Hamlet (Vol. 35) - Imagery

IMAGERY

Robert Tracy (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: "The Owl and the Baker's Daughter: A Note on Hamlet IV," in *Shakespeare Quarterly,* Vol. XVII, No. 1, Winter, 1966, pp. 83-6.

[*In the following essay originally presented as a lecture in 1963, Tracy comments on the symbolism of both chastity and sensual love associated with Ophelia's character.*]

It is a critical commonplace to discern a pattern in Ophelia's apparently random remarks during her mad scenes. While suggesting complete mental derangement, Shakespeare advances the play by giving us a very clear indication of the reasons for Ophelia's madness: her irreconcilable attachments to Hamlet and Polonius as persons, and to chastity and sensual love as desirable goals. It is the strain of attempting to reconcile these opposing allegiances that has shattered her reason, for during the mad scenes Ophelia's lips involuntarily repeat the slogans and war cries of that great battle of conflicting loyalties from which her conscious mind has withdrawn itself. Her songs in Act IV, scene v, are concerned with the loss both of Hamlet and of Polonius, and with virginity and its sacrifice to sensual love.

One passage in the scene seems to break the pattern, however. The King enters as she sings of Polonius' death and asks, "How do you, pretty lady?" Ophelia's reply is, "Well, God dild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!" "Conceit upon her father", is the King's terse—and mistaken—interpretation of her words. Ophelia's next remark can be taken as a correction of the King's gloss, for she says, "Pray, let's have no words of this; but when they ask you what it means, say you this." Then she sings "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day", a song about the loss of virginity which appears to be a gloss on her enigmatic remark about the owl and the baker's daughter.

Modern editors of *Hamlet* have ignored this hint, however, and chosen instead an explanation which makes the remark irrelevant and quite out of tune with the rest of the scene. This explanation, found in all modern editions of the play, suggests that Ophelia is referring to a folktale about a baker's daughter who was punished for denying bread to Christ. Kittredge, quoting from Douce, gives the legend as follows:

> Our Saviour went into a baker's shop where they were baking, and asked for some bread to eat. The mistress of the shop immediately put a piece of dough into the oven to bake for him; but was reprimanded by her daughter, who insisting that the piece of dough was too large, reduced it to a very small size. The dough, however, immediately afterwards began to swell, and presently became of a most enormous size. Whereupon, the baker's daughter cried out, 'Heugh, heugh, heugh,' which owl-like noise probably induced our Saviour for her wickedness to transform her into that bird. This story is often related to children, in order to deter them from such illiberal behavior to poor people.

But why should Ophelia allude to this tale at this time? She has not been stingy, nor is she a victim of divine

wrath. We may quickly discard Claudius' explanation; his attention has been caught by the word *daughter,* and so he puts the remark down to filial grief. He cannot understand the complexity of reasons for her derangement. But we must also discard Douce's two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old false lead about Christ and the baker's daughter if we are to grasp the point of Ophelia's remark, and its relevance to the rest of the play, and we must re-examine the possible contextual relevance of the owl and the baker's daughter.

The owl is here for two reasons. The bird is, of course, a common omen of night, of evil, and especially of death. It can thus be considered as relevant to Ophelia's just-completed song about death and the grave, and so to the death of Polonius. But this is only a partial expla-nation. Ophelia has already begun to change her subject from death to "true-love" at the end of her song:

> White his shroud as the mountain snow—
> Larded all with sweet flowers;
> Which bewept to the grave did not go
> With true-love showers.

The white shroud suggests virginity as well as death; so do the "sweet flowers". The "grave" is a common term for bed in Elizabethan literature, just as death is a common term for sexual intercourse. Thus the song delicately shifts from a suggestion of Ophelia's grief at the double loss of Hamlet and Polonius to a suggestion of her disappointment at Hamlet's failure to take her "to the grave". The end of the song is thus a prepa-ration for the franker treatment of the same subject of sensual love in the Saint Valentine's Day song, a few moments later.

