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The Contempt of Folly: Hamlet's View of Polonius

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THE CONTEMPT OF FOLLY: 
HAMLET'S VIEW OF POLONIUS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of the character, Polonius, in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Hamlet, a play about thinking, needs Polonius, the unthinking fool, in order to define Hamlet, the embodiment of mind. "Hamlet's transformation" (II.ii.5), as Claudius calls it, is caused by the human folly of men like Claudius and Polonius.

The first part of the paper focuses on Claudius' criminal folly and how he is able to produce and maintain supporters like Polonius. Because Polonius' folly makes him unable to understand what a human being is, he is easily manipulated by Claudius.

The paper then explores Polonius' use of language as a part of his folly, showing how his words contrast with Hamlet's.

The last part of the paper shows how Claudius' and Polonius' folly transforms them and others into beasts and how this prevents them from acting morally. Because folly does not lead to salvation, Polonius is harmful to his family, the state, and to himself. Hamlet opposes Claudius and Polonius, showing how contemplation and reason are every man's duty; it is man's defense against folly.
THE CONTEMPT OF FOLLY:

HAMLET'S VIEW OF POLONIUS
In his critical introduction to Hamlet, Harold Jenkins observes that "Hamlet's plight extends to the whole 'state of Denmark', where what is 'rotten', we may say, is that the god in man has succumbed to the beast." This "god in man" is represented as reason and the "beast" is represented as folly. In Hamlet, reason, the state of human intellect, is diametrically opposed to folly, the absence of mind. The play shows a conflict between the mind and the flesh, or more explicitly, between thinking and its opposite, human folly. Shakespeare uses this dichotomy, differentiating men from beasts, in order to define the nature of man and to determine man's duty to himself and to God. Hamlet's first soliloquy shows his reproach of his mother because she is no better than "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (I.ii.150). Hamlet is concerned with the state of the kingdom where "breaking down the pales and forts of reason" (I.iv.28) has become the custom. He speaks of and contemplates about reason because Hamlet knows that man is "noble in reason" (II.ii.304). Because Hamlet, a figure of reason and the embodiment of mind, knows that "godlike reason" (IV.iv.38) needs to be used, he has to struggle with and ultimately overcome the folly that opposes man's
The Oxford English Dictionary defines folly as "the quality or state of being foolish or deficient in understanding; want of good sense, weakness or derangement of mind; also, unwise conduct." And a fool is described as "one deficient in judgement or sense, one who acts or behaves stupidly, a silly person, a simpleton. (In Biblical use applied to vicious or impious persons)."

These definitions help to form an image of Hamlet's adversary throughout the play, but a Renaissance audience had a more precise impression of folly and the fool. The Renaissance image of folly takes into account the writings of ancient philosophers, the works of the Church fathers, and finally culminates in Erasmus' The Praise of Folly. Although Erasmus' Folly states that "all mankind is foolish," there is a difference between the folly of common men and the folly of pious men. Folly explains that the ordinary run of men regard with the greatest wonderment those things that are most corporeal; they think, in effect, that only such things really exist. But pious persons, on the other hand, the closer anything comes to the body, the less they regard it: they are completely taken up with the contemplation of invisible things. The others place most stress on riches, and next on bodily comforts, and last of all on the mind, which most of them don't really think exists anyway, because they do not see it with their eyes. Quite unlike these, the pious strive with all their hearts to reach God himself, who is purest and simplest of all; this world takes second place, and even here they place most stress on what comes
Folly praises the "ordinary run of men" for their foolish decisions because their choices lead to happiness and pleasure in this world. On the other hand, Folly states that "no fools seem more senseless than those people who have been completely taken up, once and for all, with a burning devotion to Christian piety." Folly, herself, acknowledges that the pious only "seem" to be fools. She considers the pious to be fools because they reject folly and the worldly delight that she alone provides. Folly boasts: "I alone bestow, all things on all men," and the pious Christian spurns these "things," preferring the contemplation of the invisible. For the pious, reason dictates that the mind is sovereign over any thing that the world or Folly offers. In the true fool, owing either to inherent tendencies or to ignorance, reason is at fault. Folly makes a man defective because he desires the corporeal over the divine. A man who ignores reason to be ruled by folly is not man; he is a beast.

Jenkins points out that

Hamlet's task, when placed in the widest moral context, is not simply to kill his father's killer but by doing so to rid the world of the satyr and restore it to Hyperion.

"To rid the world of the satyr" or the beastlike and "restore it to Hyperion" or godlike, means to eliminate human folly in order to restore reason to its rightful
place as ruler in man's life. Hamlet does this, not only in killing Claudius, but also in killing Polonius. Incorporating Erasmus' idea of mind or reason versus folly into Hamlet shows that Polonius' folly is as bestial as Claudius' criminal acts. Even if Shakespeare had not read Erasmus, he surely was familiar with the traditional Christian concept of folly that Erasmus set forth in the Renaissance. Shakespeare uses this concept to show the difference between Hamlet, a man, and Polonius, a beast.

Throughout the play, Hamlet's nemesis is human folly, first in the form of Claudius who is concerned with the "baser matter" (I.v.104), then, with Polonius who is full of self-love and ignorance. In the Christian tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas describes these two types of folly.

Folly...denotes dulness of sense in judging, and chiefly as regards the highest cause, which is the last end and the sovereign good. Now a man may in this respect contract dulness in judgment in two ways. First, from a natural indisposition, as in the case of idiots, and such folly is no sin. Secondly, by plunging his sense into earthly things, by which his sense is rendered incapable of perceiving Divine things...even as sweet things have no savour for a man whose taste is infected with an evil humour; and such folly is a sin.10

Claudius does not see "Divine things" because he is wrapped up in the "earthly things." His attempt to pray is thwarted because of the obsession with "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.55). Claudius kills King Hamlet
in a "foul murder" (III.iii.52) in order to acquire "those effects" (III.iii.54), those worldly things with little meaning. Claudius' life and pleasure center around what Erasmus calls the "three evils" in his earlier work concerning folly, The Enchiridion. These "evils" need to be avoided by the true Christian.

These are blindness, flesh, and infirmity. Blindness obscures the judgment of reason with a cloud of ignorance. Blindness so acts that we are well-nigh blinded in our delight toward things, pursuing the worst instead of the best, placing the better things lower in our estimation than the less useful. The flesh incites the passions, so that, even if we know what is best, yet we will love things opposite. Infirmitv so acts that we desert virtue once it has been snatched away, overcome as we are by boredom or temptation.

Revelling in the ceremonies and speeches of the court, Claudius is blinded to his crimes against virtue and custom. He is weakened by his sensual desire for Gertrude and his lust for drink. He takes custom and law to the limit with his fratricide and his marriage to Gertrude. Claudius knows that his "offence is rank, [that] it smells to heaven" (III.iii.36), but he is unwilling to give up his ill-gotten gains and repent, even though his soul is "struggling to be free" (III.iii.68).

Claudius' crimes are the extreme evil of "pursuing the worst instead of the best," but his evil is still human folly. Hamlet recognizes Claudius' crimes as a sign of folly. He shows this by his comic descriptions of Claudius. Even after learning from the Ghost that
Claudius has killed his father, Hamlet characterizes the king as a "mildew'd ear" (III.iv.64), "A king of shreds and patches" (III.iv.103), and a "bloat king" (III.iv.184). Hamlet ridicules Claudius and his position as king when he reminds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about "those that would make mouths at him" (II.ii.360) before Claudius became king. Claudius is not a successful dissembler who gets everything that he wants through crime because his folly makes him deficient in judgment, which makes it impossible for Claudius to know what anyone, including himself, needs. Claudius' folly leads to crime because he disregards reason in order to pursue the corporeal and the transient things of this world.

