

Mill versus Mill

a tragic comedy in 9 pages
by

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Synopsis

The mayor is preparing to meet the press to defend his decision to cut funding for a museum because it is exhibiting a painting, he considers obscene. His harassed PR man is feeding him quotes by John Stuart Mill, while Ruthie is preparing his coffee 'just so.' Now, if he can only keep his mind from wandering to his latest drag outfit.

Characters

RUDY	mayor of the greatest city in the world.
RUTHIE	his one-step-away-from-over-the-hill voluptuous secretary.
RANDY	his aid, a stressed-out lawyerly P.R. person.

<u>Place</u>	the mayor's office
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<u>Time</u>	Spring of 2000
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MILL versus MILL

AT RISE:

Stage right, RANDY, thirtyish, glasses, overweight, overworked, is busy at a table which is heaped with books, files, papers, empty paper cups, a bottle of Pepto Bismol. He is listening on the phone, noting something down, and using the computer, all at the same time.

Stage center, RUDY is talking on the phone behind his desk, which is remarkably devoid of clutter. A clock and a cup with very sharp pencils are lined up in the upper right corner, a yellow legal pad is placed at right angles exactly in the middle of the desk. He is biting a pencil and swiveling on his chair as he talks.

RUDY

Shit, always call it shit, not dung. Right Don't worry about that dirty little carpetbagger. It's in the bag. I know the catholic vote is sizable, why do you think brilliant, huh? Stop flattering me George Forget about Green. You're not going to see his ugly mug behind **my** desk, not if I can help it. If I have to change the law myself! My special street unit? Don't I wish. Too bad he doesn't live on Wheeler Avenue!

He laughs uproariously and hangs up.
To Randy, who is staring at him.

Kidding! Kidding! Shit all over the Virgin Mary! Outrageous!

RANDY finishing up on the phone.

RANDY

Fax me what you've got which website? Great! And Norman - good work!

He hangs up and turns to the mayor.

Turns out elephant dung is a symbol of fertility, highly significant, nothing insulting about it in the religious context.

RUDY

Who the hell would know that!

RANDY

The artist is Nigerian. Could backlash with the black vote.

RUDY

Blacks are very religious folks. The degenerate who perpetrated this atrocity is a Brit. The picture is the Virgin smeared with shit. That's the angle - basta! I'm cutting their funding.

RANDY

Please, your Honor, don't use the word *degenerate* in connection with art - bad connotation.

(RUDY looks at him blankly)

They're demonstrating in front of the museum. Screaming about the first amendment, freedom of speech. Tickets are selling like hotcakes. You've made the museum director very happy. I've got this kid in research, very bright kid, checking out Mill.

RUDY

He the judge on this thing?

RANDY

John Stuart.

RUDY

John Steward is the judge? Don't recall the name. As long as he's Republican we can deal. But it can't hurt to have a little leverage.

(grins at Randy)

Keep checking!

RANDY

John Stuart Mill, the famous economist

RUDY

Waste of time, Greenspan's the only one anybody listens to. Now there's a man to have in your corner. Talk about power!

RANDY

.. the famous economist and philosopher, John Stuart Mill, the Nineteen Century thinker!

RUDY

(gives him his infectious boy smile)

I knew that!

RANDY

The kid is faxing me over some pros and cons. We want to be prepared. You want to dazzle the press with a few more of those brilliant Mill quotes. They went over great at that Mayors Conference last month. Here it comes.

(picks up the fax)

Let me play devil's advocate.

RUDY

Shoot.

RANDY

All right, your Honor, we happen to have freedom of speech in this country. It's only just about our most important and treasured right.

RUDY

Who's against free speech? We're talking about an obscene picture.

RANDY

It makes no difference whether an opinion is expressed through a work of art, or in plain speech, or by whatever means. It's still an opinion, and it should be heard. You have the right to voice your opposition to it, but you have no right to close the exhibition or stop the Museum's funding, which is tantamount to silencing the discussion.

