

Caleb Egbert

“That He Lacked Nothing to Reign but a Kingdom”

Machiavellian Power Struggles and Political Commentary in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Politics and murder go hand in hand in nearly all of William Shakespeare’s works, but *Hamlet* speaks to ancient political theory as no other work of literature does. Critics often comment on the violent nature of Shakespearian characters and their unreasonable decisions. Alan Friedman expresses this in a critique of the base principles of power struggles and what the unclear intentions of others lead Hamlet to do. He says, “For Hamlet, Shakespeare’s more active and violent protagonist on the state, spends the vast bulk of his play trying in vain to avoid becoming the revenge hero demanded of him by his father’s ghost and, concomitantly, to avoid participating in such a scene as the final bloodbath.”¹ The facts which can be utilized in analyzing the text are many. However, it seems that the motives of the player do not come from the demand of the Ghost, but rather from Hamlet and other characters’ tentative movements. The choices of others influence the dance between the Ghost, Hamlet, and King Claudius and are tempered by the flames of political power.

Principles of power, and power’s subset of control, greatly impact the disposition of *Hamlet*’s characters. Juan Cirlot defines *Hamlet* as strictly a work of literary myth; stepping into the role of critical commentary he says, “[t]his famous Shakespearian tragedy has its origins in a Nordic legend. Apart from the Renaissance dramatist’s explanation of its ‘obvious contents,’ it also lends itself to other explanations of latent contents, or, better, to disclosures on other

¹ Friedman, Alan W. "Hamlet the Unready." (Universtiy of Texas) n.d.

planes.”² It is the wiggle room he offers in ‘other explanations’ the reader will explore here. The restriction of *Hamlet* to a psychological framework or a study in myth limits its application to the more practical social studies. In analyzing the play and Machiavellian thought; it is evident Shakespeare is aware of the ministerial implications of the Machiavel in the creation of *Hamlet*. Shakespearian political thinking in the play stems from the amoral treatise of the nature of rulers called *The Prince*. Shakespeare familiarity with its principles is used well to develop the Prince of Denmark. Julia Lupton says, “[w]hile English Machiavellism is now represented as a more or less legitimate phenomenon in the history of ideas, the state Machiavel continues to be understood as a spurious and crude caricature of Italian political theory.”³ Even with the limitation Lupton places on Machiavellian Theory as a general commentary on Italian politics, its value is in its maxims, not its history. Most critics agree that Machiavelli influences Shakespeare’s Italian dramas, but its influence extends beyond this to the general realm of most Shakespearian tragedies as well. *Hamlet*, therefore, is a study of political structures and the maxim of power; specifically, it is an exercise of the power that men and women seek to gain within these structures.

By observing how *Hamlet’s* characters negotiate these obstacles, both overcoming and failing, we get to see the evolution of powerful people and, by extension, the struggles of the masses. The call to act by the Ghost hints at this as it hollowly appeals to *The Prince’s* core principle of power: control.

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purged away. . .

² Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1983.

³ Lupton, Julia. *Truant Dispositions: Hamlet and Machiavelli*. Vol. 17.1, in *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Michelle Lee, 59-82. Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 1987.

. . . List, list, O list!
 If thou didst ever they dear father love—
 . . . Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
 A couch for luxury and damned incest.⁴

Just as Hamlet is called to action by the Ghost's appeal to his paternal love, the reader of the play must also be ready to understand the perspective of the Bard as he crafts the Prince-that-should-be in Hamlet into a caricature of the fight against tyranny and despotism. Choosing to study collectively three characters – King Claudius, Hamlet, and the Ghost – will yield an understanding of the proper role of leaders and the improper use of power. The failings of each character will demonstrate what dithering and faith in unfounded principles can do to an individual, a society, and eventually, a nation.

