**Hamlet: Imagery in Hamlet**

In the first selection, Richard D. Altick argues that Shakespeare not only emphasized the theme of bodily corruption in *Hamlet*, but also the “revolting odors that accompany the process”. Altick focuses on such images of decay as the sun as an agent of corruption, cancerous infection, and the stench which accompanies rotting. Kenneth Muir, in the second excerpt, discusses imagery and symbolism in *Hamlet*, beginning with an examination of what he considers the most apparent image pattern in the play—disease.


[Altick argues that Shakespeare not only emphasized the theme of bodily corruption in *Hamlet*, but also the “revolting odors that accompany the process”. The critic then provides an analysis of various elements of the play, focusing on such images of decay as the sun as an agent of corruption, cancerous infection, and the stench which accompanies rotting. This stench, Altick observes, represents the cunning and lecherousness of Claudius’s evil which has corrupted the whole kingdom of Denmark. According to the critic, these and other image patterns demonstrate that “the text reeks with terms symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration”. Altick also discusses the olfactory (relating to the sense of smell) connotations of such key words as “foul”, “rank”, and “offence”, and examines instances of punning (a kind of wordplay which manipulates the use of two words with different meanings based on their similarity of sound) between the terms “offence” and “offend”.

In writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was preoccupied with the corruption of mortal flesh. From the famous first statement of the idea in Marcellus’ “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” [I.iv.90] to Hamlet’s discourse with the Gravediggers on the lamentable condition of the bodies they disinter, the reader of the play may never long forget that after death the human body putrefies. To Shakespeare’s contemporaries, of course, the idea was the most familiar of commonplaces, the center of a cluster of time-worn platitudes which, by making pious capital of a universal biological process, reminded man that flesh was foul and that even a king could go a progress through the guts of a beggar. It was a commonplace, but much more. Every Elizabethan citizen knew from personal observation the reek of a gangrenous wound or a cancerous sore. Thus the fact that human flesh may well begin to rot even before death, and that the process is accelerated and even more loathsome afterwards—witness the stench of unburied “pocky corsés” in plague time and of bones being transferred to the charnel house after their sojourn in hallowed ground—was removed from the abstract realm of folk-say and sermon, and made immediate and unforgettable by the nauseating testimony of the nostrils.

The ancient moral therefore was constantly and repellently illustrated in the everyday life of Shakespeare’s time. In his plays generally, Shakespeare habitually uses allusions to the rotting of flesh as a vivid way of symbolizing repugnant ideas. In *Hamlet*, however, he not only lays heavier emphasis than in any other play upon bodily corruption, but stresses, to a degree found nowhere else, the revolting odors that accompany the process. The play indeed may justly be said to be enveloped in an atmosphere of stench. The stink that rises from dead flesh emblematizes the sheer loathsomeness of the sort of evil, cunning and lecherous, with which Claudius has corrupted the whole kingdom; the fact that once begun, the process of rotting gains inexorable headway and
the odor it generates spreads far and wide, suggests the dynamic and infectious quality of sin; and the further fact that the process transforms the beautiful human body into a horrid, malodorous mass of corruption is symbolic of the dread effect of sin upon the human soul. It is not only to Hamlet that, as G. Wilson Knight has remarked, “the universe smells of mortality”; all the leading characters manifest, through their choice of language, their awareness of the odor, originating in the foul soul of Claudius, that permeates the kingdom. Since the detailed work of Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen especially, no student of Hamlet has been unaware of the way in which images of corrupting disease dominate the poetic fabric of the play. But the importance of the accompanying suggestion of nauseating smell has not, I think, been generally appreciated. It is not a matter of images alone—images represent simply the points at which the hovering theme is made explicit by embodiment in a metaphor—but also of the many single related words scattered through the text whose sensory suggestion, dormant now as it was not in Shakespeare’s time, is overlooked unless the chief image-motif is constantly recalled.

