

‘This is I, Hamlet the Dane’: Hamlet and Kingship in Hamlet

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Abstract: *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s most famous play. Scholars have engaged in extensive debates regarding the themes of revenge and procrastination in *Hamlet*. However, existing research falls short in fully exploring Hamlet’s thoughts on kingship and his relationship with power. Despite the extensive examination of Hamlet’s complex character, a more in-depth analysis from this perspective is warranted. This paper, therefore, aims to further explore the connection between Hamlet and political power from three key angles. Firstly, it examines Hamlet’s reflections on kingship as presented through the drama and his humanistic education. Secondly, it focuses on the political aspects of Hamlet’s self-generated philosophical musings about life. Lastly, it conducts a deep analysis of the father-son relationship. Through a collective analysis of these three aspects, this research seeks to unravel Hamlet’s thoughts on kingship and their influence. It reveals how Hamlet himself and significant figures in his life, such as his father and uncle, shape his political ideology and attitudes, as well as how Hamlet’s self-identity shapes his understanding of kingship issues.

Keywords: Hamlet, kingship, political power, father-son relationship, drama

1. Introduction

Hamlet, as one of Shakespeare’s masterpieces, has long been a subject of scholarly research and analysis. Scholars have engaged in extensive debates regarding the themes of revenge and procrastination in *Hamlet*. [1]They have explored why Hamlet hesitated to kill Claudius at the outset and why he lacked a strong desire to claim the throne. [2]These discussions delve into his political inclinations and attitudes towards power.

Luo Feng [3]contends that Hamlet’s temperament significantly influences his political stance and quest for the throne. This perspective provides a comprehensive analysis of his motives for seeking revenge. On the other hand, Lan Renzhe[4] views Hamlet as an embodiment of humanist ideals and the suffering of individuals in the world. Cao Yanyun[1], taking a more holistic approach, analyzes the impact of both Hamlet’s internal character and external circumstances. This sheds light on the personal contradictions within Hamlet and, consequently, his awareness of kingship and procrastination. It places greater emphasis on Hamlet’s philosophical reflections, which subsequently extend to his understanding and attitude towards kingship.

However, existing research falls short in fully exploring Hamlet’s thoughts on kingship and his relationship with power. Despite the extensive examination of Hamlet’s complex character, a more in-depth analysis from this perspective is warranted. Being the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet’s identity

is inherently tied to the monarchy, particularly to his father and uncle. He cannot escape this connection, even though he holds a somewhat negative attitude towards it. His responsibility and his attitude towards the entire nation and his friends reveal the close link between his contemplation and his understanding of power.

This paper, therefore, aims to further explore the connection between Hamlet and political power from three key angles. Firstly, it examines Hamlet's reflections on kingship as presented through the drama and his humanistic education. Secondly, it focuses on the political aspects of Hamlet's self-generated philosophical musings about life. Lastly, it conducts a deep analysis of the father-son relationship. Through a collective analysis of these three aspects, this research seeks to unravel Hamlet's thoughts on kingship and their influence. It reveals how Hamlet himself and significant figures in his life, such as his father and uncle, shape his political ideology and attitudes, as well as how Hamlet's self-identity shapes his understanding of kingship issues.

2. Hamlet's Humanistic Education and Kingship

As a playwright, Shakespeare deliberately incorporated elements of drama into his theatrical works and possibly used Hamlet's character to express his own thoughts on drama, humanism, and political kingship. In this play, there are several instances where Hamlet uses drama to convey his philosophical reflections, and throughout the entire play, these instances are prevalent. Through this, we can gain insight into the philosophical thoughts of Hamlet, which not only focus on humanity, encompassing themes of life, the body, the soul, and death but are also closely tied to the concept of kingship politics.

In Luo Feng's "Hamlet and Philosophy,"[5] it is mentioned that, as the Danish prince, Hamlet maintains a distance from his father and courtiers but seeks education abroad on the continent. This suggests that during his formative years, Hamlet likely received a philosophical or, in a broader sense, a humanistic education rather than a political one. Wittenberg, being a center of the Reformation, was a place steeped in New Humanist and religious ideas. Hamlet's choice of this location is not arbitrary; he ventured to Wittenberg to study and understand a world beyond the realm of power. Leaving his place as the heir to the throne allowed him to shed his existing identity to some extent and truly delve into learning about humanist ideas, embracing humanistic education. In this context, the conflict between new humanist ideas, new religious thought, and traditional Danish kingship gradually reshapes Hamlet's views on kingship. He begins to question his own authority and experiences a wavering commitment to his innate pursuit of power.