Il Principe, or *The Prince*, is authored by the most notorious political scientist of the ancient world: Niccolo Machiavelli. The 15th century Italian's expression of military, social, and political power is utilized by many classes of people modernly who seek to gain dominion or greatness in a variety of professional, personal, and political fields. The focus now turns to the principles of the Machiavel as it patterns the theories of control, revenge, and fortune. Cirlot again helps us to understand the connection between the symbol of the prince, and Shakespeare's utilization of the kingly order. "The prince, or the son of the king, is a rejuvenated form of the paternal king, as the nascent sun is a rejuvenation of the dying sun. The prince often figures as the hero in legends; his great virtue is intuition and it is by no means rare for him to possess the powers of a demiurge."⁵ Cirlot's suggestion of a prince's great virtue being that of "intuition" is part of a disconnect that exists throughout the play. Here Cirlot highlights the crevasse between

⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Online Library. Prod. MIT Online Library. MIT, n.d.

⁵ Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1983.

how Hamlet acts and how he should act. While a prince, in the figurative form, is the symbol of rejuvenation, a prince in Machiavellian terms is one who gains power to lead, the genesis is of little importance. His structures depend on the threat of violence, initial establishment, and alliances that existed in experience, council, and faction management.

What Hamlet possesses in prophetic vision, he lacks in the fortitude to do what is necessary in accordance with the principles of Machiavel. J.G.A. Pocock highlights what Machiavelli intended *Il Principe* to be: “The Prince is not a work of ideology, in the sense that it cannot be identified as expressing the outlook of a group, it is rather an analytic study of innovation and its consequences; but within that character, it proceeds straight to the analysis of the ultimate problem raised by both innovation and the decay of citizenship.”⁶ In connection with this inward struggle turned outward, we will do as Machiavelli himself suggested to all who wish to obtain a lofty goal, “[h]e should do as those prudent archers do who, aware of the strength of their bow when the target at which they are aiming seems too distant, set their sights much higher than the designated target, not in order to reach such a height with their arrow, but instead to be able, by aiming so high, to strike their target.”⁷ In the hopes of hitting what we are aiming at, we must be willing to discuss the nature of Machiavelli’s theories, and how critics have applied them to political literature in general, and specifically to the comings and goings of Hamlet, the Ghost, and Claudius.

Hamlet is a man who does not know what he has the ability to do. This shortcoming highlights his lack of vision to do what is necessary to take the power of leadership that is rightfully his. Leo Paul de Alvarez shows us what Machiavelli expressed as the nature of leaders,

⁶ Pocock, J.G.A. "The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition." In *The Medicean Restoration*., by J.G.A. Pocock, 156-82. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975.

⁷ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford Universtiy Press, 2005.

and what they must become for a successful state to be defended or obtained. Alvarez analyzes Machiavelli's political thought to be an expectation of compete excellence, or not excellence in any way. Writers and readers who fail to recognize this are living in a wishful world of needing to praise only the outwardly positive traits of a prince, rather than the quality of the outcomes of their activities. The Mirrors of Princes Theory requires a leader to have all good traits and to express those traits in all ways possible. The Machiavel shows a reversal of this requirement is more necessary than the perfect reflection called for by the Mirrors.⁸ In comparing this example to the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, we are forced to consider these two points: First, according to de Alvarez, ambiguity in the mind of the prince must not exist or there cannot be a successful state. By choosing to be either excellent or less than such, a prince allows his state to be run by his hand or by the hand of others. A lack of clarity as to which is being carried out will increase the formation of irrepressible faction, and drive the state, and its inhabitants, to ruin.

Hamlet testifies to his state of mind and a lack of clarity at two distinct points in the play; "And thy commandment all alone shall live/Within the book and volume of my brain,/Unmix'd with baser matter: yes, by heaven!/ That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;/At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark."⁹ It is obvious that Hamlet's concern for the livelihood of the state is vigorous, and his motives are clear. His wish is to be the leader of the state, and the ambiguous Ghost issues this exact challenge. However, in Act II, scene ii Hamlet tips his hand in a different direction about his feelings on Denmark, "Hamlet: Denmark's a prison./Rosencrantz: Then is the

⁸ de Alvarez, Leo Paul S. *Of Those Things for Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed; Of Liberality and Parsimony; Of Cruelty and Pity: And if it is Better to Be Loved than Feared, or the Contrary; In what Mode Princes Ought to Keep Faith*. Vol. 140, in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, edited by Thomas Schoenberg, 78-90. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press; Gale, 1999.

