



POLITICAL DOMINANCE IN CLAUDIUS: THE MOST POWERFUL MOTIVATING FACTOR IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

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William Shakespeare was the greatest playwright the world has ever known. His talent with using the English language has never had any competition, not even today. With his wonderful talent, he has produced thirty-seven plays. Although Shakespeare died more than four hundred years ago, he is still very famous around the world today. Written probably in 1600 or 1601, Hamlet was probably first performed in July 1602. It was first published in print in 1603 and appeared in an enlarged edition in 1604. He could have taken the story of Hamlet from several possible sources, including a twelfth-century Latin history of Denmark compiled by Saxo Grammaticus and a prose work by the French writer François de Belleforest, entitled *Histoires Tragiques*.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a revenge tragedy and the object of revenge is Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. Hamlet is urged to carry out this revenge by the ghost of his father whom Claudius had murdered. Shakespeare's essays also note that there is also another family in the play whose fate intersects with the fate of Hamlet's family; that is the family of Polonius. Both families are destroyed as the process of that intersection works itself out. King Claudius, as seen in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, is both intelligent and well-spoken, two traits that, put together, complement his manipulative and dangerous nature. In fact though, it is his conscience that makes Claudius such a complex villain. Despite his rise to power seeming to have been carefully planned and executed he nevertheless encountered certain things that he did not expect, Such as the appearance of the ghost of his victim that ignited Hamlet's thirst for revenge.

Claudius' ambition forms the heart of the entire play. Claudius is so ambitious, he is willing to kill his brother, the king, and take over his throne. He then marries his brother's wife to cement his hold on the throne. When Hamlet Jr. begins to question Claudius and his actions, Claudius is willing to poison his own nephew/stepson. To protect his plan of poisoning Hamlet, he allows his wife to accidentally drink the poison meant for Hamlet, resulting in her death. Claudius was pretty ambitious since he was willing to kill three members of his own family in order to be king of Denmark. *"My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. May one be pardon'd and retain th'offence"(Act3, scene3, lines55-56)*. Claudius admits that he poisoned the King in order to fulfill his ambitions of getting the crown, or power, and the King's wife. He wonders if he could be forgiven while he enjoys the prizes of his sins. Claudius knows that he is doomed to eternal damnation unless he shows repentance. However, he realizes that he would rather keep all that he has taken from Hamlet rather than avoid damnation. Claudius's ambition and greed prevent him from facing the consequences of his sins. His ambition keeps him scheming late into the play. He expertly redirects Laertes's anger at him onto Hamlet and concocts an elaborate plot to remove Hamlet for good. Ambition drives Claudius's actions; in a sense, it drives the action of the play itself. *"Time qualifies the spark and fire of it. There lives within the very flame of love. A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it" (4.7.114-116)*. He would prefer it is Laertes acted while his feelings of hatred and revenge were still fresh, whereas it would be preferable if Hamlet be quiet about his father instead of keeping his memory fresh in everyone's minds.

Claudius then convinces Hamlet that his grief "shows a will most incorrect to heaven." (1.2.95), meaning that he should instead be happy for his father, for he is now in heaven. But it isn't until later that we find out that the ghost isn't in heaven at all, instead suffering in "sulphurous and tormenting flames" (1.5.3). After hearing about his father's murder, Hamlet's sadness quickly turns into anger, and he plots the revenge that he feels his father deserves. While this speech is given to Hamlet, it is for the benefit of Gertrude, who is instrumental in handling the emotional Hamlet. After all, it is she who convinces Hamlet not to go

Wittenberg, showing how well Claudius is able to manipulate people, even the ones he claims to love. It is successful in both getting Hamlet not to act, but keeps him from traveling to Wittenberg. What he does not count on is his victim's ghost igniting Hamlet's thirst for revenge.

