“The Reckoning of Polonius and Ophelia”

Abstract

*Hamlet* has often been compared to twentieth-century detective stories, with Hamlet in the role of the gumshoe narrator in search of clues. The first half of the chapter from which this writing sample is excerpted takes up Hamlet's process of detection: his attempt to gather details that he can weave into a syncretic narrative that properly represents both the events of his father's death and his own response to that event. The latter half of this chapter, which comprises this writing sample, examines the second major storyteller in *Hamlet*. Polonius plays the role of an anti-detective. Unlike Hamlet, Polonius begins with solutions and works backwards towards initial premises. But Polonius is not the perfect foil to Hamlet: Polonius's premises are not entirely false, they are just not quite true enough. If Hamlet's role in the play is to generate skepticism in search of truth, Polonius's is to destabilize this epistemological frame by generating half-truths for the sake of confirming a worldview. Polonius's misguided interpretive certainty is most dangerous when it comes just shy of the truth: he constructs events or persons *like* the real ones, but that are not quite identical to them. His confidence in his own narratives is both appealing and useful to those in power insofar as they offer often plausible alternatives to Hamlet's discoveries, but they ultimately cost Polonius his life as his attempt to gain the power of complete knowledge -- the province of the true king -- leads to the ultimate confusion in which Hamlet assassinates Polonius, mistaking him for the king he seeks to replace, Claudius.
From “Hamlet, Revenged: Reckoning Narrative, Narrating Investigation”

**Reckoning Polonius and Ophelia**

A central project of *Hamlet* is producing narratives of the past and present that make future action possible. The delay that is such a central feature of the play is not just space for Hamlet to dither and caper but is actually the space for characters to work out crucial questions of what narrative can do. Hamlet’s own encounters with investigating and testing narrative have garnered much critical attention, beginning with T. S. Eliot’s offhand comment that “the series of *Hamlet* plays, including Shakespeare’s, has an affinity to our contemporary detective drama”¹ and extending through Linda Charnes’s reading of Hamlet as a proto-noir detective² and Chikako Kumamot’s explicit alignment of Hamlet and Raymond Chandler’s iconic detective, Philip Marlowe.³ What I propose, however, is to extend this critical evaluation of the strategies of narrative investigation to the other character in the play who is equally invested in producing clear narratives of events in order to secure his future: Polonius. Polonius’s prescriptive narratives present a more direct pursuit of future action than Hamlet’s more oblique narrative constructions. Polonius produces stories of future action that guide interpretation of evidence in a particular direction. This method collapses cause and effect into a single process, as the trials Polonius devises for the evidence at hand contain their results in their conceptions. Further, the rhetoric of the king’s advisor exploits the

---


overdetermination of circular reasoning and multiple meanings to guide interpretation toward a single, certain (to Polonius, if no one else) conclusion, even in the face of contradiction.

Polonius approaches evidence not just with a clear idea of what it will reveal but with a clear idea of exactly what kinds of evidence will be necessary to reveal the proper narrative. Polonius intends for his methods to highlight his own command of knowledge and his skill at interpretation, allowing him to present himself in total possession of narrative power. His reckoning both tells and enumerates the process of telling. He also calculates the ultimate benefit of his stories. Rather than collecting extant evidence to support the knowledge he intends to prove, Polonius manufactures the necessary evidence to justify the knowledge he already believes to be accurate; his process also includes crafting an alternate version of the subject of his inquiry, his son Laertes. This Laertes created by narrative is like the Laertes who actually appears in the play, but is not identical. Both the manufacturing of evidence and this production of a copy of a known individual push the practical skepticism of the plays that precede Hamlet in my analysis into a far more radical doubt of how knowledge can be apprehended. Hamlet's epistemological framework is transformed from the practical skepticism of revenge tragedy into a radical skepticism in part by Polonius's biased experiments. In reversing cause and effect—by preparing scenes in which the effects are prescribed to justify causes—Polonius undoes the necessary link that makes skepticism functional as a practical tool for testing truth. Instead, his manufacturing of evidence also creates a radically unstable epistemological frame at the heart of a five-act meditation on knowing and telling.

