

Father-son relationships in hamlet – hamlet's loyalty to his father

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Loyalty becomes a euphemism for blind obedience in William Shakespeare's Hamlet. A curious relationship exists amongst the main pairings of fathers and sons therein. Though grown men, the sons in Hamlet essentially do exactly what their fathers tell them to do, without so much as a word of protest.

These boy-men adopt their fathers' arguments, vendettas, and wars as their own, and seemingly guide their actions entirely by paternal approval. In the case of Hamlet, he surrenders his own life and future to the will of his father, albeit following significant hesitation, not to mention the passage of an entire play. Nonetheless, this essay examines the core action Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras share in Hamlet: the absolute subjugation of their own personal ambitions and desires to paternal rule.

Let us begin with Hamlet. His case begs particularly close scrutiny when we consider that the elder Hamlet has passed away. At the beginning of the play, Hamlet receives the dictum of action from the ghost of his father, demanding revenge against his treacherous brother, Claudius, with a decidedly passive aggressive manipulative tactic: " List, list, O, list! If thou didst ever thy dear father love – ...Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder"

(Shakespeare 1744). Interestingly, at no point in this initial exchange between father and son does the elder Hamlet ask his son if he might be agreeable to the challenge. The ghost simply indicts the king. " Now, Hamlet, hear: ' Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark, Is by a forged process of my death, Rankly abused:

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but know, thou noble youth, The serpent that did sting thy father's life, Now wears his crown" (Shakespeare 1744).

The ghost then employs heavy handed tactics to remind Hamlet of his station and duty: " If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not; Let not the royal bed of Denmark be, A couch for luxury and damned incest" (Shakespeare 1745).

Significantly, the ghost reminds Hamlet not to exact revenge on Gertrude herein: " But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive, Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven" (Shakespeare 1745).

The significance of these lines lies in the ghost's assumption that the deed has already been accepted. In essence, the ghost takes for granted that his son will avenge him, by virtue of his role as a son, while reminding him not to hurt his mother. Hamlet's father, apparently, still rules the roost from beyond the grave. Tellingly, he meets with no complaint from Hamlet.

Laertes exhibits a little more freedom and self-direction when compared to Hamlet, however, he too directs his life according to the approval of Polonius, as evidenced by his return to Denmark after Polonius' death. Laertes' vulnerability to dutifully honor and obey his father becomes his undoing in the masterful hands of Claudius.

Laertes bursts into the castle, after nearly exciting a riot, and demands revenge for the death of his father: " And so have I a noble father lost; A

sister driven into desperate terms, Whose worth, if praises may go back again, Stood challenger on mount of all the age, For her perfections: but my revenge will come” (Shakespeare 1786).

Claudius, spotting another boy-man and thus, easy prey, smoothly uses Laertes’ anger to his own purpose, using the same calculated appeal to obedience that we saw earlier with the elder Hamlet.

Claudius makes use of the same masculine weaknesses which Hamlet falls prey to so effortlessly and consistently. “ Laertes, was your father dear to you? Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, A face without a heart?...Not that I think you did not love your father; But that I know love is begun by time;...There lives within the very flame of love, A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it;...that we would do, We should do when we would; for this ‘ would’ changes, And hath abatements and delays as many, As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents; ...Hamlet comes back: what would you undertake, To show yourself your father’s son in deed, More than in words?” To which Laertes, ever the good son, replies, “ cut his throat i’ the church” (Shakespeare 1788).

Fortinbras, for the purpose of this essay, represents the man whose actions appear the most practical and explicable, in that they exist beyond the realm of emotion.

He seeks revenge not for the sake of his father, but to recover the lands and inheritance that the elder Fortinbras forfeited in the battle. “ Our last king, Whose image even but now appear’d to us, Was, as you know, by Fortinbras

of Norway, Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride, Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet – For so this side of our known world esteem'd him – Did slay this Fortinbras; who by a seal'd compact, Well ratified by law and heraldry, Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands, Which he stood seized of, to the conqueror: ... Now, sir, young Fortinbras, Of unimproved mettle hot and full, Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there, Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute, ... But to recover of us, by strong hand, And terms compulsory, those foresaid lands, So by his father lost" (Shakespeare 1733).

In Hamlet, the vengeance that Fortinbras undertakes against Denmark and the elder Hamlet is essentially self serving, and less colored by emotion and obedience than that of Hamlet and Laertes. However, it is vital to note that Fortinbras praises the manner of Hamlet's death at the end of the play, which suggests that he also values and acts by paternal rule. " Let four captains, Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage; For he was likely, had he been put on, To have proved most royally" (Shakespeare 1803).

Why do these men feel so beholden to this idea of surrendering to the will of their fathers, even if they should die in the attempt? Identity. Though both Hamlet and Fortinbras are named after their fathers, only Fortinbras' action directly benefits him. Hamlet's loyalty to his father cost him his life. Both, however, are princes, and dutifully accept the limitations of public office.

In the brilliantly prophetic scene between Laertes and Ophelia, Laertes asserts that Hamlet's blind compliance to his father's will stems from his

position as the Prince of Denmark; his role is to obey and serve the dictums of royalty, regardless of his personal wishes. “ His will is not his own; For he himself is subject to his birth: He may not, as unvalued persons do, Carve for himself; for on his choice depends, The safety and health of this whole state” (Shakespeare 1740). The relationship between fathers and sons in Hamlet seems to suggest that in Shakespeare’s time, sons of kings were little more than pawns to the larger will of the paternalistic monarchy.

Shakespeare, William. “ Hamlet.” The Annotated Shakespeare. A. L. Rowse, ed. New York: Greenwich House, 1988. 1731-1803. Print.