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Author(s): Harold C. Goddard

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Hamlet to Ophelia

HAROLD C. GODDARD

WHO, reading *Hamlet* for the first time, is not disappointed in Hamlet's letter to Ophelia? Who, reading it for the twentieth time, does not retain something of that disappointment, if over the years his mind has not capitulated to the commentators?

Here of all Shakespeare's characters is the one who comes closest to possessing the imaginative genius of his creator. Here is a man with a deep capacity for affection and a rare power to express it simply and directly:

"Give me that man

That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him

In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee."

"O! throw away the worser part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.
Good night."

So speaks Hamlet to Horatio, and to his mother when she confesses that his words have cleft her heart in twain. And even his more casual greetings of friends and acquaintances ring with the spontaneous cordiality of the man. "My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah, Rosencrantz! Good

The late Professor Goddard was chairman of the department of English, Swarthmore College, 1909-1946, and the author of The Meaning of Shakespeare. For the text of this article we are indebted to his daughter, Eleanor Goddard Worthen, who found it among his papers and sent it to us.

lads, how do ye both?" Or to the Players: "You are welcome, masters; welcome, all. I am glad to see thee well: welcome, good friends. O, my old friend!" etc.

And yet, when this same man writes to one who, we would like to think, is more to him than all the others put together, this is what he produces:

"To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia. In her excellent white bosom, these, &c.

*Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.*

*O dear Ophelia! I am ill at these numbers:
I have not art to reckon my groans; but
that I love thee best, O most best! believe it.
Adieu.*

*Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst
this machine is to him,*

HAMLET

It is a hard pill for lovers of Hamlet to swallow. We wouldn't have thought it of the man who said, "Something too much of this." It sounds more like Osric addressing some Elizabethan maid of honor, if the anachronism may be pardoned. "Never doubt I love." Alas we might all too easily doubt it on the evidence here submitted. Even the uninitiated in psychology might well suspect the sincerity of an epistle so overloaded with adjectives and superlatives, with its *dears* and *mosts* and *bests*, its *adieu* and *etcetera*, not to mention the epithet *beautified*, which event that seasoned worldling Polonius finds "vile," or the reiterated word *doubt* which must in one instance be wrenched into

a meaning different from the one that it carries in the other three to bring any sense or logic into the third line of the quatrain. (A cynic, indeed, might find in that third line a sort of "joker" slyly inserted to annul the effect of the whole.) And why, in the name of Love's simplicity, should Hamlet have reserved for a girl who was scarcely more than a child a word, *machine*, so rare at that time that it does not occur even once elsewhere in all Shakespeare's works? Taken singly, any one of these lapses might be overlooked, but taken together they are hard to reconcile with the character or manner of the man who bade the Players not to overstep the modesty of nature.

"Oh, but this is a letter," it will be said, the implication being that allowance must be made for the epistolary style. Yet we have two other letters of Hamlet's, to Horatio and to the King, conspicuously lacking in the artificialities of his note to Ophelia. "But this is a love letter, and, what is more, an Elizabethan love letter," our objector will probably persist, bringing forward a crushing array of citations from Shakespeare's contemporaries to prove that this is the way that sort of thing was done in his day. But what of it? *It is the precise mark of Hamlet that he despised doing things as they were done in his day*, or any other "day," including Shakespeare's. If there was anything he scorned, it was falling in, along with the Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns and Osrics and all the other Tweedledums and Tweedledees, with what he called "the tune of the time." If a thing is in that tune, be sure it isn't Hamlet's.

"Hamlet's love letter was written before he began to play the madman," says Kittredge. "Its stilted style has

done him much harm in the esteem of modern readers. However, he is but following the fashion of Shakespeare's time."¹ He is. But a fashionable Hamlet, I repeat, is a contradiction in terms. (Ophelia tells us expressly that Hamlet did not follow fashion but that fashion followed him.) "Hamlet's letter is written in the affected language of euphuism," says Clarendon. It is. But to say so is like accusing Falstaff of talking like a puritan or Cleopatra of acting like a prude. What the man who said,

"Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not 'seems'"

thought of affected language is made sufficiently clear in his scathing satire of it in the scene with Osric. And so the attempts to bring this letter into line by those who variously find it odd, studied, stilted, inappropriate, artificial, conventional, or affected defeat themselves by calling attention to the very thing these critics want us to disregard, thereby revealing that they are themselves uneasy, not to say apologetic, about it, that they sense in it something very much in need of explanation, that—though they may not know it and would vehemently deny it—they feel underneath about it much as the naive reader does.

