

Submitted: September 9, 2024

Accepted: November 20, 2024

## Manipulation in Shakespeare's Hamlet: The Complexity of Moral Questions and Considerations

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### Abstract

*Shakespeare's Hamlet is a good example of a political play that accentuates the remarkable ways in which power is seized and used for manipulative objectives. Thus, manipulation happens in Hamlet, especially in terms of trying to search for the truth. It is also a kind of play that creates the distinction between virtue and vice. As it is reflected, Claudius becomes desperate to ascend to the throne, and for this reason, he kills his brother. This situation presents fertile ground for tragic situations in the process of political pursuit. Thus, as we see the effort of Hamlet in pursuing retributive justice for his father's death, many other forms of truth are revealed, and these bring about the act and the practice of the reality of life. Therefore, this paper reveals how Shakespeare presents moral questions and considerations using the characters of Hamlet, the protagonist, and Claudius, the antagonist, and revealing how a family feud affects a nation. The attempt to take revenge leads to multiple deaths. The paper accentuates the function of power and how Hamlet emphasises that nothing can stand in his way of revenge, including his Christian faith. The loyalty to his late father becomes a strong measure for fulfilling his wish. In other words, tragedy would not have evolved if Hamlet has not made himself a complex person by refusing to accept what his uncle has done. He becomes very careful to regain what his uncle has taken.*

**Keywords:** Hamlet, Power, Politics, Manipulations, Moral Questions

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## Introduction

Over the years, people have always applied different approaches to gaining power and influence. The desire to be in charge of everything, to dominate everything, and to become the lord of everything has always been a peculiar component of human desire. However, despite the fact that man's needs can be met by the provisions available in his environment, he tends not to be satisfied with what he has in his possession. This is similar to Mahatma Gandhi's famous quote, "the world has enough for everyone's needs but not enough for everyone's greed." The thirst for power has been one of man's enduring desires based on this concept. Even if he has all it takes to live a life of luxury, his greed makes him seek more. From ages to ages, era to era, and generation to generation, kingdoms and governments have come and gone. This is a universal phenomenon that describes the condition of the world and its materialism as ephemeral—nothing is eternal. Things that exit are mainly superficial and fugacious. They will always disappear just the same way they appeared.

Thus, people have used power to achieve great things; "great things" in this context means both negative and positive things. As political power has been used to achieve personal interests, it has also been used to affect human development. The conditions in which many people have had power at their disposal have been on the negative side of history. Furthermore, one will ask why people tend to wreak great havoc using political power. Thus, this reflects the common reality that pontificates that a sword in the wrong hand will wreak havoc. This expression connotes that if power is left in the hands of the wrong person, many evils will be committed. Therefore, in the contemporary and classical eras, political power has been used to wreak havoc, and kingdoms, states, empires, and territories have risen and fallen through the way power has been used. Serving as a mirror of life, literature has been a great component that accentuates the reality of the universe and the diversity of human desire. It has also served as a lamp that puts light on the complex reality of human behaviour. In this case, the aim of this paper is to examine how political power is used as a weapon of manipulation in *Hamlet*. It also reflects the individual characters with the traits of manipulation and how they use manipulative approaches to achieve their goals. Notwithstanding, "Shakespeare developed a cautious approach while problematising serious political issues such as factionalism, the succession crisis, rebellion, and tyranny in his plays. In the analysis of Shakespeare's various plays, Shakespearean scholars have widely recognised the playwright's strategies to avoid punishment and censorship, such as his use of other sources, distant settings, and ambiguity" (Özbey, 2021,p.viii).

