



LÆSCHER  
EDITORE

# Politics and Power

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# Politics and Power in the Renaissance

## Social Context

- Power struggles and political intrigue were fundamental driving forces of **Renaissance society**.
- Both external threats and internal power struggles created **instability**.
- There was widespread discussion about the **nature of politics**, considerations on the political models of the Classical period, and comparisons between republican and monarchical models.
- Essayists and theorists such as **Niccolò Machiavelli** (*The Prince*, 1513) led these discussions.
- Politics and power were also represented in the **literature** of the period.



# Power Struggles in Shakespeare

## *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

- **Hamlet** is one of Shakespeare's most well-known tragedies.
- Its main theme is revenge, but it also explores in depth **the nature of monarchy, ruthlessness, loyalty and manipulation.**



# Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

## Storyline

- Hamlet, the King of Denmark, has died.
- His **ghost** has been seen walking the ramparts of Elsinore castle at night.
- His son, **Prince Hamlet**, has been called back to Elsinore for his father's funeral, but, to his disgust, he has also been present at his mother's marriage to his uncle **Claudius**, who has been crowned the new king.
- Hamlet is told about his father's ghost.
- He decides to try to speak with it.
- The ghost tells him that his father was **murdered**, and that the assassin was Claudius.



# Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

## Storyline

- Hamlet intends to revenge his father's murder but, unsure of himself and of the truth, keeps putting it off.
- He becomes **deeply melancholic**, feigns **madness** to hide his purpose, and becomes **suspicious** of everyone around him.
- Hamlet invites a group of **actors** to put on a play in the castle which will re-enact the murder of his father.
- At the performance, his uncle's behaviour convinces Hamlet of his **guilt**.
- Claudius, now aware that Hamlet is dangerous, plots his death.
- In the final scene, **Hamlet dies**, but not before he has taken his revenge on Claudius.



# Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

## The Motif of the Ear

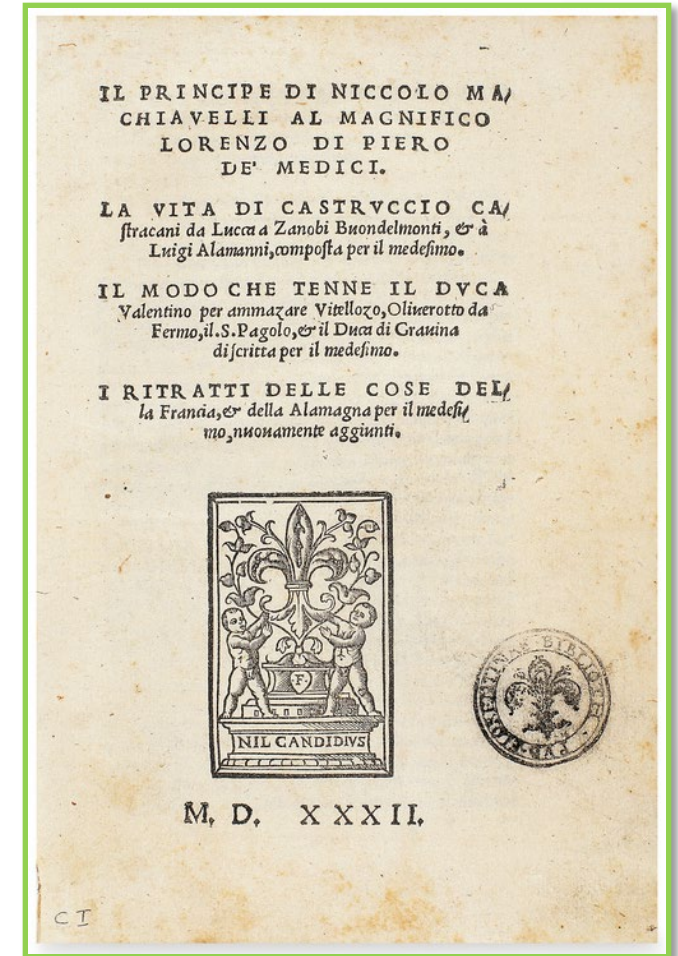
- In *Hamlet*, the human ear is used as an important **political motif**.
- The play contains numerous references to **ears, hearing and listening**.
- These references indicate that:
  - in a corrupt state, **words** can be **manipulated** and the **truth** can be **distorted**;
  - **subversion of truth** is essential to holding on to power;
  - in a world of **mistrust**, people must listen in on conversations, overhear, and **spy** on others to discover what is going on;
  - the ear becomes an important **channel of information and misinformation**.



