

LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY

(LSV.02, LS1.03, LS1.05, LS3.01, LS3.02)

My dread lord,

Your leave and favour to return to France...

- I, ii, 50-51.

The word "dread", in this case is a "false friend" – a word whose meaning we think we know, but it's changed since Shakespeare's time. Here, "dread" means honoured, or revered, a meaning different than (but possibly related to) it's modern sense of something to be feared.

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son...

- I, ii, 64.

Hamlet is, of course, Claudius' nephew. In Shakespeare's day, "cousin" could refer to any relative outside of the immediate family, or be a term of affection between social equals of any relationship. It is perhaps telling that Claudius refers to "my cousin" here, and uses the royal "our cousin" later in the scene.

Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off...

- I, ii, 68.

Shakespeare's is the first recorded use of the word "nighted"; Gertrude's reference is that his clothes are as black as night. This usage, which also appears in King Lear, has not survived.

Obsequious sorrow...

- I, ii, 92.

"Obsequious", as Claudius uses it here, refers closely to the noun "obsequy" (funeral rites) as well as the more familiar modern sense of "eager to please".

I pray thee, stay with us, go not to Wittenberg.

- I, ii, 119.

Wittenberg is a town in Germany, home to the University of Wittenberg. Most famous perhaps for its association to Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Exactly when Hamlet left his studies at Wittenberg, and his reasons for wishing to return, are open questions.

***So excellent a king, that was, to this,
Hyperion to a satyr...***

- I, ii, 139-140.

Hamlet compares his dead father to Hyperion, an Ancient Greek god of light; his uncle and new step-father to a half-man, half-beast. The tension between the god-like and the grotesque will be a theme Hamlet returns to throughout the play.

***...she follow'd my poor father's body,
Like Niobe, all tears...***

- I, ii, 148-149.

In Greek myth, Niobe turned to stone as she mourned the murder of her children; the stone continued to weep, a stream forming from her tears as they continued to fall.

I doubt some foul play.

- I, ii, 256.

"Doubt" in this case is another false friend, meaning "I suspect", instead of carrying the sense of disbelief it usually has to modern ears.

***...now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch
The virtue of his will.***

- I, iii, 15-16.

Shakespeare takes an older word, "smirch" (to smear) and adds a prefix, suggesting thorough discolouration. His newly coined form proves to be the one that has survived.

His will is not his own.

- I, iii, 17.

"Will", as usual, means "inclination" here. Hamlet cannot do as he likes. But in Shakespeare the word often also carries the meaning "sexual desire", or may refer directly to a man's physical excitement. Laertes neatly points up Hamlet's dilemma as presumed heir; his responsibility is to continue the royal line, and he cannot simply do as he likes, with whom he likes.

'Swounds, I should take it.

- II, ii, 572.

"Swounds" is a shortened form of "God's wounds"; therefore an oath or curse.

Get thee to a nunnery.

- III, i, 121.

The word "nunnery" (convent) was sometimes used in sarcasm to refer to a whorehouse; its use in that sense here would make for an interesting (if strained) interpretation of the speech.

I did enact Julius Caesar: I was killed I'th' Capitol.

Brutus killed me.

- III, ii, 102-103.

Echoes and similarities to Julius Caesar (1599) suggest that Hamlet was written just after it, probably in 1600-1601. Some suggest that the actors who played Hamlet and Polonius would also have played Brutus and Caesar in the earlier play, making this a kind of in-joke for the audience.

Let not ever

The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom...

- III, ii, 384-385.

A reference to the Roman Emperor, famous for the murder of his own mother.

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?

- III, iii, 43-46.

In Macbeth, written just after Hamlet, the title character has much the same thought after murdering the king: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/clean from my hand?"

Bring me to the test,

And I the matter with re-word...

- III, iv, 144-145.

"Reword" seems to be Shakespeare's invention – Hamlet says that he could say the same thing exactly again (thus proving that he's not mad); the modern sense implies finding different words to say the same thing.

To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms,

And like the kind life-rendering pelican,

Repast them with my blood.

- IV, v, 145-147

It was believed that the pelican fed its children with its own blood; by extension this is a Christian reference to the blood of Christ. Queen Elizabeth I was frequently pictured with jewelry in the shape of a pelican, symbolizing her role as mother of the people.

I'll rant as well as thou.

- V, i, 279.

Shakespeare's is the first recorded use of the word "rant", which is borrowed from an obsolete Dutch word, "ranten", meaning "to rave". Whether he invented the word is open to debate.