



Brevity is the soul of wit

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Polonius:

My liege, and madam, to expostulate
What majesty should be, what duty is,
What day is day, night night, and time is time,
Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time;
Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief. Your noble son is mad. . . .

[Hamlet Act 2, scene 2, 86–92](#)

Polonius, right-hand man of Hamlet's stepfather, King Claudius, has been employed to spy on the prince and report on his very odd behavior. As Polonius begins to deliver to the king and queen the results of his investigation, he embarks on this windy preface. Besides being nonsensical, his speech is self-contradictory: he wastes plenty of time denouncing the time wasted by rhetorical speechifying.

"Brevity is the soul of wit" has become a standard English proverb; in the process, its context has been somewhat neglected. Polonius, though he has high opinions indeed of his "wit" (that is, acumen), is the least brief and one of the least "witty" characters in the play. Freud aptly referred to Polonius as "the old chatterbox" in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

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