SOFTWARE & TECH

# Prince Of Norway In Hamlet

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## Introduction: The Overlooked Prince of Norway in Hamlet

When readers and audiences think of **Shakespeare's Hamlet**, their minds immediately turn to the brooding Danish prince, his ghostly father, and the tragic unraveling of the royal court of Elsinore. Yet, woven into the fabric of this masterpiece is a secondary character whose presence is brief but whose significance is immense: the **Prince of Norway in Hamlet**, young Fortinbras. Though he appears only in a handful of scenes and speaks fewer than thirty lines, Fortinbras serves as a crucial narrative device, a thematic mirror, and a political counterweight to the play's central figure. Understanding Fortinbras is essential to grasping the full scope of Shakespeare's meditation on action, honor, legitimacy, and the burdens of leadership. This article offers a deep and comprehensive exploration of the Prince of Norway in Hamlet, examining his role, his symbolic function, and his lasting impact on the play's meaning.

## Who Is the Prince of Norway in Hamlet? A Character Introduction

The Prince of Norway in Hamlet is **Fortinbras**, a young Norwegian prince whose father—also named Fortinbras—was killed in single combat by King Hamlet of Denmark years before the play begins. The elder Fortinbras lost both his life and his lands in that duel, a fact that fuels his son's burning desire for revenge and restoration. Shakespeare introduces Fortinbras early in the play through the exposition of the guards and Horatio, who note that young Fortinbras is "of unimproved mettle hot and full" and that he is raising an army to reclaim the territories his father lost.

Fortinbras is defined by his decisiveness, ambition, and willingness to act. Unlike Hamlet, who is immobilized by doubt and philosophical reflection, the Prince of Norway in Hamlet moves swiftly and purposefully. He petitions his uncle, the King of Norway, for permission to march across Denmark to attack Poland, a campaign that serves as a thinly veiled pretext for gathering forces and testing Denmark's defenses. Throughout the play, Fortinbras remains a distant but persistent presence, a reminder of the political instability that threatens Elsinore and a foil to Hamlet's paralysis.

## The Role of Fortinbras in the Plot: A Catalyst and a Contrast

Though Fortinbras does not interact directly with Hamlet until the final scene, his actions reverberate throughout the play. He serves as a **catalyst for political tension**, forcing Claudius to address external threats while managing internal ones. The King of Denmark dispatches ambassadors to Norway to negotiate with Fortinbras's uncle, successfully redirecting the Norwegian prince's aggression toward Poland. This diplomatic maneuver buys Claudius time but does not eliminate the underlying threat that Fortinbras represents.

More importantly, Fortinbras functions as a **structural contrast**to Hamlet. Shakespeare uses Fortinbras to highlight the central theme of action versus inaction. Where Hamlet deliberates endlessly about whether to kill Claudius, Fortinbras acts decisively to reclaim his father's honor and reclaim lost territory. The Prince of Norway

in Hamlet does not wrestle with existential questions; he simply moves forward, leading his army with single-minded determination. This contrast becomes explicit in Act IV, Scene 4, when Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army marching across Denmark toward Poland.

### The Polish Campaign: Honor Without Reason

In that pivotal scene, Hamlet reflects on the irony of Fortinbras leading "twenty thousand men" to fight for a "little patch of ground" that is not worth the effort. Yet even as Hamlet mocks the futility of the campaign, he admires Fortinbras's **willingness to act for honor**. The Prince of Norway in Hamlet becomes, in Hamlet's own words, "a delicate and tender prince" whose "spirit, with divine ambition puffed, makes mouths at the invisible event." This moment of self-reproach is one of the most important in the play, as Hamlet compares his own inaction unfavorably to Fortinbras's decisive leadership.

## Fortinbras as a Foil to Hamlet: Action vs. Inaction

The relationship between Hamlet and Fortinbras is one of the most carefully constructed foils in all of Shakespeare. Both are young princes who have lost their fathers under violent circumstances. Both have uncles who have assumed power. Both face the weight of expectation and the call for vengeance. Yet their responses could not be more different.

- Hamlet is introspective, philosophical, and paralyzed by doubt. He questions the morality of revenge, the nature of the ghost, and the meaning of existence itself. His famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy captures his profound uncertainty.
- Fortinbras is extroverted, pragmatic, and immediate in his actions. He does not question his mission; he simply raises an army and marches. He does not deliberate; he executes.

Shakespeare uses the Prince of Norway in Hamlet to illuminate the costs and benefits of both approaches. Hamlet's inaction leads to the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and ultimately himself. Fortinbras's action, by contrast, earns him the Danish throne. Yet Fortinbras's victory is ambiguous: he inherits a kingdom that has been destroyed by the very violence he represents. Shakespeare refuses to offer a simple moral; instead, he presents two models of princely behavior and leaves the audience to weigh their merits.

### The Parallel of Lineage and Legitimacy

Both Hamlet and Fortinbras are sons of kings who were killed, and both must navigate the **politics of succession**. Hamlet's claim to the Danish throne was passed over in favor of his uncle Claudius, who married the queen and assumed power. Fortinbras's claim to Norwegian lands was lost when his father was defeated, but he actively works to reclaim what is rightfully his. The Prince of Norway in Hamlet thus represents a vision of legitimate restoration, while Hamlet's tragedy is partly that he fails to secure his own succession. In the final scene, Fortinbras arrives to find the Danish royal family dead and the throne vacant. His first words—"This quarry cries on havoc"—acknowledge the destruction, but he immediately assumes control, ordering a military funeral for Hamlet and claiming his right to the crown.

