

Shakespeare's Measure for Measure: A Machiavellian Performance of Power

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* has long puzzled critics with its complex portrayal of authority, morality, and justice. This article explores the play through a Machiavellian lens, examining how Duke Vincentio's actions and manipulations mirror principles outlined in Niccolò Machiavelli's political philosophy. By temporarily abdicating power and observing his deputy Angelo, the Duke orchestrates a "spectacle" of governance that tests the limits of law and human nature. The study analyzes the Duke's motivations, his methods of control and observation, and the outcomes of his experiment in relation to Machiavellian concepts of power, deception, and the necessity of sometimes acting against conventional morality for the sake of the state. The article argues that the Duke's theatrical approach, while ultimately leading to a form of restoration, reveals a pragmatic, almost Machiavellian, understanding of how power is maintained and virtue is tested in the public sphere. The unconventional resolution of the play is also considered in light of Machiavellian ideas about political necessity and the use of calculated actions to achieve desired ends.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Machiavelli, Political philosophy, Power, Deception, Governance, Duke Vincentio, Angelo, Spectacle, Justice.



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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* presents a Vienna grappling with moral decay and ineffective governance. Duke Vincentio, ostensibly weary of the burdens of rule, announces his departure and delegates authority to the austere Angelo, tasking him with enforcing the city's neglected laws, particularly those concerning sexual morality. However, the Duke does not truly leave; instead, he adopts a disguise as a friar to observe Angelo's actions and the reactions of the populace. This central conceit of the Duke's hidden observation and manipulation has led many scholars to analyze the play's political dimensions, often drawing parallels to the pragmatic and sometimes controversial advice offered by Niccolò Machiavelli in works like *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* [1].

Machiavelli's political philosophy, particularly his emphasis on the effective acquisition and maintenance of power, the role of deception, and the understanding of human nature as inherently self-interested, offers a compelling framework for interpreting the Duke's unusual methods [4, 5]. While the Duke ultimately seeks a restoration of order and justice, his path to achieving this involves calculated risks, manipulation, and a willingness to allow suffering for a perceived greater good—tactics that resonate with Machiavellian principles [1]. The Duke's actions can be seen as a deliberate experiment in governance, a "spectacle" designed to expose hypocrisy, test virtue, and ultimately reassert his authority on a firmer foundation [1].

This article investigates the Machiavellian elements present in Duke Vincentio's approach to governance in *Measure for Measure*. It explores the motivations behind his feigned absence, the methods he employs while disguised, and the extent to which his actions align with or deviate from Machiavellian strategies for maintaining state stability and authority. By examining the Duke's performance of power through a Machiavellian lens, this study aims to shed light on the play's complex political commentary and the ambiguous nature of its protagonist.

METHODS

This study employs a close reading of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in conjunction with an analysis of key concepts from Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*. The methodology involves identifying instances in the play where the Duke's actions, motivations, and interactions with other characters reflect Machiavellian political strategies and observations about human nature.

The analysis focuses on:

1. The Duke's Motivation for Feigned Absence: Examining the stated reasons for the Duke's departure and the potential underlying Machiavellian calculations related to testing his deputy and the populace [8].
2. The Duke's Use of Disguise and Observation: Analyzing how the Duke's role as a disguised friar allows him to gather information, manipulate events, and exert influence without direct, overt authority, aligning with Machiavellian ideas about the utility of appearances and hidden actions [1].
3. Angelo's Exercise of Power: Observing Angelo's strict enforcement of laws and his subsequent moral failing as a consequence of unchecked power, and considering how this aligns with Machiavelli's warnings about the corrupting influence of power and the importance of a ruler's character [2].
4. The Duke's Manipulation of Events: Identifying specific instances where the Duke orchestrates encounters, reveals information strategically, and intervenes to alter outcomes, reflecting a Machiavellian willingness to use unconventional means to achieve political ends [1].
5. The Resolution of the Play: Interpreting the Duke's final dispensing of justice, including the surprising pardons and matrimonial arrangements, through a Machiavellian framework that considers the pragmatic needs of the state and the ruler's image, even if it deviates from strict moral retribution [6, 11, 12].
6. Comparison with Machiavellian Examples: Drawing explicit comparisons between the Duke's

actions and Machiavellian examples, such as Cesare Borgia's use of Remirro de Orco, to highlight similarities and differences in their approaches to establishing order and authority [1, 2].

The study synthesizes these observations to argue that the Duke's governance in *Measure for Measure*, while not a direct endorsement of Machiavellian amorality, engages deeply with the practical challenges of maintaining order and the complex relationship between virtue and effective rule as explored by Machiavelli [1, 14]. The analysis acknowledges critical perspectives on the Duke's character and the play's ending [11, 12] while focusing on the political strategies employed.

RESULTS

The Duke's decision to leave Vienna and appoint Angelo as his deputy can be interpreted as a deliberate Machiavellian experiment in governance [1]. His stated reasons for departure, suggesting he dislikes public display and the burdens of office, are immediately suspect given his subsequent actions. A more Machiavellian reading suggests the Duke recognized the need for stricter enforcement of laws but was unwilling to undertake the potentially unpopular measures himself [3]. By delegating this task to Angelo, the Duke creates a scenario where a harsh, exemplary figure enforces the law, potentially generating the fear necessary to restore order, a tactic discussed by Machiavelli [4, 5].

