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# Stagecraft as Statecraft in Hamlet and Measure for Measure

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In the two Shakespearean plays *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, and *Measure for Measure*, internal corruption plagues political and judicial bodies, and lustful leaders misuse power to pursue self-gain. In response to injustice, the respective male protagonists, Prince Hamlet and Duke Vincentio, use stagecraft to purge diseased political bodies plagued by deception, hypocrisy, and injustice. Both the ancient Greek word meaning actor—*hypocrites*—and Hamlet’s and Vincentio’s methods of deception are rooted in the word hypocrisy. While the Prince and Duke disapprove of the deceptions that disguise the true natures and intentions of the members of their royal courts, they each engage in morally dubious and hypocritical acts of deception in their attempts to clandestinely study and remedy the “seeming” corruption in their kingdoms. Hamlet acts mad to “catch the conscience of the King” (HAM 2.2.606), while Vincentio plays God to make sinners repent. The protagonists’ illusive behaviors suggest they would rather attain justice through the self-incrimination of their targets than confront them directly, and thus, maintain their capacities to observe and plot unsuspected. Hamlet’s feigned madness disguises his purpose and thereby facilitates his pursuit of evidence, which imputes Claudius with regicide and in turn justifies his murderous revenge; whereas the Duke’s disguise and lies enable him to study his subjects and mercifully rectify inequities, while encouraging personal growth. Although both Duke Vincentio and Prince Hamlet employ policies of hypocrisy to collect evidence and to plot against errant political figures in pursuit of justice, Vincentio proves more adept at deception and drama-making than Hamlet because he reveals and mercifully remedies corruption to end the play as a comedy, whereas Hamlet destroys his friends and family by manipulating and ends the play with tragedy.

While both Hamlet and Vincentio apply “Craft against vice” (MM 3.2.270), their methods, though contrived to fulfill similar purposes, vary significantly in technique and, more importantly, in consequence. Hamlet’s tactic is manufactured with destructive intent and leads the play to tragedy. By cloaking himself in madness, Hamlet attempts to evade judgment and suspicion while seeking evidence that confirms his suspicions, so he can confidently avenge his father’s assassination with moral and spiritual justification. However, Hamlet’s tactic of feigning madness ultimately serves to make King Claudius suspicious of his intentions, because he begins to disbelieve Hamlet’s dramatic pretenses of insanity. Furthermore, Hamlet’s pursuit of justice fails, since his method moves from observation to plotting to a fatal willingness to be a player in others’ plots. Conversely, the Duke’s sanctimonious habit and tempered experience in acting and deception allow him to act the roles of confessor to the subjects he wishes to study and conspirator with the subjects he wishes to advantage, without ever seeming “like a man to double business bound” (HAM 3.3.41). Moreover, the end toward which Vincentio works is a constructive one since he teaches his

targets lessons in honesty, fidelity, and mercy through carefully-plotted, humbling, public incriminations, by which he remedies social and legal injustices. The Duke's skillful methods ensure *Measure for Measure* ends as a comedy rather than tragedy.

In Denmark, after the putative ghost of Hamlet senior prompts his son to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (HAM 1.5.26), Prince Hamlet puts on an "antic disposition" (HAM 1.5.172), despite the ghost-king's warning to "Taint not thy mind" (HAM 1.5.86), in order to observe the darker machinations of fellow hypocrites at court without being analyzed or suspected in turn, because he has found himself to be "too much I' th' sun" (HAM 1.2.67). After months of searching for truth, Hamlet grows impatient with the inefficacy of observation and criticism. As Hamlet's technique changes, his feigned madness increasingly serves to reveal his plotting. Though well-played, Hamlet's methods of deception lack subtlety and serve to undermine others' perceptions of his sanity and compel the king to send him to England for fear of his purpose.

