

ABSTRACT

Hardly a year goes by without a groundbreaking conference on William Shakespeare to expand the borders of our knowledge, a thorough volume to gather a throng of academic perspectives, or a riveting film adaptation to remind us how his famous tragedy, *Hamlet*, can, more than four hundred years after its publication, touch the very foundation of our personal tragedies, reminding us that our estrangement and doubts are nothing but a consequence of being human. Few plays can match *Hamlet*'s popularity, and even fewer can live up to its versatility, a feature taken full advantage of by film and stage directors alike, but how much of what we are privileged to see today is faithful to the Bard of Avon's vision, and, more importantly, should it be?

Like Hamlet, we ask ourselves what the twist given to his identity really is, and, like him, we see retribution as the inescapable answer. Its theme, central to William Shakespeare's tragedy, is inextricably connected to its heralds, Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, and to understand it means to first understand them. These are the premises on which we will base our research.

The present thesis will be directed at understanding the unique combination of traits of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras by not only tracking them in the play, but also deep in the fabric of the Bard's own life and his sonnets. After we have gone to their roots, we will scrutinize them in full bloom, as they have been portrayed on film, and observe the effects of their being processed by popular culture. Considering the need to cover such a broad spectrum, an interdisciplinary approach will be employed for analysing the theme of retribution through the prism of the three characters, linking their possible origins to the wild success *Hamlet* has enjoyed on film. The findings of our research will either be published in book form, or in several articles destined for scientific journals, and will hopefully enrich the knowledge concerning not only the three characters, but *Hamlet* as a whole. In order for our research to provide a perspective on the three avenging sons as ample as possible, we have chosen to take four roads:

- an initial formalist analysis of the background, traits and relationship of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras
- a biographical scrutiny of William Shakespeare, selecting those experiences, people and events that may have contributed to the features of the three young men
- a comparative analysis of the Bard's sonnets, highlighting themes and verses resonant with the identities of the three avenging sons

- academic film reviews of screen adaptations of *Hamlet*, either with or without Fortinbras

We have paid special attention to focusing on the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, and not falling into the trap of devoting too much of our attention to the other characters of the play, other than to highlight those interactions that specifically bring out a number of traits of the three men. Another trap we have decided to avoid is the comfortable option of treating Laertes and Fortinbras as mere accessories to Hamlet. Instead we have allotted to them as much attention as to the sweet prince.

By employing a flexible, comparative approach with biographical and interpretive components, the present thesis will:

- offer a scrutiny with the eyes of both the scholar and the film critic, so as to provide a well-rounded approach to an intensely discussed theme
- provide better clarity regarding the interdependence of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras
- improve the understanding of their traits by comparing them with themes from the sonnets and people or situations from Shakespeare's life
- find possible historical, social and cultural origins of inspiration that led the author to their construction
- enforce their identity as essential Shakespearean epitomes
- analyse the extent to which different film directors remained faithful to the original play, and how their choices embellished or deteriorated certain features of the Bard's avenging sons

In our pursuit of understanding Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, we have encountered several limitations to our research, as it is to be expected when attempting to push the frontiers too far. However, we have managed to work our comparative and biographical approach around most of these obstacles.

In our biographical approach, even though we have made the majority of associations between the Bard's life and the three characters, thanks to compelling historical evidence, William Shakespeare's "missing years" are discussed using mostly theories based on unverified accounts. We have taken these accounts and used them as sources for our own interpretations, but not without mentioning their unreliability, merely employing them to

preserve the continuity and flavour of the analysis.

Comparisons between the sonnets and the traits of the three, as fascinating as they may be, rely mostly on our perception, as neither solid proof nor sufficient literature exists. In that regard, however, the accuracy is no less different from the analysis of any poem, and we have seen in this scarcity of literature a need to be satisfied, rather than a barrier not to be crossed.

Finally, we have based our classification of films on whether Fortinbras appears at the conclusion or not, but even then there are significant variations, such as in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), where only his image appears. Nevertheless, we have used this great variety of depictions to offer an even more thorough criticism of his rendition.

The structure of the thesis is explained below.

General Introduction: *Theoretical Frameworks* offers clarifications regarding the critical theories we have employed as basis for our analysis, an analysis dependant on a comparative and biographical approach.

As most of our thesis relies on comparisons, either between characters, themes, or literature, a comparative approach has been selected to highlight the common and diverging features of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, either in Shakespeare's work or in interpretations of it. Views on comparative literature such as those of acclaimed scholars such as Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Jonathan Culler have offered us guidance, but the interdisciplinary nature of our comparative approach has also prompted us to seek input from specialists in a variety of fields, as counselled by the Committee on Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research of the National Academies.