# Shakespeare and Machiavellian Politics

## An Influential Text

- *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli (1513):
  - circulated in Italy at the beginning of the **1500s**;
  - had a huge **influence** on the discussions which would take place in England during the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and James I on political theory;
  - raised many important issues regarding **ethics and politics** which would influence Shakespeare's writing.



# Shakespeare and Machiavellian Politics

## The Term 'Machiavellian'

- Statements by Machiavelli, such as:

“

*It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both*

”

“

*If a prince wants to maintain his rule, he must be prepared not to be virtuous*

”

- meant that the adjective '**Machiavellian**' came to indicate a ruthless, amoral, royal or political schemer.



# Shakespeare and Machiavellian Politics

## Machiavellian Characters

- A number of Shakespeare's characters have been referred to as **Machiavellian**, including the usurper, **King Claudius**, in the play *Hamlet*.



# Shakespeare and Machiavellian Politics

## A Machiavellian Character

- Claudius, in true Machiavellian style:
  - **murders** his own brother to gain power;
  - **spies** on members of his court;
  - **uses** Hamlet's friends, his love, Ophelia, and her brother, in his plots and intrigues;
  - **plots** his nephew's murder.



# Politics and Power

## Political Paintings

- **Artworks** can also serve as instruments which reinforce the power and prestige of a leader.
- In Renaissance times, artworks certainly fulfilled this function.
- For example, portraits of Elizabeth I were rich in **symbols** of her greatness.
- Examples of these symbols are:
  - the **crown**: the right to rule;
  - the **globe**: overseas possessions;
  - **pearls**: purity, chastity.



# Sources and references

- Slide 2: *Niccolò Machiavelli's Portrait*, Santi di Tito, 16th century, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio. Firenze, Palazzo Vecchio/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.
- Slide 3: Mel Gibson in the film *Hamlet*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, 1990. Franco Zeffirelli, Amleto, fotogramma/Francia, Gran Bretagna, USA, 1990/Carolco Pictures Inc., Icon Entertainment International, Le Studio Canal+, Marquis, Nelson Entertainment, Sovereign Pictures, Warner Bros., World Icon Bv/PENTA DISTRIBUZIONE.
- Slide 4: *Hamlet's statue*, by Lord Ronald Gower, Stratford-upon-Avon. © Robbie Taylor/Shutterstock.
- Slide 5: Glenn Close as Queen Gertrude in the film *Hamlet*, directed by Zeffirelli, 1990. Franco Zeffirelli, Amleto, fotogramma/Francia, Gran Bretagna, USA, 1990/Carolco Pictures Inc., Icon Entertainment International, Le Studio Canal+, Marquis, Nelson Entertainment, Sovereign Pictures, Warner Bros., World Icon Bv/PENTA DISTRIBUZIONE.
- Slide 6: Contemporary theatre performance of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*. <http://jessicarvano.files.wordpress.com/Stratford Festival, Ontario>.
- Slide 7: Title page of *Il Principe* of Niccolò Machiavelli, 16th century, Florence, National Central Library. © Mondadori Portfolio/Electa - su concessione del MiBAC.
- Slide 9: *Hamlet: Act IV, Scene V. Ophelia before the King and Queen*, by Benjamin West, 1792. Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum/Wikipedia Commons/Public Domain.
- Slide 10: *Ophelia*, by John Everett Millais, 1851-1852, London, Tate Gallery. Londra, Tate Gallery/commons.wikimedia.org/Public Domain.

