

ABSTRACT

DREWRY, JUSTIN DATHAN ANDERS. *Hamlet's Fathers: An Analysis of Paternity and Filial Duty in Shakespeare's Hamlet.* (Under the direction of M. Thomas Hester.)

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare presents the audience with the “common theme” of nature, “death of fathers,” and three sons—Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras—who feel the filial duty to revenge these premature deaths (I, ii, 103-4). At first, all three sons idealize their fathers, with Hamlet giving his father god-like characteristics, but their paths to filial duty quickly diverge as Hamlet questions the morality of the Ghost’s call for revenge. While Laertes and Fortinbras accept the pagan code of blood vengeance supported by Claudius’s court and steadily move towards revenge, Hamlet delays because this code contrasts with his Christian faith. Ultimately, Hamlet’s tragedy results when he attempts revenge, striking through the curtain and killing the wrong man. However, Hamlet quickly recognizes the significance of his actions and the power of “providence” through the many miracles on his sea voyage as he returns to Denmark offering Laertes an exchange of forgiveness. Hamlet’s revelation has come too late, but his final offer of forgiveness portrays the triumph of his Christian faith and his belief in “providence” over the codes of his earthly father.

**HAMLET'S FATHERS: AN ANALYSIS OF PATERNITY AND FILIAL DUTY
IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET***

by

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BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Hamlet and Laertes deny their own Christian characters in actions they falsely assume will reconstruct the idealized memories of their dead fathers. Shakespeare presents this paternal influence as an obligation preventing the sons from establishing their own identities. Indeed, the sons feel bound by an antiquated filial obligation to revive their idealized memories of their fathers in the minds of courtiers who have been commanded to “let your haste commend your duty” (I, ii, 39). In contrast with this command for quick “duty,” Hamlet and Laertes call for continued mourning and construct godlike images of their fathers that do not accurately represent the dead men. Laertes, instead, assumes a hasty course of revenge first against Claudius and then against Hamlet. Similarly, Hamlet attempts revenge in accordance with the codes of his father’s court. This pursuit of revenge contrasts with the “special providence” Hamlet identifies to Horatio before the duel and the Christian forgiveness both sons exchange after receiving mortal wounds (V, ii, 215-6). Hamlet and Laertes’s final exchange of forgiveness shows their discovery of their own philosophies rather than continuing to follow the revenge codes of their fathers. Thus, Shakespeare presents the audience with a tragic figure, Hamlet, who fails because he follows the pagan revenge code of his mortal father, King Hamlet, rather than respecting the code of forgiveness presented by his heavenly Father; and a pathetic figure, Laertes, who blindly follows Polonius’s allegiance to superficial honor rather than questioning his the value of his revenge.

Polonius’ final advice to Laertes, “to thine own self be true,” survives ironically as the best paternal advice of the play (I, iii, 78), but Laertes does not listen to his father’s precepts. He fails to heed the advice from his father because it is lost in the many adages

offered, and instead follows the advice of Claudius, who presents revenge as the acceptable mourning sanctioned by the court. As a father, Polonius fails because he does not command proper paternal authority, and his son feels obliged to establish this command through revenge after his murder. This perceived obligation, or “duty,” forces Laertes to act against his “own self” and contrasts with the father’s sound advice. Moreover, Laertes’ perceived expectations of his father are false, as are his own actions against Hamlet. Laertes and Hamlet construct these false perceptions in a pattern that is similar to their idealizations of their fathers. Although, he cannot restore his father, Hamlet’s epiphany begins when he realizes that “O, ‘tis most sweet/When in one line two crafts directly meet” (III, iv, 211-212). This insight foreshadows the “craft,” the physical vessel that will save him from death at the hands of the surrogate English throne and the “craft” or the “divinity that shapes our ends” (V, ii, 10). In addition, Hamlet’s statement also recognizes the two “craft[s]” as the power of the Christian father and his father who has recently assumed a heavenly position. Hamlet’s tragedy is that he recognizes this “divinity” too late, after he has already engaged in revenge. Laertes never achieves such a recognition, but his exchange of forgiveness concludes the Christian message.

Ultimately Fortinbras, the only surviving son of the three, achieves his hollow military victory because he denies the oaths of forfeiture pledged by his father and pursues his own course of self-interest. Unlike Hamlet, he fails to consider the filial “duty” to his father’s honor or to heed the expectation of the Norwegian court. He does not seek to reconstruct his father’s idealized image, instead seeking his own fortune. Moreover, like Laertes, he does not attempt to reconcile his actions with a theology or ideology, instead serving as a simple foil to Hamlet. His first commands in Act 5 to have

Hamlet honored as a “soldier” mark his ignorance of the situation and warn of an uncertain future for the state of Denmark. Therefore, while both he and Laertes are superficially successful in their attempts to restore honor to their family names, their actions are ultimately empty morally.

The major difference between Hamlet’s killing of Claudius and the other murders—Claudius’s regicide, Hamlet’s stabbing of Polonius, Laertes’ clandestine poisoning of Hamlet, and the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—is that Hamlet attributes the motive to divine providence. His actions do not attempt to restore his father to an idealized position but are part of his function as “scourge and minister,” which he sees as a punishment of heaven (III, iv, 175-178). Although Hamlet wrongly attributes Polonius’ death to divine will, rather than the revengeful commandment of the Ghost or thoughtless passion of the son, his “punish” recognizes the power of heaven. His killing of Polonius marks the beginning of his fall and transformation back to his Christian faith and the final tragic action that results in his death. As Maynard Mack Jr. says, “Hamlet is perhaps Shakespeare’s only tragic hero who knows almost as much about the meaning of his action as we do. He has, and knows he has, single-handedly turned king killing into an action of spiritual freedom, rather than imprisonment—though in the tragic world he cannot escape death.”¹ The impetus for Hamlet’s change takes place on his “providential” voyage to England, for he fails to speak of revenge or his father’s death after his return to Denmark. He achieves “spiritual freedom” when he realizes the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (V, ii, 215-6), a statement applicable to his father’s death, his salvation from death in England, and his own final

¹ Mack, Maynard, Jr. *Killing the King*, 202.

murder. Finally, Hamlet's "Let be" portrays the triumph of his faith in the Heavenly Father over the honor of his earthly father.

Chapter One: King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet

King Hamlet's was a weak father, however brave a warrior he was. His paternal control of his son was divided into two periods: his absence from Hamlet's childhood due to foreign wars and his continued influence on the prince after his death. These periods are described by the speeches of Horatio, Gertrude, and Hamlet, who provide clues about the early relationship between the father and the son. In addition, after the death of his father Hamlet attempts to idealize his father's memory, both in his mind's eye and in those of the Danish court, but he must confront the sins of his father and King Hamlet's moral weakness. Hamlet's view of his father as weak is compounded by his murder, demonstrating his mortality and his distinct difference from the Hyperion Titan. However, the Ghost cannot serve as an adequate vessel for Hamlet's memory of his father because he exists in a similarly absent and weak position, present in the eyes of a few witnesses but not visible to the whole kingdom. Hamlet struggles with understanding the paradoxes of his father's character as godlike but also weak while attempting to form his own identity outside perceived filial expectations and as a self with different characteristics than his father. Finally, Hamlet attempts to rectify his ideal image of his father with the pagan code of revenge that the Ghost requires, but he ultimately turns away from the antiquated codes of his father to embrace the importance of Christian forgiveness.

During his life King Hamlet was an absent father figure. As Horatio attests, the old "warrior" was mostly absent during his son's childhood: "th'ambitious Norway combated," and "he smote the sledded Polack" (I, i, 64-66). In addition, various

members of the Danish court note further absences of his father in Hamlet's adolescence—in victories against old Fortinbras, the Polish, and England whose “cicatrice looks raw and red/ After the Danish sword” (IV, iv, 63-4). Hamlet also describes his father through his military victories and his power rather than using personal memories. Hamlet's words and the absence of other descriptions about his father show that Hamlet hardly knew his father, but can only describe King Hamlet's victorious appearances in front of the entire court in a similar perspective to the other courtiers. Hamlet accepts the warrior image of his father to replace the absent father figure of his youth. Horatio, as Hamlet's closest friend, describes the prince's early idealization of his father as “a goodly king” (I, ii, 186), separating King Hamlet by his royal title instead of his role as a father. In fact, Horatio contradicts himself when he claims, “I knew your father;/These hands are not more like,” but he admits that “I saw him once” (I, ii, 211-12, 186). This contradiction and Horatio's “a goodly king” exemplify the general lack of knowledge about King Hamlet that accentuates Hamlet's dilemma—to replace this lack of knowledge about his father with the victorious and idealized images.

After King Hamlet's death, Hamlet attempts to resolve this victorious image with the knowledge of his father's defeat in his own garden.² Unlike the other fathers, such as Polonius, who rules both the actions of his son's departure and his daughter's meetings with Hamlet in the opening scenes, King Hamlet could not control events within his own castle and family.³ Hamlet first exhibits his difficulty in separating the distinct images of

² Avi Erlich writes: “In spite of the fact that King Hamlet had certain strengths he seems to have had his weaknesses. From Hamlet's point of view, his father was weak in that he was murdered, suddenly made absent” (Erlich 26-7).

