18. Schiller, *Fiesco*, 184.
 19. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), 103.
 20. Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 481–82.
 21. The historian Sallust, writing about Catiline’s conspiracy to destroy the freedom of the Romans and establish dictatorship, says: “The whole truth—to put it in a word—is that although all disturbers of the peace in this period put forward specious pretexts, claiming either to be protecting the rights of the people or to be strengthening the authority of the Senate, this was mere pretence: in reality, every one of them was fighting for his personal aggrandizement.” Sallust, *The Jugurthine War/ The Conspiracy of Catiline*, trans. by S. A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1963), 204–5. I owe this example to John Lewis.
 22. I am grateful to Robert Mayhew for helpful comments on earlier drafts. This chapter is excerpted from my lecture “The Originality of *Atlas Shrugged*,” given to the OCON Objectivist Summer Conference 2007, Telluride, Colorado, July 6–15. My lecture discusses at much greater length Ayn Rand’s originality, and explores a further parallel between a Schiller play (*Mary Stuart*) and *Atlas Shrugged*. It is available from The Ayn Rand Bookstore (www.aynrandbookstore.com).