



A Closer Look at

"...To thine ownself be true..."

This speech is spoken by Polonius in Act 1, Scene 3 of *Hamlet*.

Who's Polonius?

Polonius is an advisor to King Claudius, and therefore an important person in the Danish court at the castle of Elsinore. Polonius has two children: Laertes, who is about to leave for France, and Ophelia, who is secretly dating Prince Hamlet. Later in the play, Polonius hires someone to spy on Laertes in France, and also spies on other people's conversations at Elsinore. This turns out to be unwise.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

Laertes has been granted royal permission to return to France. Siblings Ophelia and Laertes have just said goodbye to each other, and Laertes has warned Ophelia to be careful about Hamlet's romantic attention. Hamlet's royal position will almost certainly necessitate a strategic political marriage, and Laertes doesn't want Ophelia to get hurt. Ophelia agrees to be careful, but also tells Laertes to "practise what you preach." Then Polonius arrives, surprised that Laertes has not yet boarded the ship bound for France.

POLONIUS:

Yet here, Laertes! aboard, aboard, for shame!
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
And you are stay'd for. There; my blessing with thee!
And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell: my blessing season this in thee!

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **yet** – here it means 'still' (as in, Laertes shouldn't still be there)
- **Laertes** – this name is pronounced Lay-AIR-teez
- **aboard** – get on board (probably a ship in this case, but could be a train or plane, depending on the setting of the production)
- **you are stay'd for** – people are waiting for you
- **There** – this word appears on its own, so probably indicates some action. What do you think it might be? Is Polonius shaking Laertes's hand? Giving a hug? Some money? A blessing?
- **my blessing with thee** – for Shakespeare, a parent's blessing had a formal power
- **precepts** – commands or rules for good moral conduct
- **look thou character** – make sure you imprint; Polonius is asking Laertes to engrave these instructions in memory
- **give thy thoughts no tongue** – don't speak your thoughts
- **unproportioned** – extreme or inappropriate
- **be thou familiar** – be friendly
- **vulgar** – having coarse manners
- **their adoption tried** – here 'adoption' means choosing to be in any kind of relationship (like friendship) and 'tried' means tested; so, 'you tested these friendships and they've passed the test'
- **grapple** – here it means fasten
- **dull thy palm** – make your hand less sensitive (imagine that your hand dispenses friendship, attention, money, and so on)
- **entertainment** – welcome, care, and attention
- **new-hatch'd** – newly arrived or developed
- **unfledged** – continuing with the bird metaphor, not yet ready to fly on its own
- **comrade** – close companion or friend
- **quarrel** – an argument or fight
- **bear't** – carry it or see it through
- **the opposed** – here it means the person you're in an argument with
- **censure** – criticism
- **reserve thy judgment** – don't judge other people
- **costly thy habit as thy purse can buy** – wear the nicest clothes you can afford
- **express'd in fancy** – displayed in flashy, showy things
- **gaudy** – tastelessly flashy
- **apparel** – clothing
- **oft** – short for often
- **proclaims** – announces or declares publicly
- **rank** – a group of people of the same class or level in a society with fixed hierarchy
- **station** – the place or position assigned to someone
- **select** – here it means chosen because it's of the highest quality
- **generous** – the word originally meant well-bred or mannerly
- **chief** – it could mean the best position (Scholars argue about the meaning of this line: it might mean that Polonius suggests that the nobility in France have a great sense of style, but it's not entirely clear.)
- **husbandry** – thrift; careful management
- **season** – it literally means to make something taste better by adding a flavourful ingredient, but Shakespeare often uses it metaphorically. Here the blessing is like salt to make all of the advice more pleasant to digest.

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?
- Are there places where Polonius seems to be having fun with wordplay? What does this tell you about the character and the situation?

Explore the character

- Polonius is a single parent who also has an important professional position in a highly political setting. How might this tension be difficult for Polonius?
- What are the different ways that Laertes' and Ophelia's behaviour might be important for Polonius?
- At the beginning of the speech, Polonius scolds Laertes about running late, then makes a 27-line speech. What might this tell us about Polonius?



Explore the ideas

Director's cut

In performance, lines are often cut for the needs of a specific production and in consideration of time. If you find the speech to be too long for the time you have, how do you decide what to cut? As you imagine yourself as Polonius, which lines are most important to you?

Getting and giving advice

- Setting out on your own is a big moment in life. As you either remember or imagine what that will be like for you, think of the people in your life who might give you advice. If you've experienced this already, what advice did they give? What did you think of it? If this event is still in your future, what advice do you imagine they'll give? What do you hope they'll say?
- Have you ever given someone advice? What did you say? Would you say anything different now? What do you think is the best way to support someone facing a big life change?

Challenge the words

William Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems more than 400 years ago, and his experience of the world was different from ours today. Shakespeare was writing in a highly patriarchal culture, and this shows in his language. As we explore Shakespeare's language today, we get to challenge this language.

- Do you notice any words in this speech that seem problematic today? For example, when Polonius says, "Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice," what assumptions might the character be making?
- What possible alternatives can you imagine as we perform the play today?
- Are there any other words in this speech that you want to challenge?

Make it your own

Performance

Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it. Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

Ask someone to film your performance so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

Art

Create a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

Music

Express what the speech means to you through music. Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

Creative Writing

Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech. Imagine a similar situation of someone giving advice to a young person setting out on their own. What advice would you include? How might you convey the character of the person giving the advice?

How would you respond? How do you imagine Laertes and Ophelia respond to this advice from Polonius? How would you respond? Write a response in the form of a poem, speech or story.