**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Fortinbras**

Of all the characters in William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Fortinbras is perhaps the strangest. He is barely seen and speaks little. Other characters often speak of him in low tones. Oddly enough, though,[Fortinbras](http://trish-m.hubpages.com/hub/Shakespeares-Hamlet-Foils-Fortinbras-Laertes) is a stabilizing force in the action of the play and he also functions as a framing device for the play itself. He makes his presence known only at the beginning, middle and end.

First and foremost, Fortinbras is a soldier from Norway. Early in the play, the reader learns there is a history of violence between Denmark and Norway. Horatio, when he sees the ghost of the old king, says:

Our valiant [old] Hamlet

(For so on this of our known world esteem’d him)

Did slay this Fortinbras, who, by a seal’d compact

Well ratified by law of heraldy,

Did forfeit (with his life) all [those] in his lands

Which he stood seiz’d of, to the conqueror[.] (1.1, lls 84-9)

Of course, Fortinbras was going to sit by after his father was killed; instead, he raises an army. Horatio guesses the Prince of Norway is going “to recover of us, by strong hand / And terms compulsatory, those foresaid lands / So by his father lost” (1.1, 102-4). Horatio is concerned with Fortinbras’s army, and this concern colors the play since it is one of the foremost concerns on the minds of the characters.

Horatio is not the only one watching Fortinbras’s movements. [Claudius](http://trish-m.hubpages.com/hub/Shakespeare-Hamlet-Claudius-careful-ruler-loving-husband-or-hateful-lying-villain) says to the courtiers of Denmark:

Young Fortinbras

Holding a weak supposal of our worth,

Or thinking by our late dear brother’s death

Our state to be disjoint and out of frame,

Co-leagued with this dream of his advantage,

He hath not fail’d to pester us with message

Importing the surrender of those lands

Lost by his father[.] (1.2, 17-24)

Two important details are revealed in this speech. First, there is the suggestion that Fortinbras knows the state of affairs in Denmark. Secondly, in a moment of hypocrisy, Claudius calls the Prince of Norway a shameless opportunist.

These estimations of Fortinbras build a connection between him and Hamlet, making him a foil for the protagonist. Both men have lost their fathers and now seek retribution. A point of difference is their family relations. Unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras has a strong relationship with the rest of his family. This is a quality Claudius uses to avoid war.

We have here writ

To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras—

Who, impotent and bedred, scarcely hears

Of this his nephew’s purpose—to suppress

His further gait herein[.] (1.2, 27-31).

Instead of fighting, Claudius sends messengers to Fortinbras’s sickly uncle and has him dissuade Fortinbras from seeking revenge. Ambassadors from Norway come and explain the situation to Claudius.

On Fortinbras, which he, in brief, obeys

Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine,

Makes vow before his uncle never more

To give th’ assay of arms against your Majesty. (2.3, 68-71)

This display is a showing of Fortinbras’s respect for family and loyalty to authority. Though a warrior and a prince, Fortinbras knows there are forces with greater authority them himself, and he honors the will of those forces. However, his off-stage actions at the beginning of the play set the political tone and context of the whole work.

Loyalty isn’t the only thing important to Fortinbras. The Prince of Norway also holds glory and honor in high regard. The captain of Fortinbras’s army says to Hamlet, “We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name” (4.4, 18-9). He is going to fight the Polish for glory, not monetary gain. This revelation leads Hamlet to praise Fortinbras:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,

Led by a delicate and tender prince,

Whose spirit with divine ambition puff’d,

Makes mouths at the invisible event,

Exposing what is mortal and unsure

To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,

Even for an egg-shell. (4.4, 47-53)

Fortinbras is ready to commit his men and himself to the grave for glory while Hamlet feels he has done nothing to avenge his own father. Again, the two princes are contrasted for the sake of developing Hamlet’s character. However, these passages let the reader know Fortinbras is still lurking on the fringes of the play, and he appears—or at least a representative of his force does—at the center of the play when the situation has become even more dire now that Hamlet has killed a man.

Another telling quality of Fortinbras is his brevity. This virtue also puts him at odds with the more introspective and longwinded Hamlet. Fortinbras only appears twice in the play, and he does not speak more than nine lines at any one time. This succinctness may be a symptom of his militaristic nature, for he is a man of action more than words. Nonetheless, this quality is admirable, and near, death, Hamlet claims the Prince of Norway is likely to be the next king (5.2, 355-6). Though he two are foils of each other, Hamlet deeply respects Fortinbras it seems.

Though much of his time is consumed by martial affairs, Fortinbras shows himself to be more than a warrior. His affinity for honor and glory makes him sound evenhanded or perhaps just. The idea of him as a law-bringer coincides with his final act as a framing device as the play closes. Here Fortinbras delivers edicts and sets right what has gone astray since the murder of the old King Hamlet. Though the weight of the action has been carried by Hamlet, it is Fotinbras who survives to see things continue to be restored to their right place. Likewise, Fortinbras knows the difference between death on the battlefield and murder. He comments:

This quarry cries havoc, O proud death,

What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,

That thou so many princes at a shot

So boldly strool [. . . .]

Such a sight as this

Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss. (5.2, 364-7)

Fortinbras may be a soldier, but he’s no butcher. There is no honor or glory in the murderous scene before him. As the tragedy comes to a close, Fortinbras is the only character with the strength left to repair all the damage that has been done.

Fortinbras is a complex, almost contradictory character. He is a soldier trained in the ways of war, yet he brings order and stability when everything has become chaotic. Driven by ideas of honor and glory, Fortinbras is also willing to submit to the institutions with greater authority. Since Fortinbras rarely speaks his mind, his reasoning remains as difficult to know as the darkness. On the other hand, his actions speak for him. As a foil for Hamlet, he provides the protagonist with one type of example to follow, and as a framing character, Fortinbras surrounds the action of the play while coloring the attitudes of the other chatacters.