The field of the psychology of literature, explained to us by the scholar and educator Louis Dudek, has proved to be especially useful, enabling us to link traits and actions of the three young men to psychological processes, and also to correlate them with themes repeatedly portrayed by the Bard.

An attempt to find a connection between Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras and the sonnets would have been impossible without an extensive analysis of figures of speech, an analysis greatly facilitated by definitions and examples provided by linguists such as Xiuguo and Zhang.

The heavy dependency of our thesis on film studies has been supported by film studies scholars Ed Sikov, Sarah Benyahia and Claire Mortimer with ample critical theories and

definitions, and the reliance of our scrutiny on the sub-field of the philosophy of film has been made possible by the theoretical frameworks provided by noted philosophy scholar Thomas Wartenberg.

Finally, an understanding of the advantages and limitations of applying a comparative approach to our thesis could not have been achieved without the theoretical indications of sociologist Reza Azarian.

A biographical approach has been our preferred method of analysis in Chapter 3, after consulting the definitions and clarifications provided by Norman Denzin and Brian Roberts, making use of ample historical evidence to tie the three characters to William Shakespeare, the man. Again, our approach brings us to interdisciplinary crossroads. No biographical approach can hope for clarity without the aid of the social sciences, the grounds for my social analysis being enforced by the theories of sociologist Amitai Etzioni.

SECTION I: *Understanding Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras* is meant to serve both as a general introduction to William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* for scholars from different fields such as social sciences, historical studies, linguistics, film studies and others, who are undergoing interdisciplinary research related to the topic of the present thesis and are unfamiliar with the Bard of Avon's tragedy, as well as a comprehensive analysis of the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras from the same tragedy, following their traits, their contribution to the plot, the dynamics of their relationship within the play, and the different ways they choose to tackle their similar but distinctive quests for retribution.

Chapter 1: *An Introduction to Hamlet* offers general details concerning *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, William Shakespeare's acclaimed play and master work, and the most well-known tragedy written in English. An in-depth analysis of the plot of the play is provided, as well as a description of the characters, both major and minor. The settings are also described, and a brief scrutiny of the themes in the play is provided, as well as details concerning the climax and denouement, the two types of conflicts, internal and external, with examples, and an analysis of the peculiar partnership between verse and prose found in *Hamlet*, looking into specific instances of iambic pentameter and prose usage. The abundance of figures of speech is not overlooked, examples of each being provided and explained.

The introduction is meant to offer a solid foundation for later references to the play and the interactions of the characters within, as well as to point out that, while being a tragedy and revenge play, *Hamlet* is not a typical one, and its particularities are what make the study of the three forms of vengeance represented by Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras a truly

fascinating endeavour.

Chapter 2: *Sins of the Sons* explores the omnipresent concept of retribution in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, at first offering the reader an extensive analysis of the character of the protagonist, then one of Laertes, son of Polonius, and, finally, one of Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, the descendant of the defunct King Fortinbras. The three are also analysed as pairs and as a whole.

The three major bloodlines in *Hamlet* are presented and discussed, offering insight into the families of King Fortinbras, of the Lord-Chamberlain, Polonius, and of King Hamlet, and into the relationships of the three sons with their fathers. An initial common point is found in the three sons of the aforementioned fathers, young men who feel driven to avenge the killing of their progenitors, fallen victims to imposing and powerful figures. The way each of them tackles his filial mission varies greatly, the analysis providing valuable information regarding the types of moral fibre possessed by the three sons and how their moralities evolve within the play. As the Shakespearean masterpiece, *Hamlet*, is chiefly a story of retribution, what is mainly followed is the manner in which Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras cope with the burdens and the implications of their filial duty to provide it. One cannot help but view their plight as a depiction of the biblical theme of the *Sins of the Father*, the present chapter deriving its name from it, as well as attempting to decipher the exact nature of their sins, with a focus on wrath, and implicitly on its extension, murder, the last logical step in their quest for retribution.

Laertes and Fortinbras are no less analysed than Hamlet, as the central theme of retribution within the play finds an essential support in the two, whose function is to advance the plot and to help with unravelling and augmenting the personality of the protagonist. The role of foil that Laertes and Fortinbras occupy in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is evidenced in the present chapter by instances where the two find themselves in positions similar to that of Hamlet, all three being young men of noble lineage who struggle to avenge their fathers' deaths. The way they come to terms with their predicament and how they go about the call is carefully followed, as it is what gives the trio their uniting yet different characteristics. Firstly, Laertes and Fortinbras, who take arms hastily and resolutely when hearing of their fathers' deaths, are shown to contrast Hamlet, who has a more dawdling approach, choosing to bide his time rather than instantly avenge his father. Laertes' reckless behaviour is described, and so is Fortinbras' skilful approach, as he seizes the ideal moment to reclaim the territories that once belonged to Norway.

