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## A Study of Machiavellian Characters in the Select Plays of Elizabethan Age

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### Abstract

The playwrights of the Elizabethan age are universally acclaimed for the portrayal of a diversified array of characters which is still exemplary and the modern playwrights still draw inspiration from them. This paper is a critical analysis of some of the finest characters from the plays of the selected playwrights who display the traits of the standard Machiavellian characters. This paper aims to disclose that how skillfully the Elizabethan playwrights rooted the basic traits of a Machiavellian character in their characters and turned their characters into a living character with flesh and bone. Such characters became immortal and often drive our attention towards their powerful existence in the English literature of the Elizabethan period.

**Keywords-** Machiavellian Character, Play, Playwright, Elizabethan Age, English Literature

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### Introduction-

Niccolò Machiavelli was a political philosopher and diplomat from Italy. He is best known for his work *The Prince*, which extends pragmatic advice on political leadership and diplomacy. His work has been influential and controversial as well, it is often colligated with the term "Machiavellian," referring cunning and unprincipled political conduct. In this book he advocated that for stable political stance, being rude or cunning is a norm, emotion has no place for an ideal ruler. His theory was very influential for the leaders and the powerful leaders throughout the world. Tamas Bereczkei, in the preface of his book *Machiavellianism: The Psychology of Manipulation* gives a brief introduction to the characteristics of Machiavellian character,

“The world abounds with tricksters, swindlers and imposters, many of them may well be described with the term Machiavellian, such individuals disrespect moral principles, deceive their fellow beings, and take advantage of others’ frailty and gullibility. They take advantage of others by using them to achieve their own goals while their victims are not in the least aware of being used. They have a pertaining rational and sober mind undisturbed by emotions.”

The playwrights of Elizabethan age have been highly concerned about characterization. They were highly skilled in the usage of blank verse. In fact, blank verse is the hallmark of the Elizabethan plays. They preferred this verse form because it is very much close to the natural flow of English speech and thus it assisted reflect a sense of originality. They used blend of language, verse for major characters and prose for minor characters, to shift tone and moods in an effective manner. They also preferred the usage of soliloquies and asides to bring out the inner reflections of the characters to the readers or audiences. Such moments reflect deep psychological insights and thus were quite memorable. They often used wordplay and puns to add wit and multiple layers of meaning to the dialogues, thus making the dramas much interesting and engaging. They are quite famous for the usage of vivid imagery and extended metaphors. To create amazing visuals and emotional effects they would draw ideas from nature, mythology, and classical references. They often used their works as a medium to comment upon the socio-cultural and political issues of that time.

In this age the forms of plays have been written by the able playwrights ranged from tragedy to comedy, from history plays to romances. The Characters that have been introduced by the playwrights became prototype of the real world characters. Out of all forms of characters the Machiavellians have been most influential and widely appreciated by the readers for reflecting the reality. The portrayal of such cunning hypocrites excited the readers and also reflected the reality of the mankind, thus imparting a lesson.

In this paper six characters from six different plays have been analyzed thoroughly. All these characters belong to different strata, they differ in their age, sex and other parameters yet there is some similarity that brings them together under an umbrella term, Machiavellians.

### Main Argument-

1. The first among the characters selected for study is Richard III from William Shakespeare’s history play *Richard III*. This nominal character reflects the perfect Machiavellian characteristic. He is ruthless, cunning, manipulative and highly selfish. His act of ascending to the throne is marked by fraudulence, betrayal and a strategic use of language and temptation to manipulate the people around him.

His special skill of manipulating others for personal use is evident from the very beginning of the play when he openly announces his intentions, “I am determined to prove a villain.” (Act1, Scene1) This blunt admission sets the tone for his Machiavellian etiquette from the beginning till the end of the play. He uses flattery, fake humility and treachery to meet his ambitions. For example, despite murdering Edward the Prince of Wales, he woos late Edward’s wife Lady

Anne by pretending himself as a reformed person, "Was ever woman in this humour won?/ I'll have her; but I'll not keep her long." (Act- 1, Scene- 2) This dialogue displays his hard-found manipulative skill and lack of real remorse.

