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from *The Development of
Shakespeare's Imagery*

The surprisingly new possibilities of language which make this play appear a turning point in the development of Shakespeare's style¹ seem to have their origin in the personality of Hamlet. The new language comes from him, in him it attains to perfection. The language of the King and the Queen, of Laertes and Polonius, although subtly adapted to their character, still treads the well-worn paths; it is less novel, because the people by whom it is spoken are not in need of a new form of expression—on the contrary, they may be more aptly characterized by a conventional mode of speech. But Hamlet's nature can only find expression in a wholly new language. This also applies to the imagery in the play. It is Hamlet who creates the most significant images, images marking the atmosphere and theme of the play, which are paler and less pregnant in the speech of the other characters. Hamlet's way of employing images is unique in Shakespeare's drama. When he begins to speak, the images fairly stream to him without the slightest effort—not as similes or conscious paraphrases, but as immediate and spontaneous visions. Hamlet's imagery shows us that whenever he thinks and speaks, he is at the same time a visionary, a seer, for whom the living things of the world about him embody and symbolize thought. His first monologue may show this; the short space of time which lies between his father's death and his mother's remarriage is to him a series of pictures taken from real life:

A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears: (Lii.147-49)

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes, (Lii.154-55)

or a little later, addressed to Horatio:

the funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (Lii.180-81)

These are no poetic similes, but keen observations of reality. Hamlet does not translate the general thought into an image paraphrasing it; on the contrary, he uses the opposite method: he refers the generalization to the events and objects of the reality underlying the thought. This sense of reality finds expression in all the images Hamlet employs. Peculiar to them all is that closeness to reality which is often carried to the point of an unsparing poignancy. They

² The spontaneous and unpremeditated character of Hamlet's imagery will become obvious through a comparison with Claudius' language. Claudius' speeches are studied and give the impression of having been previously prepared. His images often are consciously inserted. Dr. Schmetz notes that while Claudius often uses comparisons, linking object and image by "as" or "like," Hamlet's imagination fuses both into a metaphor (cf. IV.i. 40-44, IV.v. 94-96 with III.i. 83-84, III.ii. 404). Further examples for Claudius' comparisons: III.iii. 41; IV.vii. 15; IV.iv. 87. This is, of course, only one aspect of the manifold differences between Claudius' and Hamlet's language. The whole problem has been exhaustively dealt with in Dr. Schmetz's study. For the difference between the imagery of Claudius' public and that of his private language, and for further distinguishing features in Claudius' imagery see Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Frontiers of Drama*, London, 1945, p. 88.

are mostly very concrete and precise, simple and, as to their subject matter, easy to understand; common and ordinary things, things familiar to the man in the street dominate, rather than lofty, strange or rare objects. Illuminating in this connection is the absence of hyperbole, of great dimensions in his imagery. In contrast to Othello or Lear, for example, who awaken heaven and the elements in their imagery³ and who lend expression to their mighty passions in images of soaring magnificence, Hamlet prefers to keep his language within the scope of reality, indeed, within the everyday world. It is not spacious scenery and nature which dominate in Hamlet's imagery, but rather trades and callings, objects of daily use, popular games and technical terms; his images are not beautiful, poetic, magnificent, but they always hit their mark, the matter in question, with surprisingly unerring sureness. They do not waft the things of reality into a dream world of the imagination; on the contrary, they make them truly real, they reveal their inmost, naked being. All this, the wealth of realistic observation, of real objects, of associations taken from everyday life, is enough to prove that Hamlet is no abstract thinker and dreamer. As his imagery betrays to us, he is rather 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 even to the very core of things. "I know not seems."

