

## What Shakespeare Says about Sending Our Children Off to College

*Four hundred years after his death, the Bard of Avon provides advice to students embarking on the journey through college.*

By Jeffrey R. Wilson

Every fall, millions of parents send millions of children off to college for the first time, and those parents must find something ceremonious to say. What do we say to the sons and daughters we've been able to mold, mentor, guide, and indeed save (often from themselves) as they step out of our control and into a world that—quite frankly—they don't understand, couldn't possibly understand?

William Shakespeare actually wrote a scene about this event. It appears in his most famous play, *Hamlet*, and it gives us one of his most quoted lines: "To thine own self be true." This line has inspired countless [valedictorian addresses](#) and [blog posts](#). Films such as *The Last Days of Disco* and *Clueless* have riffed on it. People [tattoo](#) it on their bodies. A friend of mine went to a school where students were asked to sign every letter with their names and "To thine own self be true," even though none of them knew where the line was from or what it meant.

Indeed, what does "To thine own self be true" actually mean? *Be yourself? Don't change who you are? Follow your own convictions? Don't lie to yourself?* Determining the meaning of this line—and thus Shakespeare's advice for young men and women on their way to college—depends to some extent upon the meaning of "self," the meaning of "true," and perhaps even the meaning of "meaning."

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Grammatically speaking, the word *self* usually appears as part of a reflexive pronoun ("myself," "yourself"), but it has also emerged as a noun ("the self") because it does useful psychological work. What is "the self"? What is it that you are true to when you are "true to yourself"? When we talk about "the self," we are usually referring to who a person *really* is, to an internal condition or reality, a reality that can sometimes remain hidden behind the exterior or visible aspects of a person. *The self* is a term that—like *soul*, *mind*, *spirit*, and *nature*—refers to someone's essence, to what someone essentially, actually, really is as opposed to what someone only appears to be.

Like *self*, the word *true* has several senses. A person can be true, as in faithful, in contrast to being disloyal. Or a person can be true, as in honest, in contrast to being deceitful. And something can be true as opposed to being false; a thing can be actual and real, not imaginary, counterfeit, or only apparent. As such, we can ask, one should be true to oneself as opposed to being what? "Disloyal" to oneself? "Dishonest" to oneself? "False" to oneself?

There is also the pragmatic question: *How does one go about being true to oneself?* And the ethical question: *Should one be true to oneself?* But I want to remain with the semantic question that is both more basic and more difficult: *What does "To thine own self be true" mean?*

To answer this question, we must consider the metaquestion posed earlier, *What is the meaning of "meaning"?* What do we mean when we ask, *What is the meaning of "To thine own self be true"?* Meaning usually relates to the significance or sense of something and is often understood as intent. Thus, our question can be restated as, *What was Shakespeare's intent when he wrote, "To thine own self be true"?* What was he trying to accomplish? What were his goals? What did he intend to communicate? What did he want us to understand when we heard, "To thine own self be true"?

I would like to suggest that, if we understand meaning as intent, then "To thine own self be true" means, paradoxically, that "the self" does not exist. Or, more accurately, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* implies that "the self" exists only as a rhetorical, philosophical, and psychological construct that we use to make sense of our experiences and actions in the world, not as anything real. If this is so, then this passage may offer us a way of thinking about Shakespeare as not just a playwright but also a moral philosopher, one who did his ethics in drama.

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The line "To thine own self be true" comes in act 1, scene 3 of *Hamlet*, as Laertes is about to embark for school in France. Before he leaves, Laertes gives his sister, Ophelia, a tongue lashing about her budding relationship with Prince Hamlet: he tells her not to heed Hamlet's professions of love, which are, Laertes says, unreliable, since Hamlet will one day be king and will be forced into a political marriage not of his own choosing. Ophelia thanks him for his "good lesson" but then points out that he is chiding her to lead the dry life of chastity and temperance even as he leaves for school "like a puffed and reckless libertine" who "recks not his own rede." (1.3.44–50). He is badgering her to be reserved as he departs on the odyssey of wantonness that is college. In other words, do as Laertes says, not as he does.