The mention of the owl is a part of the subtle introduction of this subject, for along with its other associations the owl was often a symbol of virginity, probably because of its association with the virgin goddess, Athena-Minerva. Athena, the "unconquer'd Virgin", was a favorite Renaissance symbol for "Chaste austerity … Saintly chastity" (*Comus,* 446-455), as we see her in Perugino's *Combat of Love and Chastity,* where Diana and Minerva battle against Venus and Cupid. In literature there are a few examples of the owl, her sacred bird, playing the same symbolic role. In *The Owl and the Nightingale,* the owl cites her own asceticism and accuses the nightingale of singing wantonly amatory songs, which corrupt the young and lead them to unchastity and lust (lines 894-902). Elsewhere the owl's conventional role as herald of the night and omen of ill-fortune and death is reinforced by its association with virginity and the loss of virginity. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X, 452-453), for example, an owl shrieks thrice when Myrrha, in the grip of an unnatural passion for her father, Cinyras, hurries to give herself to him. What seems a mere evil omen reveals itself on closer inspection as a possible commentary on the action. Shakespeare has an owl shriek when Venus aggressively seduces Adonis (1. 531), and another is heard as Tarquin rises from his bed and creeps toward Lucrece (1. 165). The owl's connection with virginity and its loss is quite explicit in the Welsh belief that the owl's hooting warns not only of death, but often of some village maiden's loss of virginity. The hooting signals the exact moment of such an occurrence.[1]

If the owl suggests one of Ophelia's concerns, virginity, the "baker's daughter" suggests another, sensuality and harlotry. Laertes and Polonius have both warned her against the loss of virginity and its consequences, Hamlet has ordered her to a nunnery, and the remark indicates that all three speakers have impressed her. For to the Elizabethans, bakers' daughters were prostitutes. The association of trades stemmed from ancient Rome, where

Kate Winslet as Ophelia and Richard Briers as Polonius in Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet (*1996*).

> the *alicariae,* or [female] bakers, were women of the street who waited for fortune at the doors of bakeries, especially those which sold certain cakes … destined for offerings to Venus … on … certain festivals, the master bakers… sold nothing but sacrificial breads, and at the same time they had slave girls or servant maids who prostituted themselves day and night in the bakery.[2]

Shakespeare may have known of this association of bakers' daughters with prostitution from Plautus' *Poenulus,* where the prostitute Adelphasium classes the *alicariae* among the common whores (I. ii. 53-55). Bakers, bakers' wives, and bakeries retained a reputation for bawdiness even in Renaissance Rome, as the characters of Arcolano and Togna indicate in Aretino's comedy, *La Cortigiana* (1525). Shakespeareneed not have looked so far afield, however. Less than fifty years before *Hamlet* was written, the term *baker's daughters* seems to have meant loose women to the citizens of Tudor London. During the brief reign of Mary I we find a certain John Bradford writing to the Lords of the Council to accuse her unpopular consort, Philip of Spain, of treason and of unchastity:

> ye wyll crown him to make him lyve chaste, contrarye to his nature: for paradventure, after he wer crowned, he woulde be content with one woman, but in the mean space he muste have iij or iiij in one nyght, to prove which of them he lyketh best; not of ladyes and jentyllwomen, but of bakers doughters, and suche poore whores: wherupon they have a certayne saying, *The baker's doughter is better in her goune, than Quene Mary wythout the crowne?3*

It probably also explains the fate of the "dowlas" shirts made for Falstaff by Mistress Quickly: "I have given them away to baker's wives."

Once we realize what Shakespeare meant to suggest by Ophelia's reference to the owl and the baker's daughter, the sense of the passage and its relevance to the rest of the play become clearer. Ophelia is commenting on appearance and reality, the apparently virtuous woman who is really a whore. She thus echoes Hamlet's central obsession with *seems.* More specifically, she dwells on Hamlet's charge that she is a whore and that her father is a "fishmonger", or employer of prostitutes. She is also probably dwelling on the change from maid to harlot which is the subject of her song a few moments later. The owl, seemingly a symbol of virtue but actually unchaste, hints at Hamlet's earlier anger at Ophelia, at his remarks on the Queen, and at the

"paradox" which is proved for him by the conduct of both women, that the power of beauty can soon "transform honesty from what it is to a bawd" (III.i). This enigmatic sentence is thus a rich thematic and associative cluster which blends together at an important moment several of the play's most important events, themes, and ideas in an apparently random remark.

Notes

[1] Marie Trevelyan, *Folk-lore and Folk-stories of Wales* (London, 1909), pp. 83-84. Edward A. Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds* (London, 1958), p. 116.

[2] Paul Lacroix, *History of Prostitution,* trans. Samuel Putnam (New York, 1931), I, 234-235.

[3] John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (Oxford, 1822), III, Part ii, p. 352.

Henri Suhamy (essay date 1983)

SOURCE: "The Metaphorical Fallacy," in *Cahiers Elisabethains,* No. 24, October, 1983, pp. 27-31.