Claudius' crimes transform Denmark into "an unweeded garden/That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature/Possess it merely" (I.ii.135-37). The condition of Denmark is analogous to the state of England in Shakespeare's earlier play, Richard II. Under Richard's rule, England

Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers chok'd up,
Her fruit-trees all unprun'd, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars (III.iv.44-47).13

Because they are preoccupied with their own folly, both Richard and Claudius start the chain of events that puts their kingdoms in disorder. Richard, a "most degenerate king" (II.i.262),14 propagates subjects that are "The weeds which his broad-spreading leaves did shelter,/That
seem'd in eating him to hold him up" (III.iv.50-51),
just as Claudius breeds men like Polonius. Guildenstern calls Claudius' subjects, "those many many bodies.../That live and feed upon your Majesty" (III.iii.9-10). This shows the very dependent connection between the king and the public. Although both Richard and Claudius are destroyed, there is a difference in the seriousness of their folly. Richard's major fault is that he is wasteful and inattentive, while Claudius is criminal and immoral, making Claudius a more dangerous and difficult obstacle to overcome. Richard's followers recognize Richard's faults; they only "seem'd in eating him to hold him up," and Richard is easily overthrown. Claudius' followers "feed upon" him; they do not see his crimes, but grow in the evil along with him. Rosencrantz states that "The cess of majesty/Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw/What's near it with it" (III.iii.15-17). Claudius' crimes become the crimes of the state to sanction or censure. The Ghost tells Hamlet, "A serpent stung me--so the whole ear of Denmark/Is by a forged process of my death/Rankly abus'd" (I.v.36-38). Claudius' crimes affect everyone; "the whole ear of Denmark" is involved, and Hamlet, being "Our chiefest courtier" (I.ii.117), is the one "born to set it right" (I.v.197). Hamlet has to deal with Claudius' criminal folly and the folly that ensues because of his crimes. Claudius is the "massy
wheel" (III.iii.17), and Polonius is one of the "ten thousand lesser things/[that] Are mortis'd and adjoin'd" (III.iii.19-20). The folly that Claudius produces and maintains is seen in Polonius. Because Polonius' folly makes him proud and self-satisfied, he is ignorant of Claudius' crimes.

In order to keep "those effects" that Claudius is willing to kill for, he needs fools like Polonius who are so engrossed with themselves that they do not question or doubt themselves or others. Erasmus' Folly proclaims: "I follow that well known proverb which says that a person may very well praise himself if there happens to be no one else to praise him." Polonius agrees completely with Folly; there certainly is no one to praise him, and, therefore, Polonius praises himself above all others, proclaiming his infallibility. How self-righteous and silly Polonius sounds when he babbles on to the king and queen: "Hath there been such a time--I would fain know that--/That I have positively said 'Tis so',/When it prov'd otherwise?" (II.ii.153-55). Claudius answers, "Not that I know" (II.ii.155). But Claudius does not believe that Polonius is always right. After hearing Polonius' explanation for Hamlet's madness, it is Claudius who asks, "How may we try it further?" (II.ii.159). Also, he does not dismiss Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their investigation of Hamlet. Claudius is willing
to say that Polonius is always right, but he is unwilling to jeopardize his own position by having blind faith in anyone. He needs the assurance of "[trying] it further." Polonius does not doubt himself, but Claudius obviously does.

Claudius lets Polonius believe that he is wise in order to placate him. When Laertes wants permission to return to France, Claudius, seizing the opportunity to make Polonius feel important, asks, "Have you your father's leave? What says Polonius?" (I.ii.57). Claudius does not mind relinquishing what little is required to appease Polonius; he allows Polonius to speak for him. Polonius instigates the plan to spy on Hamlet in Gertrude's closet. He proposes to Claudius:

...after the play
Let his queen-mother all alone entreat him
To show his grief, let her be round with him,
And I'll be plac'd, so please you, in the ear
Of all their conference (III.i.183-87).

But, later, Polonius seems to forget that this plan is his idea; he gives the credit to Claudius:

My lord, he's going to his mother's closet.
Behind the arras I'll convey myself
To hear the process. I'll warrant she'll tax
him home,
And as you said--and wisely was it said--
'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
Since nature makes them partial, should o'erhear
The speech of vantage (III.iii.27-33).

Because Claudius permits Polonius to speak for him, Polonius believes that his own words are the king's. It gives Polonius a false sense of pride when he believes that
Claudius accepts everything that he says. But the self-importance that Polonius feels when he ascribes his own words to the king links Polonius to Claudius in ways that are absurd. Claudius allows Polonius to take his place physically behind the arras. It is difficult to determine who is more ridiculous, Polonius who devises this inappropriate plan, or the king who needs a spy in his wife's closet in order to get information. In any event, Polonius cannot possibly benefit from any information that he may receive by putting himself in this position, where he does not belong. But Polonius loves the attention, and Claudius benefits by bestowing it on him.

Claudius not only prolongs his own life by allowing Polonius to take his place behind the arras, but further benefits come when Claudius has to deal with Laertes. After Polonius' death, the crowd seems confused as to Polonius' position and Laertes' rights. They cheer, "'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king'" (IV.v.108). The king has not died, but Laertes and his followers think that Polonius' death somehow gives Laertes a claim to the kingship. This assumption stems from Laertes' own confusion about his father's importance under Claudius' reign. When Laertes thinks that he is the rightful successor to the throne, Claudius has very little trouble pacifying him (like father, like son). Claudius needs
to direct Laertes just as he directed Polonius. Claudius guides him, "Now must your conscience my acquittance seal,/And you must put me in your heart for friend" (IV.vii.1-2). Claudius can use his close connection to Polonius to manipulate Laertes in the plot to murder Hamlet. With just a little flattery, a few lies, and a secret plot, Laertes is in the king's power, willing to serve as did Polonius. Claudius gives Laertes everything that he wants to hear, telling him, "I lov'd your father, and we love ourself" (IV.vii.34), and Laertes believes as his father did, without thought. Claudius remains in power by transferring his feigned respect and affection from Polonius to Laertes. Polonius and Laertes believe that they are being rewarded by surrendering their thinking and reason to Claudius. Polonius is honored as the king's trusted counselor whose word is always right, and Laertes is promised the ardent revenge that he desires. Abandoning thought connects Polonius and Laertes closer to Claudius, but neither of them realizes that Claudius is the only one to benefit. Laertes, like his father, believes that he is helping himself by serving Claudius. Laertes does not realize that when Claudius tells him, "Requite him for your father" (IV.vii.138), "your father" can easily be replaced by "your king," and so the folly extends with the next generation, prolonging Claudius' life, his reign, and the evil in Denmark.
Although the problems that plague the court at Elsinore start with Claudius, the king is not the only person to blame for the disasters that follow his initial act of murder. Even though Polonius evidently has no physical part in the murder of King Hamlet, he is still involved. Joan Webber points out that

Surrounded by people who accept the way things are, and who depend upon authority for security and direction, he [Claudius] can quite easily substitute himself for the former ruler [because] the Polonius family and their like have no way to organize their lives except in relation to the king, whoever he may be.17

But the belief that the king provides stability is not a sufficient reason to entrust him with one's moral responsibility. Even though Polonius does not know all the treachery behind Claudius' kingship, he should have questioned the situation of "mirth in funeral" and "dirge in marriage" (I.ii.12). Polonius' life and his position at the court seem "to depend upon a reduction or unwitting denial of awareness."18 Polonius does not merely disregard the moral as well as legal uncertainties of Claudius' reign; he actually is not aware that there are any problems. Polonius as Claudius' "right-hand" man is at the top of the list of those who "have freely gone/With this affair along" (I.ii.15-16). The facade of Claudius' court that fulfills the needs and desires of Polonius is not good enough for Hamlet. Hamlet knows that "The time is out of joint" (I.v.196) because of "damned custom"
(III.iv.37). Customs should not be considered "actions fair and good" (III.iv.165) only because they are customs. Hamlet recognizes that Claudius is disguising "habits evil" (III.iv.164) with the acceptable label of custom and that customs should be changed. He complains to Horatio about Claudius' drinking parties; he observes: "to my mind, though I am native here/And to the manner born, it is a custom/More honour'd in the breach than in the observance" (I.iv.14-16). Just as drunkenness clouds the senses, drunkenness obscures any reputation that the Danes may have. In effect, drunkenness becomes their reputation, and Hamlet does not appreciate this attribute ascribed to himself or to the state. Hamlet comes to this conclusion because he has thought about it. It does not matter if he is "native here/And to the manner born." Hamlet's only concern is with what is in his "mind." Hamlet does not understand how the Grave-digger can sing while he works, how "custom hath made it in him a property of easiness" (V.i.67). The Grave-digger's singing is harmless, but other habits and customs are perilous and even sinful. Richard Hooker's Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, which defends the Church of England during the Renaissance, gives an idea of the Renaissance view on custom. Hooker points out the problems with custom; he states that

lewde and wicked custome, beginning perhaps at the first amongst few, afterwards spreading
into greater multitudes, and so continuing from time to time, may be of force even in plaine things to smother the light of naturall understanding, because men will not bend their wits to examine, whether things wherewith they have bene accustomed, be good or evill.19

