

Laertes, Hamlet's Foil and Fratricidal Brother

Laury Magnus

Fiery, self-assured, and impetuous, Laertes cuts a dashing figure, though one much colder and more distant than that of his soulful sister. Hapgood reminds us that Laertes' role, like Gertrude's "still awaits a performance widely regarded as one 'for the ages.'"¹ A crucial and explicit dramatic foil to Hamlet, Laertes is also a foil to other characters. Once his father is killed in 3.4, he exists *in extremis* like Ophelia, and as he aligns himself increasingly with the treacherous Claudius, he becomes more and more like the king—though his brand of villainy is the *unsmiling* variety. Laertes is absent from the play for two acts, but upon his return to the stage, Shakespeare puts him into the most extreme situations: his confrontation with the king, his extensive scheming with Claudius in Act IV, and his graveyard grappling with Hamlet, all leading up to the final treacherous duel. Still, Laertes' searing grief at Ophelia's madness and his sudden repentance in 5.2 can move audiences to pity—if not to tears.

Polonius, Ophelia, and Laertes are rhetorically sensitive and capable of the poetic turn of phrase. But Laertes is closer to his father in intrusive meddlesomeness and lack of self-reflection as well as his tendency to pontificate. While suavely manifested and limited in his advice to Ophelia in 1.3, this tendency seems curtailed merely by reason of his long absence from the stage. In the latter part of the play, Laertes is an instrument of a king skilled at using people, and he "make[s] love to [his] employment" with an intensity that sets the bar of suspense high indeed for his final duel with Hamlet in 5.2.

Act 1, scene 2, firmly establishes Laertes at court as his father's son. This is a position heightened in the Q2 text, whose stage direction reads "Counsaile: as Polonius, and his Sonne Laertes," the "only counselors specifically indicated" in these stage directions, according to Kliman (CN 176-7).² Though disagreement exists, some commentators have attributed Laertes' prominence at court to Polonius's part in the election of Claudius. In fact, Claudius's first act after disposing of the immediate threats to the state is to take up Laertes' suit. Wilson remarks that the king "positively coos over him, caressing him with his name four times in nine lines" (CN 222-30), and Kliman (Hamletworks.org, Essays) that "Of the thirty-two times Laertes's name appears in character's speeches, fourteen of them are by the king, five in the second scene"

In performance, Laertes' prominence is occasionally emphasized by a significant pause after "and now" as Claudius turns his attention away from matters of state to matters of personal favor, conspicuously bypassing Hamlet to inquire about Laertes' "suit."³ Laertes' request of the king's "leave and favour" to return to France—to what is probably "a pleasant kind of finishing school for fine manners and courtly breeding" (Travers, 1929, CN 232)—also highlights the contrast in Hamlet's request, to return to the serious philosophy of the school of Wittenberg. Laertes adroitly seals his request with the polite reminder that he has interrupted his studies to "show" his duty in the king's "coronation." Laertes' politic omission (in Q2 and F) of King Hamlet's funeral also shows his courtly finesse.⁴

In Laertes' initial lines to Ophelia in 1.3, we see another side to him, one of tender solicitude. He poetically beseeches her, "as the winds giue benefit/And {conuay, in} <Conuoy is> assistant doe not sleepe/But let me heere from you" (TLN 463-5); he is naturally concerned about his sister as he sets off for France. Yet, like Claudius, Laertes knows what he is about. Whatever sweetness may be audible in these opening lines, he addresses Ophelia as "sister" (an interesting contrast with Claudius's use of Laertes' name) and uses the more formal "you," so it

may not come entirely as a surprise that after his sweet first four lines, he abruptly shifts to a demeaning reference to “Hamlet and the trifling of his favour. . . .” From the nineteenth century on, critics frequently comment on Laertes’ condescension and hypocrisy. Trench (1913) singles out Laertes’ reference to “Hamlet” (rather than “Lord Hamlet”) and stresses that Polonius and Ophelia by contrast “will never fail to give ‘Lord Hamlet’ his proper title” (CN 467).

Critics see Laertes’ belittling assessment of Hamlet’s love for Ophelia as an automatic assumption, and his further judgments that Hamlet’s attentions are a “toy in blood,” sweet, not lasting,” “the perfume and suppliance of a moment” scarcely seem to be based on direct observation of Hamlet’s behavior.⁵ Laertes’ self-assured pronouncements establish his inability to see his sister in any terms other than as a family member whose honor is at stake in the eyes of the court and society. Such a failure may be more immediately visible to contemporary audiences, who will be sensitive to his pervasive understanding of Ophelia as first and foremost a sexual object, the same construction that Polonius, though more crudely, puts on her. The flower metaphors are consistent with the ready tongue and worldly-wise manner of the courtier. Thus Laertes imputes to Hamlet the kind of motives that likely give rise to his own choice of continuing his “studies” in Paris and to his father’s stratagems in sending Reynaldo to Paris to check up on Laertes himself; his rhetoric and long-windedness are like the old man’s, with the high-blown diction of “nature crescent” “besmirch,” “unvalued,” “carve for himself,” “circumscribed,” etc. , with liberally sprinkled-in Polonian hendiadys such as “thewes and {bulkes,} <Bulke:,” “mind and soul,” “sanctity and health,” “voyce and yeelding,” “soyle or cautal,” “act and place,” etc.

The severe gender divisions within the family also tell us a great deal about Laertes: he equates his sister’s “honor” exclusively with her chastity and seems to value his “dear sister” largely as the gatekeeper of her own “chaste treasure,” commodifying it and her (as his father, with his extensive puns on “tenders,” is about to do). To this discourse he adds an interminable list of other proverbial formulations about chary maids unmasking their beauty to the moon (TLN 500), about how “virtue itself escapes not calumnious strokes” (TLN 501) and about “contagious blastments” being ‘most imminent’ in “the morne and liquid dewe of youth” (TLN 504-5), etc. Rosenberg stresses the irony that Laertes’ patronizing, crude, and small-minded advice to his sister plays a crucial role in the tragic outcomes of the secondary plot line.⁶

After Ophelia turns the tables on her lecturer, good-naturedly rebuking him, Laertes is afforded the relief of his father’s “second blessing” when the old man enters. Polonius professes surprise and displeasure that Laertes is “yet here,” but takes his good time delivering his “few precepts,” this self-contradiction creating a dramatic context that casts doubt upon the wisdom he begins to impart. The ambiguous deictic in “There [F] my blessings” suggests an embrace or gesture of fatherly affection, which Theobald (1733) argues might have produced comic results in early practice (see CN 522).⁷ However, the gesture can contribute both to a sense of Polonius’s complexity of character and to a sense of the deep affection both brother and sister feel for him. In contemporary performance, they often jestingly mimic or mouth some of Polonius’s precepts behind his back, as if participating in an old family ritual. The moment also provides a margin of breathing space for their closeness to be re-established, since both brother and sister are to be the captive audience of their father’s “advice to a young man” before Laertes exits.

A few early commentators praise Polonius’s excellent maxims as good advice for his children, but some argue that his ill-digested precepts have little to do with honor and excellence of character and much to do with “show” and with caution—related to the warnings

Laertes has just given Ophelia about fearing Hamlet and the compromising situations he may lead her into.⁸ Whether or not Laertes and Ophelia indulge in mute mockery, they surely listen without interrupting. But Laertes cannot resist a last word of warning to her about Hamlet. Marshall (1875) comments, “As he is going he reverts with astounding insensibility to his former speech” and then exits (CN 551, p. 33).

By “indirections” we find out more about Laertes after he has departed. The scene in which Polonius summons Reynaldo to spy on his son in Paris makes short work of the sage advice he has so ponderously imparted to his son. Reynaldo is not averse to the chore of slandering his friend abroad by way of baiting the “carp of truth” about Laertes and demurs only when Polonius insists on adding the charge of “drabbing” to the young man’s imputed foibles. Polonius denies Reynaldo’s charge that this smear would dishonor his son and instead insists that wanton behavior is merely a kind of youthful slip, something to be expected. The double standard and the divide between word and deed have been modeled for Laertes by his father, and these may add doubts about Laertes’ own ethical standards.

We do not hear from Laertes himself again until two full acts later: Marvin Rosenberg illustrates the extreme difficulty for the actor of managing this weighty absence from the stage by quoting Skinner’s discussion of its challenges: “The long, stupefying wait in the bad air of the dressing room—over an hour and a half—robbed me of every particle of spirit. I employed violent calisthenics before the scene of fury” (Qtd. in Rosenberg 256).

That scene bursts quickly, though not without warning, right after the king, in trying to reckon with Ophelia’s madness, mentions to the queen their “hugger mugger funeral” for Polonius. The effect of the king’s mysterious allusion is to put audiences in the same ignorant place as the (presumably) absent Laertes, who seems nowhere in evidence and must surely be unaware of Ophelia’s pitiful state.⁹ Equally suddenly, the king informs Gertrude that Ophelia’s “brother is in secret come from Fraunce” (TLN 2825). Thompson & Taylor explain, “The suggestion (absent from Q1) is that the King’s spies have discovered this, though they have presumably not anticipated Laertes’ next actions, as described at 99-108 [TLN 2838-48].”