The opening scene has long been admired as a masterpiece of atmospheric writing. Francisco’s line in the first minute of the play, “‘Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart” [I.i.8-9], not only defines the foreboding, uneasy atmosphere of the setting, but, by associating the idea of sickness with an as yet unknown evil, initiates the use of a word which from time to time will reinforce the play’s dominant image. Before the end of the scene sick appears in a new context:

the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune’s empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse
[I.i.118-20]

—and by the recurrence of the word in such an image we are led to feel that the disturbance in the common soldier’s heart is simply a reflection, in microcosm, of the vast upset which is visiting Elsinore now as it did the state of Rome a little ere the mightiest Julius fell. (Brutus, it will be recalled, had “some sick offence” [Julius Caesar, II.i.268] within his mind the very night that the ominous portents visited Rome.) The association between sickness and night, thus formed, is further defined when Marcellus, in one of the few lyrical passages of the play, speaks of the happy Christmas season when “the nights are wholesome” [I.i.162], and thus makes clear that in Elsinore, at the present moment, the nights are not wholesome. The Elizabethans, of course, feared the night air as the carrier of contagion, especially from the putrescent matter in marshes and churchyards. Thus this early allusion to the unwholesomeness of the Elsinore nights begins the process, to be continued throughout the play, of appealing to the medical, the epidemiological lore of the contemporary playgoer.

This heretofore general sense of sickness is localized and given specific connection with physical decay in the second line Hamlet utters. In response to the King’s question, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” Hamlet says, “Not so, my lord. I am too much in th’ sun” [I.ii.66-7]. The usual interpretation of the line (a quibble on son and sun—I am too conscious of my character as son, and I am uncomfortable in the presence of the King, the sun) does not convey the entire meaning. Claudius is the sun, of course; but what is often overlooked is that the sun is a powerful agent of corruption. Since Hamlet does not yet recognize the King’s vast influence for evil, the line is ironical; only looking back, especially from the point where Hamlet envisions the
sun breeding maggots in a dead dog, do we realize that he is characterizing the King more truly than he can, at this point, know. Like the sun, particularly in time of plague, the King can spread corruption wherever his influence falls, and Hamlet is exposed to the full glare of that malign power. The idea contained in the line is resumed in “O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!” [I.ii.129-30]. Hamlet wishes that the physical disintegration which the sun promotes would be his own immediate fortune. (A simpler, and equally plausible, explanation which still connects the two separate passages would be in terms of the sun as the melter, not of flesh, but of snow. But the “god kissing carrion” image later on [II.ii.182], which picks up the “too much i’ th’ sun” notion again, inclines me to the former interpretation.) The rest of Hamlet’s speech, contrasting with the high sentences of the King’s address to him, is necked with base images of decay (the world is overgrown by “things rank and gross in nature” [I.ii.136]—rank in two senses) and of parasitism, which is often linked with decay (the Queen had clung to the elder Hamlet “As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on” [I.ii.144-45]). There may even be a double pun in “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” [I.ii.133-34]. To an Elizabethan auditor, the obvious meaning of the word stale in context, “musty” would have chimed with a second meaning, “prostitute”—appropriate enough in the light of what Hamlet proceeds to say about his mother—and even with a third, “horse’s urine” which would add a certain measure to the malodorousness of the whole text and detract nothing from the auditor’s appreciation of the hopelessness of Hamlet’s outlook.

The concluding lines of the scene,

I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come!
Till then sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes
[I.ii.255-57]

carry on the association begun in the first scene between night and apparitions, and relate it to the image-pattern. The allusion is to the way in which decaying animal (or vegetable) matter, though deeply buried, seems to rise again at night in miasmatic mists or phosphorescent glows, or in phantasmic shapes which old superstition identified as ghosts. Evil, Hamlet’s image says, may be put out of sight, but it will return, in some new manifestation which will affront not only the eyes but—the force of foul is clear—the nose. It may be no accident that in the first minute of the next scene, which followed without pause on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare has Laertes speak of violets and perfume; an effective contrast to the repeated foul of Hamlet’s last lines.