And so one is almost driven to believe that Shakespeare inserted this sample of the Prince of Denmark's love-making expressly to prove that Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia—like Romeo's for Rosaline—is not the real thing. The letter is certainly a trump card for those who hold that view. But the trouble with this way out of the difficulty is that it wrecks the play in too many respects to be tolerable. For my-

¹ *Hamlet*, edited by G. L. Kittredge, p. 182.

self, I could more easily believe that Hamlet, recognizing that love and vengeance cannot keep company, set out deliberately to be as unlike himself as he could and sent the letter to Ophelia with the express purpose of alienating her affection. But this theory, like the other, would be tolerable only as a last resort.

A very different possibility occurred to me recently as I was rereading the play. One reason why the idea made an immediate appeal to me was that it also seemed to clear up perfectly one of the minor perplexities of the play that has baffled many readers and critics. The longest way round is often the shortest way home, and what may seem at this point a considerable digression will really bring us to the heart of our problem.

At the beginning of the second act, it will be remembered, Polonius is discovered coaching the young Reynaldo in the art of spying. He wants him to eavesdrop on his son, Laertes, in Paris. Why did Shakespeare, in a play in which space is as valuable as it is in *Hamlet*, bestow such detailed attention on so minor an incident? Many commentators have admitted their puzzlement at the scene and its length. As an answer to the enigma Granville-Barker suggests a shift on Shakespeare's part in his conception of Polonius. "We can, I think, see Shakespeare changing his mind a little about Polonius," he says. ". . . The change comes with the charge to Reynaldo; and hence, perhaps, the seemingly undue length allowed to that minor matter; our first impressions of the character must be corrected."² And J. M. Robertson, in a section headed "Irrelevant Scenes,"³ refers to the "co-

nundrum" of Reynaldo's mission. "That Shakespeare invented such a purposeless episode as the present merely to exhibit the character of Polonius is unthinkable," he declares, and proceeds to postulate "another hand between Kyd and Shakespeare" to account for the scene. "As our play now stands," he argues, "the only conceivable motive for the Reynaldo scene is the theatrical need for comic relief after the tremendous Ghost scene," and he suggests that it may be a relic of an earlier version in which the messenger to Paris "served a purpose in the action," perhaps, he conjectures, to carry to Laertes news of his father's death. The implication that the scene as we now have it serves little or no purpose in the action is backed up by the practice of most stage directors. It is usually cut out or cut down in production. It is a pity to lose it, but the play can be understood without it. So the directors seem to reason.

Whether or not it is necessary to the plot of *Hamlet*, there can be no two opinions of its quality as a scene. Emerson once remarked that every line of a poem should be a poem. By the same token, every scene of a play should be a play. This one is—a little masterpiece all by itself. In its seventy-four lines we get Polonius' number perfectly, if we have not gotten it before; and when at the end of it he says to Reynaldo, "You have me, have you not?" the reader replies with Reynaldo, if in a different sense, "My lord, I have."

And we have Reynaldo no less. His portrayal is one of Shakespeare's innumerable little miracles in the individualization of a very minor character. Between a third and a half of Reynaldo's allotment of sixty-five words is spent in repeating "My lord," which he

² *Preface to Shakespeare*, Vol. I, p. 204.

³ *The Problem of Hamlet*, p. 57.

does ten times, with a "my good lord" and a "good my lord" thrown in for good measure. And yet he is no cipher like Shallow, nor echo like Aguecheek. He is an innocent youth with a high sense of honor who is horrified at the role of spy for which he is being cast, yet is too modest and inexperienced to protest except, as it were, in an undertone. *The World Corrupting Innocence* the scene might be called—and we think of Blake's engraving *Aged Ignorance*: an old man wearing spectacles, seated under a tree, clipping the wings of a boy who seeks to escape. But a more Hamletian title would be *Poison in the Ear*, for poison of the most noxious brew is what Polonius pours and Reynaldo's ear is the receptacle into which he pours it—so closely in theme is this seemingly digressive scene integrated with the rest of the play. As the first of several scenes on the theme of spying or eavesdropping, it prepares, too, for the others and points straight at Polonius' own death behind the arras. Little does the old man realize that he is rehearsing his own end as he shows Reynaldo how to set the mouse-trap wherein to catch the conscience of Laertes—for here is an intimation of still another of the main themes of the play. Polonius' metaphor, to be sure, turns the mouse-trap into a fish-hook:

"See you now;
Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth;
And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses, and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out:
So by my former lecture and advice
Shall you my son."