We have barely heard of Laertes’ rabble when he storms into the throne room, saying to one of his followers, “I thanke you, keepe the doore,” and then demanding, “ô thou {vile} <vilde> King, Giue me my father” (TLN 2857-8). As J. Anthony Burton points out,¹⁰ Laertes’ concern would have been recognized as parallel to that of Hamlet. Claudius’ open coup of appropriating Hamlet’s inheritance by marrying Gertrude during the widow’s quarantine suggests a similar motive for his unsuccessful ‘hugger-mugger’ attempt to conceal the fact of Polonius’ death and thus to defeat (or postpone indefinitely) Laertes’ ability to inherit.

Laertes’ loud followers might have originated from the earlier description in 1.1 of the “lawless resolute” associated with Fortinbras. “Jenkins (ed. 1982) takes a negative view of Fortinbras [in 1.1 and] thinks that Sh. must have changed his mind by 4.4, where we see a disciplined army, and fulfilled ‘an original idea of introducing a revenging son with an unruly mob of followers by transferring these to Laertes’” (Kliman, CN 2854 on Jenkins). Whatever the genesis of the sea change that Laertes undergoes when he comes back to Denmark with his forces, it is clear that this is an extraordinarily different young man from the person who had set forth. Commentators also note the fact that Laertes’ “rabble” are firmly under his control and obey his command to stay outside the throne room.

The queen’s vigorous challenges to the assault of Laertes’ followers upon the throne seem to affect Laertes’ subsequent actions in this scene: she urges Laertes to proceed “calmly.” Kliman (2008) points out that Gertrude instinctively protects the king¹¹ when Laertes asks

“How came he dead?” She argues that instead of saying “But not by him” [TLN 2875], “Gertrude could quickly have said . . . ‘Hamlet killed your father by accident.’ But she doesn’t” (CN2875), and this is what gives Claudius time to think about how to disarm this hothead of an adversary. By contrast, Laertes, never one to think things through, deeply feels the insult to his father’s memory (still unaware of his sister’s state) and will do everything it takes to “set it right.” His passion is undeniable, but his reckless anger in this scene is what is palpable and becomes increasingly so with his furious demands and desperate asseverations. As one early commentator puts it,

Laertes is ushered in with a strange insinuation importing no less than a proposition to chuse him King . . . Laertes’ attack upon, and language to a monarch, without knowing a syllable of the matter he contends about, makes him . . . equally the foe of justice, reason, and decorum; indeed the author seems to have been sensible of this, making the king say ‘Will you, in revenge of your dear father’s death Destroy both friends and foes?’” (Gentleman, 1770, CN 2891)

Though without the king’s evil nature and murderous past, and indeed with at least a semblance of right on his side, Laertes shows audiences what can happen when passion gets complete control of thought. Hamlet, by contrast, at one of his own most passionate, reckless moments, has defied death to follow the ghost, unworried about his soul, that being “a thing immortal” [TLN 656]. Ready at another moment to kill Claudius, whom he thinks is praying, he decides to defer his revenge for the right moment; chagrined by the necessity for revenge, Hamlet several times talks of “cursed spite” and of being punished by having to assume his role as heaven’s “scourge and minister” (TLN 2551). Laertes, by contrast, “dares do” anything to get emotional satisfaction: He goes beyond the pale:

To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest deuil,
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit
I dare damnation, to this poynt I stand,
That both the worlds I giue to negligence,
Let come what comes, onely I’le be reueng’d
Most throughly for my father. (TLN 2877-82).

Andrews (1993) discusses the machismo involved in this declaration and underscores its aggressive tonality in Laertes’ dialogue elsewhere: “*Stand* echoes 4.4.57 (TLN 2743+50)]; *Point* recalls 1.5.12 (821); and both words emphasize the virile assertiveness of Laertes’ refusal to be treated as a weaker vessel” (CN 2880).

Laertes does not defend himself with false information, false implications, false religion, as Claudius can confidently do because he is in the narrowest sense innocent of Polonius’s blood, yet there seem to be no limits to Laertes’ dangerous outrages in this scene. Laertes’ declaration that he will “repast” Polonius’s friends with his own blood, “like the life-rendering pelican,” drives one commentator over the edge. MacDonald (1885) asserts,

Laertes is a ranter—false everywhere. . . . he has no principle but revenge . . . [and does] not delay even to inquire into the facts of his father’s fate, but will act at once on hearsay, rushing to a blind satisfaction that cannot even be called retaliation, caring for neither right nor wrong, cursing conscience, and the will of God, and daring damnation. . . . To make up one’s mind at once, and act without ground, is weakness, not strength: this Laertes does—and is therefore just the man to be the villainous, not the

innocent, tool of villainy. . . Laertes rushes into the dark, dagger in hand . . . so he kill, he cares not whom. . . of Laertes we must note also that it is not all for love of his father that he is ready to cast allegiance to hell, and kill the king: he has the voice of the people to succeed him. (CN 2897)

Coleridge's commentary (1819) stresses not Laertes' baseness but the fact that Ophelia's re-entry here draws attention away from her brother, allowing Shakespeare "as much as possible to spare the character of Laertes, to break the extreme turpitude of his consent to become an Agent and Accomplice of the King's treachery" (CN 2905).

The stage directions in "All three early texts" strongly imply how great a shock her entry must be, for they "agree in not having Laertes speak until after Ophelia has come in . . . making it clear that on first sight he completely fails to recognize her . . ." (Hibbard, 1987, CN 2904).¹² Indeed, he cannot seem to take her in and cries out his wish for his vision itself to be struck: "O heate, dry vp my braines, teares seauen times salt, Burne out the sence and vertue of mine eye" (TLN 2907-08).

For the time being, Laertes can understand the cause of Ophelia's madness only as a reaction to their father's death, of her "wits" being as "mortal" as Polonius's life. Along the same lines, he adds a philosophical observation, though his next lines in the Folio (but not in either Quarto) give commentators pause:

Nature is fine in Loue, and where 'tis fine,
It sends some precious instance of it selfe
After the thing it loues. (TLN 2914-16)

Caldecott (1819) quarrels with "Dr. Johnson" for finding these lines "obscure and affected" (CN 2914-6), but a good many others, too, are of that opinion, including Fiebig (1857), Collier (1858), and Maclachlan (ed. 1888), the latter of whom judges harshly: "Poverty of thought, and poverty and obscurity of expression in these lines, and the tastelessness of such an addition here, make me place them within brackets as being post-Shakespearean." Edwards (1985) advises, "Th[e] conceit, too absurd even for Laertes, is not in Q2, and is found only in F. Is it possible that for once the Q2 compositor noted a deletion mark overlooked by the playhouse scribe?" Halliwell (1865) is on the fence, saying that these lines "might have been omitted in the folio without great loss, for they are obscure and affected; but, I think, they require no emendation." Several others take note of the lines' obscurity, including Clark and Wright (1872), White (1883), and Wilson (1934), who puts the lines in character as "A high-flown sentimental way of saying that Oph.'s sanity has followed Pol. to the grave." Spencer (1980) does as well: "Laertes's language is typically strained."

Laertes' grief and sense of horror, while protracted over the rest of the scene of his sister's madness, turns immediately to what Andrews calls his insistence on "more than compensatory damages . . ." Laertes promises to "pile enough 'Weight' of revenge on 'our Scale' (his family's) to tip the balance beam in his favour. It will not be enough to get 'even.'" Thompson & Taylor note "the Senecan view that revenge has to outdo the original crime." Laertes takes the very sight of his sister as his "cue and motive": "Hadst thou thy wits, and did'st perswade {revenge} <Re-| uenge,>/ It could not mooue thus" (TLN 2921-22).

Laertes can but try to make sense of Ophelia's songs and for once listens attentively to find the sense in what Ophelia is saying. Unfortunately, as we have seen in 1.3, he has no habit of attentiveness to her. He finds only "A document in madness, /thoughts and {remembrance} <remem-| brance>fitted" (TLN 2930-1), which he later deems merely "favour and prettiness" (TLN 2940).

Nevertheless, his fury makes Laertes a perfect gull for Claudius, who promises to “commune” with Laertes in his grief, offers a full investigation, and threatens “let/ The great axe fall” (TLN 2970), an impartial retribution against whomever Laertes finds to be the guilty party; Spencer (1980) connects Claudius’s threat of “the great axe” to his secret attempt on Hamlet’s life (CN 2970), an echo that triggers audiences’ memories while leaving Laertes in ignorance of Claudius’s prior treachery. In the interval between this scene and 3.7, audiences hear about Hamlet’s impending return to Denmark and the letters he has sent the king; they are prepared for what will doubtless come as a great shock to the king in his private discourse with Laertes, dialogue which opens the new scene already in progress (3.7).

Laertes’ impetuous demands on the king in 3.6 have set Claudius dancing fast to explain away appearances. When Claudius tells Laertes that Hamlet has made an attempt on his life, it should be obvious that he is feeding the young man disinformation, for the king does not know of Hamlet’s intentions during the prayer scene—though he knows Hamlet is on to him. Whatever he has told Laertes about this plot of Hamlet’s, Laertes has listened with a “knowing ear” (TLN 3009). It is also likely the king has fed Laertes the narrow truth as promised earlier, that he himself is “guiltless” in Polonius’s death. Claudius’s political objective is clearly to redirect Laertes’ rage against Hamlet (as with Fortinbras, Claudius had earlier waved his red cape toward Poland), and audiences are primed to see Laertes being manipulated by his power to put his enemies in their place. Though Claudius concedes to Laertes that he has let Hamlet off for his “special reasons,” he has no intention, he explains, of letting his “beard be shook” with impunity: he expects to hear of Hamlet’s death from England, and he hints twice at this expected news when, all at once, Hamlet’s cryptic challenge, that he is “set naked” on Claudius’s “kingdom” and will be coming “naked” and “alone” [TLN 3062-3] to see him, is delivered by letter into their presence.