The analysis continues to point out that the three are strongly contrasting individuals with distinctive life philosophies, inextricably bound by a number of occurrences. Their inner struggle is revealed to be of different intensities, and so is their ability to master it, not unlike the case of several people coping with the pain of suffering from different stages of the same illness.

Finally, Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras are shown not be kindred spirits in only negative feelings, as a strong sense of respect is pointed out in each of them, an admiration crucial to understanding their avenging drive as fuelled by the fact that their progenitors were most likely the very pillars of their values, and denying them vengeance would mean denying their own lives identity.

SECTION II: *The Roots of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras* explores possible origins of the three avenging sons, from events and people from William Shakespeare's life to verses and themes found in many of his 154 sonnets, attempting to trace their birth in the Bard of Avon's mind long before he sat down to write *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare's family, his childhood years, his mysterious youth and adventurous life in London are all scrutinized in the first part of this section, each period providing a multitude of hypotheses concerning sources of inspiration for the characters Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras. The scrutiny logically ends just before his tragedy's First Quarto publication date, in 1603.

The second part of the section deals with finding possible traces of the three characters, such as traits or a foreshadowing of their actions. A multitude of recurring themes are selected as being worthy candidates for serving as building blocks for the three characters.

Chapter 3: *The Real-Life Roots of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras* seeks to reveal how the primordial soup of creation in the Bard's mind may have been enriched with ingredients consisting of events associated with his life, the Bard robbing them of their nutrients and occasionally mashing them together into a dish so wondrous he who eats it would call it otherworldly, if he had not even the slightest idea where it came from.

When bringing William Shakespeare's Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras into discussion, one may feel inclined to ask: what is in the names of the three avenging sons? The short answer is Shakespeare. As for the long one, the reader will find part of it in the present chapter, which attempts to scrutinize particularities of Shakespeare's life and decipher in them possible origins of the three characters.

The chapter covers different stages of Shakespeare's life, after first analysing his family's background: his early years, his mysterious youth, his life as a newly-married young man, and his years in London. The later stages are left out, since his life after 1603 holds unsubstantial significance in regards to the origins of the three characters. From these stages of the Bard's existence, relevant elements such as his school curriculum, his family's financial situation, the interruption of his studies, his "missing years", his marriage with Anne Hathaway and his relocation to London are highlighted as influences to the creation, temperaments and life philosophies of the three avenging sons, followed by substantial proof, his "missing years" alone relying exclusively on circumstantial or flimsy evidence, but inserted for continuity. Major events in London are also scrutinized, such as the plague outbreak from 1592 and Devereaux' rebellion against Queen Elizabeth from 1601, to name a few. Finally, several "corporeal muses" are selected from the long line of Shakespeare's circle of friends, collaborators, alleged lovers and acquaintances, namely the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothsesely, acclaimed actor Richard Burbage, playwright Christopher Marlowe and James I, King of England and Scotland.

Chapter 4: *Roots of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras in the Sonnets* heeds the great English Romantic poet William Wordsworth's words to seek the key to the Bard's heart in the sonnets, trying to unlock the origins of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras with that very same key. Through careful study, we have found numerous verses in the sonnets to possess an emotional charge similar to those of the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, or to render situations similar to the ones the three encounter, which invariably lead to the development of their characters and further the main theme of the play, that of retribution.

The chapter scrutinizes a selection of twenty sonnets, containing a multitude of possible roots in their corpus. The chosen sonnets are numbers 18, 25, 29, 30, 33, 34, 35, 39, 43, 50, 60, 64, 66, 67, 69, 73, 74, 80, 129 and 144.

SECTION III: *The Avenging Sons on Screen* uses film as a means of analysing the identities and relationship of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, taking advantage of the plethora of available screen adaptations of the play. The section contains academic film reviews of screen adaptations both with and without Fortinbras, drawing parallels between them and the original play, in an effort to understand how the Bard of Avon's legacy is shaped by popular culture and to appreciate if leaving out Fortinbras diminishes the artistic and moral value of William Shakespeare's tragedy.

The justification for using films in lieu of stage performances is that cinematic adaptations

are not only more easily available, but also offer the scholar the opportunity to base his analysis on the original material, rather than accounts of it. Different enactments of the same stage production may present differences, but an official cinematic release remains unchanged.

Chapter 5: *Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras on Screen* sets to explore portrayals of the relationship between Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras in screen adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

In an effort to disseminate encompassing renditions with cinematic perspectives as varied as possible, the films chosen are Grigori Kozintsev's *Gamlet* (1964), Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), and Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). The chapter is divided in three academic film reviews, one for each film, a fair selection thanks to the fact they illustrate radically different interpretations, are set in different time periods and have distinct approaches as to how many of the original lines of the play are maintained.

