Hamlet and the Odor of Mortality

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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" 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 corpses" 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," 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

—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" 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," 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 i' th' sun." 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 solid flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" 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, 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 flecked with base images of decay (the world is overgrown by "things rank and gross in nature"—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"). There may even be a double pun in "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world!" 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

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," 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.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 illus-
treated by the Ghost’s narrative. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” 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, “Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purg’d away.” 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:

\[\text{Ghost.} \quad \text{Revenge his foul and most unnatural murther.}\\
\text{Hamlet.} \quad \text{Murther?}\\
\text{Ghost.} \quad \text{Murther most foul, as in the best it is;}\\
\text{But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.}\]

“The fat weed/ That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,” spoken of in the lines just following, continue the idea of foulness; as 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

—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.”1 Rather ironically, considering the state of his own mind, as manifested in his language, the Ghost commands Hamlet, “Taint not thy mind.” 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 dis-honour him” but rather to “breathe his faults so quaintly/ That they may seem the taints of liberty.” 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.” 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

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1 “He who stews in desire of carnal corruption breathes forth the stench of putridity”—Alanus de Insulis, Distinctions of Theological Terms, quoted by John E. Hankins, “Hamlet’s ‘god kissing carrion,’” PMLA, LXIV (1949), 515. Professor Hankins’ whole article, on the complex of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance ideas associating corruption and generation, throws valuable light on the connection between sexuality and putridity in Hamlet.
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 from no other thing . . . than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours": vapors spreading the evil of a dead crime far and wide. "What a piece of work is a man" indeed—a man whose sin has the power so to infect a whole kingdom. A far cry, this Hamlet whose "imaginations are as foul/ As Vulcan's stithy"—any Elizabethan's nostrils would have quivered, as ours may not, to the suggestion of thick smoke and the reel of seared horses' hoofs—from the young man who once was accustomed to utter to Ophelia "words of so sweet breath compos'd." 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.

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 putrifying 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.

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," 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," 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," 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 enseeded bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!
"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

—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.

"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." 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."

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 very setting would have for the Elizabethan playgoer. Here is the yawning churchyard, the symbol of 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?
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In this tracing of the various forms which imagery suggestive of corruption and evil odor takes in 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 sick (sickly, sickliled) and 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, sick and 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 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 stinking. In Hamlet this specific connotation is predominant, as it is nowhere else in the canon, because the word 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 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 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: 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
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely

and his admonition to his mother, "Do not spread the compost on the weeds/
To make them ranker."

Possibly we are on less certain ground when we include offence with foul
and rank as a word which recurrently supports the sickness-foul odor theme in Hamlet. Yet there is evidence that in Elizabethan times the word was frequently related to olfactory affront; for example, a passage cited in the New English Dictionary from Sir John Harington's Metamorphosis of Ajax (1596) runs: "They quickly found not only offence but infection to grow out of great concours 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 murd'ring! 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 murther"?
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murd're—
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.

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*, Shake-
speare employs *offence* recurrently within other brief passages, as if to empha-
size its specific connotative significance. As early as the first act, when Mar-
cellus’ 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

—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.

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*

—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 char-
acters thrust the words back and forth within the compass of a few lines. To me this unusual, conspicuous dwelling upon the words suggests that Shake-
peare 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. “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 occa-
sion 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 sense 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.

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