Although custom starts with only a few, it spreads like a disease, shrouding "naturall understanding." What men normally would and should see is no longer visible. Men do not look beyond the habit for motives or effects. Custom becomes the answer without ever examining the question. Polonius is unaware of Claudius' evil because he accepts the king without question. Because of the king's position, whether because of his privilege, his power, his nature, or his law, Polonius assumes that Claudius is synonymous with right. Following the king without thought is a "habit, that too much o'erleavens/The form of plausible manners" (I.iv.29-30). This habit is the "vicious mole of nature" (I.iv.24) in Polonius that contributes to his corruption.

Custom, however, is not all there is to Polonius' folly. Polonius is a man who does not act his age. Hamlet considers Polonius one of "These tedious old fools" (II.ii.219), but he also calls him, "That great baby" (II.ii.378). Erasmus' Folly shows the connection between old age and babies, explaining that "the allurement of folly, which Nature in her wisdom purposely provided to newborn babes,"20 completely occupies old Polonius because folly "[brings] those who already have one foot
in the grave, back once more as close as possible to
childhood." In his old age, which should be a time of wisdom and understanding, Polonius is like a child. He is carefree, selfish, and irresponsible. He is dependent on others for praise and his sense of self-worth. A child needs to be the center of attention, to know everyone's business, and to be involved in everyone's affairs. These characteristics are expected in a child, but not in the king's counselor who should show some mature intelligence. But Polonius prefers to be an impertinent meddlesome child.

It would be simple to call Polonius one of Aquinas' "idiots" and not blame him, but he cannot keep his folly to himself. Polonius becomes culpable for his folly because he does not "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house" (III.i.133-34). He desires and seeks attention, not caring about anyone but himself. Polonius is a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" (III.iv.31) because he advises the king without being asked, without being needed, and without thinking. Claudius may not always trust or believe in Polonius, but the king does allow Polonius to speak freely and to act out his foolish plots. Ironically, in his position as Claudius' counselor, Polonius becomes an inverted royal jester. A court fool is allowed to act the fool, and in the process, he delivers a message
of truth and wisdom. Polonius acts the wise counselor, and he is granted the privilege of playing the fool and speaking folly. Hamlet calls Polonius "a foolish prating knave" (III.iv.217). In his ignorance, Polonius is incapable of distinguishing between wisdom and folly. His folly becomes immoral knavery because Polonius professes good judgment when he knows nothing. His foolishness makes him a knave because Polonius unwittingly goes along with the king. Believing that Claudius is the rightful king without question makes Polonius an accomplice in Claudius' crimes. Because he is taken in by the king's deception, Polonius himself becomes a deceiver. Ironically, Polonius deceives himself more than anyone else because he never learns the truth; he goes to his death not knowing. He may not be as wicked as Claudius, that "arrant knave" (I.v.130), but Polonius' folly makes him a knave just the same.

Hamlet gives the distinction, "knave," to Polonius mainly because of his love of "prating." A counselor should advise, not prate, but Polonius' babble is not sensible or properly thought out. Talking makes Polonius feel important, but his chatter interferes with everyone's life. Nowhere is Polonius' folly more pronounced than in his words. Paul A. Jorgensen points out that "words (as well as all related references to speech) form a large and oppressive part of the world in which Hamlet
moves and seeks corrective action." Polonius is a major contributor to the oppression with his incessant chatter, which ultimately reveals the type of man that Polonius is. First of all, if speech is "that truest mirror of the mind," as Erasmus' Folly states, then Polonius does not have a mind. Most of Polonius' speeches do not make sense. He tries to explain his scheme:

...And now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect,
Or rather say the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause
(II.ii.100-103).

Polonius' speech, which is supposed to be an explanation, is certainly the cause, or rather say, the defective cause, which results in the effect of confusion.

In "The Imagery of Hamlet," W.H. Clemen calls Polonius' use of language the "conventional mode of speech." Clemen professes that the language of the King and the Queen, of Laertes and Polonius...treads the well-worn paths; it is less novel, because the people by whom it is spoken are not in need of a new form of expression.

Clemen's evaluation is not exactly accurate. The language is "conventional," but everyone is following the conventions established by Claudius. It is unreasonable to think that people expressed themselves in the same way under King Hamlet's rule. Because Claudius' reign begins with crime and deception, Claudius does need "a new form of expression" in order to promote the illusion of a stable
kingdom. Given that Claudius' acts are unspeakable, his words need to be inadequate for understanding. Because he wants to protect his secrets, Claudius cannot reveal what needs to be said and known. In act one, scene two, in Claudius' first speech in the play, he attempts to cover his crimes with an abundance of ornate language. He wants his words, not the actual state of affairs, to provide the stability for his kingdom. But Claudius confuses others with his language because he is confused about what he is saying; he cannot keep his lies separate from the facts. He reminds everyone of King Hamlet's death by stating that "The memory be green" (I.ii.2) and that Gertrude is "our sometime sister, now our queen" (I.ii.8). Both statements inadvertently point to the inappropriateness of Claudius' marriage. Claudius links words such as "wisest sorrow" (I.ii.6) and "defeated joy" (I.ii.10), which do not make sense. This certainly is a "novel" way of communicating. His words are incongruous, which makes his pronouncements confusing. The only thing that Claudius' language reveals is that the kingdom is in disorder.

Polonius is merely following Claudius' example when he speaks, using words to replace emotions, common sense, and even facts. Polonius seems to use words to conceal the fact that he actually has nothing significant to say. And even if he has something to say, his words
get in the way, becoming a hindrance to understanding. Polonius can recite "brevity is the soul of wit" (II.ii.90), but the "man" has no wit, and, therefore, he cannot be brief. For Polonius, the more words, the better. He describes the Players to Hamlet:

"The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited" (II.ii.392-96).

This speech gives a good example of Polonius' use of language. He lists words, in no particular order, with no specific meaning, that no one can comprehend. The usefulness of Polonius' words becomes evident when he twice announces things to Hamlet that he already knows. After Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that the Players are coming, Hamlet sees Polonius approaching, and he mocks, "I will prophesy he comes to tell me of the players" (II.ii.382). True to form, Polonius announces, "The actors are come hither, my lord" (II.ii.388). Polonius does this again; when Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that his mother wishes to speak with him (III.ii.322-23), Polonius repeats the words without conveying any information: "My lord, the Queen would speak with you" (III.ii.365). For Polonius, the words alone are sufficient, but no one benefits by his prattle because no one is capable of listening to him for any length of time.

Polonius is continually questioning people to see
if they are paying attention. He asks: "Look you, sir" (II.i.6); "do you mark this, Reynaldo?" (II.i.15); "Mark you" (II.i.42); "See you now" (II.i.62); and "You have me, have you not?" (II.i.68). After listening to Polonius, it does not take very long to realize that it is impossible to follow his words. Because Polonius does not use any logic in his speech, his way of communicating is not logical. He never communicates, making it useless to listen to him. Another reason that no one is listening is because Polonius is a master of officiousness. His advice to his children is always a set of maxims. Polonius does not realize that "so long as one stays within the guidelines of textbook rules for behavior, he can be terribly misled."