Shakespeare, in his craft, has developed many political and philosophical plays that have shed light on many universal problems. Thus, "Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a metaphor for theatre to parody the manner in which classical texts were appropriated in the first decade after the Second World War, creating a comical and at the same time socially engaged play about the cultural changes" (Portmann, 2018,p.62). However, one cannot just consider Shakespeare as a playwright but as a figure that has created an image that makes the subsequent generation look back and think while considering his works. He has of course addressed different topics in his plays, such as political history, romance, fantasy, philosophy, humanity, betrayal, and even race. For example, some of his plays that reflect political issues are *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Despite this, some scholars claim that *Othello*

has a racial proclivity, which is why Shakespeare chose a black man as the play's hero. However, Shakespeare has used *Othello* to explain the need for establishing contemporary social sovereignty that is completely different from the monarchical style of governing the people. As a result, one cannot assume that he is motivated by racial prejudice. Despite that, he reveals the flaws of Othello as a military general; he has also revealed the flaws of Macbeth, who is not from a black race. To understand Shakespeare's plays, one must read them in depth, because within the rhythm of his play lines, one finds a lot of codes and ideograms that can never be interpreted from a literal point of view. Shakespeare had some critics who were his contemporaries; one of them was Ben Jonson, who was very critical of him. Yet he maintains that Shakespeare has many more things that deserve commendation than things to be forgiven. Hence, "[t]he most explicit criticism of Shakespeare comes from his rival Ben Jonson," Smith testifies. Jonson is scornful of Shakespeare's error in giving Bohemia a seacoast in [The Winter's Tale](#) and laughs at a line from [Julius Caesar](#)—that remark seems to have stung since the text of the play doesn't include the offending line" (*Shakespeare's Birthplace*). Thus, in *Hamlet*, we can critically identify the manner in which Shakespeare presents the character of Hamlet, especially in his classification of human nature, and: "In an attempt to scold Claudius, Hamlet claims that Claudius is "no more like [his] father/ Than [he] to Hercules" (Ham. 1.2.152-3). Hamlet is using this comparison to show that his uncle Claudius is significantly unlike his father, but in turn, Hamlet is claiming that he himself is unlike Hercules" (Riggs, 2018). With the way he presents his characters, Shakespeare can also be seen as a philosopher who uses his plays to create intellectual depth. So, his works are not always seen from the surface of the concept but from the contextual nuances.

### **The Complexity of Moral Questions and Considerations in *Hamlet***

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare addresses very significant issues that are not only political but also philosophical. While presenting the protagonist of the play, Hamlet, one tends to understand the disparity between *Hamlet* as a text and Hamlet as a character. Being an eponymous play, different motifs are treated, apart from politics, betrayal, family feud, revenge, royalty, and power; the issue of love is also treated, which is reflected in Hamlet's romantic relationship with Ophelia. However, in all these motifs, there is a dominant theme that takes up the centre of the play, which is the idea of death. It is a tragic play that explains the mystery of the underworld. This situation can be identified in the death of Hamlet's father and the subsequent deaths that occur as the play progresses. Talking about the philosophical supposition of native wits in *Hamlet*, one can understand how death is vehemently apotheosised while Hamlet begins to engage in deepest thought about death. His father's ghost has appeared to him, instructing him to take revenge on his younger brother Claudius, who has taken over the throne and his wife. In the process, Hamlet begins to preoccupy himself with deep thinking that raises many questions. He thinks about death from different points of view and examines his thoughts about the mystery of death. Thus, "Hamlet is the most famous work in English literature. In which Shakespeare's brilliance takes the reader to another level of analysing literary texts. The themes Shakespeare deals with in *Hamlet* are not new, but it is the first literary work that tries to explore the nature of death" (Sagheer and Auktum, 2021, p.104).

The action of death and its consequences are considered in the mystery of death. He also has a suicidal thought, but he evaluates what the aftermath of suicide will be. This reflects the fact that the misfortune of this literal world could have been easily escaped by all individuals if they truly had an idea of what happens in the underworld. In this sense, one can see his soliloquy condition of "to be or not to be." Here, he reconsiders the fact that if one commits suicide, there could be the miserable consequence of hell because of his Christian faith, which forbids suicide—that is, committing self-murder is an action prohibited by Christian creed, and the consequence is hell. Death or how to die is not the main issue in this context, but the aftermath of committing suicide is the main issue that he considers. So, in the idea of the "to be or not to be" monologue, it raises the questions of uncertainty and the fear of the unknown. The fear of what might be the experience of the underworld has become a preponderant subject, and perhaps the misery of the underworld is worse than the earth's. Also, one can think about how credible Hamlet's experience with his ghost-father, who seeks revenge for his death through his son, is. One can question the authenticity of what is happening to Hamlet: is he truly having an encounter with a ghost, or is it just a mere hallucination? Is a ghost a realistic fact or just a mental construct? Does ghostly reality truly exist, or is it the product of a delusional mind? In terms of the underworld, is there any life after the present one? Is there any plausibility of hell if one takes one's life, or is it just something forbidden by religious tenets? Is hell real, or is it a kind of pseudologiafantastica? Is there not a kind of existential responsibility for one's actions if one makes a bad decision that affects one not only in the literal world but also in the world beyond? These are the questions that this situation has raised in accordance with the objective of this paper. Furthermore, "Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, is haunted in every sense of the word. His father, the king of Denmark, recently died under mysterious circumstances, and Hamlet's uncle (his father's brother) promptly married Hamlet's mother and ascended the throne" (Jocelyn, 2022,p.2).