As his first act of deception, Duke Vincentio's claims to take leave for Poland after deputing Angelo as the chief arbiter, entrusting him with "Mortality and mercy in Vienna" (MM 1.1.45). "The old fantastical Duke of dark corners" then cloaks himself in the guise of Friar Lodowick, a traveling man of the church, with the help of Friar Thomas (MM 4.3.56-7). This disguise gives him freedom to move about incognito and to look upon the trespasses of his flock "like power divine" (MM 5.1.377). By assuming a physical disguise, the Duke can assess the health of the city of Vienna and that of the judicial body governing it. Furthermore, by donning a habit, the Duke can study the true natures of those he encounters since those individuals he engages are less prone to deceive or appease a traveling Friar than a Duke. While disguised as Friar Lodowick, Vincentio recognizes injustice and schemes accordingly to rectify the inequities he discovers—namely, though not exclusively, Angelo's zealous enforcement of the strictures of law in public and his unlawful pursuit of bawdry. Unlike Hamlet's disguise, the Duke's unhallowed habit doesn't undermine others' perceptions of his sanity, nor does it cause him to lose face at court.

Even though Hamlet promises his father's ghost that he will "sweep to [his] revenge" (HAM 1.5.32), Hamlet hesitates to avenge his father's death, "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (HAM 1.5.215-216). Hamlet initially lacks the conviction and substantive evidence necessary to spur him to confront his uncle, and so, he feigns madness to observe his prey. Though many have argued that Hamlet seems insane, his keen insights indicate a rational and calculating mind. In the First Act, after Hamlet returns from the conference with his father's ghost, he tells Horatio and Marcellus of his intent to feign madness and swears them to secrecy, "Swear by my sword / Never to speak of this that you have heard" (HAM 1.5.168-169). Then he makes them swear to never by any

“ambiguous giving out” make known “That [they] know aught of [him],” meaning that they should never convey their knowledge of the falsity of Hamlet’s “antic disposition” (HAM 1.5.181-8). By swearing his confidants to secrecy, Hamlet indicates that his tryst with the “honest ghost” (HAM 1.5.144) does not “deprive [him] of reason” (HAM 1.4.73) or “draw [him] into madness” (HAM 1.4.74), as Horatio feared.

The first mention of Hamlet’s feigned madness proceeds from Ophelia’s lips in conversation with her father when she describes Hamlet as “piteous in purport / As if he had been looséd out of hell” (HAM 2.1.84-85). After Ophelia tells Polonius that she followed his command by “[repelling] [Hamlet’s] letters and [denying] his access to [her]” (HAM 2.1.110-111), Polonius tells his daughter that “[this rejection] hath made him mad” (HAM 2.1.112) and refers to the lovers as “the younger sort” (HAM 2.1.118), implying youthful passions have unhinged Hamlet’s mind. However, this explanation of Hamlet’s mad behavior seems implausible, because, as a man in his thirties, Hamlet no longer suffers as much from hormones of youth. While Hamlet is obviously upset by Ophelia’s rejection, the emotional anguish from his spurned affections does not compel his erratic behavior. Hamlet’s disguise first begins to work against him when Polonius tells Claudius and Gertrude his theory on Hamlet’s madness.

When Polonius seeks to verify his theory in conversation with Hamlet in Act Two, Hamlet demonstrates his sanity and wit with strange, albeit meaningful, insults. During their brief conversation, Hamlet mocks Polonius’ old age, his ignorance, and calls him a “fishmonger” (HAM 2.2.174). During his babbling rant, Hamlet alludes to knowledge of Polonius’ dishonesty and his role in Ophelia’s rejection. Despite Hamlet’s strange words, Polonius remarks that “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (HAM 2.2.205-206), and, shortly after, he notes that Hamlet’s comments seem “pregnant” with meaning (HAM 2.2.209). Polonius’ recognition of reason and rational cognition in Hamlet’s seemingly deranged vitriolic evidences the healthy, though troubled, condition of the Prince’s mind.

This evidence serves to validate the theory that Hamlet initially practices stagecraft and deception in order to study and criticize the court. Immediately after his conversation with Polonius, Hamlet speaks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Once again, Hamlet’s words indicate that he knows more than he lets on when he says, “I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw” (HAM 2.2.378-379). This statement implies that, while Hamlet is “mad in craft” (HAM 3.4.195), he can still discern true from false. Hamlet’s remarks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reported to the king and queen as “crafty madness” (HAM 3.1.8), implying Hamlet’s words were meaningful yet evasive. This information signifies Hamlet has a hidden purpose, and thus, probably makes Claudius even more wary of him.