Polonius begins to undermine the epistemological structure of narrative with his investigation of Laertes's reputation in Paris. Using the structure of questioning to elicit evidential information established in the previous interaction between Hamlet, Horatio, and the unknown quantity of the Ghost, Polonius produces an entire set-piece of action and dialogue for his intelligencer, Reynaldo. The initial instructions are limited to what questions should be asked and in
what proper order: “Look you, sir, / Inquire me first what Danskers are in Paris, / And how, and who, what means, and where they keep, / What company, at what expense” (2.1.6-9). These questions mark identity, location, and motivation as the starting points for investigation (though Polonius adds in a digression into financial status, as well).

The responses Polonius anticipates for Reynaldo are incidental to the real matter of investigation. Polonius uses these trivial queries to open an approach to the important issues behind the questions:

… and finding
By this encompassment and drift of question
That they do know my son, come you more nearer
Than your particular demands will touch it;
Take you as ’twere some distant knowledge of him,
As thus, “I know his father and his friends
And in part him”—do you mark this Reynaldo?

(2.1.9-15)

There is a syntactical paradox in the juxtaposition of these “particular demands” and the “distant knowledge” that Polonius instructs Reynaldo to acknowledge. The heavily manipulated interrogation imagined by Polonius reflects Hamlet’s struggle to produce prospective action through present rhetoric. Furthermore, the specific conditions of rhetoric and information in the play make “distant knowledge” itself an oxymoron. The kinds of knowledge available in Hamlet are neither justified nor validated until they become near and intimate, until they move from the general to the particular.

4 All citations from the Arden Third Series, edited by Neil Taylor and Ann Thompson (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), which presents the Second Quarto (1604-05) with Folio-only lines appended in the notes. I prefer the Q2 text in my argument primarily for its capaciousness; its length provides more space for the kinds of recursive and reckoning work of narrative with which I am most concerned.
The necessity of pulling knowledge into one’s immediate vicinity is made apparent by exactly the kinds of evidence-gathering in which Polonius repeatedly engages. An essential part of the evidence-gathering process in this play is the gathering, bringing knowledge physically close to the investigator. Knowing and telling in this play work to make the distant into the intimate, the general into the particular.

Within these heavily paradoxical performative instructions, the constructed dialogue Polonius presents serves to highlight the instability of what can be known. Reynaldo is told to say he knows Laertes “in part,” a line emphatically repeated:

“All in part him, but,” you may say, “not well.
But if’t be he I mean he’s very wild,
Addicted so and so,” and there put on him
What forgeries you please. Marry none so rank
As may dishonour him—take heed of that—
But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty.

(2.1.17-24)

To know a man “in part” is as useless in this play as knowing distantly. Polonius intends that the minimal profession of knowledge he prescribes will minimize the threat of his spy, but the structure of this claim leads directly to the particular accusations Reynaldo is to make against Laertes.

The ultimate result of Polonius’s instructions is a forged version of Laertes, displacing his actual son with this degraded version in the imagination of both Reynaldo’s interlocutors and, for a time, the play’s audience. The effect is probably the same for both: confusion at the discrepancy between the verbal version and the live person previously encountered. In displacing the actual with
a (false) narrative of the actual, Polonius intends to “By indirections find directions out” (2.1.63). However, the precision with which he produces the kinds of damning accounts of Laertes that Reynaldo should collect suggests that Polonius has already decided on the narrative he wants to tell and is now actively manufacturing evidence to support it through coercion and manipulation of sources. These “forgeries” are but a minor instance of the kinds of imitation and likenesses the play sets against the real again and again—Hamlet’s later forgery of Claudius’s execution order, the two portraits with which Hamlet confronts Gertrude—but their most important reflection is of what Hamlet sees as Claudius’s forgery of his elder brother. The two possible versions of Laertes cannot occupy the same space, so the false, dissolute Laertes replaces the real son, much as the false, present King replaces the true, late King.

Polonius constructs a fictional Laertes to coincide with an imagined narrative of action and motivation, hypothesizing a Parisian friend recalling, “I know the gentleman, / I saw him yesterday, or th’other day, / Or then, and then, with such or such, and as you say / There was ’a gaming, there o’ertook in’s rouse, / ’There falling out at tennis” (2.1.53-57). The when and with whom, exactly, are negligible; what is important is the particulars of action and outcome. The imagined response coincides exactly with the prescribed account—“and as you say.” Polonius again produces an opposite but parallel version of Hamlet’s account of prospective action, fabricating conditions that coincide with action of a very specific type, aiming for a single, predetermined outcome. Polonius uses the fictional, the forged, the prescribed, the manufactured to produce a correspondence between action and narrative that is in total contrast to Hamlet’s own methods of investigation and interpretation. Polonius’s approach makes obvious the facere, the making or doing, at the heart of fact.

