

Hamlet and Laertes: Roles of Opposing Foils

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Few characters in literary history have served the roles of opposing foils quite as well as Shakespeare's Hamlet and Laertes. Two young men both presented with a similar situation, the murder of their father, and yet two completely contrasting courses of action in reaction. The analytical approach of Prince [Hamlet](#) sits opposite the seething passion of Laertes, blinded by his mission of vengeance. Zeffirelli's Hamlet and Branagh's William Shakespeare's Hamlet both offer varying takes on the personalities of Hamlet and Laertes, particularly in how they interact with each other and their courses of action to revenge the murders of their fathers. Through the text of the play and portrayals of the films, the opposing foils of Hamlet and Laertes represent two vastly different philosophies in regards to two very similar events.

When first the audience encounters young Laertes, he is found giving his advice upon his sister of Ophelia before he sets out for France, as some like C. P. Aichinger speculate, "[anxious] to return to the fleshpots of Paris" (Aichinger, par. 9). In this scene, Laertes gives a thorough warning to his sister to be careful of the affections of Hamlet whose noble birth will impede upon their relationship, as such "His greatness weighed, his will is not his own. / For he himself is subject to his birth" (Shakespeare 1.3.17-18), yet as Ophelia retorts of Laertes' hypocrisy to lecture her, as "Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads / And

recks not his own rede” (Shakespeare 1.3.50-51). This scene speaks to the two-sided nature of Laertes, as he preaches to his sister despite himself walking a path of sin. Polonius, Laertes’ father, enters the scene after and proceeds to himself give advice and blessing upon his s...

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...played so well within Hamlet, offering mirrored approaches of how to solve the quandry of justice and revenge. Hamlet, with his “complex understanding of the moral dilemma with which he is faced” (Foster, par. 14) due to his extensive schooling in Wittenburg and Laertes with his passion-fueled quickness to act, justified to himself by the expectations of the society around him. In these interactions, much can be understood and learned about the reprecussions of mankind’s advanced higher intellect and emotional capacity, both revelers and slaves of our own understanding of morality and free will. Thought must be exercised before action lest the blade strike those not intended, just as Laertes’ plot struck Gertrude, but also not to let ourselves become obsessed with our own thoughts, as Hamlet when his own actions came too late to prevent the tragedy in Elsinore.

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