His maddened ambition causes him to annihilate anyone who comes in his way, even if someone belonged to his family. He masterfully plans the murder of his brother Clarence and the two princes in the Tower to ensure his claim to the throne. His callousness is evident in his musings when he calls it just to kill to reserve his throne, "I can smile, and murder whiles I smile." (Act- 3, Scene- 2) This insensate command highlights a Machiavellian characteristic of detachment from morality. He misuses the trust of people around him to fulfill his ambitions. He pretends loyalty to his brother King Edward IV and later he betrays and kills him. In the same manner, he cheats Queen Elizabeth and the Duchess of York to make them believe that he will marry their daughters, just to eliminate them once they would be of no use to him. He manipulates Buckingham and promises him rewards that he never wants to give, further displays his exploitative trait.

Richard's fluency and convincing abilities are fundamental to his Machiavellian traits. He uses his persuasive language to fascinate, cheat, and manipulate people in his target. His soliloquies display his conspiracies and selfishness, "And thus I clothe my naked villainy/ With old odd ends stolen forth of holy writ." (Act- 1, Scene- 3) This soliloquy showcases his ability to hide his villainy with religious rhetoric, a usual Machiavellian strategy. He keeps self-interest in the fore front to take any actions with least regard for morality or the wellbeing of people related to him. He keeps a view that people are tools to be used and eliminated when they become useless. His readiness to annihilate, betray and cheat without compunction brings his Machiavellian disregard for moral considerations into limelight.

2. Iago in William Shakespeare's one of the finest tragic plays *Othello* typifies the Machiavellian characteristics- cunning, rude, selfish and highly manipulative. His actions throughout the play display an intentional and strategic quest of personal benefits, often risking the lives and honours of others. His manipulative facility is evident from the very beginning of the play. He concedes to Roderigo, "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." (Act- 1, Scene- 1) This confession of Iago reveals his intention to pretend loyalty to Othello while in secret conspiring against him. He takes people around him as tools to be exploited for his personal gains. He tells Othello, "Men should be what they seem, or those that be not, would they might seem none!" (Act-3, Scene-3) Iago ironically suggests Othello to value appearances, while Iago himself is an epitome of deceit. It highlights his attainment in manipulating perceptions to serve his purpose.

Iago takes advantage of the trust that people keep on him. He makes smart use of Cassio's good nature by advocating him to seek Desdemona's intervention and later he tells Othello that their interaction means unfaithfulness. Iago's mischievous ability to turn trust into a weapon highlights his Machiavellian traits. The level of Iago's manipulation stretches to psychological tactics. He plays the role of a catalyst in germinating a sense of doubt in Othello's psyche against Desdemona by suggesting him, "She did deceive her father, marrying you." (Act- 3, Scene- 3) This indirect implication casts Desdemona's genuineness into question, convincing Othello's perception of her trustworthiness.

A sense of personal ambition and a desire of revenge can be observed in Iago's actions. His statement on Othello, "I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor." (Act-1, Scene-3) This confession reveals his deep-rooted animosity and sets the platform for his Machiavellian strategies. Iago's disregard for ethics is reflective in his actions. His manipulative language convinces Roderigo to sell off his land, and later on Iago murders both Roderigo and his wife, Emilia, to safeguard his strategies from being exposed. His readiness to sacrifice people for personal benefits showcases his Machiavellian trait.

3. Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* is an ideal Machiavellian character, exemplifying dire ambition, manipulation, and remorseless pursuance of power. From beginning till the end of this play deeds and statements exemplify her strategic craftiness and moral disengagement. She demonstrates mind-blowing manipulative skills, especially in convincing Macbeth to commit regicide. Being a valiant and principled commander it seemed to him an act of cowardice so he hesitates then she questions his masculinity and courage, "Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valor/ As thou art in desire?" (Act- 1, Scene- 7) She further challenges him and says, "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man." (Act- 1, Scene- 7) Such manipulative strategies showcase her ability to command and determine Macbeth's actions.

Lady Macbeth's blind aspiration drives her to seek power and control at any expense. After getting to know the prophecies of the bearded witches, she becomes skeptic of Macbeth's intention and capacity to capture the throne, "Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." (Act- 1, Scene-5) She determines to motivate him to kill King Duncan thus displaying her selfishness and willingness to abandon morality for power. Her madness for power increases to such an extent that she calls upon the spirits to rid of her feminine weakness and fill her with cruelty, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty." (Act- 1, Scene- 5) This conjuration reflects her ambition to transcend the orthodox gender roles and embrace the mercilessness she links with power.

Lady Macbeth suggests Macbeth to look innocent while executing their deadly intentions, "Look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't." (Act- 1, Scene- 5) This act of guidance to Macbeth underscores her understanding of the requirement of deception in fulfilling their ambition. To manipulate Macbeth into committing the heinous act of killing the King Duncan, she emotionally blackmails him and doubts his love and bravery, "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since, / And wakes it now, to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?" (Act- 1, scene- 7) She assumes his hesitation as cowardice and thereby disgracing him into action.

4. Barabas, the protagonist of Christopher Marlowe's revenge tragedy *The Jew of Malta*, exemplifies the Machiavellian archetype through his strategic manipulation, fraudulence, and persistent pursuit of egocentricity. Throughout the play his actions highlight his incarnation of Machiavellian rationales. Barabas uses crafty strategies to attain his goals. He teaches his daughter, Abigail, to pretend to be a nun to recover his hidden wealth, he says, "For religion / Hides many mischiefs from suspicion." (Act- 1, Scene- 2) It reflects his employment of religion as a medium in disguise for his conspiracies.

Barabas often uses people around him for his personal gains. He brutally remarks upon Abigail's conversion into Christianity, "Oh, unhappy day! / False, credulous, inconstant Abigail! / But let 'em go. And, Ithamore, from hence / Ne'er shall she grieve me more with her disgrace." (Act- 3, Scene-4) His remorseless decision to kill Abigail and other people in the convent exemplifies his readiness to sacrifice whosoever comes between him and his ambitions. He shows a vociferous disregard for moral considerations. He tells his servant, Ithamore, to be compassionless and to pitiless, he tells him, "First be thou void of these affections, / Compassion, love, vain hope, and heartless fear, / Be moved at nothing, see thou pity none, / But to thyself smile when the Christians moan." (Act- 2, Scene- 3) This suggestion of Barabas to his servant highlights his Machiavellian doctrine of self-interest and emotional disengagement. He espouses Machiavellian doctrines, believing power as amoral and accomplished through any possible ways. He says, "And, since by wrong thou gott'st authority, / Maintain it bravely by firm policy." (Act- 5, Scene- 2) This manifestation discloses his notion in preserving power through strategic manipulation.

5. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the violent brothers the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand showcase Machiavellian nature. Both are crafty and manipulative in nature and they both carry ruthless ambitions. They use fraudulence and cruelty to assert power and command, especially over their sister, the Duchess. Being a senior, high- ranked church official, the Cardinal's actions are backed by hypocrisy and manipulation. He secretly plans the surveillance of his sister by hiring Bosola as a spy. This is how he uses people around him to achieve his goals. He pretends to be a pious and a peace loving person, while he participates in immoral acts, such as keeping a mistress and seeking his way to papacy through bribery. He pretends to be ignorant of the Duchess's murder, thus exemplifying his manipulative nature and willingness to maintain power without involving directly into action.