At the same time, Hamlet's imagery reveals the hero's wide educational background, his many-sidedness and the extraordinary range of his experience. That metaphors taken from natural sciences are especially frequent in Hamlet's language again emphasizes his power of observation, his critical objective way of looking at things. But Hamlet is also at home in classical antiquity or Greek mythology, in the terminology of law, he is not only familiar with the theater and with acting—as everyone knows—but also with the fine arts, with falconry and hunting, with the soldier's trade and strategy, with the courtier's way of life. All these spheres disclosing Hamlet's personality as that of a "courtier, soldier, and scholar" (in Ophelia's words, III.i.154) are evoked by the imagery which, however, turns them to living account by a fit application to situations, persons, and moods. Hamlet commands so many levels of expression that he can attune his diction as well as his imagery to the situation and to the person to whom he is speaking. This adaptability and versatility is another feature in Hamlet's use of language which can also be traced in his imagery.

At the same time, this wide range of imagery can, in certain passages, serve to give relief to his conflicting moods, to his being torn between extremes and to the abruptness of his changes of mood. This characteristic which has been particularly emphasized and partly attributed to "melancholy" by L. L. Schücking and John Dover Wilson, also expresses itself in the sudden change of language and in the juxtaposition of passages which are sharply contrasted in their diction. With no other character in Shakespeare do we find this sharp contrast between images marked by a pensive mood and those which unsparringly use vulgar words and display a frivolous and sarcastic disgust for the world.

Let us consider further how Hamlet's use of imagery reflects his ability to penetrate to the real nature of men and things and his relentless breaking down of the barriers raised by hypocrisy. Many of his images seem in fact designed to unmask men; they are meant to strip them of their fine appearances and to show them up in their true nature. 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" (IV.ii.15). He splits his mother's heart "in twain," because he tells her the truth 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 a recognition of the truth. He renews the memory of his father in her by means of that forceful description of his

³ Hamlet, too, invokes God and the heavenly powers, but these invocations never take the form of grandiose images, they are mostly brief and often restricted to mere references (cf. Lii. 132, 150, 195; Iv. 92; Lii. 85; V. ii. 333, 345).

outward appearance which could be compared with Hyperion, Mars, and Mercury. On the other hand, another series of comparisons seeks to bring home to his mother the real nature of Claudius:

a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. (III.iv.65-66)

a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket!

A king of shreds and patches, (III.iv.99-102, 103)

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

Hamlet's imagery, which thus calls things by their right names, acquires a peculiar freedom from his feigned madness. Hamlet needs images for his "antic disposition." He would betray himself if he used open, direct language. Hence he must speak ambiguously and cloak his real meaning under quibbles and puns,⁴ images, and parables. The other characters do not understand him and continue to think he is mad, but the audience can gain an insight into the true situation. Under the protection of that mask of "antic disposition," Hamlet says more shrewd things than all the rest of the courtiers together. So we find the images here in an entirely new rôle, unique in Shakespeare's drama. Only the images of the fool in *King Lear* have a similar function.

Hamlet suffers an injustice when he is accused of merely theoretical and abstract speculation which would lead him away from reality. His thoughts carry further than those of others, because he sees more and deeper than they, not because he would leave reality unheeded. It is true that his is a nature more prone to thought than to action; but that signifies by no means, as the Hamlet critics would often have us believe, that he is a philosopher and dreamer and no man of the world. When, in the graveyard scene, he holds Yorick's skull in his hand, he sees *more* in it than the others, for whom the skull is merely a lifeless object. And precisely because he is more deeply moved by the reality and significance of these earthly remains, his fantasy is able to follow the "noble dust of Alexander" through all its metamorphoses. The comparisons which spring from this faculty of thinking a thing to the end, as it were, derive in fact from a more intense experience of reality.

It is a fundamental tenet of Hamlet criticism that Hamlet's overdeveloped intellect makes it impossible for him to act. In this connection the following famous passage is generally quoted:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action. (III.1.84-88)

The customary interpretation of this passage, "reflection hinders action," does it an injustice. For Hamlet does not say "reflection hinders action," he simply utters this image. The fact that he does not utter that general maxim, but this image, makes all the difference. For this image is the unique and specific form of expression of the thought underlying it, it cannot be separated from it. If we say "reflection hinders action," we make a false generalization; we replace a specific formulation by an apothegm. And thereby we eradicate in this passage that quality which is peculiarly Shakespeare's or, what is more, peculiarly Hamlet's. Here the image does not serve the purpose of merely casting a decorative cloak about the thought; it is much rather an intrinsic part of the thought.

