

Hamlet's Friends: Honest Horatio and the Two-Faced Twosome



Robert Smirke. *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 4. Ink drawing, ca. 1783. Folger Shakespeare Library.

Sometimes the only people left to turn to in times of trouble are your friends, but what if those friends aren't really friends at all? How do you know whom you can trust?

Hamlet has three friends in the play: Horatio, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern grew up with Hamlet at Elsinore, and Horatio is a friend from Wittenburg, where Hamlet studies. Horatio is the friend that Hamlet chooses to trust, asking him to keep the secret of his father's ghost, and Hamlet's "antic disposition." He leaves Horatio the hard task of telling Hamlet's story to the masses after his death. When Horatio brings Hamlet to the ramparts to view the ghost, he tries to keep Hamlet from following the specter, worried that Hamlet might be harmed physically or mentally. Horatio seems to genuinely care about Hamlet, going so far as to try to kill himself when Hamlet's death is inevitable.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other hand, are no better than Claudius' henchmen. They might have grown up with Hamlet, and he enjoys their wit, but they are in Claudius' employ to watch Hamlet and glean information from him. Hamlet picks up on this, and takes offense that they think he is so easy to manipulate. They are sent after Hamlet when he kills Polonius, but they do not appear to really care about Hamlet's mental state after committing a murder; they're just following orders. When they attend him on the ship to England, he snatches their letter from Claudius and remorselessly rewrites it so that they will be sentenced to die.

Hamlet seeks truth and honesty in those around him – he asks Ophelia if she is honest, and he wants his mother to confess her guilt – so the behavior his friends exhibit is important to him. Horatio doesn't hesitate to say why he has come to Elsinore, and cares about how Hamlet is doing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show their falseness just as quickly by lying to Hamlet about their purpose. Based on our production, whom would you trust if you were Hamlet?

Who is this Fortinbras guy, anyway?

Prince Fortinbras of Norway has raised an army to reclaim lands lost by his father to Hamlet's father. Hamlet observes the progress of the Prince of Norway and implies a desire to be more like Fortinbras: Hamlet admires Fortinbras' willingness to do battle while he has not yet avenged his own father's murder. Hamlet admires the qualities of nobility and honor that Fortinbras exhibits, qualities Hamlet feels he lacks. At the end of the play, Hamlet recommends Fortinbras be named the next king of Denmark. With Fortinbras we are reminded that there is a world beyond the castle, a world of mass political relations and manipulations which are juxtaposed against the interpersonal relations and manipulations. Their stories have some parallels in that, like Hamlet, Fortinbras' father was a king and both are nephews to the current rulers of their respective lands.



John Barrymore as *Hamlet*. Autographed photo, 1922. Folger Shakespeare Library.