Claudius, trying to make out Hamlet’s challenge, turns to Laertes and asks, “Can you advise me?” (TLN 3063). MacDonald (1885) comments, “Fine flattery—preparing the way for the instigation he is about to commence” (CN 3063) and also subtly asking Laertes to take his father’s place. This, too, adds to our sense of Laertes’ manipulability.

With news of Hamlet’s return, Laertes’ appetite has been whetted once more for an immediate personal confrontation, whose prospect, he tells the king, “warms the very sickness in my heart”—an eloquent, if not fully conscious revelation on Laertes’ part. The king immediately “works” Laertes to be “ruled” by him as he explains his plans for “working” the newly-returned Hamlet:

I will worke him
To an exploit, now ripe in my devise
Vnder the which he shall not choose but fall:
And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe
But even his mother shall uncharge the practice
And call it accident. (TLN 3073-3078)

Laertes’ expression of eagerness to be part of Claudius’s plan apes the king’s language of “device.” Earlier commentators have been divided as to whether it is Claudius who is manipulating Laertes or whether the young man’s eagerness for revenge leads to the abject treachery of their joint revenge plot. Hudson (1872) sees the impetus coming largely from Laertes, and fulminates against the young man:

In regard to the death of his father, he [Laertes] snatches eagerly at the conclusion shaped for him by the King . . . because it offers a speedy chance of discharging his revenge; and he is reckless alike of means and of consequences, in fact cares nothing for others or even for himself, here or hereafter, so he may quickly ease his breast of the mad rapture with which it is panting. He has a burning resentment of personal wrongs, real or supposed, but no proper sense of justice; indeed, he can nowise enter into any question of so grave a nature as that: hence, in the exigency that overtakes him, 'wild sword-law' becomes at once his religion. (CN 3078+1)

From the opposite point of view, Marshall (1875) saw the king as planting this diabolical scheme in a young man's mind: "In his [Claudius's] fertile brain and treacherous heart a scheme of cruel and underhanded vengeance is being planned; his only doubt is whether this generous, and seemingly noble-minded youth will consent to be his instrument in carrying it out" (CN 3073-78). Laurence Olivier's cuts and transpositions to exonerate Laertes make Michael Maloney just such a youth.

That Laertes and Claudius are well-matched in perfidy seems to be the conclusion most critics draw from the rest of the dialogue, especially when it turns to poison—one of Claudius's obsessions. Claudius is still not sure of his man and is at his Machiavellian worst here. (J. Anthony Burton even argues that Claudius intends to get rid of Laertes as well.)¹³ Twice Claudius uses the idea of "poisoned by envy" to refer to Hamlet's jealousy of Laertes' fencing reputation, as occasioned by the admiring report of the famous Norman fencer "Lamord."¹⁴ Indeed, Claudius poisons the eager listening ear of Laertes in describing this fencer's report of Laertes' skills, a report which "Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy" (TLN 3100) that Hamlet supposedly suggested Laertes' return to Denmark to play a match with him.¹⁵

The message from Hamlet when it arrives and interrupts their scheming dialogue reminds us of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's complicity in the king's plans for Hamlet; here Shakespeare takes pains to impress upon us the extent to which Laertes is ripe for becoming Claudius's deadly instrument. But before telling Laertes what he intends to make out of Hamlet's "envy," the king turns the screw a notch: he suggests that Laertes' love for his father is all talk, asking Laertes what he'd undertake to show this love "indeede" (TLN 3114). Laertes boasts that he would "cut [Hamlet's] throat i' th'church" (TLN 3115). Like his diabolical interlocutor, Laertes finds satisfaction in the fact that Hamlet is, even by the king's report, "remiss, Most generous and free from all contriving" and thus "Will not peruse the foils," so that at the worst a little "shuffling"¹⁶ will allow Laertes in a mere "pass of practice" to "requite" Hamlet for his father. Laertes immediately and hideously improves upon Claudius's plan in TLN 3131: "And for <that> purpose, Ile annoynt my sword" (etc.).¹⁷

Given a perception in early criticism that Laertes' advice to his sister in 1.3 is sound and proper, some commentators, like Ritson (1783) are shocked by the "villainous assassin-like treachery" on the part of "a character we are, in some preceding parts of the play, led to respect and admire" (CN 3131). Davies (1784) sees a departure from Shakespeare's greatness as "a faithful . . . delineator of character" and tries to defend against the general censure of the age that "The fourth act of *Hamlet*. . . is much inferior to the three preceding acts" (CN 3131).

Spencer (1980) in the twentieth-century points in this regard to a much more innocent Laertes in the alternate poisoning scheme of Q1, which attributes the idea to the king rather than Laertes. He also reminds us that Laertes, even while on the point of his own death, does

not confess “that the envenoming of the sword was his own idea” (CN 3131).

But most note how far Laertes falls in perfidy. When Laertes mentions the poison he has already purchased, Miles (1870) exclaims that “The King might have spared himself the pains of feeling his way so nicely how far in villainy he could venture without shocking his man. They are both of a mind, although the master villain is the King” (CN 3127-39). Marshall (1875) argues that

Laertes . . . [will] stoop to any treachery; for to the temper’s comparatively simple plan of using an ‘unbated’ foil, the tempted adds the complex villainy of anointing its point with a poison so deadly the slightest scratch from it would be fatal. . . . (CN 3142-45, pp. 85-86).

He further stresses that Shakespeare’s elaborate expansion of the scene’s “bare skeleton in the Quarto 1603” emphasizes Laertes’ pre-meditated readiness for foul play.

Yet finding such an “apt”¹⁸ pupil is not enough for Claudius, nor is having a sword both unbated and envenomed. Claudius’s further directs Laertes’ sword-play and instructs Laertes to make his “bouts more violent” so that the combatants’ motions make them “hot and dry.” Claudius, Miles (1870, 69-70) argues,

adds to the mix the poisoned “chalice” he has prepared for a special toast “whereon but sipping” will be mortal, just in case Hamlet evades the mere touch of Laertes’ “poisoned stuck.” Thus thickens the plot: in the foreground, the two conspirators, vindictive, eager, aggressive; in the distance, with Horatio, the great defensive avenger, moving ghostlike to his doom and theirs!” (CN 3127-39)

Thus, the schemers’ machinations have again been re-doubled when the queen comes in with her fateful announcement of Ophelia’s death, interrupting them and recapitulating almost entirely the situation of 3.5, when their discourse had been interrupted by Ophelia’s entry. Yet, once again, Shakespeare does not leave Laertes completely at a nadir at the end of this scene; he gives Gertrude her sad elegy, delivering

news of Ophelia’s death—news which seems to keep Laertes from reflecting on the baseness of the crime which he has just promised to execute; fanning, at the same time, his just wrath against the man whom he supposes to be the murderer of his father, and the indirect cause of his sister’s death. (Marshall, 1875, CN 2951)

So affected is Laertes that he seems to have difficulty taking in what the queen is saying, and asks “Alas, then she is drown’d?” In his simile, “Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, and therefore I forbid my teares” (TN 3178-9), Laertes shows his exhaustion. Kittredge (1935) explains that “This speech [TLN 3178-84] seemed far less artificial to Shakespeare’s contemporaries than it does to us, for such punning expressions had come to be natural in Elizabethan style and were by no means inconsistent with deep feeling.”¹⁹ Less patiently, Sisson (1956) declares that Laertes’s subsequent lines (“It is our tricke, nature her custome holds, Let shame say what it will, when these are gone, The woman will be out” [TLN 3180-83]) are “in character for Laertes, who like his father is given to pursuing a conceit to the last tasteless ditch, as here. It is an obvious sequel to ‘Too much of water’, and ‘my teares’” (CN 3180-82).

Laertes has the graveyard scene, one last scene of anger and confrontation before he can put into execution the plotters’ plan for his revenge; frenzied once again in his scene, he provokes disagreement about his character. We first see him in yet another confrontation with

the “churlish priest” who has denied Ophelia the mourning rite of requiem. As with Claudius, his challenge is terse and twice repeated: “What ceremony else?” (TLN 3412; 3414). Just as he stormed at Claudius over the lack of ceremony for his father (“No {trophe sword} <Trophee, Sword>, nor hatchment ore his bones, No noble {right} <rite>, nor formall ostentation,” TLN 2965), the lack of ceremony provokes his dangerous hostility toward the Priest. The vision of Gertrude strewing flowers on the grave of Laertes’ “rose of May” proves too much for him, and he gives way to grief with a prayer for her in which his humanity finally breaks through in all its sorrow: “Lay her in the earth, And from her faire and vnpolluted flesh/ May violets spring” (TLN 3429-31).

Rosenberg sheds light on this null moment for Laertes: “The Priest usually callously ignores the grieving Laertes, who has often physically seized the cleric in his rage. Laertes’ tears impart a pathetic stridency to the demands that invariably rouse audience sympathy” (p. 848).