At this point, there enters a second corruption image, which shifts attention from the putrescence of a dead organism to that in a still living one. Laertes’ image “The canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their buttons be disclos’d” [I.iii.39-40], is usually, and rightly, read as referring to the action of a caterpillar, in young buds. But the other, equally common, meaning of canker—cancer—is likely to have occurred as well to the hearers of the lines. In the next scene the idea of cancerous decay in a living organism recurs, although still only by implication. In his rambling, time-filling discourse to Horatio and Marcellus as they await the Ghost, Hamlet dwells upon the “vicious mole of nature” (some particular shortcoming) in certain men which leads them “in the general censure [to] take corruption” [I.iv.24-35]—i.e., to be condemned for that single fault. The image, although interrupted and blurred by Hamlet’s nervous loquacity, is plainly suggestive of a spreading cancer (the “vicious” makes it plain that he is not thinking of an
ordinary mole or skin blemish), which leads to total infection. The cancerous nature of evil is about to be illustrated by the Ghost’s narrative. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” [I.iv.90], says Marcellus as he watches the Ghost lead Hamlet off. The Ghost tells his story to Hamlet in language dominated by a sense of rottenness, disease, and stench. He is “confin’d to fast in fires” he says, “Til the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away” [I.v.11-13]. The word foul, given no less prominence than the key-word murther, reverberates in his solemn lines, which are among the most dramatic in all the play:

Ghost. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
Hamlet. Murder?
Ghost. Murder most foul, as in the best it is;
But this most foul strange, and unnatural.
[I. v. 25-8]

“The fat weed / That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf”, spoken of in the lines just following [I.v.32-3], continue the idea of foulness; as [George Lyman] Kittredge notes, “the very existence of a slimy water-weed seems to be decay; it thrives in corruption and ‘rots itself’ through its lazy, stagnant life. “The ear of Denmark is rankly abused”. Lust, says the Ghost, now for the first time applying the idea of repulsive odor to the sexual sin of Claudius and Gertrude, though to a radiant angel link’d,
Will sate itself in a celestial bed
And prey on garbage
[I.v.55-7]

—the olfactory suggestion of which is made explicit by the contrast provided by the very next line: “But soft! Methinks I scent the morning air” [I.v.58]. Rather ironically, considering the state of his own mind, as manifested in his language, the Ghost commands Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind” [I.v.85]. But by this time evil has as vile a smell to Hamlet as it does to his father; and, being Hamlet, he reveals it by the wild and whirling play on offend/offence, to which we shall return presently.

Even in the succeeding scene, involving Polonius, Reynaldo, and Ophelia, though the subject-matter has no relation to what has just preceded, the suggestion of vile smell is not entirely absent. Polonius directs Reynaldo to take care not to set afloat any rumors about Laertes that are “so rank / As may dishonour him” but rather to “breathe his faults so quaintly / That they may seem the taints of liberty” (II.i.20-1, 31-2). But it is only when Hamlet is seen again that the evil-smell theme is signally resumed. Hamlet identifies Polonius as a fishmonger, a term which, in addition to other appropriate aspects that have been pointed out by the commentators, has its own odorous value. And then he reads in his book: “For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?” he suddenly asks. “Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive” [II.ii.181-85]. And here we have a recurrence of the image already noted in the second scene of the play: Claudius as the sun, and the sun as an agent of noisome corruption, which, according to the pseudo-science of the time, resulted in turn in the breeding of new life. Hamlet is now fully conscious of the evil influence of the King, and he warns that Ophelia too is endangered by the same corruptive force which he had, albeit unconsciously, identified in his “I am too much i’ th’ sun”—though Ophelia, as a woman,
is imperilled in a different way. Hamlet, his father, Gertrude, and now (Hamlet fears) Ophelia: the roll of the King’s victims is increasing; the evil generated by Claudius’ sick soul is spreading insidiously through the court. No wonder, then, that to Hamlet the air “appeareth no other thing . . . than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” [II.ii.302-03]; vapors spreading the evil of a dead crime far and wide. “What a piece of work is a man” [II.ii.303] indeed—a man whose sin has the power so to infect a whole kingdom. A far cry, this Hamlet whose “imagination are as foul / As Vulcan’s stithy” [III.ii.83-4]—any Elizabethan’s nostrils would have quivered, as ours may not, to the suggestion of thick smoke and the reek of seared horses’ hoofs—from the young man who once was accustomed to utter to Ophelia “words of so sweet breath compos’d” [III.i.97]. Where now is the perfume of his former discourse?

