

# The Machiavellian Manifestations of King Claudius

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Ability and fortune, the two basic arbiters under the constraints of which humankind pieces together its modest accomplishments in this world, are both bestowed by the grace of Providence. The first, once acquired, usually remains a lifelong companion; the second, however, is of a more ephemeral nature. Machiavelli, advocating the existential over the intangible, states in *The Prince* that a leader would be well-served to place faith in his abilities rather than his fortunes, since an abundance of the former frequently compensates for deficiency in the latter. This basically sound rationale, as applied to the antagonist of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, ultimately proves false. Even as Claudius appears the ideal Machiavellian personification of the fox and the lion, fate proceeds steadfastly on its course, casting an eerie, enigmatic, inexorable pall over Elsinore and the whole of Denmark.

In the first few scenes of *Hamlet*, the political abilities of Claudius are strikingly evident, and even though it has been only a scant two months since the death of King Hamlet, his powers are well-consolidated. No justification is given for the anomaly in the right of succession to the throne of Denmark, other than Claudius' implied devious tactics and Hamlet's absence from court. Although, later in the play, Claudius speaks of "the great love the general gender bear [Hamlet]," there is to be found nary a whisper of impropriety or scandal on anyone's breath aside from Hamlet himself, and his grumblings relate almost exclusively to the hasty and indecorous remarriage of his mother, the queen, rather than to his deprivation of the throne (Shakespeare 114). Claudius has ostensibly found a way to maintain a sterling reputation while indulging, before the public, in what normally would be considered an incestuous relationship. The rationalization of his actions to the court through the pseudo-patriotic rhetoric evidenced in his opening speech of Act I, Scene ii, is a tutorial in political pragmatism. He is also shown to command significant international respect, successfully influencing the elderly king of Norway to suppress the ambitions of his young nephew, Fortinbras. Furthermore, he has somehow ingratiated himself with the monarch of England to the extent of being able to ask him, later in the play, to execute the legitimate heir to the Danish throne. This alliance most certainly was accomplished by his own initiative and not that of the royal family. In lieu of a more in-depth profile, Machiavelli would be hard-pressed not to rank Claudius with the likes of Cesare Borgia, "a man of such savage courage and ability...so well aware of just how men are to be won over or ruined" (Machiavelli 21).

While Claudius' court demeanor is one of confidence and authority, his attitude toward Hamlet is one of condescension and self-righteousness. He pays Hamlet little heed until such time as he realizes Hamlet's feigned madness might begin to cause him problems. Although he is disposed to the wishes of Gertrude regarding her son, Hamlet's actions are suspect in his mind, and he exhibits every intention of keeping him firmly under his control. The enlistment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in this endeavor is an attempt by

Claudius, in true Machiavellian form, to ascertain Hamlet's actual motives without his knowledge.

Claudius' telling faux pas, and one that changes the course of the play, is his tacit admission of guilt during the enactment of *The Murder of Gonzago*. He suffers pangs of conscience, and when Hamlet subsequently hears his uncle's confession in prayer, the die is cast. Even though Hamlet lets this prime opportunity to avenge his father's murder slip by, his resolve is firmly established, and he is set irrevocably upon the path of retribution.

In spite of his remaining decisive and never being at a loss for intrigue throughout the play, Claudius begins to lose touch with what he had perceived as *fait accompli* when faced with the death of Polonius. Just as Machiavelli warns that a prince should not place his destiny in the hands of another leader by issuing an invitation allowing that leader to intervene militarily in his state, so too should the prince not remove from his own control other actions necessary for his security. After Hamlet "runs through" Polonius, Claudius finally realizes what he appeared reluctant to admit to himself earlier; his salvation depends on Hamlet's death. In his brief soliloquy at the end of Act IV, Scene iii, Claudius importunes: "Do it, England; for like the hectic in my blood he rages, and thou must cure me" (Shakespeare 101). All considered, Machiavelli would undoubtedly agree that Claudius would have been much better off to kill Hamlet first—then send him on his trip—whether it be to England or someplace more convenient.

From this point on, fate takes over, and the drama of *Hamlet* becomes a study in machinations gone awry. Laertes arrives from Paris, and with the dementia and subsequent death of Ophelia, he and Claudius conspire to kill Hamlet, who has also returned to Denmark. Again, a principle that Machiavelli directs primarily at the military and war is shown to have been violated; a potential difficulty had been neglected. With respect to Claudius' suspicions of Hamlet, Machiavelli might have suggested that he take immediate action since "such things, ...at first [are] easy to cure though hard to recognize, but in time, ...[become] easy to recognize and hard to cure" (Machiavelli 6). Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes is, of course, achieved but not without disastrous consequences for Claudius and Denmark.

So ends *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, a drama that pits the assurance of ability against the uncertainty of fortune. The play acquires its basic impetus through the self-interest motive of Claudius and its substance from the Machiavellian implementation of that motive. As melodramatic as *Hamlet* might seem today, its tragedy is based on the immutable human condition, and it is one destined to be repeated, in one form or another, throughout human ascendancy.

## Works Cited

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