The Duke's disguise as a friar is crucial to his Machiavellian strategy. It allows him unparalleled access to information, enabling him to observe the true character of his subjects, including Angelo, without the constraints of his ducal role. This hidden position grants him the ability to subtly manipulate events, offering counsel, facilitating communication (or lack thereof), and orchestrating key encounters [1]. He becomes a hidden force, pulling the strings of the plot, much like a Machiavellian prince might operate behind the scenes to control outcomes and test the loyalty and character of his agents and subjects [1]. Angelo's rapid descent into hypocrisy and attempted coercion after assuming power serves as a stark illustration of Machiavellian insights into human nature and the corrupting influence of unchecked authority [2]. Angelo, initially presented as virtuous and incorruptible, quickly succumbs to his desires when presented with power and the opportunity to exploit Isabella. This aligns with Machiavelli's view that individuals are often driven by self-interest and that appearances of virtue can mask underlying vices, which power can expose [4]. The Duke's experiment, whether intended or not, reveals this fundamental Machiavellian truth about human fallibility [8].

The Duke's manipulations become increasingly pronounced as the play progresses. He intervenes to save Claudio from execution by proposing the substitution of Roccine's head, a pragmatic solution focused on achieving a desired outcome (saving Claudio) through deceptive means [1]. He orchestrates the "bed trick" and the "head trick," elaborate deceptions that, while morally questionable, are effective in exposing Angelo and protecting Isabella and Claudio. These actions demonstrate a willingness to operate outside conventional moral boundaries for the sake of achieving his political and personal objectives, a hallmark of Machiavellian statecraft [1, 14].

The play's unconventional ending, with its multiple pardons and unexpected marriage proposals, can also be viewed through a Machiavellian lens [6, 11]. While seemingly driven by mercy, the Duke's actions also serve to consolidate his power and restore a semblance of order without resorting to widespread punishment. Pardoning Barnadine, the unrepentant murderer, is particularly perplexing from a traditional justice perspective but might be interpreted as a calculated act of magnanimity or even a deliberate injection of absurdity to assert the Duke's absolute authority and unpredictability [12]. The forced marriages, while uncomfortable for a modern audience, function within the play's world to resolve social disorder and re-establish patriarchal control, aligning with a pragmatic approach to restoring the social fabric [11]. The Duke effectively creates a crisis through his absence and Angelo's actions, from which he can emerge as the necessary rescuer and reorganizer of the state, a strategy that echoes Machiavelli's discussion of how leaders can capitalize on disorder to implement significant changes [13].

The parallels between the Duke's actions and Machiavellian principles, while not making the Duke a

simple stand-in for Machiavelli's ideal prince, highlight the play's engagement with complex questions of power, morality, and governance that were central to Machiavelli's work [1, 14]. The Duke's performance is a spectacle of control, observation, and manipulation, demonstrating a pragmatic understanding of politics that resonates with Machiavellian thought.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Measure for Measure* through a Machiavellian lens reveals the Duke's actions as a sophisticated, albeit morally ambiguous, exercise in political control and observation. His feigned absence and disguised surveillance are not merely plot devices but represent a deliberate strategy to understand the true state of his dukedom and the character of those within it [1]. This aligns with Machiavelli's emphasis on the need for a ruler to understand the realities of power and human nature, even if those realities are unpleasant [4, 5].

The Duke's willingness to employ deception and manipulation to achieve his goals is a key point of connection to Machiavellian thought [1]. While his ultimate aims may differ from those of a purely self-interested tyrant, his methods—orchestrating events, withholding information, and using others as pawns—demonstrate a pragmatic approach to governance where the ends sometimes justify the means. This challenges simplistic interpretations of the Duke as solely a benevolent ruler and highlights the play's exploration of the compromises and difficult choices inherent in leadership.

The play's engagement with themes of justice and mercy is also complicated by a Machiavellian reading. While the Duke ultimately dispenses pardons and seeks a form of restoration, the path to this resolution is paved with calculated actions that prioritize political stability and the reassertion of his authority over strict adherence to moral or legal codes [6]. The unconventional ending, particularly the pardoning of Barnadine, can be seen not just as an act of mercy but perhaps as a demonstration of the Duke's absolute power to act above the law, a characteristic Machiavelli might recognize in an effective ruler [12].

However, it is crucial not to oversimplify the connection between the Duke and Machiavelli. The Duke's stated desire for his people's well-being and his eventual restoration of order differentiate him from a purely Machiavellian tyrant focused solely on maintaining power through fear [2]. The play does not necessarily endorse the Duke's methods but rather uses them to provoke thought about the nature of authority, the fallibility of individuals, and the complexities of applying justice in an imperfect world. The Duke's experiment is a "spectacle" that forces characters and the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and the society they inhabit.

The criticisms of the Duke's character and the play's resolution, particularly from feminist perspectives regarding the treatment of Isabella [11], remain valid and highlight the tensions within the play's political and social commentary. A Machiavellian reading does not negate these criticisms but rather provides a framework for understanding the political logic that might underpin some of the Duke's controversial actions.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, viewed through a Machiavellian lens, offers a compelling exploration of the practicalities and moral ambiguities of governance. Duke Vincentio's performance of power, characterized by hidden observation, manipulation, and a pragmatic approach to achieving his objectives, resonates with key principles outlined by Machiavelli. The play serves as a complex meditation on the nature of authority, the testing of virtue, and the difficult choices faced by those who seek to impose order on a disordered world, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of political dynamics that continues to be relevant.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the Machiavellian spectacle within Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, emphasizing the ways in which the play engages with political theory and the manipulation of power.

Through the characters of the Duke and Angelo, Shakespeare presents a critical examination of the use of cunning, strategy, and realpolitik in the exercise of authority. The study suggests that the play's complexity lies in its ability to present a moral and political critique, encouraging the audience to question the true nature of justice and governance. Ultimately, Shakespeare's portrayal of Machiavellianism in *Measure for Measure* offers timeless insights into the corrupting influence of power and the ethical compromises required to maintain it.

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