**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Laertes**

Laertes is a conventional revenge hero, and consequently represents a standard of measurement for Hamlet.

Like his father, he is given to conventional moralising, offering Ophelia some serious misleading advice on her relationship with Hamlet, just as Polonius will do.

Her quiet response anticipates the course his life will take. He is one of those who can show others the right way, but who will not follow it himself, who “recks not his own rede”, as his sister puts it.

On his return to Denmark, after his father’s death, his decisive action contrasts with Hamlet’s indecision. He has enough courage to face Claudius alone, but his words are those of a melodramatic villain rather than that of a wronged son and brother:

To hell, allegiance vows to the blackest devil!

Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!

I dare damnation... (4:5, 131-3)

**A Lack of Moral Sense**

Laertes forges all the edifying moral principles he so freely shared with Ophelia when he expresses a willingness to cut Hamlet’s throat in the church.

Even more damaging is the fact that he has come to Denmark with the means of practising treachery on an enemy “I bought an unction of a mounteback”.

He is able to add a further refinement to Claudius’ plan to use an unbated foil.

Hamlet can be emotionally unstable, but us not morally unstable; Laertes is emotionally stable enough, but morally quite unstable. (1:3, 78-80)

In the event, Laertes proves totally untrue to any decent conception he may have of himself.

The king has little difficulty in exploiting his weak moral sense.

Claudius employs flattery, a false show of sympathy, and a clever challenge to pride: “What would you undertake/ To show yourself in deed your father’s son/ More than in words?”.

Laertes allows himself to be blackmailed into a treacherous partnership with Claudius, which he lacks the moral strength to break.

His shallowness, is underlined when, before the fencing match, he repents too late, and only when his own life is ebbing away. He does, however, make sure that Claudius is trapped “The king, the king’s to blame”.