And yet, Laertes cannot leave it at that but demands, “Hold off the earth awhile Till I have caught her once more in mine arms” (TLN 2442-3). The stage direction “Leaps in the grave” confounds the critics and theatre historians alike. Dessen and Thomson discuss what this means in terms of early modern performance. F1 and Q1 “have [Laertes] leap into the fictional grave, actually [a] trapdoor Only Q1 CLN 2048-9 (TLN 3446-50) has Hamlet leap.”

And this great leap of Laertes into Ophelia’s grave? Ophelia’s death seems to have brought out the most excessive and expressive in both antagonists. We who have watched the king wind Laertes up might understand Laertes’ reaction to seeing Hamlet at the graveside--“The devil take thy soul”--and his attempt to strangle Hamlet. Critics are once again divided about this action. Farren (1827) takes Laertes’ side: “When these words, the desponding effusions of a brother’s love, reach the ear of Hamlet, unconscious of the solemnity of the scene, wholly forgetful of his former unkindness [to Ophelia], insensible that he had slain the father of Laertes, and that the death of Ophelia was the result of disappointed love and filial sorrow. . . . bellows from his covert. . . .” (CN 3447, pp. 377-8). In the early 20th century, Stewart (1914) is of the same opinion, going further to prove Hamlet a provocateur: “Laertes is very naturally overcome with grief as they prepare to throw the dirt upon his sister, and he expresses this grief feelingly. Immediately Hamlet leaps from his hiding place, jumps into the grave and accuses Laertes of doing all this simply to ‘outface’ him. Whereas it is made plain that Laertes could not have known that Hamlet was anywhere about!” (CN 3447).

Others have taken Hamlet’s side against Laertes. Miles (1870) asserted that “His [Laertes’] plunge into the open grave is unworthy of the mountebank from whom he bought the mortal unction; his invocation enough to madden any honest onlooker. All that palpable rant, all that sham despair, all that base mortal thunder, in the holy grave of the unpolluted girl!”

Marshall (1875) also takes Hamlet’s side against Laertes, insisting that we look at the physical action as our guide to right and wrong, stressing that it is Laertes who is physically out of control and thus the true provocateur: “Maddened as Hamlet is by the sight of Laertes’ grief, he still retains sufficient command of himself to remonstrate with him. Immediately on his leaping into the grave, Laertes seizes him by the throat, exclaiming—’The devil take thy soul!’ Hamlet forbears, at first, to repel violence with violence. There is dignity as well as self-command in his answer” (CN 3454, pp. 98-9).

Edwards (1984) finds right and wrong on both sides:

When Laertes leaps into the grave and expresses, too clamantly perhaps, an affection for Ophelia which he genuinely feels, Hamlet will not accept it, and chooses this moment to advance and declare himself, with a challenge to Laertes' sincerity. . . . Laertes . . . is diametrically opposed to him . . . [and] is scheming to kill him by a dreadful trick. But Shakespeare refuses to belittle him or let us despise him. And he refuses to sentimentalize his opponent or whitewash his failings. For those of us who to any extent 'believe in' Hamlet, Shakespeare makes things difficult in this scene. It is tragedy not sentimental drama that he is writing, and our division of mind about Hamlet is partly why the play is a tragedy."²⁰

Those who find Laertes' grief to extenuate his behavior are likely to be skeptical about the protestations of Hamlet's "What is the reason that you use me thus? I loved you ever (TLN 3489). Richardson (1808) takes on Hamlet skeptics here:

The whole behaviour at the funeral, shews a mind exceedingly disordered, and thrown into very violent agitation. But his affection for Ophelia appears sincere; and his regard for Laertes genuine. On recovery from his transport, to which, however, Laertes provoked him, how pathetick is [his] expostulation [cites 3488-89].

Hamlet's change in tone in these lines from "passionate invective to gentle expostulation" (Marshall [1875, p. 101]) is also evident to many. Yet this expostulation will fall on deaf ears until the end of the play.

Claudius has to curb the attacker in Laertes yet one more time, urging him to recall "our last night's speech" and further urging patience for "an hour of quiet" till "This grave shall have a living monument" (TLN 3494-5). Laertes is completely set up for the duel scene, and Shakespeare turns his attention in the intervening scene to the remarkable changes his protagonist seems to undergo in his "hour of quiet" before the final scene of strife and death.

Strachey (1848) praises the supreme artistry of that final scene of 5.2: "[I]ts apparent simplicity and homeliness are the result of the most highly wrought art in every line and word" (CN 3674-3907). But staging the scene is tricky. The Q2 text of 5.2 is missing stage directions that give us clues as to how the physical fencing match is to be conducted. Wilson (1934) reminds us that "no fewer than eight directions seem to have been omitted from the Q2 text in this scene. They concern the fencing-match and what ensues therefrom, and may be set out as they appear both in F1 and Q1" CN 3499ff).

The staging of the king's final ceremonial occasion must, in any case, necessarily embody the hypocrisy of the "sporting" invitation to the duel. Hibbard (1987) comments,

If it is apposite that King Hamlet offered his own person in single combat against the Norwegian king, it is also marvelously appropriate that the keen and long drawn out duel of wits between the two 'mighty opposites', Hamlet and the King, should end in a physical duel between the Prince and the deadliest of the King's instruments.(CN 3499).²¹

As Laertes is that instrument in the plans for covert murder, the hypocritically ceremonial terms of the final show-down abet the dubious claims of brotherhood that are a repeated motif at the scene's beginning. Some see bad faith in Hamlet's apology, "I have shot my arrow o'er the house and hurt my brother" [TLN 3707],²² though not in his pronouncing himself eager to play "this brothers' wager." Commentators dating back to Johnson have found Hamlet's apology "unsuitable to the character of a good or a brave man" but Jenkins' (1982)

overall view of Hamlet is that Hamlet as Polonius's murderer is both victim and victimizer and that Hamlet and Laertes are each other's doubles; his longer note stresses that "The element of casuistry in Hamlet's speech should prepare us for the same from Laertes. And the first thing to note about his reply is that it answers Hamlet (see [3683]) point by point, dealing in order with *nature* (TNL 3697), *honour* (TLN 3699), and, although this time the actual word is not repeated, with 'exception' (TLN 3704-5)."

Yet despite what might be seen as casuistry in Hamlet's apology, this is more than "doubled" by Laertes outrageous lies. Ritson (1773) argues that though such sentiments might indeed be adopted by men of real honour," Laertes "is, notwithstanding, a treacherous and diabolical villain" (CN3697). Another of Jenkins' longer notes argues, from an entirely different perspective, that the main thrust of the scene's opening is to

force upon our notice the appalling irony of Claudius as peacemaker and of loving words which conceal a murderous intent. Yet in the gestures of the two young men who now hold the centre of the stage I think we should see, along with this ironic prelude to a treacherous revenge, a proleptic image of the revengers' exchange of forgiveness (see n. TLN 3813-6). Shakespeare's problem is to show the two revengers as at the same time mutually destructive and at one. (CN 3668)

It is hard to reconcile Jenkins' view of "a proleptic image of the revengers' exchange of forgiveness" with Laertes' promise to receive Hamlet's love and not to wrong it. Kittredge (1939) comments: "The monstrous hypocrisy of these words, spoken as they are by a young nobleman whose instinct and training are honourable, shows the blind ruthlessness of the doctrine of revenge. Rylands (ed. 1947, Notes) sees nothing at all good here about Laertes' response: "Hamlet appeals to the generosity of Laertes and Laertes responds with affected sincerity and a quibble about his honour. It is only when all is over that Laertes recovers his truth and manhood [CN 3812-15]."

The precise beginning of Laertes' movement toward that recovery is debated, but there is a strain of commentary that sees Laertes' discomfort with what he is doing even here in these most seeming-villainous lines. Examples include Davies (1784, p. 140-141), who comments, "Laertes [is] determined to act treacherously, and therefore seems puzzled to return a proper answer to Hamlet's fair address and noble apology"; Marshall (1875) who excoriates Laertes²³ but nevertheless argues that "Laertes had in his rage consented to this treachery, but. . . in his inmost mind he never had realised its execution . . . [or] how base a part he was about to play" (CN 3675-6, p. 106); and Wilson (ed. 1934), who concludes, "Ham.'s frank statement and affectionate appeal, and his own treacherous reply make him uncomfortable, as is clear from l. 294 [TLN 3769]."