[*In the following essay, Suhamy asserts that the disease imagery in* Hamlet *elicits a variety of interpretations at once, some of which are contradictory and paradoxical.*]

The pages written by Caroline Spurgeon on the sickness and corruption imagery in *Hamlet* remain today perhaps the most famous and striking in a book[1] which the evolution of criticism and the necessary controversies that keep our discipline alive have not pulled down from its deserved position in the history of Shakespearian scholarship. Nor have these admirable pages lost anything of their stimulating pointedness. Yet the very attractiveness of Spurgeon's analyses may contain some danger, especially in relation to *Hamlet,* a play which should protect us from all forms of dogmaticism, for the hero of it is not only uncertain in him-self, he is the cause that uncertainty is in other men. Readers should beware of too comfortable assumptions about a play which will never yield its secrets easily.

The observation that sin and crime are expressed in terms of disease and rottenness remains indeed very illuminating, provided it is not overexploited and does not produce what could be called the Metaphorical Fallacy. This imagery throws lights on the inner substance and mechanism of language; it reflects the ethical vision of a Christian community; in a play, it expresses some of the implicit opinions of the characters, in so far as characters in a play can be allowed by criticism to express opinions—as indeed they should, for the assessment of opinions constitutes one of the functions of speech. But it may be misleading to infer that there lies the ultimate message of the play and the literary cement holding the whole text together.

My attention was drawn on this question recently by reading that useful and interesting book by Morris Weitz called *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism.*[2] Examining in succession some of the main theories on the play from a critical point of view, Weitz found fault with Wilson Knight's interpretation according to which the protagonist represents the blasting consciousness of death amidst a vivacious world of human passions, appetites and activities;[3] and he judged his views with exceptional severity:

> … Knight's conception of the *Hamlet* universe as one of strength, health, and humanity, with Hamlet the only sick individual in it, seems utterly perverse and about as far from "the poet's centre of consciousness" as one could get. If anything, as Francis Fergusson, among others, points out, it is the other way round. The *Hamlet* universe, which includes the court, is corrupt, unhealthy, rotten, founded on murder and incest, and Hamlet is the healthy one seeking, not decisively to be sure, to uncover and scourge the hidden imposthume. Now, I am

> not claiming that this latter view is correct, only that whatever the core or spiritual reality of *Hamlet* may be—if it has one—Knight makes a moral mockery of it by his reversal of sickness and health. After all, it is Claudius, not Hamlet, who is the usurper in the *Hamlet* universe.[4]

This text can raise many commentaries. Morris Weitz has a sound and philosophic turn of mind, but he seems at times to miss some of the subtleties and ambiguities that literature is made of.

First of all, he seems to run headlong into the metaphorical fallacy, by implicitly taking the sickness imagery of the play at its face-value, a curious delusion, when we simply remember that the very essence of metaphor consists in producing figurative senses, not factual statements. This delusion seems also to imply a wishful-thinking belief in poetic justice and retributive Providence. Whatever language may suggest, moral corruption does not systematically provoke physical corruption, even in the fictitious world of Elizabethan plays. Shakespeare knew that a man may smile, and be a villain, and a usurper, and enjoy good health too, when legitimate heirs are pining away in dungeons. When Marcellus says that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.4.90), he only expresses a personal opinion; it is true that Marcellus' statement has a choric resonance, a proverbial impact, and moreover coincides with the moral judgment that we are invited to pass on Claudius and Gertrude; but, once more, it should not be taken at face value, as an indication given by the author that the kingdom of Denmark is tottering on the brink of political and military collapse. This would mislead the spectators.

Secondly, it appears quite clearly that Weitz did not actually understand Wilson Knight's arguments. It is not the place here for exegesis and advocacy. Knight's essays are sufficiently known to the public and capable of defending themselves against misconceptions. But it may be relevant to point out some of the reasons why they were misunderstood by Weitz, because these reasons are related to the difficulty of interpreting metaphorical language, a language which is not reserved to poets only. Critics can also resort to imagery. Wilson Knight simply remarked that Claudius' crime and guilty conscience do not prevent him from thriving quite successfully as a king, jumping the life to come upon this bank and shoal of time,[5] and that Hamlet can be interpreted symbolically[6] as an ambassador of death incongruously wandering in a world of short-sighted ambitions and carnal appetites. The psychological facet of Hamlet's *contemptus mundi* results in his being emotionally sickened by the moral sickness of the people about him. There is also a paradox in the fact that he is sickened by the healthy instincts of nature, like Gulliver at Brobdingnag. When Hamlet, nauseated by his mother's hasty re-marriage—a proof of sexual vitality, if also of moral frailty—inveighs against the world because things rank and gross in nature possess it merely (i.e. completely) he uses that most Shakespearian adjective, the word *rank,* which contains a whole range of contradictory meanings and connotations. *Rankness* in Shakespeare suggests the very apex of luxuriant and voluptuous vitality, made both appetizing and repellent by the fulsome smell of riotous physicality. This complex cluster of significances entails two important consequences: first, the idea that life, in the full bloom of growth and procreative turgidity, is crude, course, obscenely immoral. Secondly, that maturity and decay follow each other very closely, not only because of the inexorable cycle of nature, but also because maturity already reeks of the sickening smell of corruption, and swells out like a body bloated by disease.