Polonius has memorized the rules for behavior for his recitation, but he does not have any personal experience with which to support his words, making his advice rather hollow and unnecessary. Polonius' guidance is not very important when his advice to Laertes is only given because Laertes takes a "second leave" (I.iii.54). Laertes has obviously already said his goodbye and should be on his way to France. Polonius asks, "Yet here, Laertes?" (I.iii.55). Polonius did not expect to see his son, but Laertes' delay gives Polonius an opportunity to lecture. Polonius' recited platitudes are only a second thought. It gives him an excuse to talk. If Polonius was genuinely concerned with instructing
his son, he would have advised Laertes the first time that he took his leave, but Polonius is not interested in teaching his children or advising anyone. Polonius is a fool because he never makes the connection that no one is listening because he is not saying anything worth listening to. Because he is more concerned with words and talking than with meanings and teaching, Polonius neglects his duty not only to Claudius, but also to his children.

Polonius' advice and counseling never lead to discussion, debate, or even questions, which shows that no one is really learning anything from Polonius. Polonius' use of language is ludicrous, but it is also morally wrong. In *The Teacher*, St. Augustine gives a Christian insight into talking and teaching. He states that

> If some talkative person, with an infatuation for words, should say, 'I teach in order to talk,' you or any other person capable of discerning the true value of things might well reply: 'Dear man, why do you not rather talk in order to teach?' 27

Laertes and Ophelia cannot learn "the true value of things" because their father uses rhetoric improperly in place of thinking, and passes this on to his children. Polonius looks for opportunities to talk, not to teach. Teaching becomes the excuse, not the reason for talking. Because teaching is a pretext, no one ever learns, and those who rely on his distorted rhetoric are confused, ignorant, or both. Ophelia takes her father's advice to heart.
(if not to mind); she can reflect Polonius' words back
to others. It is her defense if she catches herself
thinking on her own. Ophelia is left to her own defenses
because she never really learns anything from her father.

Although passionate and impetuous, Laertes' attempted
rebellion against Claudius is the one time that he might
have done something right, but "Laertes, the rebel, paused
and let himself be disarmed by words." After neatly
breaking through Claudius' guards and the doors, Laertes
cannot manage an attack against Claudius' lies. He is
defenseless, being transformed from a raging insurrectionist
into what Claudius calls "a good child and a true gentleman"
(IV.v.148). Because of Polonius' conditioning, Claudius
can easily maneuver Laertes with a few speeches. But
Claudius is no more "capable of discerning the true value
of things" than Polonius is. Doris V. Falk believes
that "one reason--among many--that Claudius' words lack
the ring of sincerity and grate upon Hamlet is that they,
like those of Polonius, represent hackneyed conventions." "Hackneyed conventions" are the only language that Laertes
knows. First, Laertes listens to Polonius talk without
saying anything worth listening to, and then, he listens
to Claudius, whose language is guarded. Laertes may
not understand what is being said, but because it is
familiar, he believes that their perverted rhetoric is
safe and right. It causes his downfall because Laertes'
education did not include St. Augustine's warning that he who is foolish and abounds in eloquence is the more to be avoided the more he delights his auditor with those things to which it is useless to listen so that he thinks that because he hears a thing said eloquently it is true.30

Laertes, Polonius, and all of those who follow Claudius seem to do the opposite; for them, eloquence is truth, and they are absurdly drawn to it, not realizing that they are following a void.

Polonius' eloquence is truly artificial. It would be interesting and amusing to hear Polonius' answer if someone should ask, "What?" or "Could you explain that?" because he does not know what he is saying. After announcing to the king that "Th' ambassadors from Norway, my good Lord,/Are joyfully return'd" (II.ii.40-41), Claudius declares that Polonius is always "the father of good news" (II.ii.42). Polonius, who cannot remember what he has said, asks, "Have I, my lord?" (II.ii.43). Polonius cannot remember what he has said because none of his words are his own. He is bubbling with textbook maxims, and recited platitudes, but his listeners can always ask themselves, "Where have we heard this before?" Polonius imitates everything and everyone. At times, this becomes ridiculous. Hamlet has a little fun because of Polonius' mimicry.

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius: By th' mass and 'tis-like a camel indeed.
Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius: It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet: Or like a whale.
Polonius: Very like a whale (III.ii.367-73).

Polonius does not know what he is saying, and he does not really care. He is so busy with the art of speaking, that he is not concerned with the effect of his words or those of anyone else. When Hamlet and the Player recite Aeneas' speech, Polonius only comments on the mechanics, praising, "well spoken, with good accent and good discretion" (II.ii.462-63), and complaining, "This is too long" (II.ii.494). Polonius seems shocked when the Player "has tears in's eyes" (II.ii.515-16), and he demands, "Prithee no more" (II.ii.516). He is uncomfortable when the words affect the Player because Polonius does not know that words are supposed to produce a meaningful effect. He does not know that words are supposed to signify something in order to produce an intent, or that a person should talk, intending to make something known by words. He does not react appropriately to what anyone else is saying, and likewise, Polonius does not expect anyone to have any significant response to his own words.

Because Polonius does not listen to what anyone is actually saying, he does not pay attention to his own words. Because he only knows how to repeat and recite, Polonius gets lost in his words, not knowing what he has said, what he is saying, or even what he is going
to utter next. While speaking to Reynaldo, Polonius loses his place: "And then, sir, does a this—a does—what was I about to say? By the mass, I was about to say something. Where did I leave?" (II.i.50-52). When Polonius loses his place, his speech changes from verse to prose. When Reynaldo repeats Polonius' last line, Polonius continues the speech in verse right where he left off. The shift in his mode of speaking shows a lack of consciousness in Polonius; reciting does not require thought.

Polonius does not have any soliloquies because he does not bother to contemplate anything before he speaks; his words have no thought behind them. Polonius uses clichés because, as Clemen observes, "a general saying carries no sense of personal obligation; it places a distance between the speaker and what he would say." Polonius' children also abandon the "personal obligation" of thought. At the beginning of act one, scene three, Ophelia seems to think of Hamlet as a sincere suitor, but Laertes tells her: "Think it no more" (I.iii.10). Laertes wants Ophelia to replace anything that she thinks with his glib speech on love and the Prince's place in the kingdom. And Ophelia stops thinking and turns over her mind to Laertes' words. She states: "'Tis in my memory lock'd,/And you yourself shall keep the key of it" (I.iii.85-86). Her memory is filled with his words,
not something that she considers for herself. Ophelia gives up the responsibility for herself because she does not think in order to understand and make decisions. Laertes is also safe from any responsibility. Because his words are not his own considered evaluation of Ophelia's situation, but seem to be of the same vein as Polonius' precepts, Laertes maintains that "distance" between himself and any "personal obligation" that he has for Ophelia or even himself.

This "distance" is what keeps Claudius in power. Claudius does not want Polonius, Laertes, Gertrude, or any of his subjects to think for themselves. Claudius sends his ambassadors to Norway instructing,

...we here dispatch
You, good Cornelius, and you, Voltemand,
For bearers of this greeting to old Norway,
Giving to you no further personal power
To business with the King more than the scope
Of these dilated articles allow (I.ii.33-38).

Claudius does not want the ambassadors to add anything of their own to his articles. He wants them to carry out his orders without thought. Claudius knows that thinking gives "personal power." The reason that Claudius fears Hamlet is because he does not know what Hamlet is thinking. There is no problem with knowing what Polonius is thinking; his words are transparent, showing that he is thinking nothing.

