

# *Malignance and Illness in Hamlet*

*Sarah T. Lawson*

*Writer's comment: Famous writers seem to always offer the same useless advice to young hopefuls: write about what you know. Unfortunately, most young people who have done well enough in high school to get into a costly, reputable university have collected little firsthand knowledge of the world beyond standard, eternally despised high school classes, alcohol drinking sprees, and wild all-consuming mindblowing romance (envious adults read: puppy love, sex for beginners).*

*Luckily for me, my first winter away from home provided me with all the richness of life experience I needed to relate to the novels and plays we read in Comp Lit 2, each one loaded with bloodshed, disease, hell, isolation, and false illusions.*

*I admit, I didn't really know what was happening to me last winter as Chem 1A flattened my head like a toad on the road and Comp Lit 2 provided a friendly, forgiving receptacle for the brains to go in. But thank you to Patricia Bulman, to my family (including roommates Randy and Paul), and to all my little cockroach friends for helping me write anyway.*

*-Sarah Lawson*

*Instructor's comment: When I asked my students to trace the imagery of sickness and infection in Hamlet, my goal was that they would read the text closely. Sarah Lawson's essay reveals a close acquaintance with the play, but she has sifted out the essential evidence and devised an original thesis, namely, that those individuals who become infected with the ills that flesh is heir to can endanger themselves and others by denying their own sickness; implicit in her argument is the idea that Shakespeare has intended disease as a metaphor for that part of the self too painful to confront. Interestingly, Sarah presents Hamlet himself as but one character among many who are stricken by the infection that tragically spreads from soul to soul. Sarah writes clearly, even with devastating simplicity. She has identified a pattern made by the play's imagery and has woven that pattern into an intricate design of her own.*

*-Patricia Bulman, Lecturer, Comparative Literature*

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In *Hamlet* Shakespeare uses images of sickness and disease to show how distrust and deceit can lead to madness and corruption, and end in tragedy and death. The parallels that Shakespeare draws between poison and plague demonstrate the idea that ill wishes are contagious and harmful, and that harmful wishes carried out against another hurt more than just the intended victim. As the theme of sickness spreads throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

emphasizes the danger of denial. Death, the ultimate result of unchecked infection, finally ends this denial and ironically confronts the characters with the final consequences of their initial ill wishes. Thus, by using different forms of sickness as allegories for various flaws in the characters' behavior, Shakespeare develops a story that ends as tragically as a life that might have been easily saved but is neglected.

The characters in Hamlet repeatedly refer to poison in terms of contagious disease. The apparition which Hamlet perceives to be the ghost of his murdered father describes the mixture which killed him as a "leprous distillment" (I.v.64). The mysterious contagion of leprosy hints at the mysterious and unusual death of the virtuous king. When Hamlet commissions a group of actors to perform a play for the new king, the poison described in the play's unsettlingly lifelike murder scene leaves the player king "thrice infected" (III.ii.258). When Laertes plots with Claudius against Hamlet's life, he refers to a poison he plans to employ as "contagion" (IV.vii.147). By mentioning all poison in conjunction with evil schemes in the play, Shakespeare constantly reinforces the idea that harmful plans and conspiracies result from and further spread a sickness of the soul. If all the wrong that occurs in Hamlet is viewed as a manifestation of illness, then the origin of the plague that descends upon the characters can be traced back to those who initiated its spread by distributing poison that they knew to be contagious, leprous, and infectious.

Meanwhile, as the pestilence of corruption and madness spreads, the original bearers of the diseases start to decay inwardly. By denying that they, too, are already sick from the illness they inflict, the characters allow their their weakness to grow and their sickness to fester. Madness, not poison, is Hamlet's weapon against others, and as a weapon, also becomes his sickness. Malignant plans involving poison dominate King Claudius's life, so corruption eats away at him. Every sick person tries to take away the focus from his or her illness by turning the spotlight on those of the other characters. When the corrupted queen accuses Hamlet of being so insane that he is hallucinating the ghost of his father, Hamlet defends himself by warning the queen:

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  
While rank corruption, mining all within,  
Infects unseen. (III.iv.145-49)

Hamlet's warning is appropriate, though completely unheeded. Hamlet could have applied his speech to his own situation, but Claudius, in avoidance of his own disease, does it for him. Claudius reflects on the threat to the kingdom that Hamlet's supposed madness represents:

But like the owner of some foul disease,  
To keep it from divulging, let it feed  
Even on the pith of life. (IV.i. 21-23)

All the characters in some way harbor some foul disease, and all avoid facing this fact by using the uncton of denial that Hamlet describes.

That the malignancies of madness and corruption eat away at certain ill-meaning souls in Hamlet is bad enough, but real tragedy occurs when these characters resolve to find a cure for the diseases. Since the characters see fault only in the actions and souls of others, they tend to perceive the best cure to be the elimination of each other, rather than the reformation of their own souls. Claudius rationalizes the murder of Hamlet, whom he constantly refers to as a sore, ulcer, or canker:

And is't not to be damn'd  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil? (V.ii. 68-70)

Diseases desperate grown  
By desperate appliance are reliev'd,  
Or not at all. (IV.iii. 9-11)

The end result is tragedy. By the end of the play, it is too late for redemption for those already infected with their own malice, and if they do not die by the poison of their own contagious ill will, they will perish from the poison of another's.

Even a little infection can lead to severe illness, as Shakespeare proves to his audience in the play *Hamlet*. From one tidy murder of a king, grows a complicated series of casualties which decimates close to the entire cast. Madness overtakes the young Ophelia, and corruption slays her father. These first deaths are mere hints of the devastation which occurs by the end of the play.