Laertes does seem to be off-kilter, and to Hamlet's claim that he'll be Laertes foil to make Laertes' skill at fencing "Sticke fiery off indeede" (TLN 3712), he can only assume that Hamlet is mocking him. Hamlet's question, "These foils have all a length?" may set Laertes ill-at-ease once again. Most critics agree that Osric would not have been complicit in the arrangement of the foils; also, "From surviving rapiers it seems that the length of the blades varied considerably. Hamlet's question increases the suspense by suggesting that he may, contrary to the King's expectation (4.7.135), inspect the weapons and so discover the plot."²⁴ Laertes certainly seems not himself here in allowing Hamlet a hit but then in challenging it. Concerning the "Drum, trumpets and shot" that celebrate Hamlet's "palpable hit," Elze (ed. 1882) asks, is it not true "that criminals try to deafen the reproaches of their conscience by

means of noise?" (CN 3746). Doubtless the noise affects Laertes too, though since he wields the instrument of treachery, it may have the opposite effect, especially as he watches the king deliver the cup he has prepared for Hamlet and then stands silently by as the queen drinks from the cup. Even this sight does not shake him into abandoning his plan. He is hit again and forced to "confess" the touch of Hamlet's sword. The drink has gone astray, and Laertes seems to bolster the flagging king—and probably himself—with his assurance: "My lord Ile hit him now" (TLN 3763). Wilson (1934) reminds us, "Ham. was doing very well; he had won two bouts and was showing fine form; what if Laer., in spite of holding the poisoned 'sharp' in his hand, found himself unable to wound Ham. with it before he lost the match? Another three wins for Ham., or two wins and a couple of draws, and it would be over" (CN 3763). But Laertes tells us "it is almost against my conscience" (TLN 3769) in what Rowe marked as an aside, although the remark could also be addressed to the king. Clarke & Clarke (ed. 1864-68) find this a typically Shakespearean "redeeming touch in the character of Laertes" and note Shakespeare's modulation of Laertes' villainous intent: "From the deliberate malice of becoming the agent in such a plot, to the remorseful candor which confesses it, would have been too violent and too abrupt a moral change, had not the dramatist with his usual skill, introduced this connecting point of half compunction" (CN 2769). MacDonald (ed. 1885) recognizes, "He has compunctions, but it needs failure to make them potent" (CN 2769). Frye (1980) takes it further, suggesting that until now it has all been a potential scheme, like Hamlet's own revenge: "Just as Hamlet, in spite of the powerful push to revenge given by the Ghost, could not bring himself to assassinate Claudius without warning, so Laertes, with both father and sister to avenge, feels ashamed of his poisoning scheme" (CN 2769). Hamlet may indeed be responding to Laertes' hesitation when he challenges him with "you doe but dally" (TLN 3770), for as Marshall points out,

he scruples, now it is in his hand, to use the treacherous weapon. It may be, if he had not committed himself so deeply with Claudius, in whose presence he felt an ignoble shame at the idea of seeming to flinch from his deadly purpose, Laertes' better feelings might even now have prevailed. But it is too late: he rouses himself to action, attacks his antagonist with the utmost vigour, meeting with a more obstinate and skillful defense than he had anticipated. (CN 3770-71).

The third bout results in a draw, and Laertes' confusion is growing more desperate with his failures to touch Hamlet with the poisoned sword. This, perhaps, leads to "Haue at you now" (TLN 3776), which editors agree amounts to a sudden attack that "wounds Hamlet before the next bout should officially begin" (Thompson and Taylor, Q2, n. 285, p. 455).

The notoriously problematic Folio stage direction informs us that this sets off a fight between them: "TLN 3777 <In scuffling they change Rapiers." There are all manner of explanations for how the exchange of rapiers could come about; Seymour (1805) finds it a "clumsy device" and suggests that the clumsiness could be eased with reference to the common fencing practice of gallantly picking up one's opponent's weapon after "throwing with a thrust and strong parry the foil out of his hand," that the rapiers could be exchanged accidentally after the scuffle, by reference to the "Rules of the Fencing-school" and the device of "disarming with the left hand (Friesen [*apud* Furness, ed. 1877]). J. Anthony Burton argues that

"Have at you now" is the only treacherous attack on Hamlet that begins with such words. All the other attacks on Hamlet begin with "come" So the sudden and lawless "have at you" almost surely would have acted

as a stage direction signaling Laertes' perfidy and desperation, enough to enrage Hamlet even if he hadn't noticed before the exchange of weapons that he had been scratched by an unbated point.²⁵

Like Claudius, Shakespeare makes sure that his stagecraft supports the plots he has laid out.

However the exchange of weapons is staged, Laertes receives what he knows to be his mortal wound. He answers Osric's "How ist Laertes?" (TLN 3782) with a frank recognition of what he has done—using precisely the same metaphor that Polonius had used to Ophelia about Hamlet's presumed seduction in 1.3. Like a "woodcock" to his own "springe," Laertes concludes, "I am justly killed with mine own treachery" (TLN 3785).

The king's final attempt at cover-up, the queen's accusation, and Hamlet's seeking out of "treachery" finally prompt Laertes' full admission:

It is heere Hamlet | <Hamlet>, thou art slaine,
No medcin in the world can doe thee good,
In thee there is not halfe an {houres} <houre of> life,
The treacherous instrument is in {my} <thy> hand
Vnbated and enuenom'd, the foule practise
Hath turn'd it selfe on me, loe heere I lie,
Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned--
I can no more, the King, the Kings too blame. (TLN 3793-3800)

In Hamlet's extremity, Laertes now finally comes to his aid, letting him know just what part he has played in Hamlet's imminent death, why his mother has died, and, of course, of the king's culpability in the poisoning—sufficient information to allow Hamlet to take all the necessary final actions in the play.

Of the central action, Hamlet's revenge, Laertes also applauds the justice, and with his dying breath entreats Hamlet, whose life he has destroyed, for forgiveness:

He is iustly serued, | it is a poyson temperd by himselfe,
Exchange forgiuenesse with me noble Hamlet
Mine and my fathers death come not upon thee
Nor thine on me. <Dyes.> (TLN 3811-14)

Laertes' final lines on stage are performative. Miles (1870) strongly argues that this "last prayer, even more than the last confession of Laertes, exhorts our compassion" (CN 3813-6). In the shadow of death, Laertes realizes that the time for shuffling has ended and wholeheartedly falls on the generosity of his former adversary. Andrews (ed. 1993) states that "This exchange concludes the cycle initiated by Hamlet at the beginning of the scene when he requested pardon of Laertes. It seals the bond between two would-be brothers, and it completes the transfer of Laertes' loyalty from Claudius to Hamlet" (CN 3813). Frye, though, reminds us, that this does not mean that "the machine-god of the earlier action has suddenly turned sentimental, in spite of Horatio's speech about the flights of angels—angels who can hardly have read the first four acts. It means rather that the two elements of tragedy, the heroic and ironic, have reached their final stage," that being Hamlet's "successful" completion of his father's commandment—and his own death (CN 3813-16).

In this play with a fratricide at its heart, Laertes' conversion under the aegis of death (like that of Lear's Edmund) restores some measure of hope for erring humanity in the bleak final tableau. Audiences may judge Laertes harshly in the scenes leading up to this moment, Laertes may die before he hears Hamlet's generous answering prayer, "Heaven make thee free of it," but can they ignore what Shakespeare has so brilliantly engineered as the first of

Hamlet's own dying wishes? In the profoundest sense, as Hamlet has come to realize, both for himself and for his brother Laertes, in the larger scheme of things, their death itself "is no matter," for "the readiness is all."

¹Hapgood continues: "[B]etween the time Irving played the part to Flechter's Hamlet and [the time that] Branagh played it opposite Roger Rees, a number of other future Princes have used Laertes as a stepping-stone to the title role. Of these, the largest success was scored by Michael Redgrave in Olivier's stage version. Wearing a thin mustache and a "startling" red wig, he brought a great deal of vigor and spirit to the role . . . (Time and Tide, 16 Jan. 1937). At first, it was his "boyish warmth" that stood out. Although he and Ophelia exchanged glances and giggled during most of Polonius' few precepts, at "this above all" Redgrave turned suddenly serious and touched his father's hand with a gesture of affection (*Daily Telegraph*, 6 Jan. 1937). In response to later events, Redgrave was convincingly "fiery in anger and moving in sorrow" (*Stage*, 7 Jan. 1937). By and large, however, reviewers have paid remarkably little attention to the role. Perhaps Shakespeare built a "foil" quality into his depiction of the other young-man-out-to-revenge-his-father's-death; or perhaps player-Princes have seen to it that Laertes stayed in their shade.

²See also Kliman's discussion of the name "Polonius" in "Three Notes on Polonius: Position, Residence, and Name" in the "Hamlet Criticism" section.

³Thompson and Taylor (2008) mention a performance tradition wherein Hamlet seems about to address the king before Claudius "deliberately turns away from him to Laertes" (CN 222-30).

⁴In Q1, he like Horatio, does mention King Hamlet's funeral, but in Q2 and F, his politic omission of the king's funeral, by its contrast with Hamlet's mourning, adds to the play's "extended meditation on maimed funeral rites" and "disrupted sacraments" (Groves, 2007, CN 368-9), starting with Hamlet's first soliloquy. It is a theme which will especially haunt Laertes in the final scenes of the play.

⁵In the Folio version of 1.2, Ophelia is part of the courtly procession, but she does not appear in that scene in either Quarto. Thus, it is possible for productions to show Laertes sizing up Hamlet's demeanor toward her on stage.

⁶Though she may ignore her brother, she is scarcely in a position to do so with her father, who catches wind of Laertes' warning.

⁷In the *Almeryda* film and in the Greg Doran production, Polonius hands Laertes a wad of money with his "there," which anticipates his crass language to Ophelia and echoes that of his son.

⁸Many commentators have noted that Laertes' precepts have little to do with honor and excellence of character and much to do with "show" and with "caution," the message Laertes has given to Ophelia concerning her treatment of Hamlet. Nevertheless, concerning "Farwell, my blessing season this in thee," Hibbard (1987) notes that "'season' means ripen, bring to maturity (as wood is seasoned to make it fit for use)" and that "Polonius's advice to his son, though platitudinous, is not foolish. Had Laertes given it better heed, he would not so readily have led the revolt against Claudius, or later trusted him, or, most important of all, entered so rashly into his quarrel with Hamlet, to whom he proves false indeed" (CN 546).