³ The ghost's exclamations of Gertrude's remarriage as “incestuous” and “adulterate” build on these fears

his father in the court scene when he questions Gertrude's use of the adjective "common" to describe his father and his death. Gertrude attempts to explain to Hamlet the "common" or natural death of all life:

Thou know's 'tis common: all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity (I, ii, 72-3).

However, Hamlet applies his mother's adjective broadly, describing mortality to refer specifically to his father's reputation. Indeed, Hamlet's admission to Horatio acknowledges the paradoxical image of his father as both mortal and god, "He was a man, take him for all in all" (I, ii, 187). Although the first clause seems to characterize Hamlet's resignation to his father's mortality, the concluding clause reiterates his view of his father as perfect.⁴ Hamlet's responses to Gertrude and Horatio demonstrate his early idealization of King Hamlet as a man above the "common" and an expression of "all in all," but these statements are ambiguous and demonstrate Hamlet's ambivalence because they only characterize the former king in general terms instead of by specific traits.

Hamlet tries to resolve this conflict by framing his father as a classical god. He conflates his father's image with the classical sun god and presents his father's loving relationship with Gertrude in similar language. To Hamlet he is "Hyperion" (I, ii, 140; III, iv, 56), Jove (III, iv, 56), Mars (57), and Mercury (58), comparisons aimed to establish his father's beauty, power, and love for Gertrude. The result, of course, is a form of idolatry that lies at the heart of Hamlet's dilemma. Lacking any actual knowledge of his father, in his first soliloquy Hamlet imagines his father to have a power

of Hamlet. Hamlet fears the suggestion that Gertrude and Claudius are engaged in adultery before the death of his father. A previous extramarital relationship would further reduce the power of his father, not to mention further complicating his views of his mother.

⁴ Harold Jenkins considers the second clause to reaffirm Hamlet's belief in his father's perfection. He writes in his longer notes on the Arden edition: "Hamlet's father, then, may be taken as a man complete in every particular, and so as the sum and pattern of excellence" (Jenkins, "Longer Notes," 439).

over nature: “That he might not betem the winds of heaven/ Visit her face too roughly” (I, ii, 141-2). King Hamlet controls nature to protect his wife, establishing the depth of his love for Queen Gertrude. This characterization serves to exaggerate the contrast between King Hamlet and Claudius, the satyr.⁵ Although brothers, they present opposing images and powers. This opposition between god and beast in the same form again evokes Hamlet’s conflicting images of his father as mortal and god-like. Thus, when Hamlet later notes “the counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (III, iv, 54) his language relies on the visual imagery in contrast to the establishment of his father’s power in the first soliloquy. That is, Hamlet, in his first soliloquy, describes King Hamlet through his love for Gertrude and by naming the King as “Hyperion” and “Hercules,” but after the visitation from the Ghost he portrays his father’s power by describing the King’s physical beauty. This shift shows the transformation of Hamlet’s imagining from a indistinct idealization of his father, King Hamlet as a loving husband and warrior king, to the idolatry of the Ghost who presents a pagan idol for Hamlet to worship during the remainder of the play. Hamlet’s refrain to his mother—“have you eyes?”—again focuses on the visual contrast between the men.⁶ In fact, King Hamlet assumes his powers “to threaten and command” from his physical beauty, “the front of Jove” and “eye like Mars”

⁵ “The contrast between the two brothers is repeatedly stressed by Belleforest along with the fact that the Queen has allied herself with the worse who has killed the better.” Jenkins also writes, “the antithesis here between the sun-god, with his majestic beauty, and a creature half man half beast epitomizes in the two brothers the complex nature of man—like a god and like a beast—which will be the theme of Hamlet’s later reflections” (Jenkins 438).

⁶ He continues with similar attacks like “hoodman-blind” (77) and “Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,/ Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all” (78-9) to say that she has lost all of her senses as well as her sense. Again for this pun see “Sense sure you have,/Else could you not have motion; but sure that sense/Is apoplex’d” (71-76).

(III, iv 56-57).⁷ While Hamlet uses these similes and metaphors to characterize his father's beauty and his love for Gertrude, he also continues to emphasize his view of his father as a warrior: he has the threatening "eye like Mars" and the face of Jove. Thus Hamlet establishes his father's physical beauty as that of a classical god and imagines that his father's power derived from this magnificence.

That the prince might realize the dangers of his idolatry of his mortal father is also evident in Hamlet's first soliloquy, when he contrasts the classical god Hyperion with "the Everlasting" (I, ii, 129). Hamlet's exclamatory call on the Christian God—"O God! God!"—contrasts with his application of his previous classical epithets for his father. In fact, when he names his mother "Niobe" he follows this reference to Greek mythology with another exclamation to the Christian God (149-150). Thus, Hamlet seems inclined to separate God's law from the classical powers that he associates with his father and Denmark. Although he wants to enable his father in his memory, his father's weakness and death threaten King Hamlet with an image of imperfection. Instead, Hamlet associates his father with the Greek Titan Hyperion, an appropriate association because the Greek gods remain open to imperfection and to defeat.⁸ Moreover, the mythology about Hyperion emphasizes the Titan's role as a father to Helios, the sun god, making the allusion more appropriate since Hamlet's speech focuses the duty of a son.⁹ Also, the Titan gods, lead by Hyperion, were defeated by their Olympic offspring—a destruction of

7 As Harry Levin says: "Using the rhetorical figure known as icon or verbal portraiture, a favorite of Shakespearean embellishment, Hamlet portrays his father at full length and in Olympian majesty. It is an idealized portrait, a classicized image in the Renaissance manner" (Levin, Harry 60).

⁸ The mythological Greek gods "personify (give human traits to) solar, atmospheric, meteorological, or other natural processes," both demystifying the natural events and connecting the gods with the human world. These gods often mirror the psychological, emotional, and physical traits of the human world as well (Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner 38-9). Most of the following general knowledge about Classical myths has been confirmed by this text.

⁹ "He is perhaps most famous in legend for his role as a father, for Hyperion sired a trio of illustrious—and luminous—offspring" ("Mythography").

traditional power that foreshadows the events of the play.¹⁰ Hamlet's first soliloquy establishes the prince's dilemma of his attempt to idealize his father's powers in the face of his father's faults—a dilemma that leads him to separate King Hamlet from the Christian God.

However, Hamlet does not figure himself as Helios, Hyperion's son, but he further proclaims himself incomparable to Hercules, the mortal who was fathered by Zeus. In this figure, Hamlet is not a god nor even the offspring of the god and a mortal, but only a mortal and like his father. He does not extend the metaphor and assume the logical position as Hercules, but further distances himself and his mother from the godlike image of his father:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer—married with my uncle,
My father's brother—but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules (I, ii, 150-153).

Hamlet focuses instead on Claudius as a beastly parody of his “godly” father and on his mother's relationship with his father.¹¹ To him his parents shared reciprocal affections; indeed, he describes Gertrude's love as “grown/ By what it fed on,” King Hamlet's goodness (I, ii, 144-5). That is, King Hamlet's god-like powers improved Gertrude's love, while Claudius's corruption restricts her passions to those of an animal.

Yet, in all his imagined idolatry Hamlet fails to describe his own relationship with his father. His early soliloquy only describes his distance in greatness from his father as

¹⁰ Indeed, as other critics have noted, Shakespeare crafts a division between the Classical and the Christian in this drama, and this reference seems to follow from that model. Moreover, the defeat of the Titan gods by the Olympic gods seems also to follow the pattern established by the fathers and sons in this drama. Finally, this characterization of King Hamlet as a classical god also seems to develop further the contrast between the earthly and heavenly fathers that Hamlet seeks.

¹¹ Janet Adelman argues for Hamlet's categorization of these figures and his self-positioning with the sinful world: “As his memory of his father pushes increasingly in the direction of idealization, Hamlet becomes more acutely aware of his own distance from that idealization and hence of his likeness to Claudius, who is defined chiefly by his difference from his father” (Adelman, 13).

more than the difference from himself to Hercules.¹² This pattern continues throughout the play. The absence of Hamlet's words about the father/son relationship is accentuated by his speech on his companionship with Yorick. Hamlet reminisces about his childhood antics with Yorick: "He hast bore/ me on his back a thousand times," and "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft" (V, i, 179-183). These fond remembrances prompt an emotional reaction from the prince that seem deeper than any grief he has felt towards his father's death. Hamlet's closest emotional reaction to his father's death comes in the soliloquy after the Player King speech, but he still does not provide any similar recollections of a relationship between his father and himself.¹³ He first describes the emotion of the Player King and then characterizes his own reaction to King Hamlet's murder:

Yet I,
A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
And can say nothing—no, not for a king,
Upon whose property and most dear life
A damn'd defeat was made (II, ii, 561-566).

This emotional reaction describes Hamlet's reaction to his father's death, not his relationship with King Hamlet. More importantly, Hamlet characterizes his duty as "for a king," for his "property" and "dear life" as equivalent losses and placing "property" first, ahead of his duty to his father. In fact, the offences of Claudius against his father are phrased as insults directed at the prince himself:

¹² Hamlet continues this characterization in the graveyard scene, after his verbal attack against Laertes, as he says: "Let Hercules himself do what he may, the cat will mew, and the dog will have his day" (V, i, 286-7). This speech again characterizes Hamlet and Laertes as inferior to the power of Hercules, but it also demonstrates Hamlet's spiritual transformation back to his belief in "providence," away from the power of the classical gods like Hercules.