The Duke begins the observation stage of his unethical social experiment when he travels to the prison to observe Angelo's arbitration. During his first visit to the prison, Vincentio plays the role of a priest as Juliet's confessor to God and thereby learns of the "mutually committed" sin for which her betrothed, Claudio, was condemned to die (MM 2.3.28). In his next visit to the prison, the Duke counsels Claudio, telling him to "be absolute for death" in an effort to reconcile him with his sentence (MM 3.1.5). Upon Isabella's entrance into the prison scene, the Duke withdraws and secretly listens to Claudio and Isabella quarrel over each others' responses to Angelo's sexual ultimatum. After learning of Angelo's malfeasance, Vincentio approaches the siblings and convinces Claudio of Angelo's puritanical and virtuous nature, claiming that he serves as Angelo's confessor and excusing the unscrupulous proposition as a test. Once again, the morally dubious Duke instructs Claudio to prepare himself for death to test his resolve.

In private conversation with Isabella, the Duke proposes his bride-swapping ruse as the remedy that changes a potential tragedy into a comedy. Vincentio tells Isabella, "And here, by this, is your brother saved, your honor untainted, the poor Mariana advantaged, and the corrupt deputy scaled" (MM 3.1.254-257). The Duke provides Isabella with moral vindication when he assures her that "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from re-proof" (MM 3.1.258-260). By first deceiving Juliet, Vincentio discovers Claudio's condition, and then, by spying on Isabella and Claudio, he learns of Angelo's treachery. Vincentio uncovers corruption, and then applies his knowledge to find the remedy. Through spying, misdirecting, and plotting from behind the scenes, the Duke begins his effort to trap Angelo, "whose cruel striking / Kills for faults of his own liking," and to requite his victims (MM 3.2.266-267).

After Isabella leaves the Duke at the prison in order to go entice Angelo, Pompey and Lucio enter the scene, and Vincentio begins to speak with Lucio. In his conversation with Friar Lodowick, Lucio calumniously talks of the Duke's lax approach to enforcing the laws that govern sexual morality (namely prostitution), and Lucio reasons that "[Vincentio] knew the service, which instructed him to mercy" (MM 3.2.116-7). Then Lucio goes on to suggest that the Duke's reclusive manner evidences an unnamed moral weakness, such as drunkenness or lechery. Before Lucio departs the disguised Duke, he tells Lodowick, "The Duke would have dark deeds darkly answered; he would never bring them to light" (MM 3.2.170-2). All the while, Vincentio remains calm rather than compromising the authenticity of his drama-making. By restraining himself, Vincentio effectively observes Lucio's incriminating indiscretions without compromising his disguise.

After Polonius speaks with Hamlet in Act Two, he tells Claudius and Gertrude that he believes Ophelia's rejection caused "Hamlet's transformation" (HAM 2.2.5). Gertrude believes "The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (HAM

2.2.49) is “His father’s death and [their] o’erhasty marriage” (HAM 2.2.57). Polonius tells the King and Queen that their son is madly in love and reads them Hamlet’s love letters as evidence. Eager to understand the reasons for Hamlet’s madness, Claudius and Polonius arrange a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. Before the conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia, Claudius and Polonius conceal themselves in order to overhear the discussion. Hamlet’s acid words to Ophelia discredit Polonius’ theory by indicating that Hamlet’s passionate infatuation does not spur his madness. This revelation fuels Claudius’ fear that Hamlet’s madness may threaten him and consequently encourages him to send Hamlet to England. However, Polonius convinces Claudius to allow Gertrude to try to determine the cause of Hamlet’s ill disposition before sending Hamlet away.

When Hamlet first meets the players who recently arrived to Elsinore, he requests the first player recite a speech from “Aeneas’ tale to Dido” about “Priam’s slaughter,” since it parallels his own situation (HAM 2.2.446). Hamlet displays his knowledge of theater by citing fourteen lines from the piece to stimulate the player’s memory. After hearing the first player’s passionate recitation of “Aeneas’ tale,” Hamlet rebukes himself for his inaction and hesitation, because, until this point, he has only observed and criticized his double-dealing peers.