⁹Even though time has clearly passed since she has gone mad.

¹⁰See "An Unrecognized Theme in *Hamlet*: Lost Inheritance and Claudius's Marriage to Gertrude" in "Essays about *Hamlet*."

¹¹See Kliman's discussion on Gertrude's overall protectiveness in "Gertrude: Wife, Widow, Mother, Queen" in "Essays about *Hamlet*."

¹²Hibbard continues, "This subtle and highly dramatic effect, endorsed by Q1's 'Who's this *Ophelia*?', has been obscured for centuries by Theobald's shifting of the stage direction for Ophelia's entry to make it follow Laertes' line, instead of preceding it."

¹³See N. 15 below on "Lamord."

¹⁴Andrews (ed. 1989): "This name ["Lamord"] may be intended to suggest both le mords ((old French for the jaw bit by which a rider controls a horse)) and La Mort ((French for 'death')). Some editors follow the Folio and print

Lamound ((which would suggest le monde and describe an ideal man of the world).” J. Anthony Burton elaborately explains the idea that “bite” is both a trap in French and in English signifies a poisonous snake. Among other words of French derivation in the King’s improvised story, though, “Lamord” would be familiar to French speakers in an Elizabethan audience, who would readily infer that Claudius’s flattery merely completes his using the young man to secure a final solution for Hamlet—and a trap for Laertes himself, who rises to the bait and gets in over his head.

¹⁵ Burton further argues that the story of Lamord’s envy is made up of whole cloth. See Note 14 above.

¹⁶ A loaded word for Claudius, since in his attempt to pray in 3.4, the king reminds himself that before God, “there is no shuffling.”

¹⁷ Laertes’ purchase of poison could not be in more striking contrast to the desperate motivation of Romeo in visiting his apothecary—to kill himself after he learns of Juliet’s death.

¹⁸ The ghost’s approving “I find thee apt” to Hamlet is a reminder that King Hamlet’s ghost is a foil to Claudius in his instructions on revenge and his concern that Hamlet not “taint” his mind in the process of seeking revenge; while the ghost’s responses emphasize the problematic situation of a purgatorial figure urging revenge, they also show concern for the spiritual discipline of his son.

¹⁹ Terence Morgan, Olivier’s Laertes, is completely overcome, crouching and weeping unrestrainedly, until Claudius, Basil Sydney, puts a black-gloved hand of “consolation” on his shoulder.

²⁰ In this connection, see also J. Anthony Burton’s “Hamlet, Osric, and the Duel,” *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (July/August 1984) 5-7, 22-25.

²¹ Hibbard’s argument continues: “It is also fitting that this mortal combat, unlike that between old Hamlet and old Fortinbras, which was absolutely fair and conducted according to rules, should take the form of a ‘friendly’ bout masking the deepest treachery and defying every rule of the game.”

²² Of this metaphor GRANVILLE-BARKER (*apud* RYLANDS, ed. 1947, Notes) reminds us that “In the sad cadence of that ‘brother’ is the last echo of *Ophelia’s story*.”

²³ The first part of Marshall’s commentary note is extremely harsh: “What must be the feelings of Laertes at this moment, as he suffers himself to go through this monstrous hypocrisy? He has need of a courage such as few murderers have ever shown, if he is not to tremble as he takes, in solemn reconciliation, the hand of the man whom he is about to assassinate in the most perfidious manner.”

²⁴ Edwards (ed. 1985) declares it “quite incredible that Claudius and Laertes should have admitted anyone else into their plot—least of all the young waterfly! Whatever ‘shuffling’ is done to get the poisoned and unbated foil into Laertes’ hand is done by himself.”

²⁵ “Hamlet and Swordplay,” The Massachusetts Center for Interdisciplinary Studies: *The Semiannual Newsletter*. Autumn 2010. 15-18.

LAERTES: Selected Commentary (March 5, 2013)

Stubbs (1736, p. 19): “The Advice of Laertes to his Sister contains the soundest Reasoning, express’d in the most nervous and poetical Manner, and is full of Beauties; particularly, I can never enough admire the Modesty inculcated in these Lines: ‘The chariest Maid is prodigal enough. If She unmask her Beauty to the Moon.’” Stubbs also comments on “The Scenes of Ophelia’s Madness [which] are to me very shocking, in so noble a Piece as this. I am not against her having been represented mad; but surely, it might have been done with less Levity and more Decency. Mistakes are less tolerable from such a Genius as Shakespeare’s, and especially in the very Pieces which give us such strong Proofs of his exalted Capacity” (pp. 36-37).

Gentleman (1770): “Laertes is ushered in with a strange insinuation importing no less than a proposition to chuse him King . . . Laertes’s attack upon, and language to a monarch, without knowing a syllable of the matter he contends about, makes him . . . equally the foe of justice, reason, and decorum; indeed the author seems to have been sensible of this, making the king say ‘Will you, in revenge of your dear father’s death Destroy both friends and foes?’”

Gentleman (ed. 1773): “This advice from Laertes to his sister, is a prudent caution; the fair fruit of good sense and fraternal affection.”

Gentleman (*apud* Bell, ed. 1773): “This treacherous plot upon the life of *Hamlet*, is truly villainous on the part of his Majesty, and pitifully mean in *Laertes*, though he has lost a father; for no revenge can be just, that is not open and manlike; it is a bad feeling of the human heart, in its best shape: what must it be, in the worst?”

Theobald (1733) mentions comic possibilities in Laertes’ receipt of his father’s second blessing]: “Laertes taxes himself for staying too long; but seeing his Father approach, he is willing to stay for a second blessing, and kneels down to that end: Polonius accordingly lays his hand on his Head, and gives him a second Blessing. The Manner, in which a Comic Actor behav’d on this Occasion, was sure to raise a Laugh of Pleasure in the audience: and the oldest Quarto’s, in the pointing, are a Confirmation, that thus the Poet intended it, and thus the Stage express’d it.” On Laertes’ in 4.5: “Laertes is a good Character; but he is here in actual Rebellion. Least, therefore, this Character should seem to sanctify Rebellion, instead of putting into his Mouth a reasonable Defence of his Proceedings, such as the Right the Subject has of shaking off Oppression, the Usurpation, and the Tyranny of the King, &c. Shakespeare gives him Nothing but absurd and blasphemous Sentiments: such as tend only to inspire the Audience with Horror at the Action.

Gentleman (ed. 1774): “Though Laertes has great provocation to rouse him, yet such peremptory violent and abusive behaviour to his sovereign, breaks through the bounds of decorum and allegiance, unpardonably; and we by no means see why the rabble offer to chuse him King.”

Ritson (1783, pp. 213-4): “This, mr. Steevens says, was a piece of satire on fantastical honour. Though nature, adds he, is satisfied, yet he will ask advice of older men of the sword, whether artificial honour ought to be contented with Hamlets submission. But, in fact, the passage is as

little intended for a satire, as the honour Laertes alludes to, is artificial or fantastical. The ingenious commentator does not, surely, mean to contend that nature and honour are one and the same thing? The sentiments of Laertes, and almost his very words, would, one may venture to say, be adopted by men of real honour, in similar circumstances, in any country or in any age. He is, notwithstanding, a treacherous and diabolical villain.”

Davies (1784, p. 140): “Laertes determined to act treacherously, and therefore seems puzzled to return a proper answer to Hamlet’s fair address and noble apology. To that, I think, we must place his referring the matter in dispute to able judges of affronts. His offering to receive his antagonist’s proffered love as love, and protesting not to wrong it, is as infamous as Hamlet’s attributing his violent behaviour at Ophelia’s grave to his madness.” Davies also notes what could be considered as a departure from Shakespeare’s greatness as “a faithful . . . delineator of character” yet defends Shakespeare against the general censure of the age that “The fourth act of Hamlet. . . is much inferior to the three preceding acts” (CN3131).

Coleridge (1819, rpt. 1987, 5.2:297): “—Shakespear’s art is to introduce a most important but still subordinate character first—Milton’s Beelzebub—So Laertes—who is yet thus graciously treated from the assistance given to the election of the King’s Brother instead of Son by Polonius—.” Coleridge further notes that the king “First awakens Laertes’ Vanity by praises of the Report—then gratifies it by the report itself—and then. ‘Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy [[3100]].—[’] (ms. notes 1819 in Ayscough, ed. 1807; rpt. Coleridge, 1998, 12.4:858). Hudson (1856, CN313) reproduces Coleridge’s comments on Warburton: “Warburton having pronounced Laertes ‘a good character,’ Coleridge thereupon makes the following note: ‘Mercy on Warburton’s notion of goodness! Please to refer to the seventh scene of this Act; — ‘I will do’t; and, for this purpose, I’ll anoint my sword,’— uttered by Laertes after the King’s description of Hamlet: ‘He, being remiss, most generous, and free from all contriving, will not peruse the foils.’ Yet I acknowledge that Shakespeare evidently wishes, as much as possible, to spare the character of Laertes,— to break the extreme turpitude of this consent to become an agent and accomplice of the King’s treachery;—and to this end he re-introduces Ophelia at the close of this scene, to afford a probable stimulus of passion in her brother.’