The hovering suggestions of physical contagion in the night air, which had been lost since the Ghost scene, are brought to a new focus in Lucianus’ concluding incantation in the play-within-a-play:

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate’s ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property
On wholesome life usurp immediately.
[III.ii.257-60]

*Rank, midnight, blasted, infected* have powerful connotations of physical evil, especially as contrasted with *wholesome*. And the connection of these midnight horrors with the stench of putrefying flesh is made specific in Hamlet’s speech at the close of the scene:

’Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world.
[III.ii.388-90]

The following scenes (III.iii-iv) have the highest incidence of corruption-smell images and puns in the play, which is but natural when we recall that these scenes are the direct, if delayed, sequel to the odor-laden interview with the Ghost. The King’s speech beginning “O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven” [III.iii.36], with its repeated use of words like *offence, strong, foul*, and *corrupted*, sets the tone of all that follows. Hamlet refers to Claudius as “a mildew’d ear / Blasting his wholesome brother” [III.iv.64-5], *mildew’d* providing a clear image of bad-smelling fungi communicating infection to a hitherto healthy organism. The Queen envisions her soul as full of “such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct” [III.iv.90-1], a phrase suggestive of cancerous or other corruptive growth. And, resuming the very imagery which the Ghost had used to describe the incest, Hamlet bursts out:

Nay, but to live
In the *rank* sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew’d in *corruption*, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!
[III.iv.91-4]

“Mother, for love of grace,” he continues after the reappearance of the Ghost,
Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass but my madness speaks.
It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infests unseen

[III.iv.144-49]

—a deservedly admired image of the insidious action of a cancer in or near the skin, the stench of which is made unmistakably vivid by “rank corruption”. Finally, Hamlet begs the Queen henceforth to avoid the “reechy kisses” of her lecherous husband. In Hamlet’s mind the evil of the Queen’s incest is firmly symbolized by a noisome smell; the marriage bed is associated with garbage and the nasty sty; and her sense of guilt is a cancerous sore whose spread cannot be arrested by any rationalization.

In the following scene (IV.i), by a nice stroke of irony, Claudius picks up the same image of cancer and applies it, in the presence of the Queen, to Hamlet’s affliction:

so much was our love
We would not understand what was most fit,
But, like the owner of a foul disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed
Even on the pith of life.

[IV.i.19-23]

“Diseases desperate grown”, he decides after an interval—anticipating Hamlet’s own conclusion following his return from England—“By desperate appliance are reliev’d, / Or not at all” [IV.iii.9-11]. Hamlet does nothing to alleviate the morbidity of Claudius’ mind when he proceeds to lecture him on the manner in which we mortal men “fat ourselves for maggots” and to assure him that, if Polonius’ corpse is not meanwhile discovered, “you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby” [IV.iii.22-3, 36-7].

Except for small reminders in the scene between Claudius and Laertes (allusions to plague, sickness, pleurisy [excess], the quick o’ the ulcer, and a gangrenous sore arising from the scratch of a poisoned sword), the corruption-smell theme lapses until the graveyard scene, when, in a sense, it reaches its climax. The significance of this scene in terms of the motif we have been tracing lies not so much in the actual lines—although the Gravedigger’s instructive remarks on the number of years required for a corpse to rot after the laying-in, and Hamlet’s subsequent exclamation of disgust upon smelling Yorick’s skull are parts of the pattern—as in the abundant suggestions which the man’s mortality, the place where flesh, whose corruption may have begun in life, was laid in earth—and where flesh continued to rot after death, its fetid exhalations assaulting men’s noses and not merely making their gorges rise but warning them of the danger of fatal contagion. All the preceding imagery and word-play dealing with the odor of mortality have pointed toward this scene; and after the scene is ended, the motif is heard but once more, in Hamlet’s simple query to Horatio:

And is’t not to be damn’d
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil?