Shakespeare follows this brief moment of inconstancy—or, if we are less forgiving, this moment of hypocrisy—with an even more egregious example. Laertes's father, Polonius, blusters onto the scene to send Laertes off to school with a speech of his own:

There; my blessing with thee!  
And these few precepts in thy memory  
See thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,  
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.  
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.  
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,  
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;  
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment  
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware  
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,  
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.  
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;  
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.  
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.  
Neither a borrower nor a lender be;  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.  
This above all: to thine ownself be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (1.3.56–79)

Formally speaking, Polonius's speech is made up of a series of proverbs that can be boiled down to some fairly straightforward rules for living: *Don't speak your mind. Don't act without thinking. Don't be too formal with people, but don't be too informal either. Keep your friends close. Keep your friends few. Don't fight, but if you do, win. Be a good listener. Don't talk too much. Listen to others complain, but don't complain yourself. Dress nicely, but not too nicely. Don't borrow money from others. Don't loan money to others.* And then there is the famous line, "To thine own self be true." Does the subsequent, often elided line, "Thou canst not then be false to any man" (1.3.79), help us understand "To thine own self be true"? When Polonius says not to be "false" to anyone, is he simply saying, *Don't lie to yourself, and then you won't lie to others?* Or is Polonius suggesting, more ambitiously, that if Laertes remains loyal to his internal essence—his self, soul, mind, spirit, nature—then the Laertes that others experience will be the *real* Laertes?

The richness and renown of this line no doubt stems from its density, from its ability to sustain multiple meanings at once. But what is most interesting about Polonius's proverbs is not that they hold some salvific truths that we all ought to adopt, although from where I stand they do represent some good advice for winning friends and influencing people, advice with an impressive pedigree in Aristotle's golden mean. What is most interesting is that Polonius's proverbs are violated in the very saying of them. His edict to "give thy thoughts no tongue" is undone in his tonguing of his own thoughts. His injunction, "Be thou familiar," jars with the schoolmasterly tone he takes with his own son (as epitomized in the archaic pronoun "thine" in "To thine own self be true"). His command to "give . . . few thy voice" is violated in giving voice to that command. Ironically, Polonius goes on (and on, and on) in a long-winded speech of more than twenty lines about how Laertes should be measured in his words. This is the same Polonius who, later in *Hamlet*, insists that "brevity is the soul of wit" (2.2.90) in a passage in which Shakespeare satirized him for his long-windedness (Queen Gertrude famously asks Polonius for "more matter, with less art" [2.2.95]). But, as with his son Laertes, do as Polonius says, not as he does. Hypocrisy runs in the family.

In performances of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius's speech is usually played for laughs up until "This above all," at which point it turns serious: the actor playing Polonius turns, however slightly, toward the audience, at which point it is not Polonius giving his words of wisdom to Laertes but Shakespeare speaking directly to us in the audience. But the keynote of Polonius's speech, "To thine own self be true," reveals a discrepancy between *doing* and *saying*. In speaking his proverbs to Laertes, Polonius is not being true to his own proverbs (that one should keep one's thoughts to oneself). In saying "To thine own self be true," Polonius is being untrue to his own self. Moreover, Polonius's climactic proverb, "To thine own self be true," is likely to conflict with the other edicts Polonius has given Laertes. He saddles Laertes with a list of rules by which to live but concludes, "This above all, to thine own self be true," an antinomian move that would override the rules just enumerated if, say, Laertes's "self" told him to do otherwise. Should Laertes be true to himself, or should Laertes be true to the list of things Polonius has told him to do? What if Laertes's self tells him, for example, to become a banker: should he be true to his own self, or should he be true to Polonius's injunction, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"?

A close reading of Polonius's speech to Laertes reveals that it has an actual meaning that is quite different from its apparent meaning. On first blush, the speech seems to be a straightforward representation of the proverbial wisdom a caring, if aloof, father imparts to his son as the son sets out on his journey from adolescence to adulthood. Upon closer inspection, however, the speech is a bed of contradiction and a satirical portrait of hypocrisy. Polonius violates his own dictates in the very saying of them, which allows us to identify and critique him as someone who insists that others follow rules that he himself does not.

This reading calls into question my earlier statement that Polonius's speech takes the form of a series of proverbs. The speech is proverbial, sure, but we must acknowledge that the speech is something *in addition to* a series of proverbs. It is a *dramatization of proverbialization*, a representation of what it looks like to give proverbs, and Shakespeare's drama is mimetic, not moralistic. That is, in this scene, Shakespeare is being descriptive, not prescriptive. He is not giving us "life lessons." He is representing the ways in which life lessons are given. "To thine own self be true" is not Shakespeare's advice for living. It is his satire of moral entrepreneurs.

