WOLFGANG H. CLEMEN
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 style 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 betrays 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. 1 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 father's remembrance is to him a series of pictures taken from real life:

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

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
or a little later, addressed to Horatio:
the funeral barked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (L.II.180-81)

These are no poetical 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 refines the generalization to the event 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 unpainting palpability. They 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 imagery and who lead 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 his mark, the matter in question, with surprisingly unsurprising 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. "I know not." 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 specially frequent in Hamlet's language again emphasizes his power of observation, his critical objectivity, his 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 scholar's trade and strategy, with the courtier's way of life. All these spheres disclosing Hamlet's personality as that of a "coun}-
cier, soldier, and scholar" (in Ophelia's words, III.1.134) 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 assume 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 such sharp contrast between images marked by a pensive mood and those which unexpectedly 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 breach 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 "the worm's pipe" in "the very core of things," (IV.ii.12), Hamlet shows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he has seen through their intent, and thus he unmasks Rosen
crantz when he calls him a "spoon," "that sucks 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 as from a wall, 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 removes the memory of his father in her by means of that forcedful description of his

1 Hamlet, too, invokes God and the heavenly powers, but these invoca
tions never take the form of grandiose images, they are mostly brief and often restricted to mere references (cf. L. II. 122, 150, 191; L. V. 93; L. II. 331, 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.63–66)

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 tnfllj under quibbles and puns, images, and parables. He would betray himself if he used open, direct language. The customary interpretation of this passage, “reflection hinders action,” Polonius, the sentimentous 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 sentimentally efficacious, so, too, it is characteristic of Hamlet, to express even these 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 though and action appears not as an opposition between two abstract principles which a free choice is possible, but as an unavoidable condition of human nature. The imaging of the leprous ailment emphasizes the malignant, disabling, slowly disintegrating nature of the process. It is by no more chance that Hamlet employs just this image. Pursuing 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 bosoms of my ears did pour
The leprous distillation, whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleles of the body,
And with a sudden vigour doth make all
And curb, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood: so did it mix
And blend itself with vile and loathsome dust,
All my smooth body. (I.v.63–75)

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 represented under the guise of images is more deeply rooted in real experience. The picture of the leprous skin disease, which is here—in the first act—described by Hamlet’s father, has burled itself deep in Hamlet’s imagination and continues to lead its subconscious 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; or every occasion repulsive images of sickness make their appearance. 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, the poisoning may pass into the body 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 sufficed by his mother’s incest which, according to the conception of the time, she committed in marrying Claudius. For him this is a poling idea which finds expression in his language. Professor Dover Wilson has defended the reading of the Second Quarto with convincing arguments:

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 acquired. 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 sentimentous 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 sentimentally efficacious, so, too, it is characteristic of Hamlet, to express even these things which would have permitted of a generalizing formulation, in a language which bears the stamp of a unique and personal experience.
O, that their too too stilled breath would speak,
Theiraudacious itssel into a daw! (I.I.129-30)

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 chanced in particular men,
That for some vicious use of nature in them,
As, in their birth—wherein they are not guilty
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the overgrowth of some complication,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
Or by some habit, that too much o'erleavings
The form of plausible manners, that those men,
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
Being nature's lively, or fortune's star,
Their virtues else—be they as pure as grace,
As infinite as may be thought the undergrouns—
Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault: the daw of cale
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal. (L.IV.23-38)

Hamlet has spoken of the excessive revels and drinking
bouts among his people and has said that this was disappar-29ing
on the Dance in the eyes of the other peoples. Then
follows this general reflection: Why does Hamlet speak in such
clear 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
speed upon that leitmotiv of the whole play; he describes
love human nature, the decay of nature through a day
birthmark, just as from one "dream of evil" a destructive
absternay spread over the whole organism. O'theasons
already stated, that is he, 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 general theme of the play;
Whose 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 "dream
of evi!"

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

The cornet calls the infants of the spring,
Toot before their bottes be disclosed,
And in the moon and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent. (L.III.39-42)

It is no more 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 bed, like ulcer and eruption, is also an in-
resistible force destroying the organism from within. Light
is cast upon this early passage when, in the last act, it is said of Cordelia: "this cornet 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
Pyrrhus with vigorous emphasis how "Aroused vengeance
sca him new a-work" (II.II.499). For Hamlet it must be

*The sententious evi! has been accepted by several scholars, e.g., by

Although 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, reaps-
pearln 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 mortised and adjoint'd: which, when it falls,
Each small annexation and consequence
Attends the boisterous ruin. (III.II.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
Sprague has already noted, 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
clearness of the images is meant to awaken the conscience of
the Queen; they can scarcely be forceful enough; "let me
write your heart," Hamlet has said at the beginning of the
meeting. In the first part of the play the atmosphere of cor-
ruption 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 unwedded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (L.II.135-37)

. . . and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition
that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterfla promontory,
O'erhanging the earth, and all the creatures therein living;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, (LV.32-33)

The image of weeds, touched upon in the word "un-
weeded," is related to the imagery of sickness in Shake-
peare's work. It appears three times in Hamlet. The
ghost says to Hamlet:

And duster shouldst thou be than the fat weed
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, (L.V.32-33)

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

And do not spread the compest on the weeds,
To make them ranker. (L.III.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 (I.II.181), on the deep dungeons
in the palace of Denmark (L.III.250), on the base subterranean (I.III.504), his comparison of himself with a whore, a drab,
and a scullion (I.III.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.