RUDY

Like hell I don't. And I'll tell you why. I am elected mayor in this town, right? And I should do what I think the majority wants me to do, right? You can't possibly argue against that. And I am one hundred percent sure that the majority does not want to see this painting, which is an insult not only to Catholics but to all decent folks. It is my duty, my absolute duty to put a stop to it. We're talking about a publicly funded institution. - How am I doing?

RANDY

Well, your Honor, we've got a bunch of issues lumped together here. First of all, you can never be a hundred percent sure of anything, because that would mean you're infallible. You'll give me that - you are not infallible?

RUDY

Pretty damn near I am.

(yells at the half open door)

Ruthie!!

(she sticks her head in)

Where is my coffee!!?

RUTHIE

Brewing, Mister Mayor.

She beams at him adoringly, looks at her watch and shakes a playfully accusing finger at him.

One-and-a-half minutes early, Mister Mayor.

RUDY looks at the clock and frowns. RUTHIE off.

RANDY

Nearly infallible is like being a little bit pregnant, your Honor. Listen,

(reading from the fax)

"All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility."

RUDY

Okay, I'm not infallible. But in this case - the holy mother of God smeared with shit - I'm pretty damn certain. You have to draw the line somewhere.

RANDY

I'm sure Mill has an answer to that one too.

(looks through the fax)

"Strange it is that men should admit the validity of the arguments for free discussions but object to their being 'pushed to an extreme' not seeing that unless the reasons are good for an extreme case, they are not good for any."

As for the next point in your argument. It makes no difference whatsoever whether the majority is of your opinion or not. I quote:

"If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

RUDY

You've got to be kidding. Who cares about one opinion?

RANDY

You want **your** one opinion to be heard, don't you?

RUDY

You bet! But I'm usually right.

RANDY

And if you had the power you would silence the rest?

RUDY

You bet your ass.

RANDY

So it's a good thing you don't have the power. Let's not go there. The reason a single voice matters is because that one opinion just possibly might be the truth and you don't want to deprive society of the truth.

RUDY

What if it isn't? What if it's nonsense? Or disgusting?

RANDY

It's still valuable because we cannot be reasonably certain that something is the truth unless

it has been tested against every possible argument, no matter how outlandish it might appear. There is a third reason. There may be some truth to either side, and you need the argument to arrive at the whole truth.

RUDY

Nothing but! That's three against me. But I'm not out by a long shot. Let me see this.

(snatches the fax from Randy)

Whose side are you on anyway?

RANDY

Yours, yours, your Honor. Always. You know that.

(he wipes his forehead)

Remember your hero?

RUDY

I have a hero?

RANDY

Cicero. You told me yourself you admire Cicero. And he says you have to know your opponent's arguments at least as well as your own.

RUTHIE rushes in, moves the yellow legal pad on Rudy's desk to the upper left corner so it lines up perfectly with the edges. She leaves and returns immediately with a demitasse and saucer of the finest bone china on a tray, which she places in front of the mayor.

RUDY

Thank you, doll face.

(to Randy)

Randy, don't give me that look. I'm not having any of that politically correct crap in my own office. We're among friends here.

RUTHIE

(in a low sultry voice)

We are Mister Mayor Man.

(she stirs his coffee)

Two lumps, to keep your Honor's sweet disposition sweet.

They get lost in each other's eyes. Ruthie leaves abruptly.

RANDY

It's just that I'm worried you might forget. You know - habit.

RUDY

Randy, you worry too much. No guts. Now me, nobody can accuse me of being timid. I am bold. I am independent. I don't worry about what every Tom, Dick and Harry thinks of what I think. I think for myself. I think things through. Now **you** listen to Mill:

“No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.”

I memorized that one for the Commencement Speech at Purdue, remember.

RANDY

Good! Chalk one up for you. Of course, whether you are a great thinker remains open for debate.

RUDY

I may have the potential for one. But if I lacked courage, we'd never find out one way or the other, would we?

RANDY

Your Honor, you dazzle me.

RUDY

I'm no shrinking violet, that's for sure.

