# UNIVERSITY LECTURE

# HAMLET — WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

## Scene 3: Advice, Love, and Obedience

*Act I, Scene III | Elizabethan Drama | Third Year*

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| **Subject** | Elizabethan Drama |
| **Class** | Third Year |
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**Lecture focus:** The scene explores family authority, advice, reputation, gender expectations, and the uncertain relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia.

## 1. Learning Outcomes

- Explain the advice Laertes and Polonius give to Ophelia.
- Analyse Polonius's advice to Laertes and its relevance to characterisation.
- Discuss how family authority shapes Ophelia's choices.
- Evaluate the scene's presentation of love, reputation, gender, and obedience.

## 2. Background and Context

The action moves to a room in Polonius's house. Laertes is preparing to return to France, and he speaks privately with his sister Ophelia before leaving. He warns her about Hamlet's romantic attention. Their father, Polonius, enters and gives Laertes a series of instructions before questioning Ophelia about Hamlet.

## 3. Scene Summary

1. Laertes warns Ophelia not to trust Hamlet's expressions of love. He argues that Hamlet's position as prince means his marriage may be controlled by political and dynastic considerations rather than personal choice.
2. Ophelia replies that she will remember his advice, but she also points out that Laertes should follow the moral standards he recommends to her.
3. Polonius enters and gives Laertes practical and moral advice about conduct, money, speech, friendship, and self-knowledge.
4. After Laertes leaves, Polonius questions Ophelia about Hamlet. He dismisses Hamlet's affection as unreliable and orders Ophelia to avoid private contact with him.
5. Ophelia agrees to obey her father, establishing the extent of parental authority over her personal life.

## 4. Critical Analysis

### Laertes as protective brother

Laertes presents himself as concerned for Ophelia's reputation and emotional safety. His warning also reflects the social reality that a prince's marriage may be a matter of state rather than individual preference.

### Polonius and paternal authority
Polonius treats Ophelia's relationship as something he can regulate. His language assumes that a daughter should obey her father. The scene raises questions about women's independence and the limits placed on their choices.

### Ophelia's intelligence and restraint
Ophelia is not simply passive. Her reply to Laertes shows that she can recognise inconsistency and challenge him politely. However, she ultimately submits to her father's command.

### The advice to Laertes
Polonius's instructions sound practical and memorable. They also reveal his concern with reputation, social conduct, and outward respectability. His advice can be wise, but it also reflects a world in which appearance and public judgement matter greatly.

### Love and political status
Laertes and Polonius both question whether Hamlet can offer Ophelia a secure future. Hamlet's feelings are not the only issue: his royal position limits his freedom and makes private love a political matter.

### Gender and obedience
The scene reflects patriarchal expectations in which male relatives claim authority over a young woman's sexuality and marriage. Modern readers can examine how Ophelia's voice is heard, limited, and controlled.

## 5. Important Quotations and Their Significance

| Quotation | Interpretation |
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| **"For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour, / Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood."** | Laertes warns Ophelia that Hamlet's romantic interest may be temporary. |
| **"Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven."** | Ophelia asks Laertes not to give advice that he does not follow himself. |
| **"Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice."** | Polonius advises Laertes to listen carefully and speak selectively. |
| **"Neither a borrower nor a lender be."** | The advice reflects concern with financial independence and avoiding obligations. |
| **"This above all: to thine own self be true."** | Polonius's best-known advice stresses integrity, although its meaning can be debated in context. |
| **"I shall obey, my lord."** | Ophelia's response reveals the authority Polonius exercises over her. |

## 6. Dramatic and Literary Techniques
- Proverbial language makes Polonius's advice memorable and contributes to his characterisation.
- Dramatic contrast between Laertes's departure and Ophelia's restricted freedom highlights gender expectations.
- Dialogue reveals character through advice, warning, and response.
- The domestic setting contrasts with the political court and battlements, but it remains shaped by power.

## 7. Key Terms

| Term | Meaning |
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| **Patriarchal** | Organised around male authority within family or society. |
| **Reputation** | The opinion others have of a person. |

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| **Dynastic** | Related to a ruling family or succession of rulers. |
| **Obedience** | Compliance with an instruction or authority. |
| **Proverb** | A short, familiar statement expressing advice or a general truth. |
| **Courtship** | The process of seeking a romantic or marital relationship. |

## 8. Discussion Questions

6. Is Laertes's warning motivated mainly by love, social convention, or concern for family reputation?
7. Which of Polonius's instructions seem wise, and which reveal his limitations?
8. How does Ophelia respond intelligently to Laertes?
9. Why does Polonius forbid Ophelia from seeing Hamlet?
10. To what extent does Ophelia have control over her own future in this scene?

## 9. Assignment

**Write a critical response to the statement: "In Scene 3, Ophelia's personal choices are controlled by male authority." Use evidence from her conversations with Laertes and Polonius.**

## 10. Suggested Study Method

Read the scene in the original text before reviewing this lecture. Mark the speaker and situation for each quotation, then explain how Shakespeare's language contributes to character, theme, and dramatic effect. In written answers, avoid retelling the plot alone: make an interpretive point, support it with textual evidence, and explain the evidence.