

Elaine Schwartz
The "Drama" Assignment
Images of Rottenness and Corruption in Hamlet
English 102, T, Th, 9:30am
Assignment Due: 4/22/03
Assignment passed in: 4/22/03

Images of corruption, madness, death and decay permeate the play, Hamlet. The treachery of Claudius is the beginning of a downward spiral for all of the characters. Most within the kingdom become seduced by Claudius and conspire with him to spy on and isolate Hamlet. In Act I Scene II, Hamlet is tortured by the incestuous relationship between his uncle and his mother, which has come about soon after his father's untimely death.

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
...How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
...She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!

Shakespeare uses rich, earthy language to illustrate the rottenness and corruption of the court. This offers a tactile, sensory experience of the images. One example takes place in Act III Scene IV, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude in her chamber.

Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
...Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
...Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty,-

Hamlet is forcing Gertrude to look at herself, to look deep within. He spells out the corruption of Claudius, that he is responsible for King Hamlet's murder. Hamlet holds nothing back, he is obsessed with his mother's love life. He blatantly scolds her and says she is too old for lust; her behavior is disgusting, wretched and incestuous. She must not fall back into Claudius's arms and believe that Hamlet is mad, rather than face the truth.

...Mother, for love of grace,
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,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker...

At the beginning of the same scene, Hamlet slays Polonius who is spying on him from behind a curtain within the chamber. When Gertrude calls out for help, so does Polonius, Hamlet stabs him, not knowing if it is the King. He removes the body when he leaves the chamber and is confronted in Act IV Scene III by Claudius.

Here, again, images of rankness come through as well as a common theme of sarcastic humor.

King: Now Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

King: At supper! Where?

Hamlet: Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten: a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots: your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but one table: that's the end.

...A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King: What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

As the play progresses each of the characters descend deeper and deeper into their own corruption. Ophelia falls into madness after her fathers' death and her betrayal of Hamlet. Gertrude clings to her ignorance. Laertes becomes obsessed with mindless revenge. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pay for their disloyalty with their lives. In the end, Claudius's treachery leads to the downfall of the kingdom and the untimely death of all but Horatio.