

Jianghan Chen

Professor Wood

ENGH-322-003

10 December 2025

**The Treacherous Sword: How a Single Prop Reshapes Power, Perception, and
Justice in *Hamlet* 5.2**

In *Hamlet*'s final scene, the fencing foils appear on stage as ordinary sporting props—light, evenly matched weapons meant to signal civility, honor, and fair play. Yet these objects quickly become the engines of betrayal and poetic justice once the King and Laertes transform one of them into a lethal device. Their simplicity makes them dramatically effective: the foils operate simultaneously as sporting equipment, concealed weapons, and symbolic indicators of Denmark's moral decay. In Act 5, Scene 2, the poisoned foil becomes a dynamic prop whose shifting ownership, altered physical condition, and sudden movement destabilize the illusion of order created at the start of the duel. Through the foil's transformation—from equal objects of sport, to a treacherous instrument, to the means of justice—the play demonstrates how a single prop can expose hidden motives and redistribute moral authority in real time. Shakespeare uses this sword to show how deception embedded in physical objects cannot remain hidden, because the objects themselves will eventually betray the corruption that shaped them.

The scene opens with the appearance of fairness and structure. Hamlet is reminded of the terms of the match with, “You know the wager” (5.2.230), a line that frames the duel as transparent and governed by rules. Laertes quickly disturbs this balance when he examines his foil and rejects it: “This is too heavy—let me see another” (5.2.235). Though subtle, his comment hints that the props are not as identical as they appear. Hamlet attempts to restore symmetry by inspecting the foils himself: “This likes me well. These foils have all a length” (5.2.236). His reassurance works theatrically to maintain the audience’s trust in the match, even though the audience already knows that the harmony is false. At the same time, the King inserts another prop into the scene’s spatial composition by ordering, “Set me the stoups of wine upon that table” (5.2.238). He expands this gesture by declaring, “Give me the cups, / And let the kettle to the trumpet speak” (5.2.245). The festive staging heightens dramatic tension because it disguises a murderous plan behind public celebration: both the poison in the cup and the altered foil prepare the audience for the collapse of ceremonial order.

As the duel begins, the foils continue to appear as harmless sporting equipment. Osric’s enthusiastic announcement—“A hit, a very palpable hit” (5.2.256)—reaffirms the match’s performative civility. Even the Queen contributes to the emotional framing by saying, “He’s fat and scant of breath” (5.2.264), a remark that emphasizes Hamlet’s physical vulnerability while still assuming that the props on stage conform

to ordinary rules of fencing. Yet the moment Laertes cries, “Have at you now” (5.2.278), the rhythm of the duel shifts. The most crucial stage action of the scene follows: **“In scuffling they change rapiers.”** This exchange is the turning point of the prop’s dramatic function. The poisoned foil, originally designed to harm only Hamlet, slips out of its intended pathway and moves into Hamlet’s hand. The switch is chaotic but symbolically precise. A prop created to enforce secret treachery refuses to obey its creators. Instead, its physical motion redistributes danger and shifts moral authority away from the King and Laertes. Horatio marks this rupture with alarm: “They bleed on both sides. How is it, my lord?” (5.2.282). His line reveals the truth that the props themselves have already shown—the match has become lethal, and treachery is no longer contained.

The foil’s betrayal of its owners forces Laertes into recognition. Wounded by the very sword he plotted to use, he confesses, “Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric. I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (5.2.285). The prop becomes both evidence and consequence of moral failure. Hamlet responds with immediate urgency: “Treachery! Seek it out. Oh, villainy! Ho! Let the door be locked” (5.2.290). The call to lock the door signifies how physical space must be controlled once the prop exposes hidden danger. The sword’s revelation cannot be ignored; it becomes the center of the scene’s truth. Laertes then clearly identifies the object that carries the moral weight of the conspiracy: “The treacherous instrument is

in thy hand, unbated and envenomed” (5.2.295). His wording confirms both the sword’s physical condition—“unbated,” with its protective button removed, and “envenomed,” coated with poison—and its moral significance. The prop is no longer neutral; it embodies the corruption of the King’s plan and bears witness against him.

Once Hamlet understands the nature of the weapon, he accepts its function with decisive resolve. “The point envenomed too? Then, venom, to thy work!” (5.2.300). In this moment, the poisoned foil becomes the means through which justice is enacted. Hamlet’s strike against the King is not merely personal revenge but the completion of the foil’s dramatic arc. The same prop used to orchestrate murder becomes the instrument of moral retribution. Laertes recognizes this reversal when he declares, “He is justly served: / It is a poison tempered by himself...” (5.2.305). The sword returns the King’s corruption back upon his own body. Shakespeare thus uses a single object to reveal his larger insight: political deceit can manipulate rituals, relationships, and appearances, but it cannot escape the material consequences embedded in the very tools it creates.

The poisoned sword in *Hamlet* 5.2 is far more than a weapon. It is a prop that transforms continuously across the scene, moving from seemingly identical sporting equipment, to a disguised murder weapon, to a symbol of truth exposing political rot, and finally to an agent of poetic justice. Through physical movement, shifting possession, and changes in condition, the foil exposes the fragility of performative

order in the Danish court. Shakespeare demonstrates that props on stage do not merely decorate the action but actively shape character relationships, reveal hidden motives, and redistribute power. By the end of the scene, the poisoned sword forces the audience to confront the play's central idea: corruption inevitably destroys itself, because the objects it touches will ultimately betray its origins.