[V.ii.68-70]
In this tracing of the various forms which imagery suggestive of corruption and evil odor takes in \textit{Hamlet}, we have not noticed the occurrence of dozens of detached words which support the dominant motif. Read in their immediate context, they usually seem colorless, with little metaphorical force; but read against the whole atmospheric pattern as we have just outlined it, they are revealed to have an indispensable relation to it. The text reeks with terms symbolic of the loathsomeness of moral disintegration.

The pervasiveness of the idea of the odor of disease in the play is due no more to the formal metaphors which incorporate it than to the simple recurrence of the words \textit{sick} (sickly, sicklied) and \textit{disease}, even when these do not in their context refer to physical illness. (Indeed, there is no actual bodily sickness in the play, unless it is the rather ambiguous malady of the Player King.) To the Elizabethans, in days long before asepsis had robbed illness of some of its malodorousness, \textit{sick} and \textit{diseased} probably had a specific sensory association which is now largely lost. The often-noted emphasis on these words in the play is not designed to convey the idea of an unhealthy state of mind, of moral degeneration, alone; the words contribute their share to the general effect of physical smell which in the images is so strongly associated with disease.

In our time \textit{foul} has lost most of its power of sensory suggestion. It had begun to do so in Shakespeare’s time, and we may doubt whether, on most of the scores of occasions upon which the word is used in his plays, it evoked any sensory reaction in his audience. Normally it was a rather neutral adjective of censure. But at the same time the word did continue to designate the odor generated by decaying flesh, and in appropriate contexts it did retain an unmistakable connotative power, roughly equivalent perhaps to our epithet \textit{stinking}. In \textit{Hamlet} this specific connotation is predominant, as it is nowhere else in the canon, because the word \textit{foul} occurs frequently in conjunction with other words which serve to develop its definite, but normally latent, olfactory reference. Because of this, and because of the presence in the text of so many other passages suggestive of smell, the word, no matter how casually used, has a special significance. It is noteworthy that in two separate passages, both of them quoted above, Shakespeare uses \textit{foul} in rhetorical repetition, as if to make sure that its full connotative value is not lost upon the audience.

The repulsive sensory connotation of \textit{rank} ("corrupt, foul, festering") in some contexts is obscured by another meaning. But by neglecting the possibility of a pun, we fail to realize how this word too supports the prevailing theme. Actually, in several instances, in which the primary meaning is "luxuriant, overgrown", the pun is double: \textit{rank} in the sense of "stinking" and also in the more specialized sense of "in lecherous heat", as in Hamlet’s description of Denmark as an unweeded garden

\begin{quote}
That grows to seed; things \textit{rank} and gross in nature
Possess it merely
[I.i.135-37]
\end{quote}

and his admonition to his mother, “Do not spread the compost on the weeds / To make them \textit{ranker}” [III.iv.151-52].

Possibly we are on less certain ground when we include \textit{offence} with \textit{foul} and \textit{rank} as a word which recurrently supports the sickness-foul odor theme in \textit{Hamlet}. Yet there is evidence that in Elizabethan times the word was frequently related to olfactory affront; for example, a passage cited in the \textit{New English Dictionary} from Sir John Harington’s \textit{Metamorphosis of Ajax} (1596)
runs: “They quickly found not only offence but infection to grow out of great concourses of people”—offence referring most explicitly to the effect upon the nostrils of the sweaty, unwashed, and disease-ridden populace. In Shakespeare’s mind there was an unmistakable, though of course not constant, association between offence/offend and bad odors. In the plays one can find some fifteen or twenty passages in which one or the other of these words occurs in intimate proximity to words or images of smell or disease (infected, sick, taint, foul, strong, rank, nose, breathe, corruption, rotten). I am persuaded that the repeated occurrence of offend and offence in Hamlet is part of the pattern of submerged punning. That the words embodied for Shakespeare not only the abstract concept (sin, crime) but also the symbolic sensory manifestation (something disagreeable, disgusting: specifically, a foul odor) seems clear, above all in Claudius’ speech in the prayer scene, in the first line of which the connection is made between offence and smell, and in the remainder of which offence, despite the shift in image, is interlaced with other terms suggestive of smell:

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t,
A brother’s murther! Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will.
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent,
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what’s in prayer but this twofold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon’d being down? Then I’ll look up;
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? “Forgive me my foul murder’”?
That cannot be; since I am still possess’d
Of those effects for which I did the murther—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardon’d and retain th’ offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence’s gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft ‘tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law; but ‘tis not so above.
[III.iii.36-59]

It is remarkable that this speech, as printed in the first quarto, does not contain a single one of the recurrent quibbling allusions to foul smell; such odorless words as trespass, fault, and sin are used instead. Although most scholarly opinion today holds that the first quarto text is a debased and garbled version of that of the second quarto, and that Shakespeare did not, as was formerly thought, write two separate versions of Hamlet, it is tempting to think that Shakespeare rewrote the speech with the conscious purpose of intensifying the prevalent aura of corruption in the play. (Why, if the text known to the abridger who made the first quarto was substantially that which is printed above, did he systematically omit every offence and every other word suggestive of smell?) Noteworthy too is the fact that, as is twice the case with foul, Shakespeare employs
offence recurrently within other brief passages, as if to emphasize its specific connotative significance. As early as the first act, when Marcellus’ remark that something is rotten in Denmark and the Ghost’s bitter reference to lust preying on garbage are still fresh in our ears, we hear Hamlet apologizing to Horatio for his wild words:

_Hamlet_. I am sorry they offend you, heartily . . .
_Horatio_. There’s no offence, my lord.
_Hamlet_. Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,
And much offence too
[I.v.134-37]

—a passage which amounts to a three-way, or progressive, pun, offence having not only the obvious meanings of “irritation” or “affront” (which alone is what Hamlet first intended) and “crime” (which is what he includes in the meaning after Horatio has converted the verb into a noun), but, thirdly, that of “foul odor”, the physical emblem of evil. Hamlet gives the same double twist to the word in the mousetrap scene:

_King_. Have you heard the argument?
Is there no offence in’t?
_Hamlet_. No, no! They do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i’ th’ world.
[III.ii.232-35]

And two scenes later (the prayer scene, with its own quadruple use of the word, has intervened) Shakespeare gives fresh rhetorical emphasis to the verb:

_Queen_. Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
_Hamlet_. Mother, you have my father much offended.
[III.iv.9-10]

—an exchange which sets the tone of the ensuing interview with the Queen, in which Hamlet’s utterance abounds with allusions to smell. In no other play does Shakespeare dwell so insistently upon offend/offence by having the characters thrust the words back and forth within the compass of a few lines. To me this unusual, conspicuous dwelling upon the words suggests that Shakespeare must have found a significance in them over and above their abstract suggestion of “sin” or “crime”. They act as hovering puns, which, once we have recognized them as such, remind us repeatedly of the play’s preoccupation with foul smell. Interestingly enough, offend appears last of all in the play by virtue of a slip of the Gravedigger’s tongue [V.i.9]. “It must be se defendendo”, he should say, referring to the coroner’s verdict on Ophelia’s drowning; but, by having him blunder into “se offendendo”, Shakespeare ekes out one more occasion for the pun.