⁹ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Online Library. Prod. MIT Online Library. MIT, n.d.

world one./Hamlet: A goodly one; in which there are many confines,/wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.”¹⁰

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘prison’ is a term that was used connectively with ‘exile’ between 1330 and 1888. Defined specifically as, “A banished person; one compelled to reside away from his native land,”¹¹ this subtle suggestion comes to pass later in the play as Hamlet is physically sent away after the elimination of Polonius. The irony of Polonius’ death is that according to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, “. . . it should be noted that men must be either caressed or wiped out; because they will avenge minor injuries, but cannot do so for grave ones. Any harm done to a man must be of the kind that removes any fear of revenge.”¹²

Secondly, de Alvarez suggests that Hamlet is a reversal of the Mirrors of Princes principle which, if followed, says that all virtue should be contained in a good leader. However, Machiavelli’s theory of leadership does not require virtues to be the keys to success; rather, he attempts to break the molds of conventional principles of power. This expression is clarified by de Alvarez as he comments on the nature of Machiavelli’s theory of leadership.

One can say that Machiavelli is not simply an amoralist or one who mocks all morality. Rather, he wants to be able to break with the generally accepted views of the good and the bad, or, as he says, to be able to be good and bad depending on what is necessary to do. Always being good will lead one to destruction, but so will always being bad.¹³

10 Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Online Library. Prod. MIT Online Library. MIT, n.d.

11 Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford Press, 2012.

12 Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford University Press, 2005.

13 de Alvarez, Leo Paul S. *Of Those Things for Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed; Of Liberality and Parsimony; Of Cruelty and Pity: And if it is Better to Be Loved than Feared, or the Contrary; In what Mode Princes Ought to Keep Faith*. Vol. 140, in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, edited by Thomas Schoenberg, 78-90. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press; Gale, 1999.

The powers of an ascended prince or king inseparably connect with their proactive or indecisive natures. As Hamlet and Claudius take their turns in failures though the course of the play, the events turn on their inability to perform what is necessary according to the Machiavel.

The symbol of the ideal prince, one who has all virtues and makes the correct decisions as the rightful heir, with the Machiavellian prince, who neither needs these traditional principles nor must show them, allows the focus to fall onto the mentality and actions of the play's apparent princes in practice. Hamlet's personal struggle leaves a question to be answered; what does the Claudius and Hamlet relationship teach us about power and control? Armed with an understanding of what the ideal prince should be, and what Hamlet is showing to be, we can now turn our attention to the specific relationship between Hamlet and Claudius. The play's foreshadow of events begins with the Ghost's appeal to Hamlet's familial responsibility in death to his father as noted earlier.¹⁴ The Ghost's petition to Hamlet's love is unfair to the character; However, his appeal highlights how Hamlet allows his actions to be manipulated by the vapors of the either imagined or real encounter. Friedman directs us to this device which Hamlet allows to be placed on him when he states, "...the rest of the play derives direction from this line is, I think, fairly obvious; Hamlet, sufficiently worn and cornered to accept what he has long rejected and opposed is at last disposed to do what he has, in effect, been charged to do from the first: Kill and be killed."¹⁵ This forcing of the final deed of death, either dealt or received and inevitably both, helps us to see the connection that Machiavelli says happens to all who are not clear with their intentions, "[f]or men do harm either out of fear or out of hatred."¹⁶ This cut and dry level of required accomplishment is softened by de Alvarez's comments on the Machiavel,

¹⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Online Library. Prod. MIT Online Library. MIT, n.d.

¹⁵ Friedman, Alan W. "Hamlet the Unready." (Universtiy of Texas) n.d.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford Universtiy Press, 2005.

specifically the theory's views on causal relationships as compared with Aristotle's explanation of the working soul.