Chapter 6: *Hamlet and Laertes on Screen* attempts to discover just how reliant Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras are on each other for character depth, if Hamlet and Laertes can maintain their original traits once the third is removed from the group, and how much the message conveyed by *Hamlet* changes with the exclusion of Fortinbras, who is often left out from both stage and screen adaptations.

In an attempt to solve the dilemma of how much it matters to keep a character whose dominating feature is absence, three films in which Fortinbras does not make a personal appearance have been placed under scrutiny. The selected films are Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), and Gregory Doran's *Hamlet* (2009). The films have also been selected due to the contrast in their portrayals of the Bard of Avon's famous tragedy.

Conclusions: *The Rule of Three* presents a number of conclusions on the characters of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras, understanding how their traits, origins and portrayals on screen come together to elucidate their indispensable connection with the forms taken by retribution and closure in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Regarding three men, as it is deduced the play, we can say that Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras attempt to undo the damage in their lives, and they do so in ways that offer us insight into their natures, opting for three paths towards revenge. While Hamlet, lost in his torturing ruminations, loses himself in details, Laertes plunges head-forward into removing

the blemishes on his beloved honour, but not knowing very well what he is contending against. Fortinbras, on the other hand, aspires only to fulfil his destiny as an heir to a crown. As the three men interact in the play, one can see how these differences tug at its very root. When faced with the necessity of retribution, things such as an individual's background start to matter far less than expected, and his true character is revealed. For all we know, revenge is only the catalyst for Hamlet and Laertes' fatal flaws to surface, as well as for Fortinbras to become the great king he is structurally designed to embody. One thing is for certain – while all three of them face adversity, only one truly conquers it, making him anything but negligible.

To those wondering where the three avenging sons come from, we can tell that without doubt the Bard of Avon did not write *Hamlet* overnight, and neither did he think it as swiftly, its embers being there long before the tragedy was immortalized on paper. What we now see as Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras was once part of his school curriculum, his harrowing childhood in Stratford, his first steps towards growing up and his move to London, where new wonders and trials awaited him, where the promising young boy from Stratford grew to become one of the favoured playwrights of the royal court.

The Bard of Avon's *Hamlet* can be seen to contain the majority of themes illustrated in his sonnets, particularly those in the first half, themes which were in all likelihood used to augment the complexity of the three characters. If one were to hold a diamond in the sun, one would notice that the white light trapped inside the gem is de-constructed into the full array of the rainbow's hues, breaking out in different nuances on the many surfaces of the stone. What Shakespeare left in our possession, his sonnets, can be regarded as literary gems, that, when held into the light, spread their verses outside of the borders we erected between them and his other literary works, radiating into the personalities and plights of the three avenging sons.

Our analysis of screen adaptations of *Hamlet* has revealed that film directors such as Grigori Kozintsev, Kenneth Branagh and Michael Almereyda drew their inspiration from the same tragedy by William Shakespeare, and kept the trio of Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras intact, but their portrayals proved to be considerably different from each other. The analysed cinematic renditions show the magnitude to which the Bard of Avon's three avenging sons are modified by artistic perception, painting them in the preferred colours of each generation of viewers.

Regarding the importance of Fortinbras to the plot of *Hamlet*, it is hard to appreciate it

without analysing the tragedy being enacted without the prince of Norway. Where there was still hope for normalcy in the kingdom of Denmark, here none remains, leaving the viewer to ask himself what good can come out of the chaos left by the onslaught at the royal court. That being said, directors that excluded Fortinbras, such as Laurence Olivier, Franco Zeffirelli and Gregory Doran, chose to do so in different ways, with varying implications of his absence. The consequence of his exclusion is that *Hamlet*, plot-wise, is lessened, and its moralizing message on carrying oneself with virtue and determination is dampened. While Hamlet and Laertes are observed to borrow traits from Fortinbras in these versions, neither of the two men make them shine in the darkness of the events, making these renditions considerably more grim than the original.

The Rule of Three, which dictates that employing the number three in a structure offers it balance, seems to also apply to William Shakespeare's view on retribution, taking the form of three avenging sons – Hamlet, Laertes and Fortinbras. Together, they represent its facets, its implications and its dangers. Their interdependence is far from being accidental, bearing the bloom of a flower whose roots are to be found deep within the fabric of the Bard of Avon's identity and his very first sparks of creativity. Perhaps it is for this reason that directors who have decided to do without the sole appearance of the third have lost an essential companion to Shakespeare's retribution along the way – closure.

And without it, without closure...

“The rest is silence.” (Hamlet 5, 2:356)