But, trap or hook, it comes to the same thing.

However, there is an important distinction. Hamlet makes his test in pub-

lic, with as open a mind as he can command, to find out whether the King is guilty. Polonius makes his surreptitiously merely to gather evidence of a guilt he calmly takes for granted. Hamlet's is a genuine experiment. Polonius' is to set a purely formal seal on what is already a foregone conclusion.

Verification such as Hamlet feels the need of is superfluous to Polonius for the simple reason that Polonius is the type of man who is always right. His opinion and the Truth are synonyms—in his opinion. Let an idea enter such a mind and it immediately takes on the character of unshakable dogma. "Do you think 'tis this?" asks the skeptical and intelligent King in the later scene in which Polonius expounds his theory of Hamlet's madness. "It may be, very likely," the more nearly but not utterly persuaded Queen agrees. How different, both of them, from Polonius, with his cocksure tone:

"Hath there been such a time,—I'd fain know that,—
That I have positively said, 'Tis so,
When it prov'd otherwise?"

"Not that I know," the King replies. But this is no admission of the Lord Chamberlain's infallibility. On the contrary it is a sign that Claudius recognizes the futility of contradicting a man who conceives his own brain under the figure of a hound with so perfect a scent for the truth that the truth is incapable of eluding it—an ominous metaphor if pushed to its conclusion.

A tiny touch in the same scene—a single word—reveals this egotism of the Lord Chamberlain's in a comical way. When the King, following Polonius' revelation, asks how Ophelia has received Hamlet's love, Polonius does not say, "What do you think of her?" or even "What do you think of my

daughter?" but "What do you think of me?" Polonius' universe is Ptolemaic and he is its center.

Now a man so certain of himself and his conclusions will naturally hold it a mere peccadillo, if evidence for a particular conclusion does not happen to be at hand, to manufacture it out of whole cloth. "After all, since the thing is true, what difference does it make?" he reasons. And that is what we see him doing in the Reynaldo scene. His rooted conviction is that Laertes is living the life of a libertine in Paris. What possible harm, then, in suggesting that Reynaldo concoct a few tales of his misconduct?

". . . there put on him
What forgeries you please; marry, none so
rank
As may dishonour him; take heed of that;
But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty."

If the young man to be "sullied" in this fashion had been a stranger, it would have been bad enough. But he is Polonius' own son. Indeed, the old man seems to be taking a sort of vicarious pride in the fact that his boy will be welcomed by the fashionable young bloods of Paris and lets his hopes, doubtless not unaided by memories of his own youth, fill in the details of the picture. Yet Shakespeare grants even Polonius a soul. He shows that there is a genuine father within him, however deeply buried, who recognizes the abhorrent character of what he is doing. But Shakespeare himself, appropriately, buries the point deep.

There are people who think that the psychology of the unconscious is a recent discovery, that Freud, for example, was the first to observe the revealing character of slips of the tongue

or sudden losses of memory. Such persons have never read Shakespeare with attention (or Chaucer either, for that matter, to go no further back). When Polonius comes to the vile conclusion of his proposition, his memory deserts him:

"And then, sir, does he this,—he does,—what was I about to say? By the mass I was about to say something: where did I leave?"

(the one passage of prose, significantly, in the scene). And Reynaldo has to help him out. This *lapsus memoriae* characterizes Polonius' act better than anything else in the scene. It is an act that his soul dares not look in the face.

Yet, in spite of all these and other merits of this scene as a scene, the objection still stands that it appears to be by no means indispensable to the *action*, and from the architectonic point of view one wonders how Shakespeare felt he could afford to include it, or at least how he justified its length. He is fond enough of brief digressions whose link with the rest is purely poetic or symbolic. But there are few scenes in his supreme plays as long as the Reynaldo scene that are not closely tied to the action as well. Does not that fact set up a presumption that there is such a tie in this case too, if we can only find it? I think it does. And I think we can find it. The scene is specifically contrived, it seems to me, to prepare for the one in which Polonius discusses the cause of Hamlet's madness with the King and Queen, so specifically, indeed, that the latter scene cannot be understood without it. And that scene in turn ties it to the very heart of Hamlet's mystery.

