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HAMLET IN FIVE WORDS BY JONATHAN HOPE & MICHAEL WITMORE

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it

'Who's there?' - *Hamlet* opens with a question. Identities, the situation, all seem uncertain - 'Bernado?' ... 'Have you and quiet guard?' ... 'Stand ho, who is there?' ... 'who hath relid you?' ... 'what, is Horatio there?'. It is cold and dark on the castle battlements, but there is more to the guards' nerves than that. 'Has this thing appeared again tonight?' They are expecting the ghost; a thing, an

Inhuman, ambiguous, 'it' tolls throughout the first scene of *Hamlet*. 'Speak to it', 'it comes again', 'speak to it', 'it harrows me', 'it would be spoke to', 'speak to it', 'it is offended', 'it stalks away'. Horatio poses the question directly to the ghost: 'What art thou?'. Later, when Hamlet is certain it is his father, the ghost becomes 'he' and 'you'.

'It' is also a philosophical word, suited to the metaphysical debates of the play, along with other terms that express the struggle of characters to communicate their uncertainty about the world: 'thing', 'stuff', 'seem', 'kind of', 'something', 'some', 'know not', 'doubt'. Gertrude questions Hamlet's grief with 'it' - "Thou knowst 'tis common all that lives must die ... Why seems it so particular with thee?" and he answers with the same words, "Seems", madam - nay it is, I know not "seems". Polonius proclaims his quest for certainty, 'I will find/ Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/ Within the centre', but 'it' leads him only to death.

I

'I think, therefore I am' was one later solution to the philosophical doubts expressed in the play, and Hamlet has been seen as the supreme self-aware, self-analysing hero. But, perplexingly, the word 'I' is rare in *Hamlet*. It is not absent, of course, but it is significantly less frequent than in Shakespeare's other work. How can this be? Have generations of critics miss-read the play?

Not quite. While 'I' is missing, the play is rich in words which focus, not on the thinker, but the thoughts - 'believe', 'think', 'mind', 'thoughts', 'dreams', 'opinion', 'passion', 'motive', 'perceive', 'reckon', 'conceive', 'assume', 'conception' - and the ways they can be disclosed - 'soul', 'secrets', 'reveal', 'confession'. Truth is found in the world, not the 'I', and this gives the language of the play a striking, sometimes gross, physicality.

rank

NOTES



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The play is full of smells. Vegetation grows unnaturally lush and stinks. Bodies are 'guts', 'offal'. They are lugged about and dumped behind the stairs, also to stink. Though grave-makers build houses that last till doomsday, the dead get no rest: flesh rotted off, their stinking, lipless skulls are turned out of the earth to make room for the more recent dead. Even kisses become 'reechy' (smelly).

Critics have objected to Gertrude's description of Hamlet, in his final fight with Laertes, as 'fat and scant of breath'. This clashes with the Romantic notion of Hamlet as too fine for this world - the noble-minded Prince can surely not be overweight! But 'fat' is in tune with the physical language of the play, and particularly a recurrent sense of things grown grotesquely beyond their bounds, of excess. Hamlet talks of 'the fatness of these pursy [swollen] times' and refers to Claudius as 'the bloat king', saying he should have 'fatted' the carrion birds with his body.

The world itself is an 'unweeded garden' gone to seed, full of things 'rank and gross'. Poison is concocted of 'rank, midnight weeds'. Claudius says of his own sin that it is 'rank' and 'smells to heaven'. Confronting his mother, Hamlet is grossly, physically explicit in his description of her sexual relationship with Claudius,

but to live

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed

Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love

Over a nasty sty

And he continues, warning her against dismissing his words as madness. That would 'skin and film' over the 'ulcerous place' of her behaviour, allowing 'rank corruption' unseen, to infect within. 'Do not', he warns, 'spread compost on the weeds', since that will 'make them ranker'.

play/player

There is something inherently theatrical about revenge: it must be observed, must be public. *Hamlet*, a play about revenge, is also a play about plays and players. An acting troupe visit Elsinore; Hamlet gives them advice, commissions a performance, writes a speech; Polonius (who has acted in his youth) commends their skill.

'Seems', 'play', 'player', 'act' are words that recur, with shifting senses. Hamlet denies appearance - "Seems", madam, nay it is, I know not "seems" - only to re-admit it. "These indeed "seem"", he says of his 'inky cloak', his sighs, his tears, his dejected face. These are both superficial, theatrical 'actions that a man might play', and genuine signs of what is within 'I have that within that passes show'. Hamlet appears to be grief-stricken, and really is. But 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to her?' - how is Hamlet to act for real when an actor can 'drown the stage' for a fiction?


The final 'play' of *Hamlet* is sword-play, suitably orchestrated and fixed. Hamlet's dying concern is not for his mother or father, or himself, but for an audience. He begs Horatio to live 'to tell my story', and Horatio steps into the role. Calling, like a director, for the bodies to be placed 'high on the stage', he delivers the extraordinary self-summary with which the play marks its theatricality:


So shall you hear

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,


Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,

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Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause,

And in this upshot purposes mistook

Fallen on th'inventors' heads. All this can I

Truly deliver

Ending with a prologue, it is as if the action were about to start again, fated to repeat, again and again to eternity. Which of course, being a play, it is.

Jonathan Hope is Professor of Literary Linguistics at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. He has published widely on Shakespeare's language and the history of the English language. His most recent book, Shakespeare and Language: reason, eloquence and artifice in the Renaissance (2010), seeks to reconstruct the linguistic world of Shakespeare's England and measure its distance from our own. With Michael Witmore (Folger Shakespeare Library), he is part of a major digital humanities project, funded by the Mellon Foundation, to develop tools and procedures for the linguistic analysis of texts across the period 1450-1800. Early work from this project is blogged at: winedarksea.org

Michael Witmore is Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC. His publications include Landscapes of the Passing Strange: Reflections from Shakespeare (2010, with Rosamond Purcell); Shakespearean Metaphysics (2008); Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance (2007); and Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England (2001). With Jonathan Hope (Strathclyde University, Glasgow), he is part of a major digital humanities project, funded by the Mellon Foundation, to develop tools and procedures for the linguistic analysis of texts across the period 1450-1800. Early work from this project is blogged at: winedarksea.org

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