"Reflection hinders action"—this phrase carries in it something absolute, something damning. We sense a moralizing undertone. Action and reflection are thus conceived of as two mutually inimical abstract principles.

⁴ Through John Dover Wilson's edition of *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1934) many of these puns and quibbles which so far had remained unintelligible (or were faintly understood) have been cleared up. On the importance of quibbles in *Hamlet* see John Dover Wilson's Introduction, p. xxviii, 292.

But not so in Shakespeare's metaphorical language. "Native hue of resolution" suggests that Shakespeare viewed resolution as an innate human quality, not as a moral virtue to be consciously striven after. But the Hamlet criticism of the nineteenth century saw the problem in this light of a moral virtue. We see, then, that a careful consideration of Shakespeare's imagery may sometimes correct false interpretations.

"Reflection hinders action." Polonius, the sententious lover of maxims, could have said this, for a general saying carries no sense of personal obligation; it places a distance between the speaker and what he would say. But just as it is characteristic of Polonius to utter banalities and sententious effusions, so, too, it is characteristic of Hamlet, to express even those things which would have permitted of a generalizing formulation, in a language which bears the stamp of a unique and personal experience.

Hamlet sees this problem under the aspect of a process of the human organism. The original bright coloring of the skin is concealed by an ailment. Thus the relation between thought and action appears not as an opposition between two abstract principles between which a free choice is possible, but as an unavoidable condition of human nature. The image of the leprous ailment emphasizes the malignant, disabling, slowly disintegrating nature of the process. It is by no mere chance that Hamlet employs just this image. Perusing the description which the ghost of Hamlet's father gives of his poisoning by Claudius (I.v.63) one 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 my ears did pour
The leperous distillment; 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 vigor it doth posset
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mine;
And thus did it infect my brother's body,
Most innocent, with vile and loathsome crust,
All my smooth body. (I.v.63-73)

A real event described at the beginning of the drama has exercised a profound influence upon the whole imagery of the play. What is later metaphor, is here still reality. The picture of the leprous skin disease, which is here—in the first act—described by Hamlet's father, has buried itself deep in Hamlet's imagination and continues to lead its subterranean existence, as it were, until it reappears in metaphorical form:

As Miss Spurgeon has shown, 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.⁵ It is certain that this imagery is derived from that one real event. Hamlet's father describes in that passage 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. But this now becomes the leitmotiv of the imagery: the individual occurrence is expanded into a symbol for the central problem of the play. The corruption of land and people throughout Denmark is understood as an imperceptible and irresistible process of poisoning. And, furthermore, this poisoning reappears as a leitmotiv 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 imagery appears to be influenced by yet another event in the action underlying the play: Hamlet feels himself to be 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. Professor Dover Wilson has defended the reading of the Second Quarto with convincing arguments:

⁵ Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, p. 316 seq.

O, that this too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! (II.ii.29-30)

It is therefore probable that this idea is present in Hamlet's mind at many moments when images of decay and rot appear in his language.

The leitmotiv occasionally appears in a disguised form at a point where it seems to have no real connection with the main issue of the play, for instance, in the following passage:

So, oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As, in their birth—wherein they are not guilty
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit, that too much o'erleavens
The form of plausive manners, that these men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star,
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as man may undergo—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault: the dram of cald
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal. (I.iv.23-38)