The manufacture of the sixteen lines inserted into *The Murder of Gonzago* indicates Hamlet’s progression to the next stage of his method in which he finally begins plotting to determine whether the specter is “a spirit of health or goblin damn’d” (HAM 1.4.40) in order to “have grounds more relative” (HAM 2.2.603-604). And so, by employing Horatio’s capacity for observation during *The Mousetrap* performance, Hamlet hopes to “catch the conscience of the king” (HAM 2.2.606). Claudius’ response to the play provides Hamlet with circumstantial evidence, which is not a reliable confession of guilt, though it does provide Hamlet with “grounds more relative” (HAM 2.2.603-4). In the plotting of his own mousetrap, Hamlet utilizes a hypocritical method, because he engages in the same deviousness for which he condemns and even justifies the murder of his peers (e.g. Claudius, Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern) by using indirections to “find directions out” (HAM 2.1.67). Although Hamlet’s *Mousetrap* alteration of the *Murder of Gonzago* does provide him with a plausible confirmation of his suspicions and long-awaited vindication, the play also confirms Claudius’ potential fears that Hamlet may know about his fratricide.

After Duke Vincetio convinces Mariana to take part in his bed-swapping plot, Isabella gives Mariana the key to Angelo’s bedchamber. That night, Mariana consummates the marital contract between herself and Angelo, but, to the Duke’s surprise, Angelo follows through with his design to hang Claudio in order to conceal his lust for Isabella. At this point, Claudio faces imminent death

and the Duke's plot seems about to fail. However, a sign of the Duke's providential role emerges when, through "an accident that heaven provides" (MM 4.3.77), the head of Ragozine, a recently deceased pirate, is presented as an acceptable substitute for Claudio's head. Then the Duke instructs the Provost to put Claudio and Barnardine in secret cells so others believe they are dead. Shortly afterward, the Duke writes letters to Angelo and Escalus, requesting their appearance at the city gates in order to greet his arrival and address any complaints addressed to them on the street. Upon Vincentio's completion of the letters, he deceives Isabella by telling her that Claudio died and by directing her to plead her case the next day at the city gates when the Duke arrives, telling her to "give your cause to heaven" (MM 4.3.124).

Later that day, Friar Lodowick puts the final touches on his plan by delivering letters to Friar Peter and asking him to deliver them to the Duke. These actions and fortunate circumstances show the Duke's skill in deception and plotting. Further, these manipulations set the stage for the veritable psychologist Duke to reveal and remedy corruption, while providing another opportunity to study his subjects' values.

At the Duke's reception by the city gates, Isabella denounces Angelo for his tyrannical governance. Vincentio adroitly plays the part of ignorant Duke and defends Angelo's honor, and then, in response to Isabella's seeming slander, he requests that guards take her to prison. When she claims Friar Lodowick can substantiate her claims, the Duke asks if anyone else knows Lodowick, to which Lucio replies, "My lord, I know him; 'tis a meddling friar" (MM 5.1.132). At this suggestion Vincentio condemns Lodowick and requests that guards apprehend him, even though he hopes Lucio that makes false claims. While guards escort Isabella to prison, Mariana approaches wearing a veil and requests that her husband ask to see her face. She tells the story of how she deceived Angelo, who unknowingly consummated their marriage. Vincentio remains impartial, tells Angelo to judge his own case, and leaves to disguise himself as Friar Lodowick. When Vincentio returns as the Friar, he claims the Duke is unjust and mocks the statutes of the state. This slander outrages Escalus, and he orders guards to take Lodowick to prison, but, when Lucio removes the friar's deceptive cowl, he unmasks Duke Vincentio. At this point the Duke enters into the final stage of his social experiment, which, firstly teaches humbling lessons of fidelity, honesty, and mercy, and lastly forgives his subjects' trespasses.

When Angelo realizes the Duke has ensnared him, he admits his guilt and begs for "Immediate sentence then and sequent death" (MM 5.1.381). Before ordering Angelo's hanging, Vincentio has him marry Mariana, so she will inherit his wealth so that she will have a dowry for future marriage. The Duke continues to deceive Isabella by telling her Claudio is happier now, since he is "past fearing death" (MM 5.1.405). Vincentio gives his final test when he says "An Angelo for