Insistence on a particular outcome is but one facet of the confirmation bias apparent in Polonius’s interpretation of events that are yet to happen. This bias becomes obvious in the prescriptive investigations of Hamlet where Polonius, absolutely convinced that he already knows
the cause of what he perceives as Hamlet’s madness, intends to reproduce the conditions of this diagnosis for Claudius. Toward this end, he doesn’t exactly stack the deck as he does in his instructions for Reynaldo’s spying on Laertes; instead, Polonius insists on interpreting Hamlet’s actions as only and unambiguously supporting his initial hypothesis. Polonius enumerates the evidence in pursuit of an already established total. Where Polonius’s instructions for Reynaldo produce a flawed experiment from the outset, purposefully tainting the witnesses before extracting information from them, his instructions for Ophelia stop short of influencing the evidence in advance. Rather, it is the interpretation of results that is flawed.

From Ophelia’s first admission of interaction with Hamlet, her father insists that she is reading the meaning of that relationship wrongly. Not only can Polonius read the situation itself, brought to his attention through secondary reports and court gossip, better than those involved, he can also read the very inner self of Ophelia better than she can because he can also read her social and political self more accurately:

Marry, well bethought:
’Tis told me he hath very oft of late
Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
If it be so—as so ’tis put on me,
And in that way of caution—I must tell you
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behoves my daughter and your honour.
What is between you? Give me up the truth.

(1.3.89-97)
The metonymy of self and position, where “yourself” is also “your social placement,” makes explicit the tension here between internal and interpretive states—betought, understand, truth—and external, public interactions—told, audience, put on me. This conflation of person and station is a microcosm of the play’s larger struggle to reconcile internal and external, particular and general, individual and social ways of knowing and narrating events. Polonius insists that he can make the shift between the two ways of knowing to reach a truth that Ophelia can “give up” but not understand fully.

Further, Polonius, concerned as he is with truth, is surprisingly unconcerned with the sources of his information. His own primary method of information gathering is acknowledged only in a passive construction: “Tis told me” contains no hint of who does such telling, as the speaker is less important here than the content of the report. As in his prescriptive instructions for Reynaldo, it matters not in Polonius’s interpretation what the status of the speaker is; only the information extracted is significant, while the particularity of the experience is disregarded.

Polonius establishes his interpretive certainty immediately after he sends Reynaldo off, in response to Ophelia’s report of Hamlet’s manic behavior toward her. Much of Polonius’s reading of Hamlet’s motives is based on narrated versions of offstage events. The collection of scripted scenes proposed by Polonius (Reynaldo’s, two with Ophelia, in Gertrude’s closet) continues the prevalence of narration in the first half of the play. Shakespeare withholds active scenes from both the audience and Polonius himself, and both must evaluate character and plot through the way events are recalled and presented verbally. This dramatic strategy reinforces a structural norm for this play that is seen again and again; from the Ghost’s first appearance to Hamlet’s trip to and return from England, events happen offstage and are reported and recounted onstage, forcing words to take the place of actions. This distance between action and the account of that action produces a contextual gap between words and the things they represent, allowing both suspicion of narrative accuracy and doubt of the possibility of knowledge to become central concerns of the play. The narratives of
these off-stage events exist in parallel to the other doubles and likenesses throughout the play. The narrative is like the event in so far as language can map onto action, but the representation cannot ever mirror the original event exactly. Both the onstage and off-stage audiences of these narratives are denied access to the unmediated action, a distance that undermines the practical utility of skepticism present in earlier plays that presented key events as onstage actions.

Ophelia produces an evocative narrative of the unseen encounter, but does not attempt to interpret events:

POLONIUS: Mad for thy love?

OPHELIA: My lord, I do not know,

But truly I do fear it.