Avoiding thought to avoid responsibility becomes dangerous when people believe Polonius and base their
actions on his trite expressions and his twisted beliefs. Polonius' children fare poorly because of his counseling. Laertes follows Polonius' advice to "Give thy thoughts no tongue, /Nor any unproportion'd thought his act" (I.iii.59-60), and he is stifled by Claudius. Polonius tells Ophelia, "Think yourself a baby" (I.iii.105), and she gives up any reason and will she may have had. Even Claudius seems to be digging his grave a little deeper every time he acts on something that Polonius utters. Polonius' conclusion about Hamlet's madness, "This is the very ecstasy of love" (II.i.102), is completely wrong. Polonius does not change his belief even after he sees and hears Hamlet and Ophelia together. Claudius also sees and hears Hamlet and Ophelia, and he does not come to the same conclusion that Polonius has. But Claudius' sensible, self-preserving plan to send Hamlet to England is delayed because of Polonius' belief. Claudius is a fool to listen to Polonius, but is not Polonius more harmful by advising the king without thought? In his book, Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments, Robert G. Hunter observes that Claudius "lacks neighbors to lend him spiritual aid." Claudius may not heed advice from anyone that goes against his own desires, but with Polonius as his counselor, Claudius is deprived of any type of wisdom that may have helped him to pray or make morally correct decisions. Polonius shirks his
duty to the king, his children, and to himself. Polonius' babble is more than just comic relief; his words prove dangerous to anyone who listens to him and to Polonius himself.

Appropriately, Polonius causes his own death because he cannot shut up. As Polonius slips behind the arras, he tells the queen, "I'll silence me even here" (III.iv.4). When the queen yells, "Help, ho!" (III.iv.21), Polonius mimics, "What ho! Help!" (III.iv.22). "She cries for help, and Polonius reflects her cry unthinkingly. For this mutual opacity, Polonius dies at once." Polonius dies because he cannot keep silent, but ironically, he does silence himself. By putting himself in the position behind the arras, he causes his own death and is permanently silenced. As Hamlet, "lugs the guts" (III.iv.214) of Polonius out of his mother's closet, he states: "This counsellor/Is now most still, most secret, and most grave,/Who was in life a foolish prating knave" (III.iv.215-17). Polonius wastes his life spouting useless information and unwanted advice to the king, his children, and anyone else that he can manage to detain. Hamlet realizes that "to be too busy is some danger" (III.iv.33), and that Polonius' position as a counselor demands that he be contemplative, serious, and sometimes even silent. But Polonius does not exhibit any of these qualities until after he is dead. Polonius' own words kill him;
his words start the chain of events that destroys his family and Hamlet's. Undoubtedly, Polonius' rash, absurd speech and his mindless use of language are folly. His speech shows that Polonius does not use reason. Failing to be commanded by reason is the folly that causes the corruption in Denmark.

Hamlet's problem is not simply with the corrupt acts that make "Something...rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90); his problem is intensified by the lies, rhetoric, and disguising language that conceal the evil acts.

Hamlet has, therefore, not only a moral murkiness to fight his way through; he has to deal with a linguistic haze that clothes prettily, comfortably, or cleverly all the corruption that he must expose.34

Most of Claudius' subjects are deceived by an illusion caused by words. It is Claudius' ability to make adroit remarks, "With witchcraft of his wit" (I.v.43), that enables him to seduce King Hamlet's queen. Claudius is able to "sugar o'er/The devil himself" (III.i.48-49) with his "most painted word" (III.i.53), making the incongruous idea of "mirth in funeral and...dirge in marriage" (I.ii.12) a reasonable concept to the "distracted multitude" (IV.iii.4). Claudius manipulates Laertes with his flattery and tries to do the same with Hamlet, calling him, "my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (I.ii.64), but Hamlet rejects Claudius, knowing the incestuous implications of linking "cousin" and "son." Hamlet can
see that acting morally is impeded by the cover-up caused by words. Just as Polonius' folly is revealed through his words, "our moral impression of Hamlet's character derives primarily from what he says rather than what he does."\(^3\)

Hamlet knows when to speak and when not to speak. After hearing about the Ghost, Hamlet proclaims, "If it assume my noble father's person/I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape/And bid me hold my peace" (I.ii.244-46). Hamlet believes that speaking to the Ghost is an opportunity. On this occasion, speaking is beneficial. Unlike Polonius, Hamlet knows that speaking is not always necessary. While discussing the Ghost, with Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo, Hamlet requests that "whatsomever else shall hap tonight,/ Give it an understanding but no tongue" (I.ii.249-50). But silence does not necessarily mean ignorance, and repeating information does not make it true, as Polonius thinks. Hamlet comes to Ophelia's closet "As if he had been loosed out of hell/To speak of horrors" (II.i.83-84). Polonius wants to know, "What said he?" (II.i.86), but Hamlet had chosen not to speak to Ophelia. Going only on Ophelia's description, Polonius runs to the king believing that "This must be known" (II.i.118). Polonius believes that if he repeats something, it is true and that this truth, which is based on his words alone, is inviolable. In
the nunnery scene after Hamlet speaks his mind to Ophelia, Claudius observes, "Love? His affections do not that way tend,/Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,/Was not like madness" (III.i.164-66). But Polonius ignores Hamlet's words, preferring to base his truth on his own words. Because Polonius does not convey any meaning with his own words, he does not look for meaning in the words of others. While Polonius rarely asks a question (and if he does, he already has his own answer), Hamlet is always questioning. Hamlet questions Horatio extensively about the Ghost, knowing that words help to acquire information and knowledge. He tells the Ghost: "O answer me./Let me not burst in ignorance" (I.iv.45-46). Hamlet can admit his ignorance and ask for answers. He knows that if the Ghost speaks, his words will be significant, as words should be. He wants the Ghost to speak, expecting to find assistance in his words. Like St. Augustine, Hamlet believes "that the two reasons for speaking are either to teach or to recall something, whether to others or to ourselves." 36 Human speech is a gift from God; it is a tool to be used to teach or to aid memory. Language serves as a means to understanding others and oneself.

Hamlet shows that he knows the significance of speech by his many soliloquies. Hamlet's soliloquies are his means to remember and learn through self-reflection.
The words that Hamlet speaks in his soliloquies show that he is thinking. His words reveal the progression of his thoughts throughout the play, showing his reasons for acting or not acting. Unlike Polonius, whose mind is filled with rhetoric, Hamlet knows the value of simple contemplation. Thinking and evaluating thoughts reveals the inner man, and words become a means to understanding and knowledge. Polonius does not use words or speak for the right reasons. He speaks because he loves to hear his own prattle. But, Hamlet knows that "there is nothing behind all this but an empty head,"\(^{37}\) which is not the proper milieu to foster speech. Words need thought for support.

For Hamlet, Polonius' words alone are not enough; he recognizes the foolishness of artificial eloquence. Hamlet tells the Players,

\[\ldots\]O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise (III.ii.8-12).

This "robustious periwig-pated fellow" is none other than Laertes at Ophelia's grave where he gives the "speech o' fire" (IV.vii.189) that was earlier doused by his weeping. Falk notes that

Laertes has not only his father's sententiousness but also his penchant for rhetoric and self-dramatization, and, of course, for 'unproportion'd thought' and its precipitate act.\(^{38}\)
Hamlet almost seems to sense danger in Laertes' unreasonable speech. He becomes angry and defensive, asking not "who is he," but "What is he whose grief/Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow/Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand/Like wonder wounded hearers?" (V.i.247-50). Hamlet recognizes the madness in excessive language; he has heard it before from Claudius and Polonius. "Hamlet prefers to keep his language within the scope of reality, indeed, within the everyday world." Gertrude thinks that Hamlet speaks madness, but Hamlet knows: "It is not madness/That I have utter'd. Bring me to the test,/And I the matter will re-word, which madness/Would gambol from" (III.iv.143-46). No one understands Hamlet because everyone has accepted the misused rhetoric of men like Claudius and Polonius as truth. Because everyone has given up individual thought, their thinking is replaced by a belief in the lies and deception.