The degree to which Shakespeare was conscious (if he was conscious at all) of his making repulsive odors as a symbol of moral corruption permeate the text of Hamlet can never, of course, be determined. Whatever his mental processes may have been, the fact remains that, in addition to the series of metaphors in which fleshly corruption so often is associated with stench, the play contains dozens of occurrences of words which intensify the dominant scent of foulness—which make the moral evil of Elsinore a stink in our nostrils. To miss them, as Dover Wilson says of Shakespeare’s punning habit in general, is “often to miss the interwoven thread which connects together a whole train of images; for imagery and double meaning are generally inseparable.”
The sense of evil which permeates the play, therefore, is not created merely, as critics have generally assumed, by the iterated allusions to corruption. It is deepened and made more repulsive by being constantly associated with one of the most unpleasant of man’s sensory experiences. Above all, the suggestion of noisome odors reminds us of that aspect of evil which Shakespeare seems most concerned to emphasize in *Hamlet*: the evil residing in the soul of one man cannot be contained there, nor can a single sin be without far-reaching consequences. Insidiously, irresistibly, it spreads into a whole society, just as the reek generated by a mass of putrid flesh bears infection to many who breathe it. In an age when everyday experience made men nauseatingly conscious of the way in which the odor arising from bodily decay cannot be localized, Shakespeare’s use of the language of smell must have provided an extraordinarily vivid lesson in the continuous, contagious quality of sin.


[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.v.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 thought-sick” [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,
Infests 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]

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.

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 rise 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 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 mazar 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 imaginations 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.

A smaller group of images concerned with the harlot has several ramifications. In its simplest form, the harlot’s cheek, “beautied with plastering art” [III.i.50], is a symbol of hypocrisy, of the contrast between appearance and reality—the contrast between the King’s deed and his “most painted word”[III.i.52]. In the same scene Hamlet takes up the theme. He implies that, since harlots paint, women who paint, including the “beautified” Ophelia, are harlots. “God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another” [III.i.143]. Beauty is itself a snare because the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty
can translate beauty into his likeness.
[III.i.110-13]

Hamlet tells his mother that “reason panders will” [III.iv.88]; and he instructs Yorick’s skull to get him “to my lady’s chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come” [V.i.193-94]. Earlier in the play he treats Polonius as a pander, and Polonius speaks of “loosing” Ophelia to Hamlet, as though she were an animal to be mated. Both Laertes and his father assume that Hamlet will try to seduce Ophelia. Hamlet himself is troubled by the contrast between appearance and reality, between seeming and sincerity and these harlot images reinforce the point. But the same imagery is used for a different purpose: a witty exchange between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ends with the statement that Fortune is a strumpet. Later in the same scene, in the extract from the Dido play [II.ii.493], Aeneas cries: “Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune!” Hamlet tells Horatio that he admires him as one who is not passion’s slave, one who has accepted “Fortune’s buffets and rewards” [III.ii.67], one who is

not a pipe for Fortune’s finger
To sound what stop she please.
[III. ii. 70-1]

In the same scene Hamlet asks Guildenstern:

Do you think I am easier to be play’d on than a pipe?
[III. ii. 369-70]

The Fortune theme is brought out in other ways—the Player King declares that it is not strange “That even our Loves should with our fortunes change” [III.ii.201] and he gives as an example
the desertion of a fallen great man by his favourites; Hamlet comments on the way courtiers who used to mock Claudius now wear his portrait round their necks and on the way the adult actors have lost their popularity; and Rosencrantz, in describing how the lives of subjects depend on the life of the King, uses the image of the wheel of Fortune.

I tried to show in my book on *Hamlet* [Shakespeare: *Hamlet*] that before the end of the play the fortune theme is modified. Instead of the strumpet fortune, the blind fate which directs our lives, we have the idea of a providence which directs our lives. Hamlet declares:

There’s a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will.
[V.ii.10-11]

This newly-found conviction enables him to face what he thinks may be his death, with the confidence that an opportunity will be provided for him to execute justice on his father’s murderer: “We defy augury: there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” [V.ii.219-20].

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]. Polonius compares the temptations of the flesh to a “general assault”. The noise of Ilium’s fall “takes prisoner Pyrrhus’ ear” [II.i.477], and Pyrrhus’ sword is “rebellious to his arm” [II.i.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’ere” (namely 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 grappe 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 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.