This unique background turns Hamlet into more than just an ordinary prince. It enriches his cognition and expands his inner world, which is reflected through the medium of drama. For instance, to test the players' quality, Hamlet selects 'a passionate speech' (2.2.393) from 'Aeneas' tale to Dido, and thereabout of it especially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter' (2.2.404-6).[6] Further, Hamlet explains the touring players that 'the purpose of playing' (3.2.17) is 'to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (3.2.18-20). Therefore, despite being the heir to the throne, Hamlet's education extends far beyond the realm of politics. Within his studies of humanism, the influence of drama plays a significant role. These philosophical and humanistic thoughts further influence his actions and judgments regarding power. For instance, after seeing his father's ghost and hearing its accusations about death, Hamlet begins to doubt his uncle and states, "That guilty creatures, sitting at a play, / Have by the very cunning of the scene, / Been struck so to the soul that presently, / They have proclaimed their malefactions." (2.2.542-545) He decides to have a play performed that would expose his uncle's crimes. In these conversations, we see that Hamlet's foundation in humanistic education, with drama as a key element, symbolically reveals the truth about political power to him.

When Hamlet lacks the military strength to confront Claudius directly, his exploration of Claudius's regicide and his efforts to distinguish the legitimacy of the new king through a play within the play reflect his desire to reveal the truth. The stage and reality, drama and kingship, become closely intertwined at this moment. Drama becomes a convenient medium for presenting the elusive struggle for power, and the performance of the play within the play also embodies the theatricality of this power struggle.

Thus, through his education in humanism, including his study and understanding of drama, Hamlet further explores his attitudes towards his uncle's ascension to the throne. This reflects his evolving perception of kingship. It becomes evident that Hamlet is dissatisfied with his uncle's usurpation. He not only upholds the principles of legitimate power succession and the preservation of the inheritance of power but also defends family honor and established rules. This aligns with his identity as the "prince" and exposes the internal contradictions within him, his exploration and defense of his self-identity, and the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of his education. This complexity adds depth to his character, revealing the inherent contradictions and complexities of human nature.

3. Hamlet's Philosophical Reflections and Kingship

Meanwhile, in Hamlet's dialogues with others, his philosophical thoughts and their relation to political power and kingship come to light. In a conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet comments that 'Denmark's a prison' (2.2.234), and he continues, 'O God, I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams' (2.2.243). To which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rather insightfully point out it is the prince's ambition that makes Denmark a prison (2.2.241-2; 2.2.245-6). In the exploration of dreams and thoughts, Hamlet uses the metaphor of a prison to represent not only the nation but also his own identity. His yearning for power, his desire for dominion over the Danish kingdom, and his inherent mistrust of authority collectively influence Hamlet. In the graveyard scene, Hamlet, seemingly out of place, asks Horatio, 'Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i'th' earth?' (5.1.167) Then, he speculates on where 'the noble dust of Alexander' (5.1.172) would go: 'Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?' (5.1.176-9). Alexander, a notable figure in history, was a king of the Macedonian Empire who achieved great feats, expanding the empire to its greatest territorial extent during his rule. The mention of such an accomplished figure at this moment invokes thoughts of Alexander's significant accomplishments. While on the surface, Hamlet contemplates the meaning and value of life and individual existence, in reality, his choice of Alexander as an example reveals his ambition, inevitably linking his philosophical thoughts to politics and kingship.

The individual he chooses to mention in the context of mortality is not an ordinary person, nor is it someone of lower status who never held power; it is someone who once held immense power. Despite the fact that this choice reflects his predominant negative stance on power and a leaning toward the denial of the meaning and value of kingship and political authority, it conveys his perspective that even when one attains power, ultimately, all ends in death, leaving everything empty and returning to the earth. Hamlet, in this moment, questions kingship, the value and meaning of the power he aspires to, revealing his internal contradictions once again. He desires power and even subconsciously compares himself to figures like Alexander, yet he holds a deep-seated disdain and weariness for kingship and political power. Here, we can see that Hamlet, on one hand, questions its significance, doubts his pursuit, and questions the choices made by his father and uncle. He harbors reservations about the value of kingship.

In this portrayal, the empty crown symbolizes the inherent emptiness of kingship. Hamlet's musings provide his own answer, demonstrating his philosophical reflections and the close link between his philosophical thoughts and kingship. The imagery of Alexander's dust returning to dust

deconstructs kingship, highlights the emptiness of authority, and delves into the exploration of the futility of life. What should have been a contemplation of pure death and the value of life suddenly takes a turn, connecting to Alexander. As an outstanding monarch, Alexander is an aspirational figure for countless successors, including Hamlet, both in the past and possibly even in the present. His princely status influences Hamlet's thoughts on the value and meaning of life, life and death, and existence, revealing his complex and contradictory nature.