Hamlet needs to look beyond the covering of words to find the truth. If Hamlet takes vengeance at once, he would only be acting on the Ghost's word. This is not sufficient; Hamlet states that "I'll have grounds/More relative than this" (II.ii.599-600). Words in themselves are not enough when words are associated with actions. In the same soliloquy, Hamlet chastises himself because he "can say nothing" (II.ii.564) and because he "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (II.ii.581).
But he is actually angry because he is unable (or unwilling) to act in his revenge. Hamlet wants his speaking and acting to connect, but the words that come to mind in his soliloquy do not coincide with how Hamlet believes he should act. He tells the Players, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (III.ii.17-19). Both, Claudius and Polonius "o'erstep...the modesty of nature." Claudius conceals his crimes by pacifying his subjects with feigned flattery and false images of a stable kingdom. Polonius accepts all that Claudius offers and adds his own deceit in the form of spying and false eloquence. When Claudius cannot pray, he recognizes that "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (III.iii.97-98). But Claudius is not concerned with his thoughts as much as he is with relinquishing "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.55). Claudius can say "Forgive me my foul murder" (III.iii.52), but the words, even if they are inspired by a sincere thought, are meaningless without the act of Claudius giving up his ill-gotten gains. In order to be sincere, Claudius' thoughts, words, and actions cannot conflict. If the words in Hamlet's soliloquy showed that he thought that instant revenge was acceptable, Hamlet would act. Hamlet may "lose the name of action" (III.i.88), but
he is unwilling to throw "Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit" (IV.v.132) as Laertes does, acting without thought. Thoughts, words, and actions need to be connected in Hamlet's world in order to come to morally correct decisions.

Polonius' words relate to nothing because he never thinks or considers ethical questions before he speaks. When Ophelia tells her father that Hamlet "hath given countenance to his speech.../With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (I.iii.113-14), Polonius demands, "Do not believe his vows" (I.iii.127). First of all, Polonius has no reason to believe that Ophelia is unworthy, telling her, "Lord Hamlet is a prince out of thy star" (II.ii.141). The queen herself tells Ophelia, "I do wish/That your good beauties be the happy cause/Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues/Will bring him to his wonted way again" (III.i.38-41). At Ophelia's grave, Gertrude laments, "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (V.i.237). But because Polonius only deals in words, never looking for meaning or thought, he can easily reject Hamlet's words, "the holy vows of heaven." St. Augustine looks to Cicero for the moral responsibilities of an orator. Cicero recognizes the damage that a man like Polonius can cause. He states:

After long thought, I have been led by reason itself to hold this opinion first and foremost, that wisdom without eloquence does too little for the good of states, but that eloquence
without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous and is never helpful. Therefore if anyone neglects the study of philosophy and moral conduct, which is the highest and most honourable of pursuits, and devotes his whole energy to the practice of oratory, his civic life is nurtured into something useless to himself and harmful to his country.  

Polonius does not "study" anything. He does not take the time for the earnest effort or deep thought that is necessary for careful examination of any subject or event. For Polonius, "the practice of oratory" is a senseless habit rather than a proficient exercise of an art that should be helpful to others. Polonius is harmful to his family and to the state because he speaks just for the sake of speaking. Being without wisdom, Polonius' words do not convey any useful information; they do not teach or aid memory in himself or others; they are just words. But "if words be made of breath,/And breath of life" (III.iv.199-200), then words become life and should bear the same meanings and values that life holds. Hamlet shows that he believes that words do equal life with his last words, "the rest is silence" (V.ii.363).  

Not only do Polonius' words intrude where they do not belong, but he is always anxious to be involved in everyone's affairs. Polonius thinks that he can find truth by spying. He gets all of his information in devious ways; he spies on both of his children. Polonius tells Ophelia: "'Tis told me he hath very oft of late/Given private time to you" (I.iii.91-92) and "If it be so--
as so 'tis put on me" (I.iii.94). Polonius does not need to question Ophelia; he has gotten his answers from someone else. In France, Laertes is not safe from his father's spies; Polonius sends Reynaldo "to make inquire/Of his behaviour" (II.i.4-5). Polonius sets up the situation with Ophelia to spy on Hamlet, and, therefore, find out the truth behind Hamlet's madness. But Polonius never gains any truth or wisdom even when he puts himself in the precarious position behind the arras. In The Enchiridion, Erasmus points out that

They call a person skilled and dexterous who, laying hold of every little rumor, knows everything that goes on in the world...him who is practiced in chattering about all sorts of business, among all kinds of men, they call wise. What is more ignorant, than to inquire into those things which take place far away and have nothing to do with you...Fruitless is the wisdom of him who has no knowledge of himself.41

Polonius does not have any knowledge of himself or anyone else. He is "a master of indirect means of getting at the truth...[but] of true wisdom he has never had a gleam."42 Delighted with the gossip and the personal concerns of others, Polonius seems to think that he will be wise if he finds out about or gets involved in everyone else's affairs. Perhaps because he himself is insincere, Polonius acts as if the truth is some illusive secret that can only be known by devious means. But Polonius never finds out the truth about himself or anyone else.

One of the reasons that Polonius does not have any
knowledge is because he makes no connection between his senses and his beliefs. He does not acknowledge what he perceives and he does not perceive what he acknowledges. Polonius cannot make a connection between his senses and his beliefs because in order for him to be "always right," he needs to ignore anything that proves him wrong. When he first reveals Hamlet's love for Ophelia, Polonius tells Claudius, "When I had seen this hot love on the wing" (II.ii.132). But Polonius has not "seen" anything; he has not "perceiv'd it" (II.ii.133) as he claims. All of Polonius' information is second-hand, coming from one of his spies or from Ophelia. It is not only Polonius' sight that is useless. He hears Hamlet reject Ophelia in the nunnery scene. He acknowledges, "We heard it all" (III.i.182), but Polonius ignores what he hears, proclaiming, "But yet do I believe/The origin and commencement of his grief/Sprung from neglected love" (III.i.178-80). Polonius wants another trial for Hamlet with Gertrude where he will be "in the ear/Of all their conference" (III.i.186-87), but this would not change Polonius' set views because he rejects anything that refutes his beliefs even when his senses tell him that he is wrong. Polonius separates mind and body ("Take this from this" (II.ii.156)) because everything he thinks is "otherwise" (II.ii.156) from what he perceives. Nigel Alexander recognizes that "the part that Polonius imagines
Hamlet to be playing—a cunning false-seemer gratifying his lust by fraud and guile—is an accurate picture of the King of Denmark." But Polonius, the fool, cannot "see" it. Erasmus' Folly acknowledges that if a person is deceived not only in the perceptions of his senses but also in the judgments of his mind, and if his deception is continual and beyond the usual share, only then will he be thought to verge on madness.

Calling Polonius mad may be an exaggeration, but given that Polonius is not lacking in the physical senses, his perceptions show that he is lacking sense when it comes to the ability to understand. He is senseless when it comes to normal intelligence and judgment. It is the part of Polonius' folly that does not allow him to recognize Hamlet's value or Claudius' worthlessness.

Hamlet seems to be the only person who recognizes the true nature of human beings. He is aware of their folly because he uses reason. When Hamlet states, "I know not 'seems'" (I.ii.76), he means that he does not live by "actions that a man might play" (I.ii.84). Hamlet's reality comes from "that within which passes show" (I.ii.85). Manipulation and the folly that ensues do not lead to any reality or wisdom. "According to the Stoic definition, wisdom consists in nothing but being led by reason and, conversely, folly is defined as being swept along at the whim of emotion."

Polonius, who does not even have the excuse of emotion behind his folly,
never uses reason. In a world where all acts should be connected to reason, Polonius becomes an obstacle to moral principles and standards that all men should follow. Hamlet knows that

...he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unus'd (IV.iv.36-39).

The "sovereignty of reason" (I.iv.73) should be the supreme ruler in man. Polonius, as part "of the distracted multitude,/Who like not in their judgment" (IV.iii.4-5), never comes close to truth or wisdom because "what we call knowledge is the same thing as what we perceive by our reason." Polonius has no justification for his behavior; his actions are not impulsive, spontaneous, compulsive, and certainly not instinctive to humans. His unthinking acts may be enigmatic, but they are still irresponsible and, therefore, immoral. Hamlet does not want to act without reason because reason is the regulator in man's nature.