¹³ Although Hamlet's following speeches about Alexander and Caesar can be considered clouded allusions to his father and the decomposition of the King's body, he does not provide the same accounts of personal interactions with his father that he grants to Yorick.

Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face,
Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat
As deep as to the lungs (II, ii, 567-70).

These perceived abuses are against himself, not injuries to his father. Most of the speeches about his father focus on his duty to feel strongly about his father's absence, his duty to revenge King Hamlet's death, and Gertrude's relationship with her husband, both the idealized memory of Hamlet and her failure to mourn for the adequate time. Hamlet fails to describe his own relationship with his father, but uses these other relationships to enforce his filial idolatry.

The Ghost also fails to mention any personal experiences with Hamlet. "[O]ne of the most striking facts about this supposed spirit of Hamlet's father," Prosser points out, "is that he utters not one word of love for his son. The Ghost's appeal is directly to Hamlet's love for his father."¹⁴ This "love" is the power of King Hamlet's paternal authority that extends beyond the grave, and the Ghost uses this love to direct Hamlet's actions, "If thou didst ever thy dear father love..., Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I, v, 23-25). The Ghost puts Hamlet's love as the first part of the conditional statement, similar to Claudius's later direction that Laertes rely on revenge to demonstrate his "love." Hamlet translates this "love" into "duty" when he swears to revenge his father's murder and puts on the "antic disposition," and again posits love as the cause of his revenge: "with wings as swift/ As meditation or the thoughts of love/ may sweep to my revenge" (29-31). However, as Hamlet seeks to transform the court's final image of his father and to reform his mother's sin, he begins a relationship with the Ghost distinct from his filial obedience to the father. The spirit's appearance, the location

¹⁴ Prosser, 142.

of his sighting on the battlements, and its request for blood vengeance raise critical questions for Hamlet about the true identity of the Ghost as his father. Hamlet at first weakly questions the Ghost—rather than accepting his word as a purported paternal authority, questioning his motives and his identity. Yet, his naming of the Ghost as “King, father, royal Dane” and his subsequent acceptance of the Ghost’s commandment show his willingness to discard the wisdom of his theological training to please the demands of his idealized father (I, v, 45). Although Hamlet fears the origin and purpose of the Ghost, he cannot dismiss the spirit because he wants passionately to please his father.

In his idolatry, Hamlet must contend with the admission of sin from the Ghost and the Ghost’s command for revenge, which oppose his romanticized memory of his father. That is, the Ghost claims that he is “confin’d to fast in fires” until his sins are “burnt and purg’d away” (I, v, 11-13), and remarks that his punishment is a result of his “sin” and “imperfections” (I, v, 76-79). While the Ghost does not delineate the nature or magnitude of these sins, Hamlet must also consider this admission in constructing the memory of his father. Thus, Hamlet idealizes his father as a classical god to emphasize his power while also justifying his weakness to “sin” and “imperfections.” In addition, Hamlet assumes a different relationship with the Ghost that contrasts with the father/son relationship because he separates the figure of the Ghost from his memory of the King.¹⁵ Hamlet idealizes his father and the present but absent figure of the Ghost resembles his father’s absence during Hamlet’s youth, but the son does not fully accept the commands

¹⁵ Later discussions separate the ghost figure from King Hamlet. Part of this discussion is the believability of the ghost as a purgatorial spirit or a devil in accordance with Renaissance religious beliefs and stage tradition. However, in this instance the ghost simply serves as a figure who further complicates the image of the King. And Hamlet is at least willing to admit that his father was corrupt with sin because of his relationship with Gertrude.

of the ghostly father because the Ghost presents himself as “corrupt” rather than Hyperion. Instead, Hamlet questions and tests the words of the Ghost, showing his reluctance to accept the words of the Ghost as commands from his father.

Hamlet shows his wariness when he relies on Horatio’s advice to ask many questions about the presence of the Ghost because the prince fears the consequences of following an evil spirit. Hamlet also sets up the conditional expectation that “If it assume my noble father’s person,/ I’ll speak to it” (I, iii, 244-5). However, Hamlet admits that the Ghost appears in a “questionable shape” as clearly neither a spirit from heaven or from hell,

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn’d
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee (I, iv, 40-4).

Hamlet speaks to the Ghost, although he fears its origin, because he also fears disappointing his father should the Ghost actually be his father’s spirit. The Ghost has not met the condition of Hamlet’s speech earlier established with Horatio, but Hamlet violates his vow and still speaks to it. He also refutes the cautious advice of Horatio and the other watchmen not to follow the Ghost away from their gathering. Hamlet violates his conditional statement and the advice of his friends because he wants to believe the Ghost is his father’s spirit and the Ghost does appear in the warlike form Hamlet remembers returning from the many foreign conquests. This armed figure may be Hamlet’s strongest memory of his father. Hamlet violates his conditional promise to Horatio because he wants to view the Ghost as a surrogate father, but he cannot reconcile his Christian beliefs with the figure and the command of the Ghost. Hamlet questions his

Christian beliefs about ghosts and revenge because he wants to believe that the Ghost is his father. This questioning marks Hamlet's turn away from his Christian spiritual tradition to question a pagan code of revenge presented by the Ghost.

The second appearance of the Ghost after "The Mousetrap" and also after Hamlet catches Claudius at prayer bolsters his view that the apparition is his father's spirit. Hamlet wants his mother to see the Ghost and he describes his appearance as "My father, in his habit as he liv'd!" (III, iv, 137). Hamlet describes the Ghost's change in shape from the warlike form on the battlements into a form more appropriate for Gertrude's closet. Hamlet does not doubt the "questionable shape" of this Ghost, but names the Ghost as his father, identifying himself as a "tardy son" who needs to be chided into action (III, iv, 107). However, Hamlet's words still intimate his uncertainty. First, Hamlet asks Heaven for defense from the Ghost, "Save me and hover o'er me with your wings,/ You heavenly guards!" (III, iv, 103-4). Although Hamlet has tested the Ghost's revelation, he requires protection because he does not trust this figure.¹⁶ Indeed, Hamlet's call for protection and then prompt naming of the Ghost as his father follows closely with the pattern he formed when he first met the Ghost, a pattern which he again repeats later in the same scene. Hamlet seems to reveal his continued questions about the Ghost's true nature in this speech, but his quick naming of the spirit as his father also shows his desire to fulfill his filial duty even in denying his Christian vows. In trying to persuade his mother that he sees a real apparition Hamlet states, "Why look you there, look how it steals away" (III, iv, 136). While Hamlet calls the Ghost "My father" in the

¹⁶ In his note on Hamlet's exclamation Harold Jenkins proposes this statement as a prayer for protection similar to Hamlet's words upon first seeing the ghost, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" (I, iv, 39). Prosser confirms that this invocation protects the audience from evil spirits and is consistent with Renaissance Christian theology.

next line, his original pronoun “it” suggests ambivalence about the Ghost’s character. Moreover, his choice of “steals” to describe the apparition’s departure attests to its dubious nature as well. Hamlet’s companions on the watch, Horatio and Marcellus, also call the Ghost “it” various times, but they do not trust the Ghost as Hamlet does (I, iv, 39-68). Horatio and Marcellus, instead, fear the Ghost and warn Hamlet not to follow the apparition’s summons to a private location. Still, Hamlet’s pattern of quickly naming the Ghost regardless of his doubt again demonstrates his desire to see the Ghost as his father.

In fact, the Ghost must make a second appearance only because Hamlet has not followed the prescripts of his filial duty handed down on the battlements. Hamlet has not completed his revenge on King Claudius, allowing the opportunity to slip by in the previous scene. Moreover, Hamlet’s attacks against his mother have become more physical and more violent, against the wishes of the ghost that Hamlet “leave her to heaven.” His actions do not even meet the definition of proper filial duty established by the Danish court, Ophelia’s actions for her father, or Laertes’ grief for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. While Laertes heads a revolution and challenges the actions of Claudius, following the form established by Claudius and confirmed by the Danish court of demanding immediate, public revenge for his father, Hamlet continues to delay. Hamlet cannot follow this pattern since his father’s death appears to the court to be from natural causes rather than murder, making revenge illogical. Hamlet, however, does not follow any of the patterns of proper filial duty presented by either Laertes or Ophelia. Hamlet’s inability to follow the prescribed patterns of mourning demonstrates his failure to meet the expectations of filial duty established by the Danish court. More importantly, since he does not follow his father’s model of physical action against a threat also

commanded by the Ghost, Hamlet establishes a new pattern of sons defying the expectations established by previous generations.