Desire is formed by the image (intellectual desire). Aristotle thus speaks of the power of rhetoric and poetry, both of which move men to action. What Machiavelli denies is the efficacy of the image to form the desiring or nonrational part of the soul. Men's desires are moved by the external forces of necessity, not by images. Here is the great dividing line between the ancient political philosophers and Machiavelli. Can the images form the soul? Is the intellect therefore able to move men into action? Or must one work with the causes external to man before which the images are nothing?¹⁷

Shakespeare's use of a Ghost is an extension of the Aristotelian Cave Allegory's theoretical application. The events which guide Hamlet to decide between his own intellect and the images of the soul are clearly present. However, without the push from the Ghost, Hamlet supposedly would have done nothing and remained sufficiently ignorant to the nature of Claudius' deceit. Friedman suggests that Hamlet's thoughts were not clear on this matter; therefore, he could not have understood his final destination. Friedman states, "[b]ut to suggest that Hamlet has been seeking – perhaps unconsciously – not to do the deed is to cut the Gordian knot. His reasoning suggests one hopelessly caught in a trap, but not yet acknowledging the inevitable."¹⁸ His observation speaks directly to the undisciplined intents Hamlet exerts on the situation. Because of his lack of control, Hamlet and Claudius are bound in eternal fates which others are

¹⁷ de Alvarez, Leo Paul S. *Of Those Things for Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed; Of Liberality and Parsimony; Of Cruelty and Pity: And if it is Better to Be Loved than Feared, or the Contrary; In what Mode Princes Ought to Keep Faith*. Vol. 140, in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, edited by Thomas Schoenberg, 78-90. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press; Gale, 1999.

¹⁸ Friedman, Alan W. "Hamlet the Unready." (Universtiy of Texas) n.d.

unknowingly dragged into. Instead of only destroying one or the other, they terminate innocent bystanders in the process of their political incompetence.

The inconsistent rule Hamlet and Claudius wield in these situations are evident by the movement of the players. Pocock's commentary illuminates the audience by addressing the principle of fortune, or *fortuna*, that is often used by Machiavelli to describe the outside influences on a situation. He says, "[i]f politics be thought of as the art of dealing with the contingent event, it is the art of dealing with *fortuna* as the force which directs such events and thus symbolizes pure, uncontrolled, and unlegitimated contingency."¹⁹ The chief failing of both Hamlet and Claudius is actually the same failure. Claudius makes the mistake of sending Hamlet away into exile as punishment for Polonius' death. Hamlet learns of the plan and is able to escape his death, leaving others to the fate that was destined to be his. Because of the failures of others, Claudius fails to remove the true bloodline in the veins of Hamlet. Machiavelli would say this is Claudius' grand mistake in his effort to retain power; he failed to remove the threat.²⁰ Fortune intercedes and Hamlet is returned safe to Denmark.

Hamlet also fails to follow the Machiavellian principle of removing threats as he has the perfect opportunity while the king prays in his chamber. John E. Alvis describes Hamlet's mindset and the reasons behind the failed attempt of eliminating Claudius; conversely, this can be applied to Claudius as well.

Hamlet depicts a murderer-usurper (Claudius) whose Christian conscience, however it may disturb him when he prays, does not deter his crime nor alter his resolve to continue to enjoy ill-acquired gains. The same play presents us with a

¹⁹ Pocock, J.G.A. "The Machiavellian Mooment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition." In *The Medicean Restoration*., by J.G.A. Pocock, 156-82. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975.

²⁰ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford Universtiy Press, 2005.

prince who allows himself to be distracted from his duty by preoccupations with discontents arising from a Christian sense of universal sinfulness.²¹

Alvis' argument is partially supported by Machiavel in *The Prince*. Machiavelli suggests being Christian encourages a state of weakness which credits fortune with more than the notion should be given.²² The suggestion only partially holds weight with our arguments here however, because it is not fortune that rules the lives and choices of Hamlet and Claudius, rather the procrastination to do what is necessary. Julia Lupton says the Christian tradition of love is connected to its understanding of justice. Justice must be superior to fear, but inspired by it for a motive of obedience. Understanding the principle leads those who are subjects to the prince to fall into loving submission. However, she notes most Christian theorist commentators suggest fear is necessary to bring people to love. Therefore, it is a dynamic and coercive principle in creating loving subjects.²³ Politically, Hamlet and Claudius could not have acted more inept or less powerfully to either gain or retain possession of the elusive control that is necessary for power to exist in the Machiavellian Theory. Neither man delivers on what should be expected of the ruler of a nation, thus leaving the state to suffer for their lack of political savvy.