To find the moral solutions to questions such as, "Must I remember?" (I.ii.143), "Shall I couple hell?" (I.v.93), and "To be, or not to be" (III.i.56), Hamlet turns to reason to find understanding. His soliloquies show how reason rules Hamlet's life. The "To be, or not to be" soliloquy begins with the premise of all contemplation--"the question" (III.i.56). Hamlet does not know the answers; he needs reason in order to find
solutions to human problems. In Hamlet's soliloquy in act one, scene two, he asks, "Must I remember?" Hamlet realizes that he must remember, that "godlike reason" needs to be used, and that contemplation is his duty. He continues in act three, scene one, asking,

    Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
    The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
    Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
    And by opposing end them (III.i.57-60).

Hamlet wants to know what is "nobler." His decisions are based on the moral qualities of his choices. But these moral qualities are only determined "in the mind." He does not take into consideration any duty he may feel toward the kingdom, his father or mother, or even himself. In the pious man, reason leads to a contemplation of death. Death is "a consummation/Devoutly to be wish'd" (III.i.63-64). Erasmus' Folly states that

    Christians essentially agree with Platonists that the mind is buried and bound in bodily chains and that it is prevented by the body's grossness from contemplating and enjoying things as they truly are. Thus, he defines philosophy as a meditation on death, because philosophy frees the mind from visible and bodily things, just as death itself does.47

Hamlet wishes that his "too too sullied flesh would melt" (I.ii.129) because flesh fouls the mind. Hamlet thinks of death because death is the only means to get closer to God. Erasmus' Folly boasts: "all the benefits of life depend completely on my good offices. After all, what is this life itself--can you even call it life if
you take away pleasure."

But what Folly offers is only desirable in "this life." What she offers is only physical; the pleasures are only those of the flesh. "This life" and the flesh are transient; only the mind is eternal. Folly recognizes that the pious "place most stress on what comes closest to him [God], namely the mind." It would be easier to end "the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir to" (III.i.62-63), but the mind is what counts. Knowing that God has "fix'd/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (I.ii.131-32), suicide is not an available choice for the rational man. Dreaming becomes "the rub" (III.i.65) that "Must give us pause" (III.i.68). To dream is to have the mind take over completely. In sleep, the flesh is unnoticed. The dream becomes reality and the mind is sovereign. The supremacy of mind is a necessary state for man; it "Must" happen. But man, "he himself" (III.i.75), has some control over his destiny. By exercising his reason, Hamlet comes to ethical conclusions. Hooker states that

> Where understanding therefore needeth, in those thinges reason is the director of mans will by discovering in action what is good. For the lawes of well doing are the dictates of right reason.50

For Hamlet, "the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (III.i.84-85) because nothing can be correctly determined without thought. Hamlet wishes that his "flesh would melt,/Thaw and resolve
itself into a dew" (I.ii.129-30) because the body and the physical aspects of life are a hindrance to "resolution." If the flesh would only "resolve," then Hamlet would not be in a quandary. Because he has a body, Hamlet needs to be sure that he is not acting because of his "weakness and...melancholy" (II.ii.597). He needs to feel confident that his decisions come from his mind, not from any desires of the flesh. "Resolution" cannot come about without resolving, an analyzing and solving of problems in the mind in order to make decisions. Resolving is the means of "right reason." John E. Seaman explains that "for Shakespeare and his age, reason had nothing to do with repression, abstinence, mere conformity to convention, or dehumanization," all of the ways of Polonius.

It was a cardinal principle that reason underlies heroic virtue; there were no heroic deeds without a rational mind, a mind in which the rational soul was sovereign and the desires disciplined. It was the essence of noble character, the image of God in man.52

"The image of God in man" is reason; it differentiates men from beasts. Hamlet's role as "the most immediate to our throne" (I.ii.9) places him in a position where he needs to live up to the "Hyperion" (I.ii.140) god-image of his father. Reason, above the senses and desires, needs to rule; Hamlet "may not, as unvalu'd persons do,/Carve for himself" (I.iii.19-20). Almost everyone, except Hamlet, seems to be one of the "unvalu'd persons,"
disregarding reason which makes them beasts.

Claudius, the "serpent" (I.v.36), gives up reason in killing his brother and marrying his queen. Claudius puts reason in a subordinate position to his desire for Gertrude. His reasoning as a king becomes completely subservient to his passions for Gertrude. Claudius acknowledges this weakness when he explains to Laertes one of the reasons why he has not done anything about Hamlet in regards to Polonius' death.

...The Queen his mother
Lives almost by his looks, and for myself--
My virtue or my plague, be it either which--
She is so conjunctive to my life and soul
That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
I could not but by her (IV.vii.11-16).

Claudius implies that his life is ruled by Gertrude; whether "virtue" or "plague," he does not have any control. Gertrude is his "life and soul." The queen is also occupied with the worldly view. She tells Hamlet, "Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die" (I.ii.72). Gertrude is more concerned with practical matters than she is with any duty she might feel towards Hamlet's dead father. She proves this viewpoint by her hasty marriage to Claudius. Although the details are not revealed, "young Fortinbras,/ Of unimproved mettle, hot and full" (I.i.98-99) must have been a factor in Gertrude's decision to remarry. Her judgmental reaction, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.225), to the player queen's, "If, once a widow, ever I be a wife" (III.ii.218), suggests that
Gertrude sees the validity of the "base respects of thrift" (III.ii.178) that may spur a "o'er-hasty marriage" (II.ii.57). But, moreover, Gertrude cannot "see" anything besides the worldly. Hamlet points out the Ghost, "Do you see nothing there?" (III.iv.132). The queen replies, "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see" (III.iv.133). In "The World of Hamlet," Maynard Mack explains Gertrude's lack of perception:

Here certainly we have the imperturbable self-confidence of the worldly world, its layers on layers of habituation, so that when the reality is before its very eyes it cannot detect its presence.53

This worldly view ultimately leads to a degenerate person.

Hamlet compares his mother to a beast when he thinks of her actions regarding his father. He wails, "O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourn'd longer" (I.ii.150-51). Hamlet implies that his mother lacks reason and is, therefore, beast-like. Because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "[soak] up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities" (IV.ii.14-15), they are no better than "a sponge" (IV.ii.11). Laertes chooses to be ruled by his passions and throws "Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!" (IV.v.132). Because he ignores reason, Laertes is like a senseless bird; he admits that "as a woodcock to mine own springe.../I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (V.ii.312-13). Ophelia ends in the same condition because she does not
have any control over her mind; she allows her father or her brother to reason for her. Her answers to questions do not vary: "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (I.iii.104); "My lord, I do not know" (II.i.85); and "I think nothing, my lord" (III.ii.116). Ophelia makes a complete break with reason and becomes "mermaid-like" (IV.vii.175), "like a creature" (IV.vii.178).

Without reason, that which makes man human in God's eyes, Polonius is also one of the degenerates, becoming like Ophelia, "Divided from herself and her fair judgment, Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" (IV.v.85-86). Polonius is "like a crab" (II.ii.203), "A rat" (III.iv.23), not a man at all. After Polonius' death, Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet has gone "To draw apart the body he hath kill'd" (IV.i.24). Hamlet has only killed a "body" because Polonius is merely a carnal presence. Boethius' Lady Philosophy shows how a Christian can lose his human nature. She states that

> Whatever loses its goodness ceases to be. Thus wicked men cease to be what they were; but the appearance of their human bodies, which they keep, shows that they once were men. To give oneself to evil, therefore, is to lose one's human nature. Just as virtue can raise a person above human nature, so vice lowers those whom it has seduced from the condition of men beneath human nature. For this reason, anyone whom you find transformed by vice cannot be counted a man.54

The queen calls Polonius, "The unseen good old man" (IV.i.12). Because of "the unseen good," Polonius is
"the unseen...man," just the semblance of a man. His status as a fool makes him nothing. Because he does not use reason, Polonius is "transformed by [Claudius'] vice [and] cannot be counted a man." Hamlet knows that being a man requires private, individual virtue. He tells Guildenstern that, "though you fret me, you cannot play upon me" (III.ii.362-63). Horatio calls King Hamlet, "a goodly king" (I.ii.186), and Hamlet replies, "A was a man, take him for all in all" (I.ii.187). Being "a man" is more significant than being a king. Hamlet has no qualms about shoving the poisoned cup at Claudius, saying, "Drink off this potion" (V.ii.331), but he prevents Horatio's suicide, saying, "As th' art a man/Give me the cup" (V.ii.347-48). Men deserve life; beasts do not. Claudius and Polonius do not know what it means to be a man. They are like the Players that Hamlet abhors:

there be players that I have seen play--and heard others praise, and that highly--not to speak it profanely, that neither having th' accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably (III.ii.29-35).