Turning away from his father's tradition and his Christian heritage, Hamlet seeks instead to revenge his father's murder and to condemn his uncle's soul to eternal damnation.¹⁷ Claudius establishes revenge as a "duty" in his court, in opposition to the court of King Hamlet and the Christian lesson of forgiveness, to manipulate Laertes. He follows this private code of revenge and Claudius praises his courtier for his actions, which meet the standards for immediate, public response privileged by Claudius in the opening scene. Hamlet follows this same path to revenge after being manipulated by the Ghost.¹⁸ Hamlet's movement away from his Christian beliefs starts with his "drink hot blood" soliloquy at the end of the play scene and continues until after his murder of Polonius. Hamlet denies Claudius any "relish of salvation" but wishes that "his soul may be as danm'd and black/ As hell, whereto it goes" (III, iii, 92-95) While the Ghost's "certain term" suggests that he may purge his sins, Hamlet wants to insure that Claudius's term is longer, denying him forgiveness. Hamlet equates the punishment with Claudius's sin because the Ghost claims he was "cut off" with "No reck'ning made," but Claudius's eternal damnation would supercede this sentence. Therefore, Hamlet rejects his Christian beliefs, denying the clues about evil origins of the Ghost when he seeks to damn Claudius rather than forgive him. Hamlet pursues this revenge to fulfill his filial

¹⁷ Again Prosser establishes the Renaissance belief that revenge is God's power and she counters the claims for an accepted private code of revenge: "nothing suggests that Shakespeare's audience was conditioned to regard private revenge as a 'sacred duty' either in the theater or out of it." In her extensive study of the history of the "revenge tragedy" Prosser also writes, "revenge itself is treated as unmistakably evil" (63).

¹⁸ Hamlet's following of the revenge privileged by Claudius's court seems to contradict his other attempts to distance himself from Claudius. However, Hamlet is, in fact, a member of that court and he follows its codes. As Adelman notes, Hamlet continually sees himself as separate from his father, the idealized god, as a part of the corruption of Denmark and, therefore, as similar to Claudius (20).

duty, which has been established by the Ghost, King Hamlet's reputation as a warrior, and Claudius.

Yet, revenge contrasts with Hamlet's idealized view of his father's honorable leadership. King Hamlet, rather than risking the lives of his men as Fortinbras uses his troops against the Poles, challenged old Fortinbras to single combat. Claudius confirms the "bonds of law" that laid out the rewards of this contest, demonstrating King Hamlet's "valiant" character to act honorably even when challenged (I, ii, 24-25). However, the Ghost's commandment for revenge does not follow either the public process for justice or any private code acceptable by the Elizabethan audience, but deviates from the established moral norms and contrasts with the other honorable images of King Hamlet produced by the courtiers and confirmed by his son. This difference between the honor of King Hamlet and the moral problem with revenge separates the Ghost as a character from the living memory of King Hamlet. Moreover, this difference also separates Hamlet as a revenger from following the same "honorable" path of his father. Hamlet, instead, follows the commands of the Ghost and takes his action after seeing Claudius praying, striking through the curtain to catch his father's murder. Hamlet admits his mistake after discovering the identity of the spy as Polonius, "I took thee for thy better" (III, iv, 32), and repents for his actions, "for this same lord/ I do repent" (174-5). He also asks that his mother "repent what's past" and "forgive me my virtue" (152-54). While Hamlet's actions oppose the social model established by his father and the moral model of Christianity, his words signal a change in his beliefs as he seems inclined to his Christian tradition.

Hamlet's transformation continues in the next act when he makes several religious references and begins to understand the "divine providence" that will confirm his faith in the final scene. First, Hamlet claims that Polonius' soul may rest in heaven, although he believed he was killing Claudius in a moment of sin (IV, iii, 33). He grants the "wretched" courtier the possibility of an afterlife superior to purgatory, which the Ghost identifies as his domain. More important, as Claudius refers to his ulterior "purposes" in sending Hamlet to England, the Prince responds with "I see a cherub that sees them" (IV, iii, 50-51). In this dialogue he not only negates the power of the king's secret plot, but he also locates his own power in a "cherub," a heavenly angel. That is, Hamlet shows his belief in a heavenly power, the "cherub," to protect him from Claudius' plan. Hamlet moves the source of power from the earthly king, similarly representing his father's former power, to heaven. Finally, in his sixth soliloquy Hamlet admits that his thoughts keep him from further revengeful action:

Now whether it be
Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th'event—
A though which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward—I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do (IV, iv, 39-44).

The prince questions his delay and locates the cause of his hesitation in "thinking." Hamlet's logic is accurate because his "thinking" prevented him from killing Claudius when he found him attempting to pray.¹⁹ More importantly, this "wisdom" separates him from the "bestial oblivion" of pagan actions that characterize the rest of his speech.²⁰

¹⁹ While Hamlet's soliloquy seems similar to other speeches by the prince, his words on "thinking" seem to echo his earlier admission to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "there is nothing/ either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II, ii, 249-50).

²⁰ Hamlet also associates this "bestial oblivion" with his mother's response to his father's death: "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourn'd longer" (I, ii, 150-51).

This act demonstrates Hamlet's change after killing Polonius, recognizing the immorality of his action and beginning his return to his spiritual beliefs. Indeed, in his murder of Polonius, Hamlet assumes the role of revenger that the Ghost requires, but he also recognizes the contrast of this revenge with his own spiritual beliefs. Hamlet does not complete this transformation back to belief in his spiritual teaching until the "divine" events of the sea voyage confirm the presence of "providence."

After his return from his sea voyage, Hamlet fails to mention revenge or take immediate action against Claudius. Although he warns Horatio in his letter, "repair thou to me with as much speed as thou wouldst fly death," his letter to the king is non-threatening (IV, vi, 21-22). His message warns of immanent danger to Horatio and himself, but he does not show any sense of danger in the graveyard scene or in accepting the duel proposed by the king. Indeed, his actions and words in the graveyard attest to his new view of death. Instead of railing against the "common" element of death as he did in the opening scenes, he seems to accept his own wisdom "to what base uses we may return, Horatio!" (V, I, 196). His "we" not only includes Horatio and himself, but also extends to the universal human race that includes his own father. In his last appearance, Hamlet joked with Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius about the significance of death, but he has relinquished this comedic and very human attitude to the gravedigger in this scene. Moreover, he criticizes the gravedigger's manner for having "no feeling of his business" (V, i, 65). Hamlet does become emotional when he see Yorick's skull and as learns that the impending funeral is for Ophelia, but his new outlook differs from that of Laertes. In fact, Hamlet reacts to Laertes' action, not Gertrude's words, which actually reveal Ophelia's death to her son. Laertes' actions, which show his despair and doubt in

her spiritual future, resemble Hamlet's own former reactions to his own father's death. However, Hamlet now demonstrates his acceptance of death in this scene, showing a return to his own Christian faith in God and "providence" rather than the revenge code of the Ghost and Claudius's Denmark.

In the following scene, Hamlet calls on the "divinity," "ordinance," and "providence" of heaven on three occasions. He credits this heavenly power with saving him from Claudius's scheme to have him executed by the English and with providing him the impetus—"in my heart there was a king of fighting/ that would not let me sleep"—and the courage to discover the contents of the packets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carried (V, ii, 4). Hamlet's "fighting" recalls the conflict between the Ghost's pagan request and Christian forgiveness that is his primary dilemma throughout the play. Hamlet concludes this speech as he exclaims to Horatio, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" (V, ii, 10-11). Hamlet recognizes for the first time the power of "divinity" to "shape" the actions of all men, regardless of the actions of human pride. Horatio quickly agrees with this statement because he has maintained his loyalty to his Christian beliefs in "divinity" in contrast to Hamlet's shift away from this morality. More importantly, in demonstrating his comprehension of God's Grace and his faith in "providence," Hamlet completes of the process that began after his murder of Polonius. Hamlet similarly credits this "divinity" for providing him with his father's signet ring to seal the commission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

Why, even in that was heaven ordinant.
I had my father's signet in my purse,
Which was the model of that Danish seal (V, ii, 48-50).

The mysterious and miraculous pirate episode, which Hamlet does not and cannot explain, seems to be the final factor to confirm Hamlet's spiritual belief in "divinity" and "ordinance."

Hamlet's renewed faith in providence is evinced when he accepts the duel against Laertes, even against the skeptical pleadings of Horatio. He shows his faith in his final words before the clash:

There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all (V, ii, 215-18).

While he previously credited "heaven" with the events that saved him from execution, this speech places faith in this same heavenly power in the near future. Hamlet recognizes the inevitability of death, accepting his father's death and recognizing his own unavoidable fate, but locates the power of determination as "special providence." In addition, his conclusion, "The readiness is all," alludes to the condition of the purgatorial spirit cut off in the blossom of sin and not ready for death. Indeed, Hamlet has finally achieved his readiness in humbly accepting the "special providence" and he continues this process by asking for forgiveness from Laertes. He has learned the power of heaven and the importance of spiritual readiness from the Ghost and the curious events of the voyage. Thus, Hamlet can approach the lethal contest with confidence; and when he immediately offers Laertes an apology, he again shows his understanding of the "special" need for forgiveness. Hamlet's first words to his impassioned victim of Claudius's evil seduction are: "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong;/But pardon't as you are a gentleman" (222-3). The remainder of his speech continues this request for pardon and forgiveness, but, more important, again characterizes his former self as divided:

Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it (229-32).

Hamlet urges and shows that he is no longer the man who “wrong'd Laertes” that son attempting to revenge a father’s death. Now he accepts “providence” and urges Christian forgiveness.

