

Hamlet, the
machiavellian prince:
an exploration of
shakespeare's use of
machiave...



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Shakespeare's Hamlet is not simply a morality play surrounding a grief-mad prince; it is a complex study of political maneuvers as described by Machiavelli. "The rules of this politics, Machiavelli's political science, then, are the choreographed moves, countermoves, and tricks that bring to life the actions of the successful new prince and others." (Tarlton, 8) Many literary critics approach Machiavelli from the perspective of good versus evil.

Machiavelli was neither; he was a realist. Machiavelli recorded his analysis of events that he studied or observed, and thus derived his principles of political science. In this paper, the reader will explore Shakespeare's use of Machiavellian politics (as described in *The Prince*) within the script of *Hamlet*. Hamlet's world involves jealousy, murder, familial relationships (and their internal struggles), and political scheming. "All the world's a stage," wrote Shakespeare; what we see in the theatre is simply a truer reflection of our lives. "Being within the field of action and never above it, there is only so much an actor seeking *lo stato* [the state, referring to the creation of a state by the prince] can ever discover. The fiction of *il principe nuovo* [the new prince] is a device to project one's own position as actor into political situations." (Breiner, 3, 30) We shall observe the following Machiavellian principles in *Hamlet*: 1) the political scheming that fuels the tension in the play 2) the new prince's enemy, created by the prince's own actions 3) the realization of hidden conspiracies and the deceptions used both to create and to unveil them 4) the role of the characters in the play as actors within their own sub-plots 5) the hidden personal motivations that drive the individual characters. Although Hamlet begins the play as a somewhat naive prince, he soon gains political astuteness and thespian skill that rivals even the actor who plays the part of Hamlet. Hamlet must walk a razor-thin line

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between deceit and truth, action and inaction, and love and hate. His agonizing journey along the edge of this razor crystallizes his purpose: to avenge the death of his father. Shakespeare sets the stage with a classic example from Machiavelli's political philosophy. In Act I, Scene 2, we learn of the death of the King of Denmark and the subsequent marriage of the queen to his brother, Claudius (1638: 1-15). The old king, who came to power by right of succession, is replaced by Claudius. Claudius moves quickly to consolidate power by marrying the queen. "Because men are won over by the present more than the past," it is logical for him to do so. (Tarlton, 3) The wedding takes place within two months of the King's death, "But two months dead! Nay, not so much, not two," says Hamlet (1641: 138). Claudius continues the Danish tradition of a wedding feast followed by a night of drunken revelry (1641: 125). The political moves of the new king serve to highlight the Machiavellian aspects of the play: "Machiavelli becomes truly interested when the hereditary prince is overthrown, the new prince is born, and the new political world, full of danger, comes to life." (Tarlton, 2) Claudius, as the new king, has already created a fearsome enemy for himself Prince Hamlet. The quick remarriage of Hamlet's mother, the queen, is a moral outrage to Hamlet, and violates Machiavelli's stricture in chapter 17 of *The Prince*, "He [the prince] can endure very well being feared, whilst he is not hated, which will always be as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women." (1494) By taking his brother's wife as his own, Claudius has given Hamlet a potent reason to hate him, on top of Hamlet's all-consuming grief (1640: 85). "The very situation that gives him [Claudius] the occasion to act also provides his opponents with a new occasion to take his stato [state] away." (Breiner, 2) In <https://assignbuster.com/hamlet-the-machiavellian-prince-an-exploration-of-shakespeares-use-of-machiavellian-politics/>

Act I, Scene 5, Hamlet learns from his father's ghost, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown." The ghost reveals what Hamlet already felt to be true: the murder of the former king by his brother, Claudius (1651: 38). Hamlet, seeing the truth of the "wrongness" he has felt, is convinced that he should avenge his father's death. "Haste me to know it, that I, with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge...O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1651: 30-40) The reader is now drawn into a complex Machiavellian conspiracy, in which Shakespeare makes extensive use of Machiavelli's precept, "He who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived." (1496)