And here I shall be surprised if the reader has not anticipated what I am about to say.

If Polonius is not above forgery (his own word, be it remembered) to prove his conviction that his son is leading a wild life in Paris, why should he be above forgery to prove the much more enticing and exciting theory that a Crown Prince has been driven mad by love of his daughter and her rejection of him?

Of course he would not be above it. Polonius is above nothing indirect, sly, or crafty; he is above nothing that will flatter his own ego by proving his own wisdom; and most of all, he is above nothing that will exhibit that wisdom to royalty and so put himself in its good graces.

Rather obviously he reasons in some such way as this: "Anyone can see that Hamlet is mad. No one *except me* knows that he is violently in love with my daughter and that I gave her orders to reject his love. If I can prove the love and then tell of the rejection, the madness will be explained." How then shall he prove the love? Even Polonius has sense enough to realize that a second-hand account of Hamlet's visit to his daughter's closet will carry no such conviction as did the words of the terrified girl herself red-hot, as it were, from the interview. He must have more objective evidence. What better way to "document" his case than with a letter?

If, then, no letter of Hamlet to Ophelia were in his possession, or if, possessing one, he did not find it satisfactory, what would be more likely than that he would compose one for the occasion, or touch up an existing one to suit his purpose? Why otherwise should Shakespeare have been at such pains to demonstrate Polonius' capacity for forgery—even to the employment of that very word? Such a supposition clears up at a stroke any mystery about

the inclusion or the length of the Reynaldo scene and dissipates equally completely the question of the uncharacteristic nature of "Hamlet's" letter, a question which, as we have seen, has bothered both unsophisticated readers and the most sophisticated critics. If, on a re-examination of the letter in the light of this hypothesis, signs appear of its having been fabricated or amended by Polonius, the case will be that much stronger. But before looking at that document again, it may be pointed out that the Letter Scene, apart from the letter itself, contains several lines and phrases that may take on a new meaning on the assumption that Polonius is trying to put over a composition of his own as Hamlet's. These points, however, are incidental rather than crucial. If there is anything in them, they add so much weight to the hypothesis of forgery. But if there is nothing in them, they do not detract from it.

Too much need not be made of the elaborate exordium—the "brevity is the soul of wit" speech—with which Polonius leads up to his announcement of Hamlet's madness and its cause. It is the preliminary flourish, the verbal counterpart of Osric's bowings and scrapings, appropriate to the man, and intended, like introductory bars in music, to set into relief what is to follow. Yet the style is excessively devious even for Polonius and it is interesting to note that Shakespeare frequently uses this sinuous manner of speech as a mark of (usually unconscious) perturbation on the part of a person about to say or do something false or cowardly—as though the man's soul were trying to hold him back, and consciousness, stalled without understanding the reason, were compelled to

fill in the gap with impromptu inconsequentials. At the very least, we may say that if Polonius were about to produce a forged document, he might be expected to speak in exactly the meandering manner in which he does. So diagnosed, his verbosities would be simply something a little more than his usual garrulity and something a little less than the complete loss of memory we saw him undergo when arranging his "forgery" against Laertes, though he seems on the verge of such a loss when his thought, which has been growing thinner and thinner, vanishes entirely in the meaningless line:

"Thus it remains, and the remainder thus."

But he pulls himself together and comes to the point.

"I have a daughter, have while she is mine;"

he begins,

"Who, in her duty and obedience, mark,
Hath given me this: now, gather, and
surmise,"

whereupon he starts reading the letter. But he has barely begun when the Queen interrupts to ask, "Came this from Hamlet to her?" Since Hamlet's madness is the issue and he and Ophelia are the only two who have been mentioned, the question seems superfluous. Has Gertrude, like others since her time, detected something uncharacteristic in the letter? Her words could easily bear such a construction. But possibly all she is asking is confirmation from Polonius' lips of what she is already convinced of in her heart.

If so, she does not get it. Instead of replying to the Queen's question by saying, "Madam, it did," Polonius puts her off with:

"Good madam, stay awhile; I will be faithful."

A touch of annoyance at being interrupted? Or at having his climax anticipated? Either would be natural enough. But if the letter is a forgery, Polonius' evasion and unwillingness to utter "the lie direct" are precisely what we would expect of him in the circumstances. The truthful man, when he decides to lie, looks you straight in the eye and utters his falsehood in a downright fashion with a good conscience. It is the habitual liar who, in spite of his experience, sidesteps or evades. "As universal a practice as lying is," says Swift, "and as easy a one as it seems, I do not remember to have heard three good lies in all my conversation, even from those most celebrated in that faculty." Polonius is the last man to be capable of a good lie.