Also, looking at Hamlet's actions and the way he tries to exercise so much patience to find out the truth about his encounter, it leads to many more deaths. The inability of Hamlet to act on time serves as his main tragic flaw as a tragic hero. One can therefore ask similar questions in line with the "to be or not to be" idea, and it can be conceptualised in the following expressions: to live or not to live, to die or not to die, to believe the ghost's claim or not to believe, and to act or not to act—those are the questions. Those are the questions surrounding the situations in *Hamlet*, and Hamlet also ponders over deep things before acting. As he tries to experiment with the truth, like Sophocles' king Oedipus, finding out the truth leads to a tragic discovery. One must also consider Hamlet's theatrical experiment as a very strong instrument for searching for the truth. As he has applied his whim to present a play that has a direct resemblance to Claudius' act of patricide, one can realise that Hamlet's main problem begins there. However, this experiment is meant to test Claudius' conscience and see how he will feel the guilt of his patricide. Despite that Claudius understands this scenario, he puts his conscience under control and fails to ask for forgiveness from God. However, this evil keeps on haunting him because he plans to cover up his evil by committing more evil. Now, without any form of penitence, he is after Hamlet's life, and this is the only way he feels he can cover up his evil.

Thus, we can see how Claudius demonstrates evil at a higher magnitude. He is "so cruel and deceitful that he can murder his brother secretly, marry his brother's wife without hesitation, and organise conspiracy against Hamlet, his brother's heir, to become the ruler of the kingdom. Although this ambitious action would raise protests among the public, he achieves handling this situation in a masterful Machiavellian practice" (Erdem, 2019,p.1044). If it is presumably admitted that he is not responsible for his brother's death, there is a kind of moral failure and question in his action. His action can easily make anyone assume he kills his brother and takes over his wife within a few weeks. One also needs to consider the fact that Hamlet has taken Claudius as a character who is more than a relative; hence, he dislikes him and his behaviour. One also needs to look at the situation of Hamlet's mother marrying her brother-in-law within a short period of time after her husband's demise. The answer to this question is critical; factually speaking, Hamlet is supposed to be the next king, but Claudius has taken over the throne, and the mother feels the only way Hamlet can claim his father's throne is for his mother to marry his uncle. We can see the complexity of power and political manipulation in this critical situation. Claudius manipulates power by committing atrocities such as murdering his brother and stealing his wife in order to seize power for himself. As Foucault explains, royal power is a kind of power that is exerted by one person, and the result is despotism. Political power here is used for personal gain—the propensity to remain relevant before the public and to take charge of all is preponderant in Claudius' character because he has gone to the extent of having blood stained in his hand. He wants to use his power to kill his nephew, first to cover up his evil, then to retain the power of royalty for himself. As Hamlet mourns his father, he is never happy about the marital union that takes place between Gertrude and Claudius. As said earlier in the introduction to this paper, man has an unquenchable thirst for power, and his desire to obtain it is high. Claudius has done the worst to take power for himself. Yet, Gertrude's acceptance to marry Claudius keeps giving Hamlet great concern.