As "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (1.5.42), and we soon realize that his crime is what is "rotten in the state of Denmark." The King has committed fratricide and regicide and has bedded the Queen with "the witchcraft of his wit" (1.5.47). Claudius represents the worst in human nature -- lust, greed, corruption, and excess. Claudius and his corrupt court bask in the pleasures of the flesh:

The king doth wake tonight and takes his rouse, Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring Claudius (1.5.49)

Sneaky and manipulative ways eventually lead to the death of Polonius at Hamlet's hands. Instead of punishing Hamlet for Polonius' murder himself, Claudius sent the prince to England alongside Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with letters that would arrange Hamlet's death, making it look like an accident. Despite the remorse shown in Act 3 Scene 3, when Claudius prays for forgiveness, he still wants Hamlet dead because he fears losing both his throne and his life. Readers are lead to believe he is having someone else do the dirty work to save the Queen's feelings, but I think it had just as much to do with politics. Hamlet was well liked by the people, for reasons we are not aware of, and his punishment could lead the people to rally around him and rise up against the King. Claudius' plans fall apart when Hamlet alters the letters himself, having Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed in his place.

Meanwhile, Laertes has returned from France to find that his father, Polonius, has been murdered. He first blames the King, but Claudius places the blame on Hamlet. While speaking to Laertes, Claudius suddenly receives a letter saying that Hamlet was alive and returning home. Claudius being opportunistic finds yet another way to avoid killing Hamlet himself in Laertes. Claudius' speech to Laertes, in light of this news, is very off the cuff, clearly lacking in preparation in comparison to his speech to Hamlet on mourning for fathers. It is noticeably shorter than his speech to Hamlet, giving Laertes less time to mull over what was being said. This made him more likely to act, and rashly at that. The length of his speech to Hamlet also helps to obscure what he is saying, where as he is very clear and to the point with Laertes. His speech was also more direct, intended only for Laertes, whereas his speech to Hamlet was also for Gertrude's benefit. Claudius insinuates that not to act would be evidence of him not loving his father, saying: "*Not that I think you did not love your father, but that I know love is begun by time, and that I see in passages of proof*"(4.7.111-113). His tone is probably hinting that yes, he does want Laertes to think that he doesn't love his father if he doesn't act. I imagine his delivery to be very much like when someone says, "no offense but...", still offending someone, but trying to lighten the blow. Line 113 also uses alliteration, using "passages of proof" to draw your attention to the image that follows, that of a candle.

Going on, Claudius says "Time qualifies the spark and fire of it. There within the very flame of love, A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it,"(4.7.114-116) alluding to the idea that over time a candle's wick will burn down, as well as Laertes feelings for his father. This is why Claudius wants Laertes to act as soon as possible, when his feelings are fresh and raw. A candle will burn down on its own, but a snuff requires action, and to get closure over his father's death, he needs to take action against Hamlet. But Claudius, in private, is a very different person.

The Ghost refers to himreels; and as he drains his draughts of Renish down, The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out The triumph of his pledge (1.4.8-12)

However, Claudius is not a total sociopath, devoid of moments of guilt and regret. His deeds, on occasion, weigh heavy on his heart: (aside) O, 'tis true! How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience! The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art, Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it Than is my deed to my most painted word: O heavy burden! (3.1.49-53)

He tries to ask God's forgiveness in a moving soliloquy but he realizes that he still reaps all the benefits of his crimes and cannot give them up:

My fault is past. But O, what form of prayer can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder? That cannot be, since I am still possess'd of those effects for which I did the murder, my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen. (3.4.52-55)

Claudius can also be sensitive and gentle. He is genuinely sorry for Polonius' death, and he truly loves Gertrude. He must kill Hamlet, but he refuses to do so with his own hand for Gertrude's sake. He also sincerely likes Ophelia, and treats her with the kindness that she should receive from her great love, Hamlet. But even those whom Claudius cares for cannot come before his ambition and desires. He will use the grieving Laertes to whatever ends necessary, and he denies Rozencrantz and Guildenstern the knowledge of the contents of the letter to England- knowledge that would have saved their lives, or at least made them proceed with caution. In addition, Claudius does not stop Gertrude from drinking the poison in the goblet during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes because it will implicate him in the plot.

It is clear that we are intended to see Claudius as a murderous villain, but a multi-faceted villain: a man who cannot refrain from indulging his human desires. He is not a monster; he is morally weak, content to trade his humanity and very soul for a few prized possessions. As the great critic Harley Granville-Barker observes: "we have in Claudius the makings of the central figure of a tragedy".

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