From this point he goes on to the end of the letter uninterrupted and, having read the signature, adds:

"This in obedience hath my daughter shown me."

But he said that before. Why repeat it? (This is a repetition of a very different type from the mere wordiness or prolixity we continually expect from him.) Is he still seeking to dissipate a trace of skepticism on the Queen's face, or the King's, as to the authorship of the letter? Is he just a shade too anxious to explain how so confidential a document as one of his daughter's love letters happened to be in his possession? Or is the repeated statement an over-compensation for something he is unconsciously ashamed of? Any of these explanations, or all of them, would fit the theory that the letter is forged. Polonius being Polonius, his mere assertion that his daughter showed him the letter in obedience makes us suspect that she did not. His repetition of the

statement makes us practically certain that she did not. The classic example of this psychology occurs later in this very play: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

But Polonius goes even further. According to him, Ophelia did not stop with the surrender of the letter:

"And more above, hath his solicitings,
As they fell out by time, by means, and
place,
All given to mine ear."

But who will believe that such a daughter as Ophelia would confide to such a father as Polonius all the details of what was undoubtedly her first love affair? Polonius is a domestic tyrant. Ophelia is a timid, docile, and obedient child. That she should run to him when frightened, as when she tells of Hamlet's visit to her closet; or obey a direct command, as when she denies her lover access to her and repels his letters; or give up a letter if her father knew definitely of its existence or caught her with it in her hand: any of these things is quite in character. But I recall nothing in the text that forces us to picture her as a girl who would reveal secrets to which her father had no clue or who would genuinely unbosom herself to so unfeeling a man. On the contrary, Shakespeare strongly intimates that she kept a great deal back. If she had confessed as fully as her father pretended, would she have gone mad? Her madness is the measure of what she still had locked up in her breast. Ophelia may have handed over a letter from her lover. But we need more than her father's unsupported assertion to that effect before we are compelled to accept his testimony as fact.

In justification of a skeptical attitude toward everything Polonius says about

the relations of Hamlet and Ophelia, one particularly marked discrepancy may be pointed out. He tells the King that he himself noticed what was happening before his daughter confessed:

"When I had seen this hot love on the wing,
As I perceiv'd it, I must tell you that,
Before my daughter told me,"

etc.; whereas he told Ophelia (only after she herself had introduced Hamlet's name) that rumors of their relations had come to him:

"Marry, well bethought:
'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late
Given private time to you; and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and
bounteous.
If it be so,—as so 'tis put on me,
And that in way of caution,—I must tell
you,"

etc. Plainly he was lying in one case or the other. The chances are that he was in both.

And now, having cleared the way, let us scrutinize the letter itself.

"To the celestial, and my soul's idol, the most beautiful Ophelia."

Suppose the incident in which it figures were not included in *Hamlet* at all and we were given the letter, with the names in blank, and asked to guess what character in Shakespeare wrote it. Who would ever think of Hamlet?

Could anything, especially that *beautified*, be less like Hamlet? (Or more like Polonius, we are tempted to add.) Theobald, the most inspired of Shakespearean emendators, was so struck with the "dreadful anticlimax" of *beautified* coming after *celestial* and *soul's idol* that he suggested the substitution for it of *beatified*. Few, if any, editors have adopted this reading, but Theobald's objection to *beautified* has never been met. Feeling the incongruity

of the adjective with the assumed author of the letter, commentators have been at pains to explain it away by contending that the word means neither more nor less than *beautiful* (which, if it does, still leaves the anticlimax). "Hamlet has used *beautified*," says Kit-tredge, "in the sense of 'endowed with beauties'—as an emphatic synonym for the ordinary word *beautiful*."⁴ Polonius censures it as affected and also, no doubt, as suggesting artificial aids to beauty."⁵ And so we have the arch-rhetorician reading a lesson in sincerity to the apostle of simplicity in speech. And the editor of the play in the Tudor

⁴ Shakespeare uses *beautified* in just one other place (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, IV, i, 55) and this passage has been widely relied on to prove that it meant *beautiful* to him and that therefore it was not a "vile phrase" to Hamlet. But under inspection the instance turns out to be a more than dubious one. The scene is in the forest between Milan and Verona when Valentine encounters the outlaws, and they, struck by his gentlemanly bearing, ask him to become their captain:

" . . . seeing you are beautified
With goodly shape, and by your own report
A linguist, and a man of such perfection
As we do in our quality much want."