However, researchers "have presented many reasons for Hamlet's extreme frustration with his mother's new union, such as his Oedipus complex, misogyny and fear of uncontrolled female sexuality, and loss of his right to the throne. While Hamlet thinks that Gertrude remarried out of lust, she clearly has political motives prompting her to marry Claudius and give him the throne" (Tuhbatullina, 2021,p.2). One can understand that the main reason Hamlet develops a great resentment against his mother's marriage to Claudius is that Claudius has taken over his birth right, the rightful royal ascendance to the throne, after his father's death. Thus, Gertrude and Hamlet have the same motive, even if it is presented differently. Hamlet needs to secure the throne (the power) for himself by using different manipulative means and intellectual approaches, yet his mother's aim in accepting to marry Claudius is to take the throne back for her son. In a moral quandary, political motives and manipulation are presented. Looking at this situation, as Hamlet keeps on expressing his displeasure and anger towards his mother because of her quick marriage to Claudius; he feels that his mother has betrayed him and his father. However, Gertrude never feels the same way because she is not wary of the fact that it is Claudius who poisons her husband. There is a kind of discrepant awareness, a situation where certain people—Claudius, Hamlet's ghost father, and Hamlet—are the only characters who are aware of the cause of the death except Gertrude. The main problem here is Gertrude's personality of few words. She does not talk

much, and this makes the viewers or the readers idealise her character. Bradley explains her character in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*, saying that her character appears as "a sheep in the sun," who cannot be involved in King Hamlet's murder but who is also too shallow to care about him or her son or her kingdom (167; cited in Tuhbatullina, 2021,p.3). Many interpretations have been given to Hamlet's behaviour towards Claudius and Gertrude; Sigmund Freud's theory has associated Hamlet's attitude with the Oedipus complex, in which the son has hatred for his father and then tries to kill his father and marry his mother. As this situation happens to King Oedipus, Sigmund Freud's concept of Hamlet as a son who develops sexual desire for his mother and then tries to kill his father in order to marry his mother becomes widely known among researchers in the twentieth century. Hamlet is seen as a son, while Claudius, who has assumed the position of his father, has been hated, and thus, he plans to kill him. This theory can be refuted because the reason for Hamlet's resentment towards his mother is clearly presented in the text. This has to do with a feeling of betrayal; Hamlet feels a sense of betrayal from two sides of a family space. The first is from his uncle, who plots the death of his father, and the other is from his mother, who agrees to marry his father's killer.

### **Political Manipulation and the Complex Dilemma**

Looking at *Hamlet* in terms of manipulation, there are various forms of manipulation, be it political or personal. Yet, both work interchangeably towards achieving specific goals. For example, Claudius takes advantage of the friends around Hamlet despite his sick state of mind; his depressive and melancholy situation has affected his mental health. Thus, from the beginning till the end of the play, Hamlet maintains a very pessimistic attitude—he becomes negative throughout the play. Claudius' manipulative situation achieves both personal and political goals. One can understand that the "plot and action of *Hamlet* include dramatisation of dilemmas of sovereignty, patriarchy, supernatural forces, political strategy, political violence, regicide, kinship, and popular sovereignty—all forms of power and modes of conduct that are juxtaposed and intertwined" (Frazer, 2020,p.194).

Claudius therefore exploits Hamlet's friends' love for him by constantly feeding them false information, manipulating them to do his bidding. As Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, feel that it is essential for them to medically examine the main cause of Hamlet's mental problem, Claudius takes advantage of their care and kindness to plan the death of Hamlet. The manipulation here is carried out by Claudius for his personal interest in order to retain power and cover up his evil. In Claudius' concern to monitor the assassination of Hamlet, this leads to many other subsequent deaths of others, which include Hamlet's childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As he attempts to kill Hamlet, he is also scared for his own life; thus, he becomes very desperate to kill Hamlet. However, in the case of Hamlet, instead of using emotional appeal to manipulate like his uncle, he applies intellectual manipulation to ensure that he establishes a discombobulating and deceitful situation. From the beginning until the end of the play, Hamlet presents himself in a very cryptic manner in which no one has the perspicacity of his personality. His intellectual approach is of a much greater magnitude than that of his childhood friends. Nobody knows how he acts out his insanity because no one has the ability to do so.

More so, taking a critical look at this situation, we can see that "Claudius states his intention to send Hamlet to England, to keep himself safe from Hamlet's madness. Polonius tells Claudius that Hamlet is going to Gertrude's room. Polonius says that he will hide behind a curtain and listen to their conversation because they cannot trust Hamlet's mother to give a true and objective account "(Grudzina, 2006, p.12).

