Summary: Act II (2), scene i

Polonius dispatches his servant Reynaldo to France with money and written notes for Laertes, also ordering him to inquire about and spy on Laertes’ personal life. He gives him explicit directions as to how to pursue his investigations, then sends him on his way. As Reynaldo leaves, Ophelia enters, visibly upset. She tells Polonius that Hamlet, unkempt and wild-eyed, has accosted her. Hamlet grabbed her, held her, and sighed heavily, but did not speak to her. Polonius says that Hamlet must be mad with his love for Ophelia, for she has distanced herself from him ever since Polonius ordered her to do so. Polonius speculates that this lovesickness might be the cause of Hamlet’s moodiness, and he hurries out to tell Claudius of his idea.

Analysis: Act II, scene i

In his advice to Reynaldo, Polonius explicitly develops one of the themes of Hamlet, the idea that words can be used to bend and alter the truth. He explains to Reynaldo how to ask leading questions of Laertes’ acquaintances and how to phrase questions in a way that will seem inoffensive. As with Claudius, who manipulated the royal court with his speech in Act I, scene ii, words become a tool for influencing the minds of others and controlling their perception of the truth. Remember that Claudius killed King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear. Shakespeare continually illustrates that words can function as poison in the ear as well. As the ghost says in Act I, scene v, Claudius has poisoned “the whole ear of Denmark” with his words (I.v.36).

An important symbol of the power of words to manipulate the truth. Polonius’s conversation with Ophelia is important for several reasons. First, it Illustrates how Hamlet has been behaving since his encounter with the ghost: he has made good on his promise to Horatio and is behaving as a madman. Though we learn about It only through her description, his emotional scene with Ophelia may stem in part from his general plan to feign insanity, and in part from real distress at seeing Ophelia, since she has recently spurned him. In addition, his mother’s marriage to Claudius seems to have shattered his opinion of women in general. The conversation also informs the audience that she has obeyed her father’s orders and broken off her relationship with Hamlet, confirming her docile nature and dependence on her father to tell her how to behave. And finally, the conversation engenders an important moment for the plot of the play: Polonius’s sudden idea that Hamlet’s melancholy and strange behavior may be due to his Lovesickness for Ophelia. Though Polonius’s overly simple theory is obviously insufficient to explain Hamlet’s behavior, it does lead to several plot developments in the next few scenes, including Hamlet’s disastrous confrontation with Ophelia and Gertrude and Claudius’s decision to spy on Hamlet.