Even this much of the context makes plain that the outlaws are speaking of Valentine's appearance and worldly accomplishments, not of beauty in any spiritual sense, concerning which, as men who have been banished from society for abduction, murder, and "such like petty crimes," they can hardly qualify as authorities. Moreover, it is to be noted that *beautified*, instead of being an adjective as in the letter to Ophelia, is the past participle of the verb *beautify*, and this makes a big difference between the two instances. Even today the verb carries a very different flavor from the adjective. We might still say without offense that the sunset beautified every leaf and stone. But to talk about beautified stones and leaves would imply that they had been subjected to some artificial attempt to better their appearance.

Probably the most illuminating use of *beautify* in Shakespeare is Lady Capulet's inane couplet describing Paris:

"This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him, only lacks a cover."

⁵ *Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

edition (George P. Baker) achieves, if possible, an even greater paradox. *Beautified* is used, he says, "in a sense of the time, 'gifted with beauty,' not in the modern sense, understood by Polonius, 'beautified artificially.'" How Polonius came to take the word in its modern sense is not explained. Is it not a bit odd to find that inveterate time-server so far ahead of his time? Again, he and Hamlet seem to have exchanged roles. Moreover, all these attempts to defend the reputation of this very dubious adjective blink one fact that the text makes incontrovertible: that the worldly Polonius found it "an ill phrase," "a vile phrase." It would take more than a modern commentator to re-establish its innocence after being indicted by a man so unsqueamish in such matters as he.

"But in that event what becomes of your theory that Polonius forged the letter?" someone will be certain to inquire. "You cannot have it both ways. If the adjective is his, he would not call it vile. If he calls it vile, that shows it isn't his." The retort sounds convincing but it overlooks the fact that Polonius may have been attributing a vile phrase to Hamlet intentionally, or, what is much more likely, that he was just fool enough to suppose Hamlet would really use it in a letter to Ophelia—and discovers his mistake too late.

We may be certain that as Polonius reads he is watching the faces of his two royal auditors to catch their reaction. Is it possible that at the phrase *beautified Ophelia* a faint frown of doubt or disapproval crosses the countenance of either the King or the Queen, or both, causing Polonius to hesitate and attempt on the spur of the moment to cover his error by condemning the word he had used in all seriousness? It

is exactly like Shakespeare to slip in histrionic directions in this way. It is exactly like Polonius, too, who is an unconscionable fawner and flatterer, to fall in with the faintest intimation of royalty. Would it be exactly like the Queen or the King, it remains to be asked, to be displeased by the word *beautified*? In the case of the Queen, all we can say is that the mother knew little of the son if she thought he had a taste for beautified women. (Hamlet, like his creator, makes abundantly plain his detestation of any tampering with nature in this respect—a consideration almost sufficient in itself to rule out Hamlet as author of the letter unless it can be demonstrated that *beautified* does not mean what it seems to mean, or that the text is corrupt, as Theobald would have us believe.) But in the case of the King we happen to know quite specifically that he disapproved of a slightly different form of this very word.

In the opening scene of the next act, Polonius, indulging in a little further forgery, asks his daughter to act as decoy for Hamlet while he and the King eaves drop on the interview:

“Read on this book,”

he says to Ophelia,

“That show of such an exercise may colour
Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in
this,
'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's
visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.”

The irony of this, at such a moment, is obvious. The King, keener than Polonius, gets the application of the words to himself and remarks in an aside:

“O! 'tis too true;
How smart a lash that speech doth give my
conscience!

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering
art,

Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden!”

Beautied and *beautified*—not a hair's difference between their meanings. So does Shakespeare give proof that *beautified* was a vile word to the King. Is it stretching anything to conjecture that *therefore* it became one on the instant to the yes-man Polonius? . . . I can understand how far-fetched any connection between the two passages must seem to anyone uninitiated into Shakespeare's psychological subtleties. But anyone who knows him well knows that his supreme plays are literal webs of such minute interrelations.