(2.1.82-83)

Polonius, who understands both the situation and Ophelia “so clearly” in the earlier scene, is able to present possible readings of this second-hand scene; the principal player in it cannot herself assay such a reading. The multiple uses of terms of likeness in Ophelia’s description further underscore her tentative approach to assigning meaning or motive: “As if he had been loosed out of hell,” “He raised a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk,” “He seemed to find his way without his eyes” (80, 91-92, 95). She is unwilling or unable to assess the situation without recourse to simile and comparison, which further distances both the speaker and her audience from the event being described.

This is the single moment when Polonius admits to the possibility of his own prior misreading of Hamlet’s internal motives:

5 The Arden editors note that “This encounter is described, not staged, in all three texts, but some productions (and films) presented it in dumb-show, and it became a popular subject for illustration” (note to 2.1.74-97). This post-textual urge to bring the off-stage action back onstage suggests that later adapters were trying to bring the play’s skepticism back into the practical range.
I am sorry that with better heed and judgement
I had not quoted him. I feared he did but trifle
And meant to wrack thee — but beshrew my jealousy —
By heaven it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion. Come, go we to the King:
This must be known which, being kept close, might move
More grief to hide than hate to utter love.

(2.1.108-116)

The Arden editors find in this passage a hint of Polonius’s willingness to self-evaluate, noting that “Polonius shows more self awareness and humility here than some performers and critics allow him” and approvingly cite Johnson’s observation that “This is not the remark of a weak man” (note to l.112). But this seems to be more an excuse than an apology, as the appeal to what is “proper to our age” and “common for the younger sort.” Polonius does make a gesture at self-correction here, but it is a correction based not on acknowledging and evaluating conflicting evidence. Polonius accepts the new information and allows it to replace the previous knowledge entirely. Instead of analyzing how Hamlet’s actions can appear to support contradictory readings, Polonius replaces the previous reading with the new one, eradicating the information that no longer signifies and covering the absence with distracting complaints about kids these days.

This is, indeed, not the remark of a weak man. It is the remark of a man intent on promoting a particular interpretation of knowledge. His immediate turn to informing Claudius, in order to prevent further suffering by either Hamlet or Ophelia, is a gesture intended, in part, to spare the young couple. But it is also a gesture that will serve to solidify Polonius’s relationship to both
knowledge of court events and to the king himself. Polonius frames his delivery of this information to Claudius in terms of “policy” and service to the crown:

I assure my good liege
I hold my duty as I hold my soul,
Both to my God and to my gracious King;
And I do think, or else this brain of mine
Hunts not the trail of policy so sure
As it hath used to do, that I have found
The very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy.

(2.2.43-49)

Polonius’s primary unit of political currency is information filtered through “this brain of mine” to produce a solid conclusion. In a play that stages the project of knowing and articulating experience in multiple encounters with uncertainty, ambiguity, and the struggle to reconcile them with a stable account, Polonius’s certainty marks him as both an anomaly and an appealingly useful figure to those in power. In alluding to his own possibly declining intellectual power, Polonius also manages to reassert his stable position as interpreter; if Claudius begins to suspect that his advisor’s political acumen is no longer so sharp as it once was, he must also suspect how accurate Polonius’s identification of cause is. In addition, the “very” attached to “cause” serves to further whet the desire for certain knowledge that permeates the play.⁶

Yet certain knowledge, in Polonius’s formulations, is always its own proof. His investigations have revealed that “your noble son is mad. / Mad, I call it for to define true madness, / What is’t

⁶ Notably, this scene also includes the only accurate reading of Hamlet in the first part of the play, as Gertrude, basing her evaluation on direct observation and engagement with her son, declares that what Claudius calls “the head and source of all your son’s distemper” is “is no other but the main — / His father's death and our hasty marriage” (2.2.55, 56-57).
but to be nothing else but mad?” (2.2.92-94) This circular definition gives clear explanation of the result, but obscures the cause that Claudius desires to know. Further, when Gertrude calls Polonius on this purposefully obscure declaration (“More matter with less art” [95]), his defense is to descend further into circularity and repetition:

Madam, I swear I use no art at all.
That he’s mad, ’tis true, ’tis true ’tis pity,
And pity ’tis, ’tis true, a foolish figure!
But farewell it, for I will use no art.
Mad let us grant him then, and now remains
That we find out the cause of this effect—
Or rather say the cause of this defect,
For this effect defective comes by cause.
Thus it remains, and the remainder thus.