Clarke & Clarke (ed. 1864-68): “From the deliberate malice of becoming the agent in such a plot, to the remorseful candor which confesses it, would have been too violent and too abrupt a moral change, had not the dramatist with his usual skill, introduced this connecting point of half compunction.”

Hall (1869, p. 31): “Satisfied with the assertions of the king that the guilt belongeth not to him, Laertes, in his intense desire to avenge his father’s murder, a desire rendered yet more strong by witnessing the sad state of his dear sister, falleth readily into the kingly plot, and determined to do aught and everything, for when questioned by the king ‘What would you undertake To show yourself your father’s son in deed More than in words?’ answers, ‘To cut this throat I’ the church’ and not content with this, in order that his revenge may be gratified, he will sully his knightly honor, by anointing his word with an ‘an unction’ bought of a mountebank, ‘So mortal, but dip a knife in it, Where it draws blood, no cataplasm so rare . . . can save the thing from death, That is scratch’d withal: I’ll touch my point With this contagion; that, if I gall him

slightly, It may be death.” Concerning Laertes “and the warlike Fortinbras,” they “are both representatives of action, and as such furnish a most expressive contrast to the non-activity of the Danish prince” (p. 32).

Miles (1870) comments on Laertes’ mention of the poison he has bought, “The King might have spared himself the pains of feeling his way so nicely how far in villainy he could venture without shocking his man. They are both of a mind, although the master villain is the King” (CN3127-39), and notes that Laertes “adds to the mix the poisoned ‘chalice’ he has prepared for a special toast ‘whereon but sipping’ will be mortal, just in case Hamlet evades the mere touch of Laertes’ ‘poisoned stuck.’ Thus thickens the plot: in the foreground, the two conspirators, vindictive, eager, aggressive; in the distance, with Horatio, the great defensive avenger, moving ghostlike to his doom and theirs!” (CN3127-39) Concerning the graveyard scene, “How different [Hamlet’s] high-bred, graceful lament [3435-8] from the low wailing of Laertes. This choleric stripling, whose heart was in Paris; who cowers before a ‘King of shreds and patches,’ yet bullies an irresponsible and discretionless priest; who had even more than the full fraternal indifference to his sister until she lost her reason and her life; this small Hector must now make a scene over her death body. And such a scene! . . . His plunge into the open grave is unworthy of the mountebank from whom he bought the mortal unction; his invocation enough to madden any honest onlooker. All that palpable rant, all that sham despair, all that base mortal thunder, in the holy grave of the unpolluted girl!”

Moberly (ed. 1870): “Hamlet wishes . . . to go, not as Laertes does, to Paris, the centre of frivolous gaiety (and study music and fencing there), but to Wittenberg, the university dear to the Protestant heart of England from its memories of Luther; dear also for its publication of a host of popular books, such as the tale of Faustus. From this student’s life he cannot conceive Horatio’s playing truant.” On Laertes’ taking vengeance for his father, he comments, “Laertes’ father is far indeed from being like Hamlet’s; he [Laertes] has no assurance that the king is guilty of his death: yet, the moment he hears of it, he rushes headlong from France, sweeps to his revenge with lightning speed, gathers and excites the people, and is ready to strike the king down all in a moment. This shews the man of action, which Hamlet would fain have been and of whom he expresses approval in [5.2.75 (3579)]; one who would never ‘think too precisely on the event’; one in whom the ‘hue of resolution would never be sicklied over by the pale cast of thought.’ Immeasurably superior to Laertes in every other point, in this one Hamlet stands far below him; and nothing can be more finely imagined than the contrast.”

Hudson (1872, p. 296): “In regard to the death of his father, he [Laertes] snatches eagerly at the conclusion shaped for him by the King, without pausing to consider the grounds of it, or to weigh the merits of the case, because it offers a speedy chance of discharging his revenge; and he is reckless alike of means and of consequences, in fact cares nothing for others or even for himself, here or hereafter, so he may quickly ease his breast of the mad rapture with which it is panting. He has a burning resentment of personal wrongs, real or supposed, but no proper sense of justice; indeed, he can nowise enter into any question of so grave a nature as that: hence, in the exigency that overtakes him, ‘wild sword-law’ becomes at once his religion.”

Tyler (1874, p. 13): “. . . the idol of Hamlet’s heart, the maiden whom he loved with a love greater than that of ‘forty thousand brothers . . . [is]distinguished, in comparison with others, by

a high degree of moral purity. Shakespeare's general conception of her character, in this respect, is not unsuitably expressed by the words which her brother addresses to the priest, by her grave:— [cites 3429-33].”

Marshall (1875, p. 86): “It is now the game of Claudius to check the vindictive ardour of Laertes; at the same time he feels he may go to any length in atrocity. . . . These two worthy characters having thus brought their plots to perfection, they are interrupted in their further communing by the entrance of the Queen, with the news of Ophelia's death—news which seems to keep Laertes from reflecting on the baseness of the crime which he has just promised to execute; fanning, at the same time, his just wrath against the man whom he supposes to be the murderer of his father, and the indirect cause of his sister's death. Claudius . . . really feared . . . lest this new aggravation of his suffering might not render Laertes incapable of the coolness, and patience, necessary for the success of their scheme.” Concerning Laertes' opening pledge at the beginning of 5.2, (pp. 105-106): “The answer of Laertes is a perfect marvel of hypocrisy; one can hardly comprehend how any man could speak such words to a friend whom he was about to murder: [cites 3697-3707] . . . Laertes talks seriously here of appealing to a court of honour. It was hardly worth his while to invent such a piece of wanton duplicity; and I cannot help thinking that this is either an oversight of the poet's, or that he means us to understand that Laertes had in his rage consented to this treachery, but that in his inmost mind he never had realised its execution. This speech, if intentionally untrue, shows a depth of falsehood almost incredible in one so young as Laertes; it is just what, had his better nature prevailed, we should have expected him to say to Hamlet, and I believe that we must suppose him to have forgotten, at the time he spoke it, how base a part he was about to play.”

Elze (ed. 1882): “Laertes somewhat sophistically distinguishes between a touch and a hit and only confesses to the former.”

MacDonald (ed. 1885): “Now at length re-appears Laertes, who has during the interim been ripening in Paris for villainy. He is wanted for the catastrophe, and requires but the last process of a few hours in the hell-oven of a king's instigation.” Of the graveyard scene, MacDonald asserts, “Laertes is a ranter—false everywhere. . . . he has no principle but revenge . . . [and does] not delay even to inquire into the facts of his father's fate, but will act at once on hearsay, rushing to a blind satisfaction that cannot even be called retaliation, caring for neither right nor wrong, cursing conscience, and the will of God, and daring damnation. . . . To make up one's mind at once, and act without ground, is weakness, not strength: this Laertes does—and is therefore just the man to be the villainous, not the innocent, tool of villainy. . . . Laertes rushes into the dark, dagger in hand . . . so he kill, he cares not whom. . . . of Laertes we must note also that it is not all for love of his father that he is ready to cast allegiance to hell, and kill the king: he has the voice of the people to succeed him.” Concerning “almost against my conscience,” he points out “[Laertes] has compunctions, but it needs failure to make them potent.”

Clarke & Clarke (*apud* Furness, ed. 1877): “This symptom of relenting is not only a redeeming touch in the character of Laer. (and Sh., in his large tolerance and true knowledge of human nature, is fond of giving these redeeming touches even to his worst characters), but it forms a judiciously interposed link between the young man's previous determination to treacherously take the Prince's life and his subsequent revelation of the treachery. From the deliberate malice

of becoming the agent in such a plot, to the remorseful candor which confesses it, would have been to violent and too abrupt a moral change, had not the dramatist with his usual skill, introduced this connecting point of half compunction.”

Mull (1888, p. 20-22): “On the entrance of Ophelia, Laertes is filled with anguish at the strange manner and grotesque appearance of his sister—at what he sees; and after giving vehement expression to his feelings, he is induced by her silence to address her, which he does in the tenderest language, full of emotion, ‘O rose of May!’ &c. His imploration, however, is cut short by Ophelia breaking out into pathetic threnody, no response to his appeal or recognition of himself being indicated; this again stirs him to deeply-moved, but now calm and restrained utterance, caused by what he has just heard.”

Tomlinson (1889, pp. 13-14): “It is in the absence of Laertes that Polonius is killed and Ophelia goes mad and is drowned. Laertes being informed of his father’s death, returns home for the purpose of avenging it, and then he has to bear the additional stroke of his sister’s death. So also Hamlet, by boarding the pirates’ vessel, while the cowardly courtiers allow their ship to drift away, is conveyed back to Denmark, when, as if by chance, he enters the churchyard at the very time when Ophelia’s grave is being prepared. This leads, in the most natural, but at the same time in the most unexpected manner, to the encounter between Hamlet and Laertes.

Adams (1913, pp. 39-40): “The leaping of Laertes and of Hamlet into the grave of Ophelia has always seemed to me both startling and unpleasing. Surely the dead body of the unfortunate Ophelia might be spared such an outrage. Moreover, the action seems rather inappropriate on the part of Laertes, who throughout invariably does what he thinks the world expects of him. No editor of the play, so far as I am aware, has attempted, by any explanation, to make this action less startling or less painful to the reader.”