From this, readers catch a glimpse of Hamlet's philosophical thoughts and the emotions underlying his pursuit, which he attempts to conceal. Embedded in the text is Hamlet's longing, potentially ongoing, for the ambition of becoming an outstanding monarch, which is indeed rooted in the pursuit of power. Although he may exhibit a negative view of power, leaning towards the negation of the meanings and values associated with kingship and political authority, his ambition to acquire power is still influenced by his past or present, hidden or expressed longing for kingship. In this way, Hamlet's internal contradictions and complexities make his musings appear chaotic and unclear throughout. This complexity represents the constant state of Hamlet's philosophical thoughts, influenced by his status as a prince, while he simultaneously longs to escape it but cannot fully let go.

4. Father-Son Relationship and Kingship

While previous research has predominantly focused on Hamlet's procrastination[7], his contemplation of kingship and his own role as heir to the throne is evident from the beginning of the play. This reflection is notably revealed in Act 1, scene 2. When Claudius asks, 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?' (1.2.66) Hamlet replies: 'Not so my lord, I am too much i'th'sun' (1.2.67). Here, 'sun' directly refers to kingship while also containing a pun with 'son', implying Hamlet's skepticism and challenge to the new king's authority. Even though Hamlet is unaware of his uncle's usurpation, he finds it difficult to accept the fact that Claudius has become the new king and his stepfather. Simultaneously, the shared name of Old Hamlet and Hamlet points to the fact: after the death of Old Hamlet Hamlet should have become the direct heir to the Danish throne. The interpretation of 'I am too much i'th'sun' reveals not only Hamlet's remembrance of the old king but also his realization of the anger arising from the usurpation of his right to the throne.

Claudius' discussion of filial duty and the father-son relationship, aimed at establishing Hamlet as 'Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son' (1.2.117) ironically concludes with the pun on 'son', echoing Hamlet's earlier retort, 'I am too much i'th'sun' (1.2.67). In this context, 'sun' serves as a symbol of kingship. Thus, such wordplay blurs the line between 'sun' and 'son', concealing the power struggle between stepfather and son while also highlighting Hamlet's resistance to Claudius, the new father. Furthermore, Hamlet's role as a son further reveals his position in the father-son relationship and kingship. After his father's death, his uncle not only assumes the kingship that belonged to Old Hamlet but also takes on the role of Hamlet's 'father'. In this interplay, kingship and the father-son relationship become closely intertwined, and Hamlet's rejection of his role as a son reflects his desire for political power. He yearns to acquire power, to replace Claudius, and yet he is discontented with the means by which Claudius obtained power. Through the continuation of this regicide, it is not just the usurpation of power but also the subversion of family, royal honor, and kinship. In this complex web of princely and filial identities, Hamlet's only choice is patricide. Although Claudius is not his biological father, in this context, he functions as a surrogate father due to his position as both the king and 'father of the country'. Thus, Hamlet's decision to kill Claudius represents a dual rebellion in his 'father-son relationship' and the sovereign-subject relationship, reflecting his contemplation and contestation of kingship.

5. Conclusion

In summary, William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* offers a rich and profound exploration of kingship and power. This exploration is evident in various segments, including Hamlet's soliloquies and dialogues with others. While previous research has exhaustively delved into the philosophy of Hamlet's procrastination concerning kingship, this paper argues that an examination of Hamlet's personal exploration of power and authority is equally significant.

Although the academic consensus generally downplays the relevance of Hamlet's relationship with kingship, focusing on his melancholy and philosophical pondering, this paper emphasizes his perception and attitude towards kingship. Accordingly, this paper has unfolded its discussion from three angles: through the lens of drama, philosophical contemplation, and the father-son relationship. It has revealed Hamlet's cognitive processes regarding power. Through the medium of drama, he discloses his views on those who wield the crown and the political authority itself, offering insights into his personal philosophy influenced by his humanistic education. Simultaneously, as an educated individual, Hamlet has numerous philosophical reflections deeply influenced by his princely identity, which is intimately linked with politics and kingship. Hamlet's soliloquies and dialogues provide a glimpse into his inner thoughts, allowing for the exploration of his complex emotional attitudes towards power, exposing the inherent contradictions of human nature. Regarding the father-son relationship, multiple, distinct identities similarly impact Hamlet's political life. In this context, his roles as both a son and a usurped heir to the throne introduce a dual nature to his inheritance of power and his resistance against it.

In conclusion, *Hamlet* is not only a profound character study but also a profound examination of power, kingship, and the multifaceted relationship between individuals and authority. Through Hamlet's philosophical musings and interactions, the play offers a layered portrayal of human nature's intricacies and contradictions in the realm of politics and kingship.

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