Finally, Hamlet kills Claudius, but only after the King’s plan has poisoned Gertrude, Laertes, and himself. Hamlet’s actions, stabbing Claudius and forcing him to drink the poisoned wine, meet the courts expectations of immediate public action; however, Hamlet’s words portray his attack as the result of his mother’s death or of his own inevitable end rather than as revenge for his father’s death. He commands Claudius to “follow my mother,” focusing on Gertrude’s “incestuous” relationship instead of his father’s murder (V, ii, 330-2). Hamlet, finally, does not trust the Ghost or continue the obligation to revenge after his murder of Polonius. He continues to question and to test the Ghost, as he has since the opening act, and he finally establishes his father’s idealized memory as separate from the sinful and “questionable” form of the Ghost. The Ghost’s bloody command conflicts with Hamlet’s memory of his father’s honorable conduct and his own spiritual beliefs. Hamlet returns to this faith in his final actions as he explains to Horatio that “special providence” has elected him as both “minister and scourge,” even as his actions contradict social, political, and “religious” laws of Denmark. More important, this “special providence” counters the “divinity” that Claudius claims as his right to the throne. Therefore, Hamlet resolves his actions with his faith by recognizing God’s ordinance for his actions.²¹ Hamlet wanted to believe the Ghost because he wants to

²¹ Fredson Bowers describe Hamlet’s meaning of “minister and scourge” as either an agent of God’s wrath

atone for the imagined weaknesses of his father, including his ambiguous paternal control during his youth and his pagan beliefs; however, Hamlet finally replaces the pagan authority and revenge codes of his father with an assured faith in the Grace of Christianity. No longer trapped in the “pagan” past of youthful passion and filial idolatry, he fights, dies, and in his closing words affirms his “readiness” to face faithfully whatever the future holds for him as a man.

or a divinely appointed messenger. Both of these meanings position God as the source of Hamlet’s actions after he kills Polonius (Bowers 91).

Chapter Two: Laertes and Fortinbras

Like Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras must justify and respond to the premature deaths of their fathers, but they respond differently to the kind of filial obligations that Prince Hamlet confronts. They do idolize their fathers and seek “rites of memory” to distinguish their fathers from the corruption of the world, but they do not share the same emotional bonds to their fathers that characterize Hamlet’s dilemma. Thus, they create exaggerated images of their fathers to compensate for their sense of loss and the absence of these men while they move towards responses to these deaths most immediately and meretriciously, countering Hamlet’s meditative, introspective, and eventually tragic delays with proud forms of revenge. While the act of revenge proves eventually morally and practically unsatisfactory to Prince Hamlet, as he offers forgiveness to Laertes and his dying voice to Fortinbras, the other sons settle for a mundane and essentially “pagan” response to their loss: they are literally and spiritually unable to achieve the transcendence of the paternal ghost that “haunt” the three sons in the play.

As the only living father in the play, Polonius, of course, is neither a “ghost” nor a former king who has suffered from the “chivalry” or the crimes of the Danish ruling family. Yet, Shakespeare draws definite and significant parallels between the two sons in the play. Hamlet and Laertes, for instance, are of similar age, attend college in Europe, are deeply committed emotionally to Ophelia, and see themselves as morally or familially bound to revenge the deaths of their fathers; but more importantly, they are equally affected by the absence of a dominant father figure, which is accentuated by what they see as their filial duty as “scourg[ing]” vehicles of paternal revenge. The similarities

seem drawn, however, mainly to highlight the eventual differences between the two male heirs' responses. As Prince Hal says of Hotspur at one point early in *I Henry IV*, Laertes seems to be “merely my factor” to the Prince; so the accentuated similarities of these two sons serves primarily to contrast the differences between an impulsive, passionate, and ignorant response and a thoughtful, meditative, and eventual refusal to respond to nearly identical situations. The contrasting responses of these two remarkably similar young men lies at the “heart” of the mystery of the Renaissance morality play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*

Any response to the quality of Laertes's reaction to the death of his father derives from Shakespeare's characterization of Polonius-as-father. This characterization is complicated by the contrasts between the familial obligations of the father and his children, portrayed in the four scenes in which the Poloni family appears. In the first of these scenes Polonius strives ponderously to assume his role as “sage” advisor to his son and daughter. In addition, to its centrality to the characterization of Polonius, this scene is especially significant as the only scene of direct paternal advice by a living father in the play. Polonius's orders to Reynaldo to spy on Laertes also contrast with the father/son relationship, revealing the father's suspicion of the son as well as showing Polonius's true character—his experience with spying, his high regard for social position, and his corruption of innocent characters. Polonius's use of Ophelia in discovering the cause of Hamlet's madness also contrasts with the father/son relationship. Polonius offers his son “these few precepts in thy memory/ Look thou character,” mostly imperatives about proper actions in France to “season” Laertes's future choices (I, iii, 58-59, 81). Polonius follows these words to his son with criticism of Ophelia's actions. Instead of advice he

states, “Marry, I will teach you,” and relies on several demonstrative rebukes such as “Pooh, you speak like a green girl” and “Go to, go to” (I, iii, 105, 101, 112) to chastise Ophelia as a girl who has not thought about the consequences of her actions and must now be corrected through further instruction. This sequence, his showing of the letter to the King and the Queen and using Ophelia as a mouse-trap, demonstrates the old courtier’s loyalty to the Danish royal family above his own family bonds. Finally, while the responses of Ophelia and Laertes to the death of Polonius demonstrate their love for their father, Laertes’s desire for revenge, his challenge of Claudius, and his willingness to follow the monarch truly reveals the pathetic legacy that Polonius has left with his son.

The main idea developing from these scenes is Polonius’s concern with courtly status even at the expense of members of his own family. Polonius uses Ophelia to prove his loyalty to the throne—to assure that he maintains his courtly position after the death of King Hamlet. Polonius’s commands that his daughter cease her contact with Hamlet focus on the possible effect of her actions to her father’s reputation, “you’ll tender me a fool,” instead of the effects to Ophelia’s reputation or emotions (I, iii, 109). Several scenes later Laertes shows his understanding of his father’s value on courtly status by proving his own loyalty to Claudius and following the example set by his father.

However, Laertes does not sacrifice himself in an honorable act, for his participation in Claudius’s plan defies the rules of social conduct. In fact, his final exchange of apologies with Hamlet recognizes his fault and Laertes’s rejecting the method of external honor and of thoughtful action established by the precepts of his father. His immediate rebellion against Claudius and his deceptive attack against Hamlet contrasts with the actions of his father, who even in spying on Hamlet, attempts to help the prince and always places

loyalty to the royal family above his own family.²² Polonius works to prove himself “As a man faithful and honorable” as Claudius describes him, but Laertes responds to his father’s death by leading a group of traitors against Claudius. Indeed, Gertrude’s description of Laertes’s rebellion as “false”—“O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs” (IV, v, 110)—contrasts with Polonius’s final “to thine own self be true” (I, iii, 78). Therefore, like Hamlet, Laertes struggles with the social pattern presented by his father, but ultimately he denies this pattern in his many false actions.

Polonius’s advice to his son before his departure shows a family moment with no one present from outside the nuclear family; however, Polonius only presents common adages instead of actual advice during this speech. Polonius’ advice ranges from suggestions on clothing to warnings about fighting, friendships, and lending (I, iii, 58-81).²³ His words about Laertes’s dress, which make up five of the twenty-one lines, are the longest time he spends on one topic:

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express’d in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that (I, iii, 70-74).

Polonius again shows his concern with “rank and station” and his belief that Laertes can achieve a higher social position through his dress, not his character. Most of the remaining advice Polonius offers comes in one to two line points such as “Give thy

²² While Polonius may be attempting to demonstrate his loyalty to the throne or to protect his daughter and his own interest in court by proving Hamlet mad, his actions are not necessarily malicious. Indeed, his spying is only to prove that Hamlet is mad. The audience has no indication that he knows about the actual disjointed state of affairs in Denmark, or that he would condone the death of Hamlet. Indeed, while Hamlet often uses the man as his fool, Polonius never shows any ill will toward the Prince. Even in warning Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet, he places the blame with her “tenders” not Hamlet’s actions.

²³ Rebecca West also points to the importance of this scene, “Shakespeare would never have held up the action in order that Polonius should give his son advice as to how to conduct himself abroad, unless the scene helped him to develop his theme” (West 19).

thoughts no tongue, Nor an unproportion'd thought his act" (I, iii, 59-60). Polonius does not expound on this advice, but swiftly moves onto his next point. This moment demonstrates the inability of Polonius to serve as an adequate figure because his most important advice is lost in a list of common proverbs. In fact, this advice ironically contrasts with the practical suggestions that Laertes gives his sister touching Hamlet. Finally, Polonius delivers the most important advice at the end of his speech:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man (I, iii, 78-80).

He shows this "truth" as the most important value by using the preamble "this above all," but Laertes fails to distinguish these words from the other platitudes because Polonius clouds his message with too many other points. Polonius, moreover, further disguises the significance of the advice with the simile "and it must follow as the night the day," again diluting the importance of this value.²⁴ Polonius later attempts to show his same "truth" to Claudius and Gertrude, which shows the significance of this value to his character, but, as he has not been able to show his own son the importance of this value, they also get lost in the "art" of Polonius's rhetoric (II, i, 95).

