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Hamlet: A Mature Reading

Paul Lewis

The opening of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* and the departure of my 15-year-old daughter for a four-week stay in Italy brought an unexpected reminder of generational shift. In the airport lounge waiting to say goodbye, I found myself torn between delight and anxiety, straining to offer parting advice. Like Shakespeare's Polonius in a similar situation, I was drawn irresistibly to the obvious. "Just be yourself," I said, only to see my daughter cock her head to the side and execute the 360-degree eyeball rotation that is the definitive marker of adolescence.

When I first read *Hamlet* as an adolescent myself 30 years ago, I identified with the much-beset prince and his studious companion, Horatio. The adults in the play -- from the lascivious queen to the murderous king and the demanding ghost -- seemed overbearing, excessive, out of control: "more than kin [for sure] and less than kind." Mingling corruption with banality, Polonius seemed the least appealing, and seeing his children mock him during his famous "few precepts" speech delighted me.

Looking now with a father's eyes at both Ophelia and Laertes, I cannot fail to note how much they suffer later in the play from their failure to follow their father's advice: how Laertes too easily abandons his old friend Hamlet for the "new-hatched" friendship of the king; how Ophelia, allowing misfortune to shake her from her "own self," loses everything.

As I went with my daughter to buy traveler's checks, as I watched her selecting clothing to pack for her trip -- I could not help thinking about Polonius's counsel about borrowing and lending and about the importance of appearance. As I caught snatches of her long pre-trip phone exchanges with soon-to-be-missed schoolmates, I thought of the counselor's comments on the wisdom of listening more than one speaks and of avoiding quarrels. Good stuff, I thought, resisting the temptation to copy the entire speech and insert it into the book I knew my daughter would read on the plane over.

Instead, as we moved from errand to errand, I simply played the part, trying -- unsuccessfully, I'm sure -- to sound wiser, more original, than the character who for the first time seemed to me worthy not only of sympathy (he is first called a rat and then murdered by his daughter's boyfriend) but of empathy as well. Whether it is the first step of your 1-year-old or her first day at nursery school, her first date or first long trip away -- raising children repeatedly brings parents to the Polonius experience: that tangle of holding on and letting go that all too often makes us sound like fools.

As the instinct to protect and harbor inevitably conflicts with the necessity to release one's child, what parent doesn't linger, prolonging the moment of separation until the delaying tactic becomes obvious? Even as Polonius launches into his seemingly comic speech, he knows that he should just let Laertes go, that they have previously said their farewells, and that the boat is waiting. "There," he says, intending to send him away, "my blessings with thee." But then, with an instinct that now strikes me as compelling, the old man shifts into parental mode to insert a few sage comments into his child's memory.

As he "lugs the guts" of Polonius out of Gertrude's boudoir, Hamlet taunts the corpse. "The counselor is now most still, most secret, and most grave," he says, "who was in life a foolish prating knave." At an earlier time, I applauded the defiant energy of this speech; now it seems a sign of Hamlet's immaturity.

Approaching my sixth decade along with my baby-boomer peers, I find intimations of mortality everywhere in the culture: from the death of '60s icons to the nostalgia for a time of progressive politics and freer love, from an obsessive interest in retirement planning to an excessive consumption of beauty aids and vitamin supplements. Finding Polonius in my mirror closed a circle of dreaming and pain, achievement and loss familiar to Crosby, Stills, Nash, Young, Shakespeare, and every parent.