Stewart (1914, pp. 216-7): “But note what suddenly takes place. While Hamlet and Horatio are lying hidden among the tombstones, their presence being quite unknown to the people at the grave, Laertes is very naturally overcome with grief as they prepare to throw the dirt upon his sister, and he expresses this grief feelingly. Immediately Hamlet leaps from his hiding place, jumps into the grave and accuses Laertes of doing all this simply to ‘outface’ him.- Whereas it is made plain that Laertes could not have known that Hamlet was anywhere about! Hamlet’s mood is not one of sorrow or of love for Ophelia, but purely of rage at Laertes who would thus ‘outface’ him, and of disdain for Laertes’ expressions of grief!”

Wilson (ed. 1934), concerning 5.2: “[N]o fewer than eight directions seem to have been omitted from the Q2 text in this scene. They concern the fencing-match and what ensues therefrom, and may be set out as they appear both in F1 and Q1” (CN3499ff). Concerning Laertes’ exchange with the king in 5.2, he avers, “I do not know of any comment upon these asides. I interpret: ‘Laer. I intend to finish it off now—King. I doubt whether you will be able to get past his ward at all.’ Ham. was doing very well; he had won two bouts and was showing fine form; what if Laer., in spite of holding the poisoned ‘sharp’ in his hand, found himself unable to wound Ham. with it before he lost the match? Another three wins for Ham., or two wins and a couple of draws, and it would be over.”

Kittredge (ed. 1939), argues that in Ophelia's retort, the word "lesson" is used "with a mischievous suggestion that Laertes is 'reading a lesson' like a preacher," and after her retort, she bids him take a leaf out of his own book. The effect is diverting: Laertes suddenly remembers that he is in a hurry." Concerning Laertes' entrance in 4.5, "The fact that **Laertes** has the mob under control makes him all the more terrifying and emphasizes the King's fortitude." Kittredge further argues, "Henceforth Laertes appears as the typical avenger [and] serves as a complete foil to Hamlet in this regard. He assumes that the King is somehow guilty of Polonius's death and acts accordingly, without weighing the evidence. Then, informed that Hamlet was the slayer, he joins in the King's plot without scruple and violates his own code of honour. Witness his confession in [5.2.313ff. (3793ff.).]" When Laertes talks of the poison he has bought, "This is Laertes at his worst. He forgets his own code of honour in his reckless pursuit of revenge, although he is aware that Hamlet killed Polonius by mistake for the King" and of Laertes' promise not to wrong Hamlet's love, he declares, "The monstrous hypocrisy of these words, spoken as they are by a young nobleman whose instinct and training are honourable, shows the blind ruthlessness of the doctrine of revenge and stands in marked contrast to Hamlet's caution and conscience in his own case."

Rylands (ed. 1947, Notes): "Hamlet appeals to the generosity of Laertes and Laertes responds with affected sincerity and a quibble about his honour. It is only when all is over that Laertes recovers his truth and manhood [3812-15]."

Sisson (1956), concerning Laertes' "The woman will be out" [TLN3180-83]), comments that it is "in character for Laertes, who like his father is given to pursuing a conceit to the last tasteless ditch, as here. It is an obvious sequel to 'Too much of water', and 'my tears'" (CN 3180-82).

Frye (1980) notes that the forgiveness of Hamlet and Laertes does not mean that "the machine-god of the earlier action has suddenly turned sentimental, in spite of Horatio's speech about the flights of angels—angels who can hardly have read the first four acts. It means rather that the two elements of tragedy, the heroic and ironic, have reached their final stage," i.e., Hamlet's "successful" completion of his father's commandment—and his own death.

Edwards (1984): "When Laertes leaps into the grave and expresses, too clamantly perhaps, an affection for Ophelia which he genuinely feels, Hamlet will not accept it, and chooses this moment to advance and declare himself, with a challenge to Laertes' sincerity. . . . Laertes . . . is diametrically opposed to him . . . [and] is scheming to kill him by a dreadful trick. But Shakespeare refuses to belittle him or let us despise him. And he refuses to sentimentalize his opponent or whitewash his failings. For those of us who to any extent 'believe in' Hamlet, Shakespeare makes things difficult in this scene. It is tragedy not sentimental drama that he is writing, and our division of mind about Hamlet is partly why the play is a tragedy."

Jenkins (1982): On Laertes and Fortinbras as dramatic foils, "Jenkins takes a negative view of Fortinbras [in 1.1 and] thinks that Sh. must have changed his mind by 4.4, where we see a disciplined army, and fulfilled 'an original idea of introducing a revenging son with an unruly mob of followers by transferring these to Laertes'" (Kliman [CN2854] on Jenkins). Concerning 5.2, "[T]he main thrust of the scene's opening is to force upon our notice the appalling irony of Claudius as peacemaker and of loving words which conceal a murderous intent. Yet in the

gestures of the two young men who now hold the centre of the stage I think we should see, along with this ironic prelude to a treacherous revenge, a proleptic image of the revengers' exchange of forgiveness ((see n. 3813-6)). Shakespeare's problem is to show the two revengers as at the same time mutually destructive and at one."

Spencer (1980) finds a "much more innocent Laertes in the alternate poisoning scheme of Q1, which attributes the idea to the king rather than Laertes. He also reminds us that Laertes, even while on the point of his own death, does not confess "that the envenoming of the sword was his own idea."

J. Anthony Burton (1984): Burton argues that Hamlet's rage in the graveyard scene, which is so essential for his later consent to the duel scene, is in turn caused by Laertes' rant, which shows his ignorant misunderstanding of the giants' rebellion, a moralized story that everyone knew, not only debasing the solemnity of the moment in a ludicrous public display, but confirming Laertes' general, self-satisfied cluelessness. See "Hamlet, Osric, and the Duel" in "*Hamlet Criticism*."

Hibbard (ed. 1987): "All three early texts agree in not having Laertes speak until after Ophelia has come in. Moreover, in neither F nor Q2 are his first words addressed directly to her, thus making it clear that on first sight he completely fails to recognize her. This subtle and highly dramatic effect, endorsed by Q1's 'Who's this Ophelia?', has been obscured for centuries by Theobald's shifting of the stage direction for Ophelia's entry to make it follow Laertes' line, instead of preceding it." Concerning Laertes as the king's instrument in the final combat, Hibbard comments, "If it is apposite that King Hamlet offered his own person in single combat against the Norwegian king, it is also marvellously appropriate that the keen and long drawn out duel of wits between the two 'mighty opposites', Hamlet and the King, should end in a physical duel between the Prince and the deadliest of the King's instruments" (CN 3499).

Andrews (ed. 1993): "To this pledge I commit myself, and I will not be moved. Stand echoes [4.4.57 (2743+50)]; Point recalls [1.5.12 (821)]; and both words emphasize the virile assertiveness of Laertes' refusal to be treated as a weaker vessel. Compare the erotic analogies in [4.4.40-66 (2743+33-2743+60)] and in lines [4.5.124-26, 131 (2868-70, 2877)] (where Claudius depicts kingship as invulnerable to assault by aggressive 'Will') and in line 134 (where 'Pit' suggests both Hell and the 'Sulphurous' female 'Pit' of Lr. [4.6.130 (2571)]."

Rosenberg (1993) "The Priest usually callously ignores the grieving Laertes, who has often physically seized the cleric in his rage. Laertes' tears impart a pathetic stridency to the demands that invariably rouse audience sympathy" (p. 848).

Dessen & Thomson, 1999. "Only Q1 CLN 2048-9 (3446-50) has Hamlet leap (into Ophelia's grave)."

Thompson & Taylor (ed. 2006): "Sometimes in performance Hamlet seems about to address the King, who deliberately turns away from him to Laertes; the King may appear ingratiating by his repetition of Laertes' name and flattery of his father; alternatively he may be coaxing a shy Laertes to speak up." Concerning Claudius's generosity with Laertes: "The King claims he will give Laertes what he wants before he asks for it. Spencer quotes Isaiah, 65.24: 'Whenever they call, I will answer them; while they are yet but thinking how to speak, I will hear them.'" On

Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet: "Laertes assumes, as does Polonius later in this scene (see maiden presence at [587]), that Ophelia is still a virgin; some productions and films indicate, contrary to any evidence in the text, that her relationship with Hamlet is already a sexual one — which they may perhaps deduce from the songs she sings in 4.5 (see [2769-8 and CN]). Concerning the flowers Ophelia offers: "Apart from Laertes, the particular recipients of the flowers are not specified in any of the three texts," but "based on the traditional flower symbolism" one might conclude that "pansies for thought are offered to Laertes."

J. Anthony Burton (2013): "As the audience should already know from the manner in which Claudius has deflected Laertes's rebellion, the young man has not come home from the cultural center of Europe as a sophisticated courtier, but as an uncultured patsy." Burton further argues, following sophisticated linguistic clues about embedded French words, idioms and the visual imagery they invoke, and bi-lingual phonemes frequently found in *Hamlet*, that Claudius has baited his trap not just for Hamlet, but for Laertes as well: "Lamord's name alerts the audience not only to recognize Claudius's fencing stratagem as a "bite" aimed at Hamlet, but also to recognize the flattering report of Lamord's admiration and the description of Hamlet's envious reaction, as no more than the bait in a reprisal-trap directed against Laertes. . . . Claudius repeats what Hamlet has already done to him in stating that he called his play-trap The Mousetrap See "Hamlet as a Bilingual Text: the Unrecognized Importance of French" in "*Hamlet* Criticism."