**Hamlet: Characterisation**

**Polonius**

There is a general thought that Polonius is a foolish old man, a comic victim of Hamlet’s sharp wit, even as a buffoon.

However, Polonius is more than just a fool. He is a man bred in courts, exercised in business, stored with observation, confident in his knowledge, proud of his eloquence and declining into dotage.

Hamlet sees him as one of “those tedious old fools”, and as “that great baby... not yet out of his swaddling clothes”.

There are, too, the oddities of speech and thought: the long-windedness, the impressive openings that meander into fatuity and sometimes jolt into embarrassing frankness, as in the business of communicating his diagnosis of Hamlet’s “madness” (2:2, 92-165).

He wins easy laughs, and sees himself as something of a sage, if an absent-minded one.

He gets three character testimonials in the course of the play. One is solicited, and is from Claudius, who describes him as “a man faithful and honourable”. Two are unsolicited. Claudius describes that the throne of Denmark is at his command, and Gertrude calls him “the unseen good old man” after his death. This epitaph contrasts oddly with Hamlet’s reference to the “wretched, rash, intruding fool”, who was in his lifetime “a foolish prating knave”.

**A Gravely Hindered Common Sense**

What is attractive about Polonius belongs to the outward man, who can claim a certain indulgence for his foibles.

But beneath the mask lurks a treacherous plotter, with a gravely retarded moral sense. In this respect he resembles Claudius.

He trusts his children so little that he sets spies on one, and spies on the other himself; he dies as a spy in the queen’s apartment.

He cannot see his fellow human beings as other than puppets, and has no respect for the privacy of others.

He forces Ophelia against her better interests to act in his nasty drama involving Hamlet, and manipulates her like a doll: “Ophelia, walk you here... read on this book”.

He pries into other people’s lives without apology or embarrassment.

He can sacrifice his daughter’s feelings and her reputation to his own limited, self-centred concerns, and his choice of words to describe his procedures underlines their, and his, nastiness: “At such a time I’ll loose my daughter to him” (2:2, 162)

He cynically misinterprets Hamlet’s attentions to Ophelia, and debases the office of Chancellor by converting it into a spying agency.

The intensive intrusion of Polonius into the Hamlet-Gertrude relationship shows his blindness to the intense feelings that may underline such relationships, as well as his lack of respect for the privacy that should surround him.

He encourages Gertrude to provoke Hamlet to a violent outburst. He even takes perverse delight in anticipating what he feels will be almost an entertaining spectacle for him, but his final instructions to Gertrude, in which he urges her to be “round” with Hamlet, show no understanding of the kind of response such behaviour on her part will arouse.

It is ironical that he should meet his death in a production staged by himself, and with himself as director. We remember his earlier lines:

I did enact Julius Ceasar. I was killed

i’ the Capitol, Brutus killed me. (3:2, 97-8)