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Re-Imaging Hamlet: Courtier,
soldier and scholar.



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I am going to focus on Hamlet's imagery because it is, after all, Hamlet, who creates the most significant images in the play and the best way to understand Hamlet is through his imagery. It is true to say that Hamlet keeps his language within the scope of reality and within the everyday world in contrast to Othello or Lear for example, who use heaven and the elements in their imagery. The images themselves are mostly very real, concrete and precise, familiar things dominate rather than strange or rare objects. They are not always beautiful, poetic and magnificent but they always hit the mark. And I think the imagery is one of the keys to Hamlet; like the five soliloquys in the play which help us gain entrance into Hamlet's mental being and understand his isolation, the imagery, with the wealth of realistic observations, shows us that Hamlet is not just an abstract thinker and dreamer, rather he is a man gifted with greater powers of observation than the others. He is capable of scanning reality with a keener eye and of penetrating the veil of semblance to the very core of things 'I know not seems'.

Hamlet's imagery reveals the hero's wide educational background, his multi-dimensional character and the extraordinary range of his experience. That metaphors taken from natural sciences are especially frequent in Hamlet's language again emphasises his powers of observation. But Hamlet is also at home in classical antiquity or Greek mythology, in the terminology of law, he is familiar with theatre and with acting, with the fine arts, with falconry and hunting, and the courtier's way of life. In Ophelia's words, Hamlet is a 'courtier, soldier and scholar', he is the vision of an ideal Renaissance man, bear in mind the Renaissance was at its height in England during Shakespeare's lifetime so this was a very intentional characterisation through imagery.

Hamlet commands so many levels of expression that he can attune his words as well as his imagery to the situation and to the person to whom he is speaking. It is this adaptability and versatility that makes Hamlet so universally popular, the man who encounters his father's ghost is also the man who greets Marcellus and Barnardo – unknown and junior officers – with instant and total courtesy, this is instinctual behaviour rather than put on and it endears Hamlet to us. These images of the humane Hamlet are important as they enable us to remain sympathetic to Hamlet despite his cruelty to

Ophelia and Gertrude, his killing of Polonius and disrespect towards Laertes because we understand that he is human and he is flawed.

Hamlet's use of imagery reflects his ability to penetrate to the real nature of men and things. Many of his images seem in fact designed to unmask men; to strip them of their fine appearances and to show them up in their true nature. The play starts with a question 'Who's there' and, if we look at this question metaphorically, it is perhaps this question that Hamlet seeks to answer through his use of imagery as he navigates the deception that is all around him. There is an emphasis on seeming one thing and being quite another and this concealment is a key theme in the play. Thus, by means of the simile of fortune's pipe, Hamlet shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has seen through their intent and thus he unmasks Rosencrantz when he calls him a 'sponge that soaks up the king's countenance' Reflecting on the short time between his father's death and his mother's remarriage to Claudius, Hamlet employs a series of images that reveal his repulsion at the thought of his mother married to him and in such haste:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes

and a little later, he says to Horatio:

the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

These are not poetic similes but keen observations of reality. He splits his mother's heart in twain because he tells her the truths from which she shrinks and which she conceals from herself. And again, it is by means of images that he seeks to lead her to recognition of the truth. He renews the memory of his father in her by means of his forceful description of his father's outward appearance which he compares with Hyperion, Mars and Mercury. He uses another series of comparisons to bring home to his mother the real nature of Claudius – who is really there:

a mildew'd ear.
Blasting his wholesome brother
a vice of kings
A king of shreds and patches

So Hamlet sees through men and things. He recognises what is false, visualising his recognition through imagery.

But why does he use all these images? Why doesn't he just tell it like it is? Remember, Hamlet begins the play as an unaffectedly open and candid person, he is naturally 'remiss, most generous and free from all contriving'. So, for Hamlet to have to hold his tongue is a real penance and the feeling that he must do so, in spite of his own nature, makes for the charged atmosphere of the first court scene. But, Hamlet would betray himself if he used open, direct language. So, he conceals his real meaning under images and, under the protection of that mask of 'antic disposition' Hamlet reveals more shrewd things than all of the rest of the courtiers put together.

