

Hamlet and His Foils: Fortinbras and Laertes

TRICIA MASON • JUL 18, 2022 9:05 PM EDT

Foils in Hamlet

A foil is a character who sets off another person by being a contrast to that person. For a character to be a foil to Hamlet, they must have things in common with him so that any differences become more obvious. Thus, the audience would note how Hamlet shows particular aspects of his own character and personality by behaving differently from others in a similar situation. For example, Ophelia's apparently genuine madness is a foil for Hamlet's supposedly feigned 'antic disposition'.

There are two characters in the play who are obvious foils for Hamlet. They have a number of things in common with Hamlet, but they respond to their circumstances in markedly different ways. They are Laertes and Fortinbras.

All three are young men associated with royal courts of Scandinavia, and all three lose their fathers in violent and inter-related ways.

Three Young Men

Fortinbras is a royal prince of Norway whose father was killed over a land dispute many years before by Old Hamlet. Like Young Hamlet, he did not attain his country's throne on the death of his father but, again as with Young Hamlet, it is his uncle who has become king. He is a soldier prince, with little real power, since his uncle controls him and his country. However, he intends to lead his men into battle, one way or another.

Laertes is not a prince, but he is the son of the most highly-regarded royal counsellor at the Danish court, and his sister is the lady expected—by the queen at least—to become the bride of Prince Hamlet, heir to the throne. His father is killed during the action of the play. The killer is Young Hamlet. However, the killing is unintentional. Hamlet's reflex action on hearing a hidden voice in his mother's room, while in a highly emotional mood, results in him killing Polonius almost accidentally. Without his important father, Laertes may lose his status and his place at court. He prefers to spend his time in France, rather than at court.

Hamlet is a royal prince of the Danish court. His father was murdered only a matter of weeks before the action of the play begins. The killer is Old Hamlet's own brother, Claudius. It is Hamlet's uncle—this same Claudius—who has been elected king. Hamlet is said to be a soldier, but he has no real power and does not wish to be involved in battles. He is a scholar, and would prefer to spend his time in Wittenberg, rather than at court, but may not go because the king wishes it that way.

All three young men intend to avenge their fathers' deaths.

Fortinbras and Revenge

The audience is likely to gather that Young Fortinbras was just a child when his father died, but that he now intends to gain back the land then lost to Denmark. He prepares for invasion, without his king uncle's knowledge, but his plan is thwarted, when Danish emissaries inform the old man.

Desirous of land and battle, he instead agrees to fight a meaningless battle with Poland. Certainly the invasion plan must have been many years in the making, but it was not well thought out and Fortinbras seems to have been willing to accept the alternative. He shows no animosity towards Young Hamlet.

How Is Laertes a Foil to Hamlet?

Laertes' response to his father's death is to return immediately to Denmark, ready to kill Claudius, whom he assumes to be the killer. His grief exhibits itself as anger and hatred for all to see ~ indeed, he arrives at Elsinore at the head of a riotous mob. To be about to kill Claudius, without even checking if he were the culprit, indicates a complete lack of thought or planning. He has not checked the details of the death or whether he has his facts right. His father is dead and he wants revenge. It is as simple as that and requires no time for thought or consideration.

When he discovers that it is Hamlet, rather than Claudius, who is the killer, he wants to know, immediately, why he was not punished

fully. He then shows great pleasure in the fact that he, himself, will be able to deal Hamlet a fatal blow in a fencing match. There is no soul-searching, no worrying about an afterlife and no concerns about conscience. It is a simple matter. His father has been killed by Hamlet, so Hamlet must die at his hands.

How is Laertes a foil to Hamlet?

Compared to Hamlet, Laertes is faced with similar issues, but he reacts very differently.

Hamlet and Revenge

Hamlet's father has only recently died when the play begins, so Hamlet is experiencing tremendous grief.

On top of that, his mother, rather than supporting her distraught son, and grieving as might be expected of a widow, has re-married in unnatural haste. Her new husband is someone Hamlet cares little for. He also happens to be his father's brother, so in his eyes, the marriage is incestuous.

The new husband has been elected King, over Hamlet's own claim. Hamlet is in emotional turmoil. While he is in distress, he encounters a ghost demanding revenge. The ghost appears to be that of his father, who claims that he was murdered by his adulterous brother, Claudius, the new king. Hamlet's emotional turmoil is almost too much for him to bear.