Off the stage, imitating humanity is a dangerous business for the body and the soul.

Men like Polonius do not realize that the worldly view does not lead to salvation, that there is something higher than man's conventions. Webber states that

Committed to the scheme of things in Denmark,
not on account of its intrinsic truth or strength, but because of their own weakness, greed, or inflexibility, they are dangerous to themselves and to the very society in which they believe.55

Because their minds are inactive, they base their decisions on passions and desires or other transient things of the world, or worse, they allow others to make their decisions for them. Unlike Hamlet, Polonius does not question convention, authority, or even himself. If the hero, Hamlet, is too noble a character to set the standards of moral expectation, Marcellus will serve just as well. During his first visit with the Ghost, Hamlet pushes Marcellus and the others away telling them, "Unhand me, gentlemen/.../I say away" (I.iv.84-86). Following convention, Marcellus has no other choice but to obey the authority of Hamlet, but he realizes, "'Tis not fit thus to obey him" (I.iv.88). Marcellus allows his conscience to rule him because it is the Christian thing to do. In Shakespeare's time, the Church of England Homilies taught that

we may not obey kings, magistrates, or any other, (though they be our own fathers) if they would command us to do any thing contrary to God's commandments. In such a case we ought to say with the Apostle, 'We must rather obey God than man.'56

If Marcellus, a lowly guard, can follow his conscience, then it seems as if Polonius, the king's counselor, could try to do as much.

Erasmus knows that reason dictates that
we so turn our whole mind to the admiration of things heavenly that...the love of things eternal and honorable, draws the mind by its very nature to the shunning of transient things and the hatred of wicked things.57

Polonius never thinks beyond or above his immediate situation at court. He tells Laertes, "To thine own self be true" (I.iii.78), but the words have a perverted meaning for Polonius because he associates his "own self" with the king. Polonius vows to Claudius, "I hold my duty as I hold my soul,/Both to my God and to my gracious King" (II.ii.44-45). For Polonius, being "true" means being ruled by the king. Others are also wrapped up in the same kind of folly. The queen tells Claudius, "I shall obey you" (III.i.37). Laertes tells the king, "I will be rul'd" (IV.vii.67). Indirectly, Ophelia links herself to Claudius when she tells Polonius, "I shall obey" (I.iii.136). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern show the ultimate subservience when Guildenstern tells Claudius,

...we both obey,
And here give up ourselves in the full bent
To lay our service freely at your feet
To be commanded (II.ii.29-32).

These fools give themselves up to Claudius, who is not a true king, which endangers not only their lives, but their salvation. Referring to Polonius' maxim,

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man
(I.iii.78-80),

Bertram Joseph in Conscience and the King, states that
Polonius'

misplaced loyalty to the usurper whom he mistakes for king leads him inevitably to his death. For as long as he serves the wrong man it is impossible for the counsellor to follow the precepts which he gives with his blessing to Laertes.58

Joseph makes a logical conclusion, but if Polonius had been true to himself, he would not have been following "the wrong man." It is not that Polonius cannot be true to himself because he serves Claudius; it is because Polonius is not true to himself that he is able to serve Claudius. Polonius does not "turn [his] whole mind to the admiration of things heavenly," and, therefore, he is easily allured by Claudius, making Polonius a beast who gets what he deserves.

But is death the just reward for human folly? First of all, all the deaths, except Hamlet's, are self-induced in one way or another. For Ophelia, it is probable suicide. Laertes knows, "I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (V.ii.313). Claudius "is justly serv'd./It is a poison temper'd by himself" (V.ii.332-33). Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup after Claudius tells her not to. As Polonius hides behind the arras, his outburst leads to his demise. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die because "they did make love to this employment/...their defeat/Does by their own insinuation grow" (V.ii.57-59). Erasmus knows that God allows these people to take care of themselves:
But how, then, does this powerful One harm man? Will he snatch money away, will he strike the body, will he take away life? If he does this to a pious man, he has given good for evildoing, but if he has done it to a wicked man, God has furnished the occasion but man has harmed himself. For no one is harmed except by himself.59

Because they ignore reason, their deaths are inevitable. Webber points out that "Polonius and the others are really spiritually dead before they die physically."60 They die spiritually because they do not look to the divine. Boethius' Lady Philosophy states that

The human race alone lifts its head to heaven and stands erect, despising the earth. Man's figure teaches, unless folly has bound you to the earth, that you who look upward with your head held high should also raise your soul to sublime things, lest while your body is raised above the earth, your mind should sink to the ground under its burden.61

Polonius and the others are "bound...to the earth" because of their folly. Polonius' folly causes the degradation of his soul, which results in his spiritual death. Hamlet, as heaven's "scourge and minister" (III.iv.177), merely disposes of the flesh.

Symbolically, Hamlet, the figure of mind, kills both types of folly. Hamlet cannot attain salvation as long as folly rules, and, therefore, it becomes his duty to destroy Claudius and Polonius, the figures of folly. Shakespeare uses a similar idea of a required death in Henry IV, Part I. Prince Hal needs to kill Hotspur because "Two stars keep not their motion in one
sphere,/Nor can one England brook a double reign/Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales" (V.iv.65-67). Just as England cannot endure "a double reign," a man cannot survive the "double reign" of mind and folly. Whether in words or actions, thinking and reason have to reign.

In The Faerie Queene, a text contemporary with Hamlet, Spenser affirms the Renaissance belief in the importance of reason and thinking. Redcross Knight learns the importance of contemplation. After Vna takes Redcross to the house of Holinessse,

Shortly therein so perfect he became,  
That from the first vnto the last degree,  
His mortall life he learned had to frame  
In holy righteousnesse, without rebuke or blame (I.x.45).

Because there is more than "mortall life," Charissa knows that even though Redcross appears "perfect," he still needs to visit "heauenly Contemplation;/Of God and goodnesse was his meditation" (I.x.46). Contemplation asks why they have traveled to his hermitage. Charissa explains,

What end...should cause vs take such paine,  
But that same end, which every liuing wight  
Should make his marke, high heauen to attaine?  
Is not from hence the way, that leadeth right (I.x.50).

The way to attain salvation is through contemplation. Hamlet is willing to travel the same "painfull way" (I.x.46) that Redcross endures. Contemplation is man's duty to himself and to God; thinking and reason differentiates men from beasts. "Polonius hides himself"
both literally and figuratively. Hiding himself, literally costs Polonius his life. More importantly, hiding himself, figuratively and forgetting that he is a human being with everything that entails, costs Polonius his salvation. Hamlet knows that "every man hath business and desire" (I.v.136), but he also agrees with Redcross, that "So darke are earthly things compard to things diuine" (I.x.67). 68 Hamlet knows that reason needs to be the ultimate ruler in man's life above revenge, anger, duty, desire, despair, or even love. While abounding in information and commands from the Ghost, Hamlet proposes his first act: "for my own poor part,/I will go pray" (I.v.137-38). To do anything less would be utter folly.
Notes

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Praise of Folly and The Enchiridion in his letter to
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under the appearance of a joke, my purpose is just the
same as in 'The Enchiridion'" (143).

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13 William Shakespeare, King Richard II, ed. Peter

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23 Erasmus, Folly 13.


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61 Boethius 114.
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VITA

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