Hamlet's realization of the deception employed by his uncle jades him, however, to the ghost's message. Hamlet no longer trusts appearances; knowing that his uncle is playing out a large deception, he is unsure if the ghost is honest or not. In fact, Hamlet no longer trusts anyone even Polonius, the chief advisor. Hamlet tells Polonius, "to be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand." (1662: 174) Hamlet distrusts his friends as well, "My two schoolfellows, whom I will trust as I will adders fanged..." (1692: 203) In the Danish court, Claudius managed to deceive his brother, concealing his lust for power (and his lust for the queen) behind a smiling face and lying lips. Claudius also manages to deceive the entire court concerning the death of his brother; Hamlet is the only courtier that senses something wrong: "I doubt [perceive] some foul play; I would the night would come! Foul deeds will rise, though all the earth overwhelm them, to men's eyes." (1644: 260)" The third phase of princely action requires the prince to feint; a moving or invisible target is hardest to hit." (Tarlton, 7) The importance of this skill to Hamlet is found in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, where <https://assignbuster.com/hamlet-the-machiavellian-prince-an-exploration-of-shakespeares-use-of-machiavellian-politics/>

Machiavelli writes, “ everyone sees what you appear to be; few experience what you really are.” (1497) The art of the successful feint must be taught to nobles, especially within the realm of fencing. Fencing was a required skill for nobility in the pre-firearm era; those who wished to avoid the assassin’s blade were as skilled in the salle as they were in the council chamber.

Hamlet elects to use his own deceptive ploy to discover the truth about his father’s death. Additionally, he plans to use his affected insanity as an excuse for his eventual revenge upon Claudius. (1647: 170) Hamlet knows “ the actions of friends and enemies alike will be based on what they take the prince to be.” (Tarlton, 7) What better defense for his actions than that the grief-stricken prince lost his mind and, in a fit of rage, murdered his uncle?

Hamlet expands and intensifies his deception with the arrival of the theatre troupe he creates a play within his own play, within the overall play. “ The play’s the thing, wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king,” said Hamlet (1671: 552). The action within Hamlet’s play reflects the actual events of the former king’s death; the words he wrote to accompany the action scene are designed to provoke a response from Claudius’ guilty conscience. “ For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak...I’ll have the players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle; I’ll observe his looks; if he but blench, I know my course,” (1671: 540-552) says Hamlet.

Hamlet and the other characters in this tragedy are all actors within the context of the play, in the physical world of the theatre, and within the schemes that the characters develop to further their own interests. “ The prince as literary fiction becomes the prince as exemplary actor, teaching us how to discover the various entries for action...in the field of political

conflict.” (Breiner, 35) Even the casual reader of Hamlet will notice the
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various motivations and hidden machinations that absorb the main characters. The king, Claudius, is busy trying to figure out Hamlet's behavior at the start of the play; later, after Polonius is killed, he plots Hamlet's death with Laertes, Polonius' son. Claudius even hopes that Hamlet will commit some offense that results in his death while he is gone to England. Hamlet of course, is focused on his vengeful plot and the play-acting that is making everyone at court think he has really gone mad with grief over his father's death. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play their part in trying to draw Hamlet out of his "madness," but Hamlet discerns their intent as well as their purpose in coming to Denmark in the beginning of the play. He knows that the king and queen have sent for his friends; he dismisses their efforts as insincere and motivated by reward rather than by friendship. Hamlet tells them later, "Though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me." (1684: 335) Polonius, until his death, is pushing his daughter forward as a possible match for Hamlet, while trying his best not to seem to be involved in their romance. "The brilliance of this strategy is that there is no strategy at all in the eyes of anyone watching." (Corum, 4) The interplay of competing interests and the undercurrent of punnery that is rampant throughout the play are the driving forces behind Hamlet's popularity throughout the world. Hamlet, in one sense or another, is acted out in each of our lives every day. We all use Machiavelli's principles to accomplish our goals and to protect our achievements. People in the business world engage in "honest" deception in order to protect their interests. Academics and smart-alecks alike use their knowledge of the English language to make fun of and to criticize other people. We learn the art of deceit at a young age; how many times did you trick your friends or siblings into giving up that coveted toy so that you could

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have a turn with it? We learn this art from the examples that are set before us. In Machiavelli's view, the good of the state was the driving moral code. Machiavelli observed that an effective leader should not be limited by a religious or moral code, as good governance sometimes requires the use of religiously or morally unacceptable behavior. The key to effective leadership for Machiavelli was that the prince appears to have all the positive qualities — while quietly reserving the negative qualities for use as needed.

Shakespeare's plays, especially Hamlet, include situations and characters that seem to be torn directly from Machiavelli's manuscript. The literary union of these two authors gives us a potent demonstration of the power of language within the political world, and yields a script for our leaders (both political and literary) to follow.

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