

In staging the so-called ‘nunnery scene’ of 3.1, many *Hamlet* productions portray the prince’s sudden and out-of-context question to Ophelia of “*Where is thy father?*” as the moment when he realizes their conversation is being spied upon, almost certainly by the meddlesome Polonius and very likely by his despised uncle and perhaps the queen too.

In my view, the prince’s suspicion—and pained sense of betrayal—is present from the very beginning of the encounter. I interpret his opening question of “*Ha, ha! are you honest?*” as an echo of his earlier query to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “*Were you not sent for? ... Come, come, deal justly with me*” (2.2). Accordingly, I believe much if not all his verbal outburst is not for the ears of the “*fair Ophelia*” but for the benefit of the “*seeing, unseen*” observers.

The prince has three grounds for suspicion: after being mysteriously “*sent for*”, he encounters the woman who has for two months shunned his company; she happens to be holding “*remembrances*” to return to him; and lastly, her words of “*Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind*” have the air of a prepared statement in the pompous verbal style of her father.

In the prince’s tirade, there is anger at her perceived betrayal. But also, by pushing her away (“*I loved you not*”), a protective wish to shield her from any taint of involvement in the “*hot blood ... bitter business*” (3.2) action against King Claudius that may follow that evening’s performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. But in his rage, Hamlet blurts out his murderous intent towards Claudius (“*all but one, shall / live*”) that prompts the king to write the ‘commission’ that will see the prince dispatched “*with speed*” (3.1) to England. On overhearing the king’s decision, Ophelia must surely feel any hope of restoring her relationship with the prince is forever lost.

---