Hamlet has spoken of the excessive revels and drinking bouts among his people and has said that this was disparaging to the Danes in the eyes of the other peoples. Then follows this general reflection. The question arises: Why does Hamlet speak in such detail of these matters here? For at this point in the play he has as yet heard nothing of his uncle's murderous deed. And still he touches in this speech upon that leitmotiv of the whole play; he describes how human nature may be brought to decay through a tiny birthmark, just as from one "dram of evil" a destructive effect may spread over the whole organism. *O'erleavens* already points to sickness *o'er*, and, as in the passage discussed, the notion of the human body is in the background. As in later passages, the balance of the powers in man is the theme here, and "corruption," a basic motif in the whole play, already makes its appearance. This general reflection on gradual and irresistible infection is made in passing, as it were. Thus Shakespeare makes use of every opportunity to suggest the fundamental theme of the play. When the King says to Laertes in the fourth act:

There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it;

the same motif occurs again: corruption through a "dram of evil."

The following passage, too, from Laertes' words of warning to his sister, has never been examined for its value as "dramatic presaging."

The canker galls the infants of the spring,
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent. (I.iii.39-42)

It is no mere chance that this sententious little image, which is so neatly woven in and so conventional, touches upon a motif later to be worked out more clearly. The worm in the bud, like ulcer and eruption, is also an irresistible force destroying the organism from within. Light is cast upon this early passage when, in the last act, it is said of Claudius: "this canker of our nature" (V.ii.69). But here we still know nothing of the coming developments. The image is a faint warning, preparing the way, together with other hints, for the future.

The Pyrrhus episode which the first Player recites before Hamlet contains features which are also of importance for the theme of the play. For here it is related of Pyrrhus with vigorous emphasis how "Aroused vengeance sets him new a-work" (II.ii.499). For Hamlet it must be

*The emendation *evil* has been accepted by several editors, e.g. by John Dover Wilson in the *New Shakespeare* edition.

a guards warning that vengeance calls forth as bloody a deed in another without delay. On the other hand, the previous lines described Pyrrhus as being in suspense, unable to act, "neutral to his will" as Hamlet still is:

So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
And like a neutral to his will and matter,
Did nothing. (II.ii.491)

The mention of "strumpet Fortune" and the picture of her broken wheel rolled "down the hill of heaven" at the end of this passage, is likewise a hint; in the third act this image of the wheel plunging down from the height, reappears in the conversation between Rosencrantz and the King:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone; but, like a gulf, doth draw
What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. (III.iii.15-22)

Through these images, which are also spun out from a more general reflection, the coming catastrophe is already significantly foreshadowed.

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, but in quite other terms. Several degrees, as it were, of the metaphorical expression of a fundamental idea may be distinguished. Besides images which express a motif with the greatest clarity and emphasis, we find others which utter the thought in a veiled and indirect manner. An examination of the way in which the images are spread over the play, can reveal how subtly Shakespeare modifies and varies according to character and situation.

The most striking images of sickness, which Miss Spurgeon has already listed, make their first appearance, significantly enough, in the second half of the play, and most notably in the scene in which Hamlet seeks to bring his mother to a change of heart. Here the plainness and clarity of the images is meant to awaken the conscience of the Queen; they can scarcely be forceful enough; "let me wring your heart," Hamlet has said at the beginning of the meeting. In the first part of the play the atmosphere of corruption and decay is spread in a more indirect and general way. Hamlet declares in the first and second acts how the world appears to him:

... Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (I.ii.135-37)

... and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. (II.ii.305)

The image of weeds, touched upon in the word "unweeded," is related to the imagery of sickness in Shakespeare's work. It appears three times in *Hamlet*. The ghost says to Hamlet:

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, (I.v.32-33)

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, (III.iv.152-53)

Images of rot, decay and corruption are especially numerous in the long second scene of the second act. There are, for example, Hamlet's remarks on the maggots which the sun breeds in a dead dog (II.ii.181), on the deep dungeons in the prison Denmark (II.ii.250), on the strumpet Fortune (II.ii.239), who reappears in the speech of the first Player (II.ii.504), his comparison of himself with a whore, a drab, and a scullion (II.ii.599).

Seen individually, such images do not seem to be very important. But in their totality they contribute considerably to the tone of the play.