Claudio, death for death!” (MM 5.1.417). Mariana immediately beseeches Vincentio to “not mock [her] with a husband!” (MM 5.1.426). When Mariana turns to Isabella and asks her to plead for Angelo’s life, the Duke reasserts that “He dies for Claudio’s death” (MM 5.1.451), thus maintaining the premise that Claudio is dead. In spite of Angelo’s faults, Isabella still pleads his case since “His act did not o’ertake his bad intent” (MM 5.1.460). Though the Duke did not foresee Isabella’s role in determining Angelo’s fate, Vincentio is surely pleased by her forgiveness and mercy. Despite this, the Duke remains steadfast in his intent, because Claudio was supposedly executed at an unusual hour instead of Barnardine. Vincentio initiates the end of his plot when he requests that a guard send Barnardine before them. Only after Angelo loses all hope of redemption, as was the case for his victims (i.e., Claudio, Juliet, Mariana, and Isabella), and is truly penitent are Barnardine and Claudio unmasked.

Soon after, the merciful Duke Vincentio forgives Angelo, Claudio, and Barnardine. Vincentio marries Lucio to Kate Keepdown, because Lucio got her with child. Angelo has learned a lesson in temperance, fidelity, and merciful governance; Isabella learns mercy; Claudio most likely comes to a greater appreciation of liberty and self-restraint; and, perhaps, Lucio learns of honesty and fidelity. In summation, although this seemingly-omniscient “meddling friar’s” nonconsensual experimental manipulations violate modern ethical standards, the Duke’s disguise and skillful plotting achieve justice and convert tragedy into comedy both through the forgiveness of sins and by teaching humbling lessons of morality, rather than manufacturing mortality.

Hamlet’s final act of deception occurs after Claudius deports him to England to die there for killing Polonius. Polonius’ murder marks the end of Hamlet’s play-acting and ensnares him in the plots of others. When Hamlet deviously discovers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carrying his death warrant with them to England, he cunningly alters the document, erasing his name and replacing it with their names. This pernicious act of deception ends the lives of Hamlet’s unsuspecting, naïve friends, but doesn’t advantage him since pirates abduct and ransom him before his ship reaches England. Once Hamlet returns to Denmark, he finds Ophelia has committed suicide and Laertes has returned from France upon hearing the news of his father’s death. Hamlet’s adventures at sea have changed him from a hesitant plotting playwright to a passive player in Claudius’ poison plot. Hamlet has accepted that “There’s a divinity that shapes our end” (HAM 5.2.10) and turned over his future to “providence” (HAM 5.2.218). The Prince’s transformation leads him to accept Laertes’ challenge to a duel, which concludes with the slaughter of the royal family of Denmark, thus ending the play with tragedy. Hamlet’s inability to recognize the murderous intentions of his rivals and plot accordingly, rather than accept the fatal duel, is his undoing.



Although Hamlet does manage a form of justice in that his royal rivals receive their mortal punishments according to their crimes, the extent of Hamlet's merciless retributive justice could have been lesser had he avoided the fateful duel. Laertes' words hold true for all who have murdered during the course of the tragedy when he declares, "I am justly kill'd with my own treachery" (HAM 5.2.318), and so, "Bloody instructions, which being taught, return to plague th'inventor" (MAC 1.7.9-10). Furthermore, Hamlet's murderous justice, unlike the Duke's, extends to characters such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose roles as ignorant tools of treachery lead to their deaths as a result of the potential harm they could have done.

While both Hamlet and Vincentio pursue justice through play-acting and deception, Vincentio is the superior manipulator and actor, or hypocrite, since he successfully finds out and remedies corruption and immorality without destroying the lives of those he seeks to prosecute, but rather schools them in morality and mercy. Conversely, Hamlet achieves brutal justice but only at the cost of his life and loved ones. While Hamlet is highly intelligent, familiar with actors, and knowledgeable of memorized repertory and acting modes, his inability to discreetly apply theory to practice at deception and stagecraft indicate a limited experiential grasp of espionage and affirm him as inferior in deception and drama-making. Alternatively, the difference in outcome can be understood as being driven by the respective genres; the tragic mode fates Hamlet's plot to "pall" (HAM 5.2.9) in spite of his craftiness, while the comic mode enables Vincentio to find the remedy and end the play with matrimony and mercy, despite the dubious morality of his duplicity. Ultimately, the audience must decide whether the protagonists' are actors whose ends are preordained by genre or hypocrite playwrights whose fates are fashioned by their own plots.

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