(he gets a far-off look as he sips his coffee)

Violet - chiffon - violet chiffon - flowing violet chiffon!

RANDY

Your Honor?

RUDY

(sharply)

What?

RANDY

Something about violet chiffon?

RUDY

Never mind! I was saying, I'm no shrinking violet, but there are a few things for which even I lack the gumption.

RANDY

I can't imagine what.

RUDY

I've always had this fantasy of coming to a budget meeting in heels and a fedora.

RANDY
(*aghast*)

Oh my God!

RUDY
Gottcha! - Kidding! Kidding!

RANDY gets himself a drink of water.

RUDY
Which brings me to another point. Those bleeding-heart liberals screaming *Freedom of Speech* at every opportunity. Half of them don't even know what they're screaming about, they're just shouting slogans. They're doing it out of habit, or else they are in that picket line in front of the museum because their girlfriend is there, or because it's the *in* thing to do. Listen to my buddy Mill.

He looks through a notebook he has pulled out of the desk drawer.

“If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one's own opinions.”

At least I know why I believe what I believe and how I arrived at it. Do they even ask themselves if allowing anti-Catholic paintings on display is worth freedom of speech? Have they really thought about it? Have they made a choice?

RANDY
(*looking at the website Norman gave him*)
Mill has a good short quote here, something about *the deep slumber of a decided opinion*. It's a beaut. Let's remember this one:
“The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful is the cause of half their errors.”

RUDY
There you go! Looks like I'm doing everybody a favor by starting this stink. I'm keeping democracy alive and well and kicking!

RANDY
That is so cynical. We all know that's not why you're doing it.

RUDY
Why not collect a few votes in the process? Don't be so negative. It's bad for your health. How is your ulcer? Don't tell me! You know something, if nothing else I could argue separation of state and church.

RANDY
How so?

RUDY

If the painting is anti-Catholic, it can be interpreted as persecuting Catholics, for which purpose no public funds should be used.

RANDY

You're on a roll. Is that Mill?

RUDY

I have no idea. If you look long enough, you'll probably find something. Of course, the crux of the matter is "if" **if** it's anti-Catholic. Whose to decide? I'm qualifying my own argument. God, I'm good.

He finishes his coffee, puts the cup down. RUTHY appears, takes the tray.

RUTHIE

Your wife left a message. She wants to know how you liked her on the soap. I said you were in conference.

RUDY

Darn, I missed it! Darn! I promised to watch the darn thing!

RUTHIE

Not to worry Mister Mayor Man. I set my VCR this morning before I left home.

(RUDY gives her an appreciative look.)

Oh, and there is a reporter on the line, he's been calling three times. Says he heard a rumor that you are friends with some of the trustees and that this whole thing is a ploy to get people over to Brooklyn to see the show?

RANDY

If that isn't the last straw. Put him through to me. I'll give him a piece of my mind.

RUDY

(puts up his hand)

Tell him *no comment*, doll face.

(RUTHIE off)

RANDY

Was that wise, you Honor?

RUDY

(grinning)

People like to think what they like to think! In their heart-of-hearts everybody wants a strong man, law-and-order! They just don't like to admit it. They all love me! Gives those artsy types an out to vote for me. If they want to think I'm trying to generate some revenue for the museum, who am I to tell them different? I can't lose for winning!

RANDY

Tell me it's not a ploy.

RUDY

Randy, you look beat. Get out of here!

RANDY gets himself together and leaves. RUTHIE stands in the doorway with her coat on.

I'll be another twenty minutes or so. You get those videos ready, doll-face. I guess we'll have to squeeze in a little daytime drama.

RUTHIE leaves. RUDY makes sure she is gone, closes the door, muttering to himself.

This idiot thinks I don't know my Mill.

He takes a shoe box out of his desk drawer and unwraps a pair of large, violet, rhinestone-studded sandals with very high heels, which he places on the desk. He leans back in his chair, relishing the view, and starts to take his shoes off, repeating to himself like a mantra as the lights dim.

Eccentric is good, eccentric is good, eccentric is good

END OF PLAY