(96-104)

The repetition of “true,” “pity,” and “art” simultaneously multiply their implications while emptying the words of meaning. The definitional stability and constancy of “true” is undermined by the alignment with “pity”; the absolute standing of truth is compromised by the necessary emotional and personal subjectivity of compassion. Further, “art,” standing in for being, representation, and falsity, triangulates the two main terms—art and true—both extending and aligning them. The Arden editors propose that “Polonius’ verbosity … could … reflect genuine embarrassment about both Hamlet’s madness and its supposed case” (n. 86-104), and while this generous reading explains much about the character’s actions here, it overlooks the collapse of truth and art into each other, producing a circularity that exacerbates the play’s ongoing problems with likenesses of self and of experience, and with the narratives of both. Only Polonius’s own determined interpretation can sort
these problems properly, and he displays a persistent tendency to produce narratives of evidence that skew response to that evidence.

“True” is also a scientific term (“Conformable to the type, or to the accepted idea or character of the genus, class, or kind; properly or strictly so called”) and it is related here to Polonius’s investigations into cause. His research is intended to classify Hamlet’s madness in a particular frame of understanding based on cause. In discovering cause, Polonius will be able to make Hamlet conform to a recognizable and explainable “type” of melancholy, producing a proper narrative of the prince and his suffering. Without this narrative, Hamlet will remain outside the realm of understanding, all effect (or defect) without cause.

In attempting to reckon Hamlet’s actions, Polonius is left with a word problem that he solves by narrating. Narrative is the action by which the problem is addressed. The conflation of “effect” and “defect” again multiplies and empties out meaning: the neutrality of “effect” is compromised by “defect” in the same way “true” is muddied by “pity.” The additive quality of “effect” (“As a count noun. Something accomplished, caused, or produced; a result, consequence”) is contradicted by the subtractive quality of “defect” (“The quantity or amount by which anything falls short; in Math. a part by which a figure or quantity is wanting or deficient”). Polonius is producing a calculation in which the sum of the cause is lessened by the defect.

The tortured grammatical construction Polonius arrives at also suggests a mathematical equation: “For this effect defective comes by cause. / Thus it remains, and the remainder thus.” If the relationship between cause and effect is normally assumed to be direct and equal (cause = effect), the defective effect makes that equation unequal, as the defective effect is one that “want[s]

---

7 OED Online, s.v. “True (adj.),” def. 5.b.
8 OED Online, s.v. “effect (n.),” def. 2.b.; s.v. “defect (n.),” def. 4.
some essential part of proper quality.” The remainder results when the cause side of the equation outweighs the effect side; the equation now reads “cause – X = effect.” To solve for X, we must divide both sides by effect, leaving us with a remainder that is exactly the lack of the defective effect. If the remainder is a positive (that is, “true”) concept, then effect must be greater than the lack represented by the defect in order for something to be left over. This “leftover,” then, is the gap in Polonius’s equation. “Thus it remains, and the remainder thus” returns to the circularity he began with in defining madness. But this remainder must be something that can be positively identified, although Polonius fails to do so. Contextually, though, it appears that the remainder is Ophelia herself: “Thus it remains, and the remainder thus. Perpend, / I have a daughter — have while she is mine — / Who in her duty and obedience, mark, / Hath give me this. Now gather and surmise” (2.2.104-107).

Ophelia, in this context, is a cipher for knowledge, as she has previously been stripped of interpretive ability by Polonius. She can interpret neither her own experience nor her narratives of that experience “so clearly” as Polonius can (1.3.95). As this cipher, she is the perfect remainder. The experience available to her is what is left over after it has been properly and “clearly” interpreted by Polonius as evidence for his case for cause. Her narrative is translated and edited by her father into a radically different account that not only leaves out her own personal responses to the events she experienced, but that replaces her own narrative (earlier presented in 2.1) with what Polonius “perceived … before my daughter told me” (2.2.130-31). Surveillance and interpretation supersede direct personal experience and its account.

