MAGNA

Interdisciplinary Humanities