

Kenneth Muir

Muir discusses imagery and symbolism in Hamlet, beginning with an examination of what he considers the most apparent image pattern in the play—disease. The critic suggests that images of disease are not associated with Hamlet himself, but a sense of infection surrounds both Claudius's crime and guilt and Gertrude's sin. Muir attributes Hamlet's disorder to his melancholic grief over his father's death and his mother's frailty. In addition, the critic includes images of decay, flowers, and prostitution with those of disease in the larger patterns of corruption and appearance versus reality. Finally, Muir explores war imagery in Hamlet, noting that it frequently recurs in the text and that its dramatic function is to underscore the fact that Hamlet and Claudius are engaged in a duel to the death.

A good many of the sickness images are merely designed to lend atmosphere [in *Hamlet*], as when Francisco on the battlements remarks that he is "sick at heart" [I. i. 9] or when Hamlet speaks of the way the courtier's chilblain is galled by the peasant's. Other images ... are connected with the murder of Hamlet's father or with the corresponding murder of Gonzago. Several of the images refer to the sickness of the state, which some think to be due to the threat of war, but which the audience soon comes to realize is caused by Claudius' unpunished crime. Horatio believes that the appearance of the Ghost "bodes some strange eruption to our state" [I. i. 69] and Marcellus concludes that

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

[I. iv. 90]

Hamlet himself uses disease imagery again and again in reference to the King's guilt. He thinks of himself as a surgeon probing a wound: "I'll tent him to the quick" [II. ii. 597]. He tells Guildenstern that Claudius should have sent for a physician rather than himself, and when he refrains from assassinating him he remarks:

This physic but prolongs thy sickly days.

[III. iii. 96]

He compares Claudius to "a mildewed ear Blasting his wholesome brother" [III. iv. 64-5] and in the last scene of the play he compares him to a cancer:

Is't not to be damn'd

To let this canker of our nature come

In further evil.

[V. ii. 68-70]

It is true that Claudius reciprocates by using disease images in reference to Hamlet. He compares his leniency to his nephew to the behaviour of one suffering from a foul disease who conceals it and lets it feed "Even on the pith of life" [IV. i. 23]. He supports his stratagem of sending Hamlet to England with the proverbial maxim:

Diseases desperate grown

By desperate appliance are reliev'd,

Or not at all.

[IV. iii. 9-11]

In hatching his plot with Laertes, he calls Hamlet's return "the quick of th'ulcer" [IV. vii. 123]. It is surely obvious that these images cannot be used to reflect on Hamlet's character: they exhibit rather the King's guilty fear of his nephew.

Some of the disease images are used by Hamlet in reference to the Queen's adultery at which, he tells her, "Heaven's face ... Is thoughtsick" [III. iv. 48-51]. He urges her not to lay to her soul the "flattering unction" that he is mad:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.

[III. iv. 147-49]

Gertrude herself, suffering from pangs of remorse, speaks of her "sick soul."

Laertes uses three disease images, two in his warnings to Ophelia not to allow herself to be seduced by Hamlet since in youth

Contagious blastments are most imminent.

[I. iii. 42]

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Richard

Easton as the Ghost and Roger Rees as Hamlet in Act I, scene iv, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1984 (© Donald Cooper/Photostage. Reproduced by permission)

In the third he tells Claudius that the prospect of avenging himself "warms the very sickness" [IV. vii. 55] in his heart.

Hamlet uses one image to describe the cause of the war between Norway and Poland—

the imposthume of much wealth and peace
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies.

[IV. iv. 27-9]

We have now examined nearly all the disease imagery without finding any evidence to support the view that Hamlet himself is diseased—the thing that is rotten in the state of Denmark. It is rather

Claudius' crime and his guilty fears of Hamlet, and Gertrude's sin to which the imagery mainly refers; and in so far as it relates to the state of Denmark it emphasizes that what is wrong with the country is the unpunished fratricide committed by its ruler. But four disease images remain to be considered. While Hamlet is waiting for his interview with his father's ghost he meditates on the drunkenness of the Court and of the way a single small defect in a man's character destroys his reputation and nullifies his virtues in the eyes of the world—"the general censure" [I. iv. 35]. The dram of evil,—some bad habit, an inherited characteristic, or "some vicious mole of nature"—

Doth all the noble substance of a doubt.

