

Polonius is personally concerned, and it is this which distinguishes them from other scenes, in which he is dealing with questions of the state. The advice which Laertes received, containing as we have seen a serious element, is a valuable help in arriving at an appreciation of Polonius as a father.

Having seen that the passage of which we are treating is an important one, let us consider its substance. It is made up of a series of maxims whose pithiness and appropriateness are undoubted. They are the result of careful observation during many years of varied experience. The father poured into his son's ear all his worldly wisdom, concluding with the injunction "To thine own self be true." What is the import of these words? Here is the point at issue. One may be true to oneself through selfish motives, or on account of a sense of moral obligation. Medicine tells us to beware of alcoholic drinks, because by extracting moisture, they harden the tissues of the alimentary canal, with the result that digestion is impaired. Hygiene teaches the benefits of pure air and cleanliness. Chemistry points out to us poisonous substances and gases. Self respect prompts us to avoid foul language, that we may not be lowered in our neighbor's estimation. A person might be living according to all these laws, and true, in one sense, to his physical nature. But how different does he act who is guided by moral consideration! He, too, obeys the same laws as the first man, but for entirely different reasons. For him, good health means more strength, and energy to accomplish good. He is clean of tongue because it offends his conscience to be otherwise. He is true to himself by considering always in what he can be of use to others, and by following as closely as possible the dictates of conscience. In which class, then may we rank Polonius?

If, as we have seen, this passage goes a long way in aiding the reader to know the character of Polonius, and if we bear in mind the rule from rhetoric which says that characters must speak pointedly, surely we must come to the conclusion that, had Shakespeare wished to give to these lines a moral tone, he would have made that particular element predominant, and not contented himself with having conveyed such an important character-making element in an obscure manner. It might be urged that Shakespeare is oftentimes exceedingly brief, and in passages of great consequence. For instance, when he sums up Brutus', whole persona-