The words, “but you shall hear,” that follow Polonius' condemnation of the vile phrase are somewhat ambiguous. They might imply either “but there is worse to come” or, just the opposite, “but there is no further offense in the letter.” Either would testify that he was watching the effect on his auditors closely. The *etcetera* (*In her excellent white bosom, these, & c.*) is generally dismissed as a bit of epistolary convention, but it is at least possible to doubt whether it is rightly included in the letter itself. (Some editors drop it.) It may be that at just this point Polonius suddenly decides to omit something from the document he has fabricated, in compliance with an expression on the face of Gertrude, and that the *etcetera* is his way of covering a pause, for, significantly, it is right here that she inquires, “Came this from Hamlet to her?” Adams, in his edition, even gives her the stage direction, *Reaching out for the letter*, just before she asks the question. That fits the forgery theory perfectly by emphasizing her skepti-

cism and stressing the fact that Polonius is careful to keep possession of it.

*Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.*

"Hamlet's poetry is poor, as he himself confesses," says Kittredge of these lines; "but it was expected that every lover should show his devotion in verse."⁶ Hamlet was so given to doing the expected thing! And how comes it that the man who, as Bradley remarks, is the one character in Shakespeare whom we can conceive of as the author of Shakespeare's plays falls so unaccountably below his known powers of expression when he comes to write a love letter?

Yet however "poor" its quality, the quatrain, relative to the rest, is the part of the letter that (except for its third line) might most easily be imagined Hamlet's. But, unluckily for the assumption that it is his, that third line points straight at Polonius.

The first two lines call on Ophelia to doubt two indubitable truths sooner than doubt his devotion: that the stars are fire and that the sun moves. The third line, on the contrary, calls on her to doubt a manifest lie—that truth is a liar—sooner than doubt his love, causing the thought of the little poem not to rise to a climax but to fall into an absurdity. It is as if Hamlet had written:

*Doubt that one and one are two;
Doubt that two and two are four;
Doubt that three and three are seven;
But never doubt my love.*

But now look at it on the other assumption. Could the character of Polonius be more succinctly summed up than to say that he is a man who holds

truth to be a liar? His method of getting at what he considers the truth is—to lie. Why! to the puzzlement of many who have not sounded the depths of his mendacity, he can suborn to the purposes of falsehood even so fine a truth as

 ". . . to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man,"

making true in his own person for the moment the perverted proposition that truth is a liar. Indeed, a queer reversal of the usual procedure is in order where Polonius is concerned. In general the burden of proof is on anyone who contends that an apparently straightforward statement carries a crooked or sinister meaning. But with Polonius exactly the opposite is true. The burden of proof is on whoever takes anything that comes from him at face value. Like an habitual criminal, he is to be presumed guilty unless he can clear himself. The spirit, too, leaves its fingerprints, and it is practically an axiom that anything Polonius touches will carry the mark of his corruption. The third line of "Hamlet's" quatrain smells of a moral obliquity precisely like his own. Modern analytic psychology has shown over and over that it is in just such unconscious slips as this inversion—which, if occasioned by the demand for a rhyme, makes the case all the more convincing—we give ourselves away. And Shakespeare proves over and over that he anticipates analytic psychology on this point. That "doubt truth to be a liar" is almost as good as Polonius' initials under the signature "Hamlet"—or, shall we say, as his thumb print in the margin?

The remaining sentences of the letter speak for themselves. We have already

⁶ *Hamlet, op. cit.*, p. 182.

mentioned the word *machine*. "The advance of practical invention," says Kitzredge, "has made the word *machine* so familiar that it sounds hopelessly prosaic, but to Shakespeare's audience it was an 'elegant' term."⁷ Again, a Hamlet bent on the proprieties!

And then there is the word *art*. "I use no art," says Polonius just before he reads the letter, and, as if once were not enough, he repeats it, "I will use no art." "I have not art," says the letter itself. If Hamlet wrote it, this is, to say the least, a queer coincidence. But if the letter is a forgery, it is exactly the sort of clue⁸ we might expect Shakespeare to drop. Indeed, the word *art* in the letter is in itself a bit suspicious. Art, in its creative sense, was the interest closest to Hamlet's heart, while it was quite out of Polonius' range. But in its artificial sense nothing was dearer to Polonius than "art"—a conception and a word that were in neither the philosophy nor the vocabulary of Hamlet, except for purposes of derision. Again, his merciless parody of Osric comes to mind. In the light of it, one would like to hear Hamlet's opinion of "Hamlet's" letter to Ophelia.

The only alternative I can think of⁹

⁷ *Hamlet*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁸ The possible echo in "I am ill at these numbers" of Polonius' "That's an ill phrase" is scarcely worth mentioning.

