

Birds in Hamlet

Throughout his play 'Hamlet' and a number of his other works, Shakespeare uses ornithological metaphors, motifs and imagery to explore ideas of morality, loyalty, madness and revenge which are prevalent throughout the play; and to criticise the ruined state of Denmark that has shied away from the natural order. At the time this play was written the use of avian, and more widely animal imagery was flourishing in medieval and renaissance works – often being used to emphasise a connection between human morality and nature similar to other medieval concepts such as the great chain of being.

Firstly, Shakespeare repeatedly refers to “springes” and “woodcocks” to explore the culture of spy craft and the duplicity of the Danish court that has become corrupted and intertwined with morality and reason. The first occurrence is when Polonius dismisses Hamlet's “holy vows of heaven” towards his daughter as “springes to catch woodcocks”; rather than confessions of true passion and love. In this instance, the predatory imagery of “springes” built to snare and harm a small and delicate bird twists an innocent protest of affection into something uncomfortable and vile; emphasizing the powerless position of Ophelia in a male-dominated court, where her innocence and ‘virtue’ are the only things providing her with purpose and value. As birds gain their freedom through flight and therefore are often used to symbolise privilege, this predatory and uncomfortable dismissal is made worse through Polonius’ relationship with his daughter; as when surrounded by the other mercantile lexis used in the scene such as “tenders”, “bonds”, “investments” and “true pay” the readers are made aware of Ophelia’s lack of freedom and how she is used as a ‘bargaining chip’ to provide leverage within the court hierarchy for her father and brother without regards to her own “affection”. In this way, Shakespeare uses avian imagery to explore the duplicitous nature of the court and its members, which renders those weaker as silent prey. However, Shakespeare then repeats this metaphor of passivity at the end of the play at the time of Laertes’ death – “as a woodcock to mine own springe [...] killed with mine own treachery” to explore further the immoral corruption both of Hamlet and the wider court. The repeated metaphor emphasises the corruption of the Danish court as it shows how someone who once held power, freedom and far more authority than his sister is reduced to the same fate: trapped and preyed upon through a manipulation of the social order which condemns both siblings to the fate of death; despite their loyalty “like the kind life-rendering pelican” to their court; and the apparent freedoms they should possess due to their status and loyalty.

Shakespeare then uses avian imagery to explore the idea of madness, and perhaps to suggest its root as being Ophelia's desperation to escape her ‘role’ in the court rather than ‘erotomania’ as argued by Polonius. During her ‘bout’ of madness, Ophelia makes constant avian references, such as “for bonny sweet robin is all my joy” and “fare you well my dove”. Two of these references are symbolic of childhood tales and songs popular during the Renaissance period; connoting a sense of a “ministering angel” blind to the cruelties of the world who remains ‘sweet and loveable’ despite the agonies she is suffering. The image of a “bonny sweet robin” depicts a delicate and joyful songbird – similar to how the corrupted court seeming perceives Ophelia as she sings with her flowers; and even in her “muddy death” Gertrude depicts her as being “melodious” and “mermaid-like” – a fantastical yet misunderstood creature of beauty as they were seen to symbolize the defamation of the feminine, despite their beauty. Ironically, in ancient Norse mythology, the robin often symbolized good luck and hope due to them being protectors from storms and lightning; so perhaps Ophelia doesn’t perceive herself as the robin, trapped to perform within a court, but rather wishes for a robin to save her

from the 'storm' or a corrupted and unnatural court. I believe this is only further emphasized by Ophelias' mention of a "dove" and that her song is a funeral song in nature; as while she appears to be lamenting the death of her father, her use of the symbol of peace and goodwill to refer to a father who viewed her as a commodity and fostered a culture of manipulation and deceit within the court that benefitted both his selfish desire for control over his children is ironic, and clearly heavily critical of Claudius and his kingship, as well as the behaviour of his courtiers. To summarize, I believe that Shakespeare uses avian imagery, combined with references to well-known folk law and the subversive nature of madness to criticize Ophelias' treatment within the court; and to warn against a culture of deceit and cruelty.

Finally, Shakespeare explores Hamlet's madness and desire for revenge through metaphor, such as the famous line "I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw.". Despite the humour evoked for a modern audience due to the seemingly absurd comparison of a bird and an inert piece of machinery; Shakespeare cleverly uses the ornithological connotations of the two birds; a "hawk" and a "handsaw" to explore Hamlet's morality and the idea of appearances vs reality that frequently litters the play. A more surface-level interpretation of this ironic simile is that while Hamlet is trying to prove his sanity; he is clearly losing his grip on reality and becoming unreliable like the wind. However, from an ornithological, Shakespeare is cleverly using another metaphor of hunting to explore Hamlet's desire for revenge on Claudius, and intentionally feigned madness. Both birds involved in the metaphor are very different, however the intricacy lies in Hamlet's mention of the winds. When the wind is southerly, and the sun (or the watchful eyes of the court) is turned away from him due to the birds flying with the south wind; he is clearly able to discern the two birds apart and fulfill his filial obligations. However, when the wind is "north-north-west" and the birds are flying into the sun Hamlet is unable to tell the difference between appearances and reality and is therefore unable to act. Shakespeare further explores this crisis of inaction when Hamlet depicts himself as "pigeon liver'd and lack(ing) gall"; a preyed-upon bird without the conscience or bravery to fight back. In the Renaissance period, Pigeons and doves were viewed as feminine; with a gentle disposition; while gall was seen as being the source of masculine courage and anger. When comparing the gentle pigeon Hamlet to "all the region kites" we see the central dilemma: Hamlet wishes to violently condemn Claudius and return the natural order of the court by having "fatted all the region kites with this slave's offal"; yet instead he can only think upon acting and coo in the shadows rather than lead the hunt. Despite this negative tone, the use of avian lexis seems to justify Hamlet's actions; as it suggests that despite his naivety he is attuned to nature and the natural pecking order within the court, and therefore his actions are moral. In this way, Shakespeare uses avian metaphors to explain the sense of inertia Hamlet feels towards his filial obligation, as well as the complexities of feigned madness within a corrupted and decaying court which justifies his actions