[I. iv. 24-5]

The line is textually corrupt, but the general meaning of the passage is plain. Some critics, and Sir Laurence Olivier in his film of the play, have assumed that Hamlet, consciously or unconsciously, was thinking of the tragic flaw in his own character. But there is no reason to think that at this point in the play Hamlet suffers from some vicious mole of nature—he has not yet been tested. In any case he is not arguing that a single defect outweighs infinite virtues, but merely that it spoils a man's reputation. The lines cannot properly be applied to Hamlet himself.

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Two more disease images occur in the speech in which Claudius is trying to persuade Laertes to murder Hamlet. He tells him that love is apt to fade,

For goodness, growing to a plurisy
Dies in his own too much: that we would do
We should do when we would

[IV. vii. 117-19]

If we put it off,

this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing.

[IV. vii. 122-23]

The speech is designed to persuade Laertes to avenge his father's death without delay. But as Hamlet and Laertes are characters placed in a similar position, and as by this time Hamlet's vengeance has suffered abatements and delays, many critics have suggested that Shakespeare is commenting through the mouth of Claudius on Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty. It is not inherently impossible; but we should surely apply these lines to Hamlet's case only if we find by the use of more direct evidence that Shakespeare so conceived Hamlet's failure to carry out his duty. Only one sickness image remains to be discussed, but this is the most famous one. In his soliloquy in Act III scene 1 (which begins "To be or not to be" [III. i. 55ff.]) Hamlet shows that thinking about the possible results of action is apt to inhibit it. People refrain from committing suicide (in spite of the miseries of this life) because they fear that death will be worse than life. They may, for example, be punished in hell for violating the canon against self-slaughter. Hamlet continues:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

[III. i. 82-7]

Obviously these lines are an important clue to the interpretation of the play. I used to think that conscience meant both "thinking too precisely on the event" and also the "craven scruple" of which Hamlet speaks in his last soliloquy—*conscience* as well as conscience, in fact. I now think the word is used (as in the words "the conscience of the King" [II. ii. 605]) only in its modern sense. Since Hamlet foresees that in taking vengeance on Claudius he may himself be killed, he hesitates—not because he is afraid of dying, but because he is afraid of being punished for his sins in hell or purgatory. But, as G. R. Elliott has pointed out [in his *Scourge and Minister*], Hamlet is speaking not merely of himself but of every man:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

[III. i. 82]

It is apparent from this analysis of the sickness imagery in the play that it throws light on Elsinore rather than on Hamlet himself. He is not the diseased figure depicted by a long line of critics—or, at least, the imagery cannot justifiably be used in support of such an interpretation. On the other hand, the parallels which have been pointed out with Timothy Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* do suggest that Shakespeare conceived his hero as suffering from melancholy. As depicted in the course of the play, he is not the paragon described by Ophelia, the observer of all observers, the glass of fashion, The expectancy and rose of the fair state. [III. i. 152]

But it is necessary to emphasize that his melancholy has objective causes in the frailty of his mother and the death of his father.

Closely connected with the sickness imagery is what may loosely be called symbolism concerned with the odour of corruption ... Hamlet, like Webster in Eliot's poem, is much possessed by death. He speaks of the way the sun breeds maggots in a dead dog, he refers to the corpse of Polonius as "the guts"; he tells Claudius that the dead man is at supper at the diet of worms and he proceeds to show how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. The Graveyard scene is designed not merely to provide a last expression of Hamlet's love for Ophelia, and an opportunity for screwing up Laertes' hatred of Hamlet to the sticking-point. This could have been done without the conversation between the gravediggers, and that between the gravedigger and Hamlet. The *Page 217 | Top of Article* scene is clearly used to underline the death-theme. Hamlet's meditation on the various skulls serves as a *memento mori* [a reminder of mortality]. We are reminded of Cain, who did the first murder, of Lady Worms, "chapless and knocked about the mazard with a sexton's spade" [V. i. 89-90], of Yorick's stinking skull, and of the noble dust of Alexander which may be stopping a bung-hole. Hamlet is thinking of the base uses to which we may return; but his meditations in the graveyard, though somewhat morbid, are calmer and less bitter than his thoughts earlier in the play. All through the play there are words and images which reinforce the idea of corruption. Hamlet, feeling himself to be contaminated by the frailty of his mother wishes that his sullied flesh would melt. He suspects "foul play" when he hears of the appearance of the ghost. The intemperance of the Danes makes foreigners *soil* their addition with swinish phrase. Denmark's ear is "rankly abused" by the false account of the death of Hamlet's father; and later Claudius, at his prayers confesses that his "offence is rank" [III. iii. 36]. The Ghost tells Hamlet that Lust