He wants to avenge his father. He wants to obey the royal ghost, but he is not as active and incisive as either Fortinbras or Laertes. He does not lead an army or even a mob. He is careful not to act rashly. He does not pass on the ghost's accusations to the sentinels. Throughout the play he is deliberating, pondering and worrying.

His soliloquies confirm his confusion and concern. Is Claudius genuinely guilty, or is the ghost really a devil, giving misleading information? What if he does kill Claudius, won't that secure a place for himself in Purgatory?

How can he kill the king, when he is always surrounded by guards, yet if he kills him when he is alone at prayer, won't that send him directly to the pleasures of Heaven?

How Hamlet Is Similar and Dissimilar From His Foils

Unlike Laertes, Hamlet is a thinker. Unlike Fortinbras, he is not a natural soldier. Hamlet is a scholar; a philosopher. He is trained to think things through, intelligently, considering all options, before making decisions. It is not that he considers revenge wrong, or that he is happy about Claudius's behaviour. He knows that Claudius is a criminal and that he deserves death, but Hamlet is not a natural killer.

Fortinbras is a soldier and Laertes is hot-headed, so killing someone who deserved it would cause them no problems, but Hamlet is a decent man, who has been disgusted by all the wrongs that he has seen about him. He is not a criminal; he could not deliberately kill in cold blood. That is what Claudius did. He is not Claudius. Furthermore, being a thinker, he worries about right and wrong and their long-term effects.

Hamlet worries that he is not incisive like Fortinbras and that he does not even show as much emotion as an actor, in the face of great evil. However, Hamlet does avenge his father and his mother. He kills Claudius at the right time: when it is obvious that it is a just killing and not treason; when Claudius has poisoned his mother and arranged Hamlet's own death; when Laertes has publicly confirmed his guilt; when Claudius is not likely to go to Heaven.

Indeed, all three young men succeed in avenging their fathers' deaths. Hamlet kills Claudius; Laertes kills Hamlet and Fortinbras regains the crown of Denmark for himself.

"I'll be your foil"

'Hamlet', Act 5, Scene 2, gives us a trial of swordsmanship, between Hamlet and Laertes ~ but fixed by the king (and Laertes) so that Hamlet will die.

'Foils' are mentioned ~ these are the swords.

*Enter KING CLAUDIUS, QUEEN GERTRUDE, LAERTES, ... and Attendants with **foils***

*HAMLET:
Give us the **foils**. Come on.*

*HAMLET:
I'll be your **foil**, Laertes*

*KING CLAUDIUS:
Give them the **foils***

It is believed that the literary term '*foil*' comes from this comment, said by Hamlet, to Laertes:

"I'll be your foil"

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Comments

Tricia Mason (author) from The English Midlands on May 09, 2012:

Hi Andrew :)

I think that Laertes is, indeed, presented as an overly hot-headed young man ~ ie the opposite of the over-thinking Hamlet.

Claudius didn't kill his father, so it seems odd that anyone should have said that he did. I agree that it seems strange that Laertes should immediately decide to kill someone, to whom he and his father had been close.

Maybe he knew, or suspected, that Claudius killed Old Hamlet and is not to be trusted ~ not even by those near and dear to him.

Andrew Simoes on May 09, 2012:

I disagree with some part of the Laertes analysis. Laertes must have been advised that Polonius was killed by Claudius. It seems rather impossible for anyone to be so hot-headed as to hear of their father's murder and automatically (and quite randomly) blame the king for it.

Tricia Mason (author) from The English Midlands on April 27, 2012:

Hi :)

Yes, Robert, you are right ~ each personality is very different. Shakespeare was quite a talent!

Thanks for reading and commenting :)

Robert Erich from California on April 26, 2012:

I just wrote an essay on Hamlet last year - in regards to these three fine men. It is a fascinating story and amazing how Shakespeare was capable of capturing so many different personalities in such detail.

Voted up and shared!

Tricia Mason (author) from The English Midlands on May 08, 2010:

Hello William. Thank you for your comment.

Yes, I agree, one could discuss this play endlessly, I think. I wonder if Shakespeare intended it to be so thought-provoking, or if he would be surprised at the amount of attention that it has received.

I'm guessing that he would never have imagined that it would still be popular today :)

William F Torpey from South Valley Stream, N.Y. on May 07, 2010:

There's something about Shakespeare's "Hamlet" that makes it incredibly interesting to discuss. I guess that's what makes it the best play ever written (At least in my opinion.) Every character is worthy of analysis. No character in literature is more complex than Hamlet, I'm sure. Thank you, Trish_M for yet another look at this complex literary character.