A common criticism of Hamlet is that his over-developed intellect makes it impossible for him to act 'And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'. However, Hamlet's agony of mind and indecision is precisely what distinguishes him from the smooth plotter Claudius and the coarse, unthinking Laertes, ready to 'dare damnation' and cut his enemy's throat in a graveyard. Hamlet will never have a better opportunity to kill Claudius than when he comes upon him on his knees but do we really want to see Hamlet stab a defenceless, kneeling man? Hamlet uses the image of the leprous ailment, emphasising the malignant, disabling, slowly disintegrating nature of the disease to reflect his agony. It is not by chance that Hamlet employs this image. If we think about the description which the ghost of Hamlet's father gives of his poisoning by Claudius, we cannot help being struck by the vividness with which the process of poisoning, the malicious spreading of the disease is portrayed:

And in the porches of mine ears did pour
 The leprous distilment; whose effect
 Holds such an enmity with blood of man
 That swift as quicksilver it courses through
 The natural gates and alleys of the body,
 And with a sudden vigour it doth posset
 And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
 The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;
 And a most instant tetter bark'd about,
 Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
 All my smooth body

This real event described at the beginning of the drama exercises a profound influence upon the whole imagery of the play. The picture of the leprous skin disease, described by Hamlet's father in the first act, has buried itself deep in Hamlet's imagination and continues to reappear in metaphorical form.

The imagery in Shakespeare's tragedies often shows how a number of other images are grouped around the central symbol which expresses the same idea in different forms. In Hamlet, the idea of an ulcer dominates the imagery, infecting and fatally eating away the whole body; on every occasion repulsive images of sickness make their appearance. Hamlet's father describes how the poison invades the body during sleep and how the healthy organism is destroyed from within, not having a chance to defend itself against attack. And this now becomes the leitmotif, or leading image of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning. The poisoning reappears as a leitmotif in the action as well – as a poisoning in the dumb-show and finally, as the poisoning of all the major characters in the last act. Thus imagery and action continually play into each other's hands and we see how the term 'dramatic imagery' gains a new significance.

The image of weeds is related to the imagery of sickness in Shakespeare's work and it appears three times in Hamlet. Hamlet declares in the first act how the world appears to him:

Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed'

The ghost says to Hamlet:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf

And in the dialogue with his mother, this image immediately follows upon the image of the ulcer:

And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker

Continuing the atmosphere of rot and decay, Hamlet feels himself sullied by his mother's incest, which, according to the conception of the time, she committed in marrying Claudius. For him this is a poisoning idea which finds expression in his language 'O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew'. Hamlet's imagery centres around decay throughout the play from Yorick's skull to the maggots which the sun breeds in a dead dog. These images of rot, sickness and decay leave us with the certainty that something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark.

In his four great tragedies (Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth) Shakespeare relates his beginnings to his ends particularly closely. Hamlet ends with the image of a soldier's funeral and opens with sentries at their watch being relieved. The soldier on guard, who cannot leave his post until he is relieved or given permission from above, is a metaphor for the soul in this world. Hamlet cannot leave voluntarily, that is, he cannot commit suicide, he must bear whatever anguish life brings. The play continually recurs to the thoughts of suicide, and the temptation to give up the battle of life. Hamlet's first soliloquy opens with the lament that the Almighty has 'fixed his canon' against self-slaughter' and Hamlet's last action is to snatch the poisoned cup from the lips of Horatio. Hamlet believes that man is 'ordained to govern the world according to equity and righteousness with an upright heart' and not to renounce the world and leave it to its corruption. The images of rot, decay and corruption throughout the play test Hamlet and reveal the moral anguish which moral responsibility brings. Ultimately though, Hamlet is a noble character and he is fittingly borne 'like a soldier to the stage' at the end of the play because in the secret war he has waged, he has shown a soldier's virtues.