Will sate itself in a celestial bed

And prey on garbage.

[I. v. 56-7]

Polonius speaks of his son's youthful vices as "the taints of liberty" [II. i. 32]. The air seems to Hamlet "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" [II. ii. 302-03] and he declares that if his uncle's guilt is not revealed, his

imaginings are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy.

[III. ii. 83-4]

In the scene with his mother, Hamlet speaks of "the rank sweat of an enseamed bed"; he urges her not to "spread the compost on the weeds To make them ranker"; and he speaks of "rank corruption mining all within". The smell of sin blends with the odour of corruption. [III. iv. 92, 151-52, 148]

The only alleviation to this atmosphere is provided by the flowers associated with the "rose of May" [IV. v. 158], Ophelia. Laertes compares Hamlet's love for her to a violet; Ophelia warns her brother not to tread "the primrose path of dalliance" [I. ii. 50], and later she laments that the perfume of Hamlet's love is lost. In her madness she distributes flowers and the last picture we have of her alive is wearing "fantastic garlands". Laertes prays that violets may spring from her unpolluted flesh and the Queen scatters flowers in the grave with the words "Sweets to the sweet" [V. i. 243]. Hamlet, probably referring to his love for Ophelia, tells Gertrude that her adultery

takes off the rose

From the fair forehead of an innocent love

And sets a blister there.

[III. iv. 42-4]

The rose colour again reminds us of the flower. But the flowers and perfumes associated with Ophelia do not seriously counterbalance the odour of corruption.

I have left to the end what by my reckoning is the largest group of images. This is derived not from sickness, but from war. Many of these war images may have been suggested by the elder Hamlet's campaigns and by the activities of Fortinbras; but we should remember that Prince Hamlet himself is not without martial qualities, and this fact is underlined by the rites of war ordered for his obsequies and by Fortinbras' final tribute. But the dramatic function of the imagery is no doubt to emphasise that Claudius and Hamlet are engaged in a duel to the death, a duel which does ultimately lead to both their deaths.

Hamlet speaks of himself and his uncle as mighty opposites, between whose "pass and fell incensed points" [V. ii. 61] Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had come. All through the play the war imagery reminds us of the struggle. Bernardo proposes to "assail" Horatio's ears which are "fortified against" his story. Claudius in his first speech tells of discretion fighting with nature and of the defeated joy of his wedding. Later in the scene he complains that Hamlet has a heart unfortified. Laertes urges his sister to "keep in the rear" of her affection,

Out of the shot and danger of desire [I. iii. 34-5]

and he speaks of the "calumnious strokes" sustained by virtue and of the danger of youth's rebellion. Ophelia promises to take Laertes' advice as a "watchman" to her heart. Polonius in the same scene carries on the same imagery: he urges her to set her "entreatments at a higher rate Than a command to parley" [I. iii. 122-23]. In the next scene Hamlet speaks of the way "the o'ergrowth of some complexion" breaks down "the pales and forts of reason" [I. iv. 27-8]. [Page 218 | Top of Article](#) Polonius compares the temptations of the flesh to a "general assault," The noise of Ilium's fall "takes prisoner Pyrrhus ear" [II. ii. 477], and Pyrrhus' sword is "rebellious to his arm" [II. ii. 470]. Hamlet thinks the actor would "cleave the general ear with horrid speech," and says that "the clown shall make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o'th'sere" (*i.e.* easily set off) [II. ii. 563, 323-24]. He speaks of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and derides the King for being "frighted with false fire" [III. i. 57; III. ii. 266]. Rosencrantz talks of the "armour of the mind" [III. iii. 12] and Claudius admits that his "guilt defeats" his "strong intent" [III. iii. 40].