Because of his desperation to take revenge, he has kept everybody away from himself except Horatio, the only character trusted by Hamlet from the beginning till the end of the play. Hamlet sees others as the agents of Claudius who prevent him from taking revenge on Claudius for his father's death. He confronts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and makes them realise that he is not easy to be played on. He confesses that he has no trust in his childhood friends because he feels that they are instruments in the hands of Claudius or that they tend to take advantage of him for their personal interests. Here, as Shakespeare applies illusion, he reflects an egregious situation. In fact, it is obvious that Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius. Regardless of "Ophelia's loyalty to him, Hamlet thinks that she, like everyone else, is turning against him; he feigns madness with her also and treats her cruelly as if she were representative, like his own mother, of her "treacherous" sex. Hamlet contrives a plan to test the ghost's accusation (Bevintong, 2023).

Despite Claudius and Hamlet's ability to manipulate and deceive others, their actions appear to be prone to backlash. Claudius, who becomes very desperate to fulfil his personal ambitions using personal and political power, eventually reveals himself. Hamlet deceives the audience and, as a result, is brought to his knees by his existential deception and desire for vengeance. Eventually, both the protagonist and antagonist meet face-to-face, and they find themselves at a point of no return. Thus, they both lose everything due to the egregious gambling they both engage in, and this leads to more deaths of other guiltless characters with pure intentions. Furthermore, "William Shakespeare's Hamlet explores what constitutes a betrayal. Claudius's poisoning of Hamlet's father drives the play's plot development, and Hamlet abhors his uncle for the murder of his father. Throughout the play, however, Hamlet focuses his anger on his mother, extrude" (Tuhbatullina, 2021,p.3). Thus, as Shakespeare applies illusion, it makes the play one of his best tragedies and the inclusion of dramatic irony makes the readers develop pity and fear in the process. The entire cast suffers misfortune, eliciting strong sympathy from the readers or audience.

## Conclusion

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare raises a serious question regarding the concepts of ambition and power. Claudius plans the murder of his brother because it serves his selfish desire. One may be driven to act in an illogical manner by an unquenched desire for power. Because of one man's choice to seize power, we can see how the blood flows. So from the start of the play until the very conclusion, Hamlet continues to be inconsistent. This inconsistent ambience enables many other events to develop until he reaches the decisive stage, a level from which there is no turning back. As a result, other characters die because of Hamlet's quest for retribution. Hence, as "the lucky Shakespeare could escape an early death, most of his characters were not able to do so. Most of them have tragic ends and leave behind some big questions unanswered. In most of Shakespeare's tragedies, the issue is not about the death

of a protagonist, but it is more about what that death reflects on the reader's mind by making him/her ask the same questions the tragic characters ask" (Sagheer and Auktum, 2021:107). The death Hamlet contemplates, his skepticism about the events of the underworld, and the uncertainty he expresses about life after death can therefore be known to him. The truth is known not only to the audience but also to the other characters, which are kept in the dark; they eventually become aware of the evil that Claudius has privately committed. As a result, this paper reveals the profundity of Shakespeare's deep political interests in relation to both Shakespeare's time and contemporary times. *Hamlet* as a play therefore reflects the reality of power pursued in a dangerous way, which does not mind killing as many people as possible regardless of the number. As we can see from the manner in which Claudius tries to shed more blood in order to cover up his evil, this same action can be compared to Macbeth's attitude when he keeps on killing every person he perceives as an obstacle to his ambition. Hamlet never allows anything to deprive him of fulfilling his desire, just as his uncle has not allowed anything to stand in his way to become king. This strong opinion of Hamlet makes him feel that it will not amount to heroism if he allows poetic justice to take place. Rather, he plays the roles actively by taking revenge despite his Christian faith. In order to avenge his father's assassination, he is willing to go to any length, even if it means carrying out the vengeance inside the church. Getting to the point of no return then gives him a kind of tragic fulfillment. Thus, when comparing this type of heroic action, it is a combination of classical heroism and Christian heroism.

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