⁹ It might for a moment be an alluring idea to suppose that Hamlet himself "forged" the letter and contrived to have it fall into the hands of Polonius. It would not be at all out of character. But it is affectation, not pretended madness, that the letter breathes, and if Shakespeare had intended to suggest that Hamlet was fooling Polonius be sure he would have given some further clue. There is all the difference in the world between a subtlety in Shakespearean interpretation that remains just a "bright idea" and one that specific points in the text immediately leap forward to confirm, as the Reynaldo scene clinches the idea that Polonius was

to the view that the letter isn't his is the theory that Hamlet himself passed through an Osrician stage of which the letter is a relic. Perhaps he did. Perhaps that accounts for his later violent antipathy to anything artificial. We are all of us likely to turn on whatever reminds us of one of our rejected selves with just such cynicism. But if once upon a time Hamlet was a creature of fashion, it must have been far in the past, for all the impressions we get from the text of what Hamlet was prior to his father's death indicate that he had long since been a disciple of naturalness and simplicity.

"Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice

And could of men distinguish,"

he declares, he had picked as his bosom friend not some rich and influential court favorite but the poor and inconspicuous Horatio. His advice to the Players reveals a similarly ingrained taste for the modest and unhistrionic in acting. And Ophelia's description of him as he was before his mind was supposedly overthrown confirms these impressions.

This maturity of judgment, taste, and character—not to mention the Shakespearean range and wisdom for which Hamlet is almost universally given credit—is not something to be acquired overnight. Ophelia could have been but the merest child at a time when Hamlet would have been capable of writing such a letter. If we ignore this chronological difficulty, and make the letter contemporary with the action of the play, we are caught on the other horn of the dilemma, for we are then compelled to believe that Ham-

capable of forgery or as the King's aside proves that at heart Claudius loathed artificial aids to beauty.

let's love, instead of being profound and tender, was little more than gallantry or sentimentalism, an idea, I believe, that outrages the instincts of all unprejudiced readers and mars the play in a dozen other respects. If a love such as could have produced that letter was all Hamlet had to give up in order to obey the injunction of the Ghost, his sacrifice was an easier one than has generally been held. That is the predicament in which this epistle to the most beautified Ophelia places us. If Polonius wrote it, all these difficulties disappear. If Hamlet's authorship of it is to be maintained, some equally satisfactory disposition of them is demanded.

The fact is that criticism has never really grappled with the problem of this letter. Instead, as we have seen, it has evaded it. And so—quite apart from its acceptance or rejection—I think the hypothesis of forgery has been worth raising, if it has compelled us to look this letter, and its implications, in the face. Forgery or no forgery, the consequences of confronting it squarely are considerable. A Hamlet freed of the responsibility of writing it is once and for all a different Hamlet from one who must shoulder that responsibility; while a Hamlet who has been a slave to courtly fashion is likewise a different man from one who has never been a victim of "the tune of the time."

And, similarly, with Polonius. The history of his role shows how many shades of interpretation his character is susceptible of—most of them, in all conscience, making him out bad enough. But if the count of the letter be added, as a cap-stone, to the rest of the indictment against him, his folly

is given a criminal edge, his fate an added irony and justice, that deepen the moral significance of his story and impart to it an extraordinary pertinence to our time.

Polonius is a perfect specimen of the despotic mind in its most cowardly aspect. Tyranny, as we have been learning over again to our bitter cost, proceeds by lying and violence: by lying if it can, by violence when it must—the one being the potential, the other the kinetic form of a Janus-faced entity for which we have no contemporary name but which we recognize as the god of all who put their trust in a union of mental and physical violence, or, to use the current nomenclature, in propaganda and the state. One of the two faces of that Janus is Polonius. So exactly is it that type for all time that not one feature of it has faded.

Forgery, thy name is Polonius!

It may seem a far cry from the Lord Chamberlain of Claudius' court and his domestic problems to the tremendous events of the present. But poetry, on whatever scale, has to do with things that remain the same for thousands of years, and one can never be certain that its most unconsidered trifle may not illuminate the most imposing of contemporary or historical events. The lies of Polonius led straight to his own death by violence and to the wholesale slaughter with which the drama of which he was one of the mainsprings ends. It is at least interesting to note that the greatest reign of violence the world has ever witnessed was formally initiated by what was perhaps the most striking symbolic forgery of all time: the Reichstag fire.