These shop-worn commonplaces are the extent of Polonius's direct relationship with Laertes, who only returns only after the death of his father. Thus, this scene establishes the audience's only knowledge about Laertes view of his father. Yet, Shakespeare only provides a few words from Laertes to portray this relationship, and these words come before Polonius's precepts, when Laertes states, "A double blessing is a double grace:/ Occasion smiles upon a second leave" (I, iii, 53-4). Laertes's sarcastic

²⁴ Faulk says, "the important difference between the advice of Shakespeare's Polonius to his son and that of other wise fathers is that the latter always begin with spiritual advice—to worship God, respect the king, one's parents, and the law—but Polonius selects the practical and politic advice" (Faulk 27).

comment suggests that the father has already taken his leave and these prescripts may be repetitive of an earlier meeting. That is,

Laertes himself, for whose behoof the counsel is given, pays scant heed to it. In fact, when later in the play he finds himself in the same situation as Hamlet's, he acts in a manner diametrically opposed to the "few precepts" Polonius had asked him to "character" in his memory (I, iii, 58-59). Suspecting Claudius's complicity in his father's murder, he not merely gives "tongue" to his thought but proceeds straightaway to give this "unproportion'd thought his act."²⁵

Laertes's response suggests that he does not hear or does not remember the last words from his father. After listening to his verbose father for many years, it seems he merely tunes out this speech. Laertes's actions do not show any memory of his father's prescripts, although they do demonstrate an allegiance to his family's honor. That is, Polonius fails to instill the value of "truth" in his son, but Laertes's vengefulness shows his allegiance to the value that Polonius located in a high social position. Again, this failure at teaching his son the true values demonstrates Polonius's ineptitude as a father.

Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo make up the remaining details of the father/son relationship as Act Two, scene one portrays Polonius dealing with family matters and not the affairs of state. He sends Reynaldo, his servant, to France to deliver "money and notes" to Laertes, and Ophelia enters to tell her father about Hamlet's visit. Significantly, Shakespeare contrasts this scene of Polonius' paternity with the preceding encounter between Hamlet and the Ghost. The Ghost's commands for Hamlet, and Hamlet's remembrances of his father contrast with Polonius' orders for Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and his dismissal of Ophelia's fears. Polonius' instructions to Reynaldo reveal his lack of trust of his only son and contrast with the value of "truth" he prescribed to Laertes.

²⁵ Kaul continues, "When he learns from Claudius that Hamlet is the slayer, he is equally ready to sweep to his revenge against the Prince" (Kaul 19).

These instructions to Reynaldo, which are more sincere than Polonius's parting advice to his son, show the courtier's hypocrisy as well as his disregard for his son's reputation. He asks Reynaldo to lie about the character of Laertes to find the truth of his actions abroad:

And there put on him
What forgeries you please; marry, none so rank
As may dishonor him—take heed of that—
But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty (II, i, 19-24).

This plan to catch Laertes committing some small misdemeanor demonstrates lack of knowledge about his son's actions, lack of trust, lack of concern for the effect of these rumors. He offers no other motive for the spying other than "So, by my former lecture and advice,/ Shall you my son" (II, i, 67-68). This sentence lacks a verb, but either "find out" or "have" from the previous and the proceeding sentences may be substituted to form a suitable answer. That is, Polonius wants Reynaldo to discover the true character of Laertes and report as to his son's fidelity to his advice; however, he does not give Reynaldo any charge to change Laertes' actions if he finds wrongdoing. Similar to the pattern established with his parting advice, Polonius is not worried about his son's spiritual development, but only about his own appearance.

Reynaldo's surprised response at Polonius's request further illustrates the deplorable action of spying. Reynaldo seems most concerned about bringing dishonor to Laertes and protests with "My lord, that would dishonor him" and "But my good lord," which Polonius interrupts (II, i, 27, 36). Reynaldo's amazement at the orders suggests that this is his first attempt at spying, even though Laertes has been in France for some time, and portray the servant as an innocent youth, like Laertes and Ophelia, who is

misled by Polonius's advice. In fact, Reynaldo even asks Polonius questions about appropriate "forgeries," showing his uncertainty with the task. This episode confirms Polonius deceit and shows Reynaldo's corruption by the suggestions of Polonius: "He is an innocent youth with a high sense of honor who is horrified at the role of spy for which he is being cast, yet is too modest and inexperienced to protest except, as it were, in an undertone."²⁶ Polonius's advice to Reynaldo contrasts with the prescripts he offers Laertes before his departure because Polonius offers practical advice about spying rather than the general warnings he gives Laertes. This advice is similar to the poison that Claudius pours into King Hamlet's ear. Indeed, this advice is also similar to the Ghost's advice to Hamlet, a commandment to revenge that denies the established Christian social and moral codes of Denmark. To confirm that Reynaldo understands this advice, Polonius takes care to question his servant—"do you mark this, Reynaldo" and "You have me, have you not?" (II, i, 15,68). Reynaldo's responses and his further ability to supply Polonius with his exact words after he becomes confused show the servant's attention to Polonius's advice in contrast with Laertes's inattention. Again, Polonius is a father who seems not to merit "honor" as he is more concerned with his advice to the spy instead of correcting his son's actions.

Therefore, Polonius approaches his paternal role in a similar way that he views his loyalty towards the throne of Denmark as he relies on spying and eavesdropping in both settings.²⁷ Yet, Polonius places his political position and loyalty to the royal family above

²⁶ Goddard, 406.

²⁷ Kaul notes that Polonius reveals his own paternal method in his advice to Reynaldo: With windlasses and with assays of bias,/ By indirections find directions out (II, i, 64-6). Kaul writes, "he applies his method uniformly to all situations that arise in the play, including situations involving his son and daughter" (16). Gierasch also recognizes this dual role for Polonius: "As for affection between parent and children, from Polonius comes a protective love, from Ophelia and Laertes a remote devotion, yet strong enough to be part cause of the madness of the daughter and the incitement to revenge in the son. This

his concerns for his own family. He requires “duty and obedience” from both children, but he uses them both to advance his own position in the court. He rules his house in the same manner that Norway and Claudius rule their kingdoms. His commission to Reynaldo assures him of his son’s commitment to social status and the sports of youth while abroad. Indeed, his use of his daughter as a snare demonstrates his willingness to exploit his own family in order to assist the king. Clearly, his politics supercede his paternity.

However, the reactions of Laertes and Ophelia to the death of Polonius seem to confirm their love of their father and their lack of understanding his personal corruption. Laertes leads an open and armed rebellion against Claudius. Quickly satisfied by Claudius’s explanation of Polonius’s death, he joins in the plan to kill Hamlet. Yet, these reactions are not characterized by mourning; instead Laertes attempts to redeem his family’s social status and to fulfill the socially accepted filial role. Indeed, his entire response is based on his predicted expectations of the court. He challenges the king:

That drop of blood that’s clam proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother (IV, v, 116-120).

The “proclaims,” “cries,” and “brands” represent Laertes’s fear of taunts and repercussions for crimes he has not committed. Laertes fears the taunts of “Bastard,” “cuckold,” and “harlot.”²⁸ These taunts do not describe his father’s death, but focus instead on the integrity of the familial relationships. That is, Laertes believes his father’s

parent-child relationship is responsible for half of Polonius’ ‘prating,’ as is his devotion to the crown for the rest” (Gierasch 700).

²⁸ Moreover, his revenge focuses on his mother’s reputation rather than his father’s wrongful death. Rebecca West confirms, “Laertes’ expressions of grief are extreme,” and “[he] forgets his true grief in the excitement” (27).

death has destroyed the legitimacy of his family. His father is called “cuckold” because he has been defeated by another man and can no longer control his own family. The labels “harlot” and “bastard” are extensions of the insult against Polonius that Laertes fears will be directed against him for failing to revenge the death of his “noble” father. These terms characterize the wrong crime and do not describe or question the incidents of his father’s murder, but, instead, reveal Laertes lack of understanding of his father and Polonius poor education of his son. Laertes, mimicking his father’s concern for social status, describes the murder as a crime against the social legitimacy of his family instead of an attack on the person.

Later in the same scene Laertes even recognizes a ghostly voice, a “cry to be heard, as ‘twere from heaven to earth,” as the cause of his rebellion (IV, v, 213). In locating the cause of his rebellion “from heaven,” Laertes places himself in a position similar to Hamlet’s as he is also a son fulfilling the “cry” of his father. However, the “cry” comes from the absent funeral rites, not the father:

His means of death, his obscure funeral—
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o’er his bones,
No noble rite, nor formal ostentation—
Cry to be heard, as ‘twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call’t in question (210-214).

Laertes protests that his father did not receive the proper respect at his burial. Again, this protest does not follow from his desire to revenge his father’s murder, but focuses on the court’s view of his father’s burial. As Richard Levin observes, “he is governed by an external and conventional conception of honor that seems to depend upon public opinion, and that emerges again in his protest.”²⁹ In a similar outburst at Ophelia’s grave, Laertes again pleads for further rites in honor of his sister. Laertes differs from Hamlet because

²⁹ Richard Levin, 223.

he does not consider the spiritual state of his father or his sister. Instead, he focuses on the outward shows of honor, which follows from Polonius' speeches on the importance of appearance. Indeed, in his baiting of Laertes, Claudius uses the son's reliance on outward signs of honor to manipulate him—"are you like the painting of a sorrow,/ A face without a heart" (IV, vii, 107-8). Laertes is not, in fact, concerned with the physical act of revenge, but on reinstating his father's social respectability.