---


10 The quarto separates Polonius’s “remainder” and his reference to Ophelia with another interjection from the queen; the folio, in joining the two phrases together in not only the same speech but the same line, makes the alignment more forceful. “Perpend” is also “extrametrical” (n. 104), itself a remainder.
The play’s resistance to granting Ophelia possession of her own experiences relaxes only when she can no longer own them. Ophelia’s death is so prettily and movingly described that it occludes the impossibility of the description. Only an eyewitness could know that

Her clothes spread wide

And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

(4.7.174-182)

But what eyewitness would not attempt to save the drowning girl? Only the girl herself, for whom narrative power emerges in this moment of fictional construction, exceeding the logical necessity of evidence. The account as presented by Gertrude must be a product of post-mortem deduction and conjecture. It cannot be an accurate report, but it is, for all who hear it, a truthful narrative. That both the characters and the audience accept it as such suggests that something has changed regarding the nature of knowledge and time in the play. The sequential and the synchronic are synthesized here, leading toward an integrated structure of knowledge necessary for history to be re-started in the final act.

As noted previously, Hamlet deploys the offstage event repeatedly as a means for prompting and justifying narrative rather than action. Examining another moment of this dramatic technique in
Romeo and Juliet, Lina Perkins Wilder argues that moments of remembering in the play both provoke and deny the audience’s desire for visual and verbal information. She goes on to note that

The sense of the play’s past, implied and staged through the performance of memory, is never complete. It is restricted not only by the absence of the remembered object (always absent or it would not have to be remembered) but also by the rememberer’s limited experience … Romeo cannot remember scenes that he did not witness, cannot recognize structural connections between events that he does not understand and over which he has no control … The sense of structure generated by performed remembering is always, often tragically, denied by the rememberer’s experience and perspective. Performed remembering can create new things, new connections, but it occasionally ignores (literally, does not know) old ones.11

In contrast to this framing of Romeo’s remembering of the apothecary’s shop, the verbal account of Ophelia’s death is a moment of remembering a scene that no one witnessed, a moment where the structural connections of narrative and event supersed epistemological impossibility in order to produce narrative necessity. The limits of memory fail to restrain Gertrude’s account, as the remembered object, Ophelia, has always been a lost object, a cipher, a remainder. The perspective of the account is disembodied, distanced from individual experience and recollection. Rather than ignoring old connections, Gertrude’s act of “performed remembering” is able to unite sequential individual experience and synchronic communal response into a single historical narrative, something Hamlet himself will be unable to accomplish until he can produce a narrative of self that allows him to re-enter historical time.

Before that happens, though, the play will continue to pursue the two methods of investigation, evaluation, and action. Hamlet’s confirmation bias pushes him toward action that addresses not only the Ghost’s command to “Remember me” (1.5.91) but that also allows him to lash out at the symbol and source of his grief: Claudius. Polonius’s bias, meanwhile, allows him to make his personal interpretive conclusions stand as the official account. Polonius’s primary activity is monitoring the social and political life of the court and warning of threats to it.

His advising role requires that Polonius defer to his superiors while prompting them toward his foregone conclusions. The directive to “surmise” appears to extend the privilege of interpretation to Claudius and Gertrude, but that gesture is immediately undercut by Polonius’s insistence on pre-empting others’ interpretations: “To the celestial and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia—that’s an ill phrase, a vile phrase, ‘beautified’ is a vile phrase, but you shall hear—” (2.2.108-10). The literary criticism seems oddly out of place in the presentation of evidence, but it is directly in line with Polonius’s penchant for interpreting and framing every aspect of articulation. “Surmise” is also a pointed choice of vocabulary, carrying as it does the implication of slight proof and false charges; even as a more neutral verb of allegation, it seems incongruous that a presentation of evidence would be framed as an exhortation to accuse.

What is actually being alleged here seems, again, to place Polonius at the center. As in his earlier attempt to remind Claudius of his role as trusted counselor, Polonius now redirects the conversation away from direct evidence and toward his own political and personal reputation:

KING: But how hath she
    Received his love?

POLONIUS: What do you think of me?

KING: As of a man faithful and honorable.
POLONIUS: I would fain prove so.

(2.2.124-26)

The allegations Polonius wants the royal couple to make are of his own trustworthiness and interpretive acuity. The evidence that follows, then, is as much in support of his personal and political standing as of his claims to the source of Hamlet’s actions.

The presentation of this evidence casts the results of Polonius’s varied methods of surveillance and collection into a single, coherent narrative. First, he describes his own approach to the problem, with reference again to his loyalty and reliability, before detailing his prescriptions for Ophelia’s interaction with Hamlet.

But what might you think,

When I had seen this hot love on the wing—

As I perceiv’d it (I must tell you that)

Before my daughter told me— what might you,

Or my dear majesty your Queen here, think,

If I had play’d the desk or table book,

Or given my heart a winking, mute and dumb,

Or look’d upon this love with idle sight?

What might you think?

(2.2.128-36)

The first rhetorical movement of this speech revisits Polonius’s earlier insistence on his status in relation to the royal couple. Again, negative examples are set against the positive example of Polonius himself. There is also a conflation here in the methods of evidence collection he employs: an earlier conversation with Ophelia suggests that he learned about her connection to Hamlet from
prior reports (“‘Tis told me he hath very oft of late / Given private time to you” [1.3.90-91]) rather than from his own observation as he states here, or her own narration, as the audience has seen. Process is minimized in favor of the rhetorical and narrative effects that can be produced from the material it uncovers. Polonius, however, is still the active, perceiving agent who receives and interprets that material, rather than the “mute and dumb” subject who does not act upon information.

Indeed, Polonius explains that,

No, I went round to work
And my young mistress thus I did bespeak:
“Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star.
This must not be.” And then I prescripts gave her,
That she should lock herself from his resort,
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.

(2.2.136-41)

His “work” is the same kind of scene-setting and manipulation see in his instructions to Reynaldo. The “prescripts” listed here are a heavily abridged version of what he tells her directly in 1.3, dictating her actions in relation to Hamlet rather than kinds of speech addressed to him. These prescriptions are restrictive and contained, holding Ophelia back from active effect and producing a lack, a defect in action. Polonius is again here sketching an arithmetical equation, subtracting Ophelia from the Hamlet/Ophelia combination. Where she was once a remainder, now she is a negative. The more she is reckoned, the less she totals.

---

12 This contradiction is also noted by the Arden editors (n. 2.2.130).
The sum of this equation is a rhetorical series that tracks the effects of the cause instigated by Polonius himself. Only after setting this purposefully framed context does he explain Hamlet’s actions:

Which done, she took the fruits of my advice,
And he, repulsed, a short tale to make,
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,
Thence to a lightness, and, by this declension,
Into the madness wherein now he raves,
And all we mourn for.

(2.2.142-48)

The ordering here uses both catacosmesis and climax, bringing together the opposite rhetorical figures as it moves in chronological order from least important to most, with a little anadiplosis thrown in for good measure, to make sure Polonius’s auditors recognize the importance of his speech. The paradoxical alignment of opposites parallels Polonius’s own interests as they conflict with what Claudius is after. Polonius believes that the important part of his narrative of Hamlet’s madness is the process by which he, as investigator, has exercised both his surveillance skills and his interpretive abilities to diagnose the prince; Claudius is interested only in what that diagnosis is and how compelling the evidence is that points toward it.

Polonius’s insistence on foregrounding his own approach to the narrative moment, neglecting to properly evaluate and appraise the evidence he compiles, leads not just to flawed and incomplete conclusions, but in this case to death. Polonius’s reading of Hamlet’s inner motivations and the narrative he produces to explain and predict them does not allow for productive, directed action. The terms Polonius uses for Hamlet’s condition—sadness, fast, watch, weakness, lightness,
do not predict effective action, merely ineffectual moping about. Polonius’s reading of Hamlet’s grief, guilt, and growing suspicion of Claudius as mere “weakness,” “lightness,” and lovesickness cannot anticipate the revenge impulse or the angry lashing-out (depending on how one reads the motivation behind Hamlet’s lunge at the curtain) that results in Polonius’s death.

In trying to establish and secure his own position and status as observer and advisor, Polonius overstates the process of detection and understates the result. The approach Polonius takes to investigation and evaluation is one that foregrounds his own approach and response, rather than the pursuit of objective truth. This seems, however, not an intentionally self-centered methodology. Polonius is a counselor; his job is to arrange, interpret, and explain, and his own reputation is a necessary component in justifying his advice. Difficulty arises when he tries to direct evidence toward a single, predetermined explanation and constructs the justifying narrative around that bias. That is, when he moves from advising, warning, and admonishing to prompting, Polonius moves toward more and more prescriptive investigations as the play progresses, proceeding to equip Ophelia with not only a scenario and script but also with props to play the scene. The culmination of this urge to stage-manage will be his production of the scene in Gertrude’s closet that leads directly to his own death.