Power is elusive. Hamlet learns this in death and Claudius learns it in attempting to eliminate Hamlet by the hand of another. Alvis' summarization of the end of the play suits the previous suggestion that Hamlet failed as a prospective prince and Claudius failed as a sitting prince. Because neither could deliver on gaining true control, they allowed fortune to rule their kingdom.

²¹ Alvis, John E. "Shakespeare's Hamlet and Machiavelli: How Not to Kill a Despot." Edited by John E Alvis and Thomas G West. *Shakespearean Criticism* (Gale) 107 (2000): 289-313.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lupton, Julia. *Truant Dispositions: Hamlet and Machiavelli*. Vol. 17.1, in *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Michelle Lee, 59-82. Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 1987.

The prince's death deals a serious wound to Denmark since, as the designated future king, Hamlet's obligation is to provide the realm with a transition from Claudius's despotism to decent government. Finally and most damaging to the political well-being of the state, Hamlet leaves his country defenseless against a foreign invader. In fact he ratifies Fortinbras' illegitimate acquisition of Denmark for Norway with his dying words. For Machiavelli, but not only for Machiavelli, losing the independence of one's fatherland is the gravest of political sins.²⁴

Hamlet's great failure is not putting aside his goodness. Machiavelli states, "[a] man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity."²⁵ From de Alvarez and Friedman's differing suggestions about the nature of power and its purpose in *Hamlet*, to Lupton and Cirlot's definition of the Machiavellian power structure in literature, there is still room for a discussion on the lack of concern states have for the individual, and that princes with power have for the state.

The obvious lack of personal care and managerial view which Hamlet and Claudius could not present reveals the answer to the question, 'What does Claudius' and Hamlet's relationships tell us about power and control?' As Niccolo Machiavelli related the historian Justinus' high praise of Heiro the Syracusan, we would not be able to say about the Ghost, Claudius or Hamlet: *quod nihil illi deerat ad regnandum praeter regnum*, "that he lacked nothing to reign but a kingdom."²⁶ Had either Claudius or Hamlet been more decisive, the facts might fall to the other

²⁴ Alvis, John E. "Shakespeare's Hamlet and Machiavelli: How Not to Kill a Despot." Edited by John E Alvis and Thomas G West. *Shakespearean Criticism* (Gale) 107 (2000): 289-313.

²⁵ Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford University Press, 2005.

²⁶ Ibid.

side of the scale. It is evident their lack of decisiveness from Hamlet and Claudius, as the Machiavellian Theory of power calls for, is the reason both lost their position, their lives, and eventually, the state of Denmark.

Bibliography

- Alvis, John E. "Shakespeare's Hamlet and Machiavelli: How Not to Kill a Despot." Edited by John E Alvis and Thomas G West. *Shakespearean Criticism* (Gale) 107 (2000): 289-313.
- Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge, 1983.
- de Alvarez, Leo Paul S. *Of Those Things for Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed; Of Liberality and Parsimony; Of Cruelty and Pity: And if it is Better to Be Loved than Feared, or the Contrary; In what Mode Princes Ought to Keep Faith*. Vol. 140, in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, edited by Thomas Schoenberg, 78-90. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press; Gale, 1999.
- Friedman, Alan W. "Hamlet the Unready." (University of Texas) n.d.
- Lee, Michelle, ed. *Machiavellianism*. Vol. 107. Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 2007.
- Lupton, Julia. *Truant Dispositions: Hamlet and Machiavelli*. Vol. 17.1, in *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Michelle Lee, 59-82. Detroit, Michigan: Gale, 1987.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. *Il Principe*. Translated by Niccolo Bondanella. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford Press, 2012.
- Pocock, J.G.A. "The Machiavellian Movement: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition." In *The Medicean Restoration*., by J.G.A. Pocock, 156-82. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Online Library. Prod. MIT Online Library. MIT, n.d.