Thus, Shylock, speaking of Jacob's 'fulsome ewes' at the mating season, says that they were 'rank'.[7] In quite a different context, Mark Antony, sounding the intentions of Caesar's murderers, asks them:

> *I know not Gentlemen what you intend,*
> *Who else must be let blood, who else is*
> *ranke:*
> (*Julius Caesar, III. 1.152*)

Here to be rank is to be ready for death, like a ripe fruit about to drop. The grim joke contained in *let blood* is quite illuminating: excess of blood must be cured by bleeding, so to cut a man's throat is the most operative

remedy to rankness. We are also reminded of the old medical myth, which ensured the reign of the lancet for many centuries, that diseases are caused by excess of blood, that is to say, by excess of health. A paradox often exploited quite explicitly by Shakespeare, war, for instance, being regarded as a consequence of peace. Cf. *Hamlet,* IV.3.27:

> *This is th'Impostume of much wealth and*
>
> *peace,*
>
> *That inward breakes, and showes no cause*
>
> *without*
>
> *Why the man dies.*

The above examples show that metaphorical language does not constitute a rigid code. It is possible indeed to equate sickness with sin, but other correspondences are possible. Wilson Knight happened to use the sickness imagery in his own essay "The Embassy of Death", but with a different framework of meanings: to him sickness means lack of vitality, due to a disabling consciousness of death and of the vanity of human undertakings. So Morris Weitz applied the wrong code to decipher Wilson Knight's imagery. Yet the latter did not use his own imagery gratuitously. The substance of it is present in the play. It is Hamlet who, in a passage not deprived of some notoriety, says that the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. He undoubtedly alludes to himself here, not to Claudius. So the sickness imagery in *Hamlet* divides itself into—at least—two currents of significance, plainly contradicting each other: The King's prayer is a physic that but prolongs his sickly days (III.3.96) whereas Hamlet feels sicklied by his irresolution (III. 1.84).

If the two metaphorical systems are combined together, the result may prove perplexing. If we lay down on the one hand that disease means sin, and on the other that ebullient vitality is essentially immoral, we are driven to the apparently absurd conclusion that health and sickness are interchangeable. This is what Morris Weitz would call a perverse statement. Yet the vision underlying this paradox is profoundly Shakespearian. The immediate proximity of maturity and decay is, as we have just seen a recurrent theme in Shakespeare (cf. for instance Sonnet 11, "As fast as thou shalt wane so fast thou grow'st"), as well as the dualistic enmity between physical and moral beauty. (Cf. the sermon on fairness and honesty delivered by Hamlet to Ophelia, III.1.103-115, *This was sometime a Paradox.*) These obsessions are not alien to the more austere patterns of religious orthodoxy. The idea that life, especially in its generative functions, is stained at the root, should not surprise a western reader.

The fact that Shakespeare could deal in paradoxes and ambiguities has a literary consequence of some weight.

It saves the sickness and health imagery of the play from a danger which certainly constitutes one of the aspects of the Metaphorical Fallacy: the danger of banality. Indeed, what is more commonplace and superficial than a semantic texture in which moral misdemeanour is expressed in pathological terms? These corespondences are already present in the remotest etymologies of the words. When the ghost exclaims: *what a falling off was there* (I.5.47) we can fleetingly remember that *fall* and *fault* have the same origin. The word *ill* can be taken in the two senses, *holy* and *healthy* derive from the same root, etc. There is no possibility of poetic invention here. To be sure, the manipulation of words by a great writer can refresh the staleness of this material. In this field Shakespeare's accumulative virtuosity will never cease to arouse our interest, but perhaps it would be naïve to expect some sort of philosophical revelation from the study of a metaphorical network which has been for a long time part and parcel of our lexical and cultural heritage. All this traditional lore verges on tautology, like the apophthegm enunciated by Hamlet:

> *There's nere a villaine dwelling in all*

Denmarke

But hee's an arrant knave.

to which Horatio retorted, not unreasonably,

> *There needes no Ghost my Lord, come from*
> *the grave*
> *To tell us this.*
> (I.5.123-6)[8]

Must we conclude from these remarks that interest in imagery has overreached its possibilities? Shall we limit our investigations in this field to stylistic skill and thematic consistency,[9] and return to the times when critics ascribed a merely redundant and decorative function to metaphors, when George Bernard Shaw recognized in Shakespeare nothing but a talent for verbal jugglery, and for painting commonplace wisdom in lively colours?