The actions of Duke Ferdinand are characterized by emotional imbalance and violent dispositions. He betrays the Duchess into convincing her family members are dead by using wax statues to imitate their corpses thus showcases his sadistic delight in her chaos and suffering. His jealousy and blind ambition for control head him to imprison and then murdering his own sister, thus he disregards genetic bonds for personal profit. In his madness he believes that he is a wolf, and bark and act accordingly, this shows his psychological reflection of his Machiavellian actions.

Both brothers share some common Machiavellian characteristics. They manipulate people around them to meet their ends, for example they both use Bosola as an instrument in their strategies. Both of them have hunger for power and control and their actions are driven by this hunger that at times feed on the lives of others. They feign virtue and honour while both of them engage in corrupt and immoral behaviours. Their Machiavellianism finally becomes the reason for their downfall, as their fraudulence and cruelty result in betrayal and death.

6. Lorenzo in Thomas Kyd's seminal play *The Spanish Tragedy* is an epitomizing Machiavellian character, exemplifying the ruthless ambition, manipulation and morally corrupt nature. Throughout the play his actions showcase an intentional and strategic pursuance of personal benefits without worrying about others' wellbeing. One can trace the outstanding skill of Lorenzo's manipulation from the outset. He masterfully plans the murder of Horatio to pull ahead his sister Bel- Imperia's marriage to Prince Balthazar as he presumes the act of murder as an important step to raise the status of his family. As he plans the murder, he says, "Let's go, my lord; your staying stays revenge. / Do but follow me, and gain your love." (Act- 2, Scene- 1) This statement of Lorenzo reveals his intention to use Balthazar's sentiments to foster his own agenda.

Lorenzo uses people around him to fulfill his ambitions. He manipulates Pedringano, a servant, into annihilating Serberine, another servant, to forbid any possible disclosures about his participation in Horatio's death. When Pedringano is taken into custody then Lorenzo pretends worry and promises forgiveness and later he betrays him. He tells his pageboy, "My master hath forbidden me to look in this box, and by my troth 'tis likely, if he had not warned me, I should not have had so much idle time: for we men's-kind in our minority are like women in their uncertainty: that they are most forbidden, they will soonest attempt." (Act- 3, Scene- 5) This dialogue explains Lorenzo's computed use of people related to him to eradicate menaces to his plans.

Lorenzo's blind ambition drives him to execute heinous acts without remorse. He observes the annihilation of Horatio as an important sacrifice for his sister's progress to marriage. He remarks without any warmth of feeling, "I'll trust myself, myself shall be my friend, / For die they shall – slaves are ordained to no other end." (Act-3, Scene-2) This declaration highlights his belief in using others as only mediums to fulfill his objectives.

Lorenzo exemplifies the principles of Machiavelli's political philosophy, which recommends for the use of manipulation and deception to maintain power. He coordinates with Balthazar, the opposition prince, to promote his own interests, demonstrating a sense of readiness to betray

his nation for personal profit. Fredson Bowers in his treatise *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (1587-1642): The Spanish Tragedy and the Ur-Hamlet* writes, “Lorenzo is fundamentally cold-blooded and unsentimental, a practical man after Machiavelli’s own heart.” This judgment highlights Lorenzo as an epitome of Machiavellian traits.

### Conclusion

A Machiavellian character denotes an individual who shows traits of cunning, manipulation, and a strategic attention on self-interest without seeking wellbeing of people around them. Characters with high Machiavellian attributes often show manipulateness, emotional detachment, cynicism, pragmatism over morality, and strategic planning. Such characters are superb at using others as tools to achieve their targets and they often ignore relationships once they are out of use. Machiavellians are characterized by lack of emotional awareness, fake empathy, cold and unemotional treatment to others. The detailed analysis of the aforementioned characters clearly suggests that they have something common in their traits that outweighs other characters. All of them are cunning, ruthless manipulative, exploitative and highly ambitious in nature. All of them are Machiavellians.

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