Hamlet fears that Gertrude's heart is so brazed by custom that it is "proof and bulwark against sense", and he speaks of the way "compulsive ardour" (sexual appetite) "gives the charge" [III. iv. 86]. He tells his mother that he will outwit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar; and it shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.

[III. iv. 206-09]

The Ghost speaks of Gertrude's 'fighting soul'. Claudius says that slander's whisper

As level as the cannon to his blank
Transports his pois'ned shot.

[IV. i. 42-3]

He tells Gertrude that when sorrows come,

They come not single spies
But in battalions!

[IV. v. 78-9]

and that Laertes' rebellion,

Like to a murd'ring piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.

[IV. v. 95-6]

In explaining to Laertes why he could not openly proceed against Hamlet because of his popularity with the people, he says that his arrows,

Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind,
Would have reverted to my bow again,
But not where I have aim'd them.

[IV. vii. 22-4]

Hamlet, in apologising to Laertes, says that his killing of Polonius was accidental:

I have shot my arrow o'er the house
And hurt my brother.

[V. ii. 243-44]

(These last two images are presumably taken from archery rather than from battle.) Gertrude compares Hamlet's hairs to "sleeping soldiers in the alarm."

Six of the images are taken from naval warfare. Polonius tells Ophelia he thought Hamlet meant to wreck her [II. i. 110] and he advises Laertes to *grapple* his friends to his 'heart with hoops of steel' [I. iii. 63] and, in a later scene, he proposes to board the Prince [II. ii. 170]. Hamlet, quibbling on "crafts," tells his mother:

O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

[III. iv. 209-10]

In the same scene he speaks of hell that *mutines* in a matron's bones; and, in describing his voyage to England, he tells Horatio:

Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.

[V. ii. 5-6]

In addition to the war images there are a large number of others that suggest violence. There are four images about knives, as when the Ghost tells Hamlet that his visitation is "to whet" his "almost blunted purpose" [III. iv. 111].

The images of war and violence should have the effect of counteracting some interpretations of the play, in which the psychology of the hero is regarded as the centre of interest. Equally important is the struggle between Hamlet and his uncle. Hamlet has to prove that the Ghost is not a devil in disguise, luring him to damnation, by obtaining objective evidence of Claudius' guilt. Claudius, for his part, is trying to pierce the secret of Hamlet's madness, using Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, and finally Gertrude as his instruments. Hamlet succeeds in his purpose, but in the very moment of success he enables Claudius to pierce the secret of his madness. Realising that his own secret murder has come to light, Claudius is bound to arrange for Hamlet's murder; and Hamlet, knowing that the truth of his antic disposition is now revealed to his enemy, realises that if he does not kill Claudius, Claudius will certainly kill him.

We have considered most of the patterns of imagery in the play—there are a few others which do not seem to throw much light on the meaning of the play—and I think it will be agreed [Page 219 | Top of Article](#) that ... the various image-patterns we have traced in *Hamlet* show that to concentrate on the sickness imagery, especially if it is divorced from its context, unduly simplifies the play. I do not pretend that a study of all the imagery will necessarily provide us with one—and only one—interpretation; but it will at least prevent us from assuming that the play is wholly concerned with the psychology of the hero. And that, I hope you will agree, is a step in the right direction. It may also prevent us from adopting the view of several modern critics—Wilson Knight, Rebecca West, Madariaga, L. C. Knights—who all seem to me to debase Hamlet's character to the extent of depriving him of the status of a tragic hero. It may also prevent us from assuming that the complexities of the play are due to Shakespeare's failure to transform the melodrama he inherited, and to the survival of primitive traits in his otherwise sophisticated hero.

Source: Kenneth Muir, "Imagery and Symbolism in *Hamlet*," in *Etudes Anglaises*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, October-December 1964, pp. 352-63.