**Introduction to Claudius in *Hamlet***

As with all the supporting characters in *Hamlet*, Claudius is not developed to his full potential. His primary role in the play is to spawn Hamlet's confusion and anger, and his subsequent search for truth and life's meaning. But Claudius is not a static character. While his qualities are not as thoroughly explored as Hamlet's, Shakespeare crafts a whole human being out of the treacherous, usurping King of Denmark.

When we first see Claudius, he strikes us an intelligent and capable ruler. He gives a speech to make his court and country proud, addressing his brother's death and the potential conflict with Norway. Claudius knows that a change in government could ignite civil unrest, and he is afraid of possible unlawful allegiances and rebellion. His speech juxtaposes the people's loss with the new beginning they will have under his care, and he uses the death of Hamlet's father to create a sense of national solidarity, "the whole kingdom/To be contracted in one brow of woe" (1.2.3-4).

Claudius has assumed the role of the chief mourner, and the people can unite behind a collective suffering. He can now concentrate on his kingly duties, and he takes immediate and decisive action by sending Cornelius and Voltimand to appease the Norwegian king. He also deals skilfully with Laertes' request to leave for France. "On the whole, then, there emerges a King who is well qualified for his office...there continually appears on the stage a man who is utterly unlike the descriptions, and this in turn gives to Hamlet's words their real value." (Lokse, *Outrageous Fortune*, 79).

But Claudius, in private, is a very different person. The Ghost refers to him 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" (I.v.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 reels;
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. And 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." (Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 269)

**Thye manipulative nature of Claudius**

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](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/keyword/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.

In the play, Hamlet is introduced as a troubled man in deep depression. He was mourning the death of his beloved father and his mother’s marriage to his uncle. In Act 1 Scene 2 Claudius gives Hamlet a speech to try and get him to stop bringing up his father, probably fearing that the more the late King was talked about, or remembered, the more likely people were to look into his death. It is understandable that he wanted Hamlet to move on quickly. This speech seems carefully planned out, as if Claudius had written it out before he delivered it. Hamlet had probably been lamenting his father’s death for quite some time now, so Claudius had ample time to compose the speech.

It is unclear how much time passes between this point and when Hamlet puts on the play intended to catch Claudius in her guilt. He brings the question of time up to Ophelia beforehand, “For look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within’s two hours”(3.2. 124-125). But Ophelia says, “Nay, tis’ twice two months, my lord”,(3.2.126). The most notable aspect of the speech is Claudius’s repetition of the word “To” at the beginning of lines 87,91 and 102. The first two uses of “to” are infinitive, an impersonal construct distancing himself from the death of the prior king. The use of an infinitive also lends an emotionless aspect to his words, saying get over it, I already have. The “To” in line 102 is a preposition, introducing the absurdity of faulting heaven, by mourning his father. He is trying to get Hamlet to move forward, away from his father’s death.

Claudius begins his speech saying, “’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, To give these mourning duties to your father“, but that he “must know your father lost a father, That father lost, lost his.”(1.2.87-89) But he insults Hamlet, adding “’Tis unmanly grief.”(1.2.94) This is the opposite of what Claudius says to Laertes later in the play, where he says that he should act quickly,

*“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.

He 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 “sulf’rous and tormenting flames”(1.5.3). After hearing about his father’s murder Hamlets 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 no count on, is his victim’s ghost igniting Hamlet’s thirst for revenge.

Claudius’ 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 some one 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](http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/keyword/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 candles 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.

He then compares inaction to pleurisy, which can mean excess, or even a chest inflammation, coinciding with the theme of sickness that was appeared throughout the play. Is he insinuating that him taking too much time to think about it could lead to sickness? His comparison here does not seem too well thought out. Maybe it pertains to the next few lines, where Claudius “Dies in his own too much. that we would do, we should do when we would; for this “would” changes” (4.7.119-120), indicating that he would stress over regrets he had about not acting. Note the repetition of the “ould”, an attempt to drive his point into Laertes brain even further.

Claudius continues to talk about the harm of delay, saying “ And hath abatements and delay as many As there are tongues, are hands are accidents; And then this should is like a spendthrift sigh, That hurts by easing.”(4.7.121-124). This means that if he waits long enough, he probably won’t do anything at all, bringing to question whether he really loves his father. A caesura occurs in the middle of line 124, likely indicating a change in Claudius’ tone, “But to the quick o’th’ ulcer, Hamlet comes back”(4.7.124-125). He is indicating that Hamlet is the root of his problems and telling Laertes that now was the time to act, or like an ulcer, this pain would burn in his core for some time.

Finally, he finishes his speech by asking Laertes what he plans to do about the death of his father, “What would you undertake to show yourself in deed your father’s son more than in words(4.7.125-127)? The last thing he says attempts to direct him to action, asking him what he plans to do about this. Laertes makes it very clear that he seeks vengeance, saying that he would “…cut his throat I’th’ church”(4.7.127).

Ultimately, Claudius was successful in his plan to kill Hamlet, not due to some master workings of his own doing, but because of his ability to manipulate events according to his own desires. He may have gained the crown by vote, but not until after he took advantage of the king, killing him in his sleep. In the end, his manipulative and deceptive ways brought him temporary success, but only at the cost of his own life.