More importantly, the mode of Laertes' revenge contrasts with Hamlet's delay. Laertes takes acts quickly, first in his weak revolt against Claudius and later in his deception of Hamlet. He does not question the method or logic behind his attacks in the way that Hamlet questions almost endlessly the validity of the ghost. Laertes, instead, readily accepts the excuses of Claudius as if he were his father, and agrees to his plan against Hamlet. Moreover, while Hamlet cautiously questions, "And shall I couple hell?" Laertes asks for an allegiance with hell:

To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation (IV, v, 131-33).

Laertes fails to consider the lack of honor in his proud "dare" because he believes that these words show the extent of his filial duty. That is, he demonstrates his filial duty in his willingness to defy everything, including God, for his father's revenge. His later declaration to "cut his throat i'th' church" follows a similar pattern in which Laertes denies the spiritual significance of his actions (IV, vii, 125). Again, Laertes seeks to demonstrate his devotion through the passion of his response. He would achieve his revenge by simply cutting his throat, but he accentuates his ardor with the sacrilege of "i'th' church." This fervor does not characterize Laertes as a good son, as he would like,

but instead shows him as the true son of Polonius, foolishly willing to participate in Claudius's plans. Finally, the greatest contrast between Laertes and Hamlet is the former's rejection of the religious significance of his revengeful actions.

The active revenge of Laertes and the madness of Ophelia contrast with the solemn, meditative response of Hamlet. Indeed, the "shapes of grief" from Laertes and Ophelia are similar to the "trappings and the suits of woe" that Hamlet described in his speech against his mother's actions and further distance Hamlet's character from the other offspring in the play (I, ii, 82, 86). Hamlet attacks these outward demonstrations of grief as false:

These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play;
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe (I, ii, 83-86).

Laertes publicly shows his grief because his father stressed the importance of appearance. Although Polonius also advises his son "to thine own self be true," Laertes chooses only to follow the precepts concerning appearances. Polonius's vague precepts, spying on Laertes, and use of Ophelia to bolster his position in court show his weak paternal influence. Laertes's rebellion, while initially appearing to represent true filial duty, assumes dishonest and deplorable tactics that contrast with the social status his father valued but follow from his father's morally short-sighted advice. However, Claudius, by appealing to Laertes' value on appearance, quickly redirects Laertes's actions against Hamlet. In these final actions against Hamlet, Laertes attempts to follow his father's example and to restore the social respect of his family.

Fortinbras has also suffered the death of his father and the rule of his uncle. Moreover, he also maintains a unique position as the major external threat to the Danish kingdom. He extends the problem of paternal influence and filial duty beyond the examples of Hamlet and Laertes. Like Hamlet, he forms his filial relationship with his father based on old Fortinbras' reputation, which is dominated by his final defeat. Fortinbras seeks to restore his father as an ideal father figure by winning back the lands lost to King Hamlet. On the other hand, Horatio and the gravedigger characterize old Fortinbras' pride and belligerence as the cause of the original conflict. Hamlet respects Fortinbras' position as a duty-bound son, like Laertes, and his opposition to Claudius, but he regards his military conquest as rash and foolish in the same way that old Fortinbras' campaigns continue to be viewed by the Danish court. Indeed, Fortinbras does not establish revenge as his objective, but sees the transition of power as opportunity to prove his military power. Fortinbras' objectives contrast with Hamlet's desire to revenge his father's death regardless of the loss of his claim to the throne of Denmark. Fortinbras' ambitious quest for military glory in foreign lands, regardless of cause or of honor throws into sharp relief the unique differences between the two orphaned sons.

In the opening scene, Horatio characterizes old Fortinbras by his pride and belligerence as he explains the history of conflict between his family and Denmark. Horatio blames this former king for the first battle, describing Fortinbras as "prick'd by a most emulate pride" and his challenge as "ratified by law and heraldry" (I, i, 86, 90). Horatio emphasizes Fortinbras' pride with the words "prik'd," "most emulate pride," and "dar'd." He accentuates this trait by using the superlative "most" before "emulate." Again, Horatio's "dar'd" places the impetus of combat with Fortinbras, not Hamlet.

Horatio contrasts this image of Fortinbras with the “valiant Hamlet/ For so this side of our known world esteem’d him.” Still, Horatio also grants this old warrior some honor for following the codes of “heraldry.” Old Fortinbras follows a similarly antiquated tradition of King Hamlet, choosing single combat rather than risking many men as young Fortinbras does against Poland and Denmark. This honor of old Fortinbras stands in opposition to the actions of young Fortinbras, an imposing opposition that Hamlet also faces. Instead, young Fortinbras replicates the “most emulate pride” of his father’s challenges against King Hamlet. Young Fortinbras, unlike Hamlet or Laertes who seek to restore the honor of their fathers through revenge, discredits his family honor in his actions against Denmark. Horatio’s words foreshadow the same characteristics of pride and belligerence that will be used by Claudius and Hamlet to describe young Fortinbras.

The only other mention of old Fortinbras is the gravedigger’s remembrance that Hamlet was born on the same day Fortinbras was defeated and the same day the gravedigger began his work: “Of all the days i’t’h’year I came to’t that day that our last King Hamlet o’ercame Fortinbras” (V, i, 139-40). He remembers the defeat of Fortinbras, even though the threat of invasion seems to be over. The connection of Fortinbras’ death, King Hamlet’s victory, and Prince Hamlet’s birth suggests a connection between the boy’s birth and his father’s victory.³⁰ The gravedigger represents a common man, one of the few members not inside the court of Denmark presented to the audience, but even he remembers the defeat of Fortinbras. His response to Hamlet’s question about the passage of time attests to the common memory of the events: “Every fool can tell that. It was that very day that young Hamlet was born” (V, i,

³⁰ Harold Jenkins notes, “What matters is that when Hamlet came into the world a man began to dig graves and has now been at it for a lifetime” (Jenkins, “Longer Notes,” 554).

142-3). His “Every fool” suggests that many people remember Fortinbras’ defeat because of its association with Prince Hamlet’s birth. “Every fool” in the Danish kingdom remembers old Fortinbras for his pride and his defeat because of his connection with Prince Hamlet’s birth.

Similarly, Claudius describes young Fortinbras’s pride and portrays his military threat as similar to the challenge of his father. Fortinbras attacks because he assumes that the death of the Danish king has weakened the kingdom:

Young Fortinbras
Holding a weak supposal of our worth
Or thinking by our late dear brother’s death
Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,
Collegued with this dream of his advantage (I, ii, 17-21).

In addition to the perceived “disjointed” nature of Denmark, Claudius admits that Fortinbras does not give the new Danish King any authority or “worth.” Instead, Fortinbras assumes this moment to be “his advantage” as an opportunity to make a military advance.³¹ Moreover, his seeming willingness to change his target from Denmark to Poland rather points to a basic but unfocused belligerence. This belligerence again aligns his image with his father’s final challenge against Denmark. In addition, Fortinbras chooses to make his attack for a part of Poland that all agree is worthless, further marking this campaign an effusion of personal pride. His Captain remarks that the land is not worth farming and will not be worth the price of the war (IV, iv, 20-22). Similar to the characterization of his father by the Danish court, Fortinbras is a proud and belligerent young man, searching for war regardless of cost or cause. The similarity

³¹ Richard Levin denies revenge as Fortinbras’ motive: “When we first hear of Fortinbras he is not trying to revenge this death (indeed the word “revenge” is never mentioned in connection with him); he only wants to recover the lands that his father lost to Denmark as a result of this combat (102-4), which is a very different thing” (226).

between this father and son pair contrasts with the prominent differences in characteristics in the other father and son pairings. Fortinbras mimics the traits of his father instead of challenging the values of the previous generation, as Hamlet ultimately must do, and thus he establishes Hamlet's struggle as unique and significant.

Hamlet again mentions Fortinbras' pride as he watches the soldiers cross Denmark on the way to Poland. He seems to respect Fortinbras as he refers to him as "a delicate and tender prince" (IV, iv, 48). Yet, Hamlet then corrects this impression when he describes Fortinbras as one "Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,/ Makes mouths at the invisible event" (IV, iv, 49-50). This description as "delicate and tender" rather places Fortinbras in a similar position to Laertes as young and naïve. Hamlet claims that Fortinbras mocks or "makes mouths at" death, "the invisible event," in risking his life and his soldiers against Poland. According to Hamlet, Fortinbras considers military victory more valuable than life. The true value of this "ambition" comes to light when compared with Hamlet's earlier conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet says, "and I hold ambition of so airy and/ light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow" (II, ii, 261-2). Hamlet considers military ambition to be worthless and therefore mocks Fortinbras. Furthermore, the adjective "puffed" and the phrase "makes mouths at the invisible event" emphasizes Fortinbras' pride at taunting death.³² This phrase again recalls the interview of Hamlet by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when Hamlet lamented,

It is not very strange; for my uncle is King of
Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him
while my father lived give twenty, forty, fifty, a

³² Ophelia first used the image of "a puff'd and reckless libertine" in warning her brother not to prove hypocritical in his cautionary advice about the changing promises of young men. Indeed the "puff'd," which Ophelia makes synonymous with "reckless," foreshadows the qualities and the appearance of Fortinbras. Rudiger Imhof notes in his study, "The verb 'puff'd' surely bears negative connotations" (Imhof 19).

hundred ducats apiece for his picture in a little (II, ii, 359-62).