## The Thematic Significance of Fortinbras: Honor, Ambition, and the Cost of War

Beyond his role as a foil, the Prince of Norway in Hamlet embodies several of the play's most important themes. Honor is central to his character. Like Hamlet, Fortinbras is driven by a desire to avenge his father's death and restore his family's name. However, Fortinbras's conception of honor is martial and public, whereas Hamlet's is moral and private. Fortinbras seeks honor on the battlefield; Hamlet seeks it in the court and in his own conscience.

Ambition is another key theme associated with Fortinbras. He is described as having "divine ambition," a phrase that suggests both approval and irony. His ambition is divine in the sense that it is pure and

uncompromising, but it is also blind to the human cost. The Polish campaign, as Hamlet notes, is fought over a piece of ground "that hath no profit in it but the name." The critique of war-like ambition is never more explicit than in this passage, though the play as a whole maintains a complex attitude of the futility of violence even as it acknowledges the necessity of action.

### Fortinbras and the Cycle of Revenge

The Prince of Norway in Hamlet also participates in the play's exploration of the **cycle of revenge**. The conflict between Denmark and Norway echoes the private vendetta between Hamlet and Claudius. Both are built on a pattern of retaliation that seems endless. Fortinbras's father was killed by Hamlet's father, and now Fortinbras seeks to reclaim what was lost. In the end, Fortinbras's victory can be seen as the final act of revenge—the Norwegian prince succeeds where Hamlet failed. Yet the cycle is not broken; it is merely transferred. Fortinbras now rules Denmark, and the future may bring new conflicts.

## Key Scenes Featuring the Prince of Norway in Hamlet

Fortinbras appears or is referenced in several critical scenes throughout the play. Understanding these moments helps to illuminate his function in the narrative.

### Act I, Scene 1: The Exposition

In the opening scene, Horatio explains to the guards that young Fortinbras is gathering forces to attack Denmark. This exposition establishes the political backdrop and introduces the theme of revenge before Hamlet himself appears. Already, Shakespeare is drawing a parallel between the public threat of Fortinbras and the private grief of Hamlet.

### Act II, Scene 2: The Ambassadors

Voltemand and Cornelius return from Norway with news that the King of Norway has ordered Fortinbras to stop his aggression against Denmark. Instead, Fortinbras is permitted to march across Denmark to attack Poland. This scene demonstrates Claudius's political skill and buys time, but it also allows Fortinbras to remain a physical presence on the margins of the action.

### Act IV, Scene 4: The Soliloquy

This is the most important scene for understanding the Prince of Norway in Hamlet. Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's army and delivers his "How all occasions do inform against me" soliloquy. He compares his own inaction to Fortinbras's willingness to fight for honor, concluding that "thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth." This scene marks a turning point in Hamlet's character, as he resolves to act with more decisiveness.

### Act V, Scene 2: The Final Scene

Fortinbras arrives at Elsinore in the aftermath of the massacre. He finds the royal family dead, along with Laertes and Hamlet. With characteristic pragmatism, he orders the bodies removed, claims the throne, and orders a military funeral for Hamlet. His final lines—"Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage"—elevate Hamlet to a warrior status he never fully achieved in life.

## Political Parallels: Norway and Denmark in the Play

The relationship between Norway and Denmark in *Hamlet* is not merely a backdrop; it is a **political allegory** that mirrors the conflicts within the Danish court. Both kingdoms are hereditary monarchies vulnerable to internal and external threats. The elder Fortinbras and King Hamlet fought in single combat, a form of conflict that was both personal and political. Their sons inherited both the grievances and the ambitions of their fathers.

The Prince of Norway in Hamlet represents the **external threat** that Claudius must manage while dealing with the internal threat posed by Hamlet. Claudius successfully diverts Fortinbras's attention to Poland, but this is a temporary solution. The Norwegian army remains a presence just beyond the border, a constant reminder of

the fragility of Claudius's reign. In the final scene, that external threat becomes the new reality, as Fortinbras takes control of Denmark.

## The Prince of Norway in Hamlet in Performance and Adaptation

Fortinbras has been interpreted in many ways across the long history of *Hamlet* performances. Some productions emphasize his **military bearing** and youthful energy, presenting him as the ideal prince whom Hamlet fails to become. Others highlight the **irony of his success**, showing him as a conqueror who inherits a ruin. In some modern adaptations, Fortinbras is cut entirely, though this is a significant loss, as it removes the thematic anchor of the play's final moments.

In film adaptations, Fortinbras has been played with varying degrees of prominence. In Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version, Fortinbras appears more frequently than in the text, visually reinforcing the political subplot. In other adaptations, his role is minimized, but the final scene remains crucial. The Prince of Norway in Hamlet is, in many ways, the **final voice of authority in the play**, and his interpretation shapes the audience's understanding of the ending.

## Fortinbras and the Question of Succession

One of the most intriguing aspects of Fortinbras's role is the **question of legitimacy**surrounding his claim to the Danish throne. In the final scene, Fortinbras declares that he has "some rights of memory in this kingdom," referring to the lands his father lost. Yet his claim is tenuous at best. He is a foreign prince who has crossed Denmark with an army, and he assumes power by force of presence rather than by lawful succession. The dying Hamlet gives Fortinbras his "dying voice,"


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