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But I want to suggest that "To thine own self be true" is more than just a critique of hypocrisy. It is also Shakespeare's indictment of the idea of "the self." Consider the fact that, immediately after Polonius sends Laertes off to France, as Ophelia tells her father that she isn't quite sure what to think about her relationship with Hamlet, Polonius does not tell her to be true to her own self. Instead, he tells her what to think: "You do not understand yourself. . . . Think yourself a baby" (1.3.95, 104)? If Laertes should be true to himself, why does Polonius not extend this same courtesy to Ophelia? Why can Laertes be true to himself while Ophelia must think of herself as a baby? Is it blatant misogyny? Sure, but it is also true that Polonius's concept of "the self" is incoherent. For Polonius means exactly the same thing when he tells Laertes "To thine own self be true" and Ophelia "Think yourself a baby." What he means is: *Do as I say*. There is no meaningful sense in which Laertes and Ophelia have internal essences to which their external actions make reference. Instead, "the self" is Polonius's image for the version of his children that he wants to see. Polonius is his children's self. Thus, later in *Hamlet*, after Polonius dies and Ophelia goes mad, she is said to be "divided from herself" (4.5.85)—not divided from her mind but from a father who has assumed the status of her self through his dominance of her will. When Polonius speaks to Ophelia and Laertes, "the self" isn't *who they really are* but *who he wants them to be*, and Laertes and Ophelia (like the rest of us) aren't essentially anything other than the sum of their past actions. From this perspective, "the self" is something we invent in an attempt to synthesize patterns in our actions, to recognize our ideals, and to stabilize the ethical choices we might face in the future.

To be clear, I am not saying that "the self" does not exist. I am saying that, from a Shakespearean perspective, "selves"—along with souls, minds, natures, identities, and essences—exist in a radically different and less impressive way than is usually assumed. The self exists as a function of discourse, as a concept invented by humans, not as a reality that is psychologically, philosophically, theologically, or existentially compelling.

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In this passage, then, Shakespeare was something of a moral philosopher. He was not a moralist, one who tells others how to behave. Polonius is a moralist, but Shakespeare had no interest in moral instruction. Shakespeare was interested in moral philosophy—in studying, theorizing, and representing through his drama what we humans do, never mind what we ought to do. At the end of the day, the Shakespearean question is not, "Should we be true to our own selves?" That is an ethical question about what one ought to do. The Shakespearean question is, "Are we true to our own selves?" That is an analytical question that requires us to observe and interpret what we actually do, not to pontificate on what we ought to do.

And the Shakespearean answer to this question is, like Shakespeare's answers to many other questions, to scrutinize and ultimately reject the terms upon which the question has been posed. Shakespeare's point in the scene with Polonius's precepts is not simply that we are inconstant, contradictory, hypocritical—that we humans are, like Polonius, not true to our own selves. Shakespeare's point is, more radically, that we cannot be true to our own selves because "the self," understood as one's essence, does not exist. We have no selves to be true to: that, paradoxically, is the meaning of "To thine own self be true," if we understand meaning as intent. If we ask the question, as we did at the start of this essay, "What did Shakespeare want to communicate when he wrote 'To thine own self be true'?" then we must answer that Shakespeare's intent was to display for his audience the simultaneous attractiveness and offensiveness of the concept of "the self": it simplifies our inconstant, disorganized actions by saying that some of them are true and some false to who we really are, and in this simplification it misrepresents the human being, who is not a container or vessel for some self that sometimes one is true to, sometimes not. The notion that there is something inside me that is truly, absolutely, impermeably, really *who I am*—whether I call it my soul, mind, spirit, essence, identity, or self—is a fiction, one that covers over the fact that what we are is simply the totality of what we do.

If this is so, then what, we might ask, would Shakespeare have said to his own kids when sending them off to college? That is a difficult question, of course, because the Shakespeare I have described in this essay positioned himself against the simplified ethics of proverbial wisdom. So maybe Shakespeare would have said nothing at all. Or maybe he would have asked his kids to spurn ethics for analysis: *Ethics is easy; analysis is hard. And moral decisions are easy when they come after good analysis, while immorality almost always follows poor analysis. Thus, aim to understand the world, not to fix it. As a play like Hamlet shows us, when you try to fix a world you don't understand, you and your entire family might die.* Or perhaps Shakespeare would have told his children to prepare to change: *Humans are inconstant creatures whose actions do not cohere, are not accountable to an identity. You will be a different person at the end of college from the person you are at the start. That's not advice. It's neither good nor bad, neither something to pursue nor something to resist. It just is the case.* Or perhaps Shakespeare would have said exactly what Polonius said. Even though he satirized moralists like Polonius, the whole point of Shakespeare's satire was that we humans don't ourselves do what we tell others to do, Shakespeare included. He could satirize moralists in one breath and moralize himself in another, which would at once contradict and demonstrate by contradicting his satire of the idea of a constant and stable self.

Jeffrey R. Wilson is a preceptor in expository writing at Harvard University, where he teaches the "Why Shakespeare?" section of the university's first-year writing course. His e-mail address is [jeffreywilson@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jeffreywilson@fas.harvard.edu).