Hamlet's speech exemplifies his displeasure with the members of court who previously scorned or "made mouths" at Claudius, but who seek portraits of him now that he has assumed the throne. Hamlet mocks their taunting, their extravagance for royal favor, and their hypocrisy. Hamlet's second speech connects Fortinbras to these courtiers.

Fortinbras's taunting of death accentuates his pride and is rebuked by Hamlet. More importantly, Hamlet attempts to distinguish his own revenge by separating himself from the pride that compels Fortinbras and that he also associates with the court of Denmark, but ultimately he also assumes this pride in attempting to act against "providence" and Christian morality.

Thus, the primary differences between Fortinbras and Hamlet are the causes for their actions and the results they seek. Whereas Laertes returns to Denmark to seek immediate revenge, and Hamlet also seeks revenge for his father's murder,³³ Fortinbras' father has been dead for some time and he was killed in combat. Young Fortinbras is not seeking revenge for his father's death.³⁴ In addition, the Ghost orders Hamlet to revenge his murder, and the prince struggles with the spiritual consequences of revenge throughout. Fortinbras rather assumes this moment, seizing on the political uncertainty after King Hamlet's death, as a chance for personal advancement. Fortinbras' movement differs from the Ghost's order for revenge in that the latter is a demand for action not

³³ The actual passage of time over the course of the play, and even from the death of King Hamlet to the beginning of the play is the subject of much debate. Ophelia places the date at "twice two months," but it is clear from Hamlet's speech that he believes the date was much sooner, "within these two hours" (III, ii, 137). Regardless of the actual passage of time, Hamlet considers his course of action, or thought about action, to be prompt. Laertes interrupts Claudius and demands immediate satisfaction for his father's death. However, Fortinbras waits until King Hamlet's death creates the advantageous situation.

³⁴ To achieve revenge he would have to kill King Hamlet, and that act has already been completed by Claudius. He does not make his attack a personal "vendetta" against Hamlet; rather he makes his attack against the whole kingdom of Denmark.

requested by old Fortinbras. Hamlet struggles because of his allegiances both to his father and to a moral authority, the Holy Father. However, Fortinbras does not consider his father's wishes in his attempts to regain this land. In fact, his attempts to reverse the defeat of his father go against the agreement that old Fortinbras made with King Hamlet before their battle. The change of target further removes honor as the motive for Fortinbras as Richard Levin points out, "a few scenes later, we learn that he has even abandoned this project and decided instead to attack Poland (2.2.60-80), after which we hear no more of the father whom, according to these critics, he is supposed to be revenging."³⁵ Unlike the other two sons, Hamlet and Laertes, Fortinbras does not seek to revenge his father's death, but instead seeks personal gains in his attacks on Poland and Denmark. Instead, Fortinbras appears like his father because he attacks Denmark without any cause other than personal gain.

On his return from Poland, Fortinbras ultimately attacks Denmark, defying the directive handed down by his uncle before Claudius's messengers. This deception again rejects any honorable aspects of revenge to restore the honorable reputation of old Fortinbras. As Imhof urges,

The astounding thing about Fortinbras in act 5—in addition to Hamlet prophesying 'th' election' will light on him (5.2.360)—is that he marches into the castle of Elsinore like a conqueror, accompanied by 'warlike noise,' as first the dying Hamlet and then Osric (5.2.357) remark. This is strange behavior for someone who could of course have no knowledge of the death of the King of Denmark. There is nothing here of the dutiful attitude Fortinbras wished to exhibit towards Claudius in Act 4.³⁶

³⁵ Levin, 226.

³⁶ Imhof, 24.

Fortinbras cannot know the fully “disjointed” nature of the throne and must approach the kingdom expecting to fight King Claudius. Horatio exemplifies the court’s surprise at Fortinbras’s approach as he says “Why does the drum come hither?” and Fortinbras first question “Where is this sight?” also reveals his surprise at finding “so many princes at a shot so bloodily hast struck” (V, ii, 366-7, 371-2). This final scene seems to close with as many questions as first began the play as both Fortinbras and the English ambassador are stunned by the bloody sight they find. Fortinbras’s statements—“This quarry cries on havoc” and “Such a sight as this becomes the field, but here shows much amiss (V, ii, 369, 406-7)—show his dismay at the many bodies, but also his condemnation of the actions as “amiss” and “havoc,” a view the ambassador confirms with “The sight is dismal” (V, ii, 372). Instead, the play ends in much the same way it began with the death of a king and the coronation of a new ruler, while the fear of war against Fortinbras that desired so much attention at the start of the play has come to fruition, and the fears of Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio have become real.

To resolve this chaos, which Fortinbras describes as “havoc” and “amiss,” he, like Claudius, assembles the court and ends the play similar to its beginning. His first address—“For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune./ I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,/Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me” (V, ii, 393-5)—recalls Claudius’s coupling of “sorrow” and “fortune” in his first speech: “That we with wisest sorrow think on him/ Together with remembrance of ourselves” (I, ii, 6-7) and continued,

With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife (I, ii, 11-14).

Fortinbras's words echo the opening court scene and suggest an equally ominous future for the new king attempting to restore order to the "havoc" he has gained as his "fortune." Horatio also attests to the continued threat of "havoc" as he asks for the prompt performance "even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance/ On plots and errors happen" (V, ii, 399-400); yet, Fortinbras next commands to honor Hamlet as a soldier further show his ignorance of the events and forecast a troublesome future for Denmark. Fortinbras chooses to honor Hamlet "like a soldier," which is the honor bestowed on King Hamlet after his death, with "The soldier's music, and the rite of war," but this honor does not fit Hamlet's actions or his divergence from his father's war-like model (V, ii, 401, 404). Fortinbras's orders again recall the opening court scene as he calls for the "trappings and the suits of woe" that Hamlet rejected as false and against which he argued in front of the court of Denmark. In the end, while Hamlet has become the "scourge" and eliminated the corruption in the state of Denmark, the state remains in a similarly precarious position, with a foolish and deceptive Fortinbras assuming control of the throne, and the courtiers bound to repeat the same tragic events as before unless they can understand the Christian message of forgiveness exemplified in Hamlet's actions and witnessed in Horatio's final words.

Thus, Hamlet laments "O, 'tis most sweet/ When in one line two crafts directly meet," as the three sons become "crafts" that "meet" in the final scene to revenge the premature deaths of their fathers (III, iv, 211-12). Hamlet, however, differs from the other two sons as he is the only one to recognize the false promise of revenge, offering forgiveness to Laertes and Fortinbras instead. Neither Laertes nor Fortinbras questions

the moral implications of their actions, but both pursue calculated and deliberate actions against Hamlet and Denmark. Polonius's failed attempts to offer his son guidance appear in Laertes' revenge, which blindly follows Claudius's direction instead of his father's actual advice "to thine own self be true." Laertes, like Fortinbras, finally personifies the worst traits of his father in his primary concern with social position and honorific image. Fortinbras expresses the same pride and belligerence that are historically associated with his father in the reports of Horatio and Claudius. Fortinbras and Laertes take action because they believe the need for immediate action and they deny the more noble values of their fathers in their actions, but Hamlet questions the implications of his revenge and denies the promptings of the ghostly father. That is, Hamlet, in questioning his own idealization of his father, realizes his father's imperfections and the immorality of the ghost's revenge. Therefore, through his deliberative delay and final offers of forgiveness Hamlet denies the "example" of his father—a man characterized by powerful action and classical, essentially "pagan" codes of combat—also denying the example of filial action established by the other sons in the play.

Hamlet's tragedy results because he achieves his epiphany only after he has already attempted to revenge his father's death, ironically epitomized by his pathetic and thoughtless passionate stabbing through the curtain in his mother's closet. Hamlet realizes his own responsibility for Polonius's death and attributes the source of his action to his desire for revenge. He traces the occasion of this revenge to the ghostly father, while he also begins to recognize the presence of a Heavenly father, "a divinity that shapes our ends." His first beliefs about "providence" are supported by the later pirate episode that saves him from certain death at the hands of the English king. Hamlet shows

his change in attitude as he expresses sorrow for his outburst against Laertes and empathy for Laertes's erroneous revenge,

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,
That to Laertes I forgot myself;
For by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his (V, ii, 75-78).

While Hamlet makes this statement to Horatio, which includes his plans to “court [Laertes's] favors,” he makes two direct offers of forgiveness to Laertes before the court. The other two sons do not achieve the same awareness about “divinity” or “providence.” Laertes rejects Hamlet's first offer of forgiveness before the duel, but pleads for Hamlet's pardon in his final words, “Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,/ Nor thine on me (V, ii, 334-5). However, unlike Hamlet, he does not understand the relation of this action to Christian Grace. In the same vein, Fortinbras's forceful march onto the stage and his final request to “bear Hamlet like a soldier” also reveals his ignorance (V, ii, 401). Hamlet is the only son who receives and recognizes this right rule of “divinity,” “providence,” and “ordinance,” even though his understanding comes too late to avoid the tragedy he has willfully brought about.

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