No we shall not. Such a regression would be damageable to Shakespearian studies. We should not ignore the profound aspects of this imagery, for instance these ambiguities and paradoxes which, as was stated at the beginning of this paragraph, protect Shakespeare's choric voice from banality, and give a problematic turn to his gnomic utterances. Nor should we forget that the metaphorical texture of the play, suffused with moral and religious references, has a cultural and anthropological dimension, in revealing the inner workings of the Christian mind. These assets are not negligible. They contribute to the lasting and universal interest of *Hamlet* as a text, and not only as a play.

Yet those readers who regard *Hamlet* mostly as a play, as a self-contained work of art, and who read literary criticism only in quest of linear explanations, could perhaps find something useful in the sickness imagery of the text, especially in its very obsessiveness: something dramatically relevant to the tragedy, and perhaps one of the clues to the protagonist's behaviorial mystery. The sickness obsession is also a health obsession, not only on account of those conceptual ambiguities and dialectic antitheses which have been previously mentioned, but simply because a person who is obsessed by dirt will also be obsessed by cleanness. Malady calls for remedy. Now, it appears clearly enough that the hero of the play does not regard himself as a mere link in a *vendetta* concatenation, and that his preoccupations are more moral than political. Even though he is conscious of not being like Hercules—capable, one might infer, of cleansing the Augean Stables, and killing the Hydra of Machiavellianism—and of being distressingly inferior to the task of setting the disjointed Time right again, he has the inordinate ambition of purifying the world. Like Jaques, he most invectively pierceth the body of the country, city, court, and like him he could cry out

> *Give me leave*
> *To speake my minde, and I will through and*
> *through*
> *Cleanse the foul bodie of th'infected world,*
> *If they will patiently receive my medicine.*
> (*As You Like It,* II.8.58)

But unlike Jaques, Hamlet is not satisfied with venting out his misanthropy and cleansing *idée fixe* in words. He has what Jaques himself could have called the Reformer's melancholy, which is Utopian. The enterprise of great pitch and moment that Hamlet dreams of is one of moral revivalism and chastisement. He wants to change the nature of women, recommending chastity to all of them; to send Claudius and his accomplices to Hell, not shriving-time allowed; after the murder of Polonius, he regards himself as an agent of Providence. Because his programme can be summed up in one word, Purgation, one might say almost jocularly that the *hubris* of Hamlet, who by his dramatic function as avenger, is supposed to stand for *nemesis,* lies in his

ambition to impose *catharsis* on the whole world. In some of his delirious outbursts, for instance when he announces that there will be no more marriages, etc. (III. 1.150) he seems to take himself for one of those angels of God that announced the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah under a rain of brimstone and fire. But the sulphurous and tormenting flames of the prison-house where the Ghost returns at dawn belong to God, not to men, not even to avengers prompted by supernatural solicitings. There is perhaps something Promethean in Hamlet's imaginary stealing of Purgatorial fire.

Notes

[1] *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us,* Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1935).

[2] Chicago University Press (Chicago, 1964); Faber & Faber (London, 1965).

[3] Wilson Knight wrote two main essays on *Hamlet:* "The Embassy of Death" in *The Wheel of Fire,* Oxford University Press (1930); reprinted by Methuen, 1949-61, etc. pp. 17-46 in the Methuen paperback edition; and "Rose of May: an Essay on Lifethemes in *Hamlet"* in *The Imperial Theme* (O.U.P., 1931; reprinted by Methuen 1951-65, etc. pp. 96-124 in the Methuen paperback edition.)

[4] Op. cit., pp. 32-3. Francis Furgusson is the author of *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1949).

[5] This line of argument was considerably developed by J. F. Danby in *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature,* Faber (London, 1949).

[6] All through his book, Morris Weitz contends that there is no difference between *interpretation* and *explanation* and that consequently the claims laid by interpretative critics to a distinctive method are not justified. Yet one can remark that in the terminology of literary criticism, *interpretation* usually implies a symbolical approach, and other types of extrapolation, whereas *explanation* is focused on the inward texture and organization of a literary work.

[7] *The Merchant of Venice,* 1.3.77 and 83.

[8] To obtain the best lineation, Hamlet's cue has been taken from the Folio, and Horatio's from the 1609 Quarto.

[9] Cf. the poison theme, for instance, which creates a link between the dramatic events and the imagery.

Copyright Notice