



## More matter with less art

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**Polonius:**

Your noble son is mad:  
Mad call I it, for to define true madness,  
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?  
But let that go.

**Queen:**

More matter with less art.

**Polonius:**

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.

[Hamlet Act 2, scene 2, 92–99](#)

In one of the funniest scenes in [Hamlet](#), the politician Polonius, who has declared that "Brevity is the soul of wit" [*see* p. 17], continues to enlarge upon Hamlet's supposed madness. The impatient Queen dryly demands "More matter with less art," that is, more substance and less rhetoric.

In Shakespeare's age, rhetoric was an element of the so-called "trivium" (grammar, rhetoric, logic) into which every schoolchild was indoctrinated. Highly rhetorical, sometimes pedantic literature had been extremely popular throughout the late sixteenth century. But by the time of [Hamlet](#), Polonius's brand of "art" had begun to seem affected, passé, almost vulgar; there was a new insistence on the value of spontaneity.

Polonius, despite his protests, is anything but spontaneous. By claiming that he uses "no art," he pretends that polished rhetoric comes as naturally to him as breathing. His tautologies and "figures"—rhetorical devices, such as chiasmus (inversion of word order), *occupatio* (pretending to pass over something one actually mentions), and parallel clauses—are, however, blatantly affected, as befits his character. Polonius, a self-satis-fied, tedious old man straight out of classical comedy, tries so hard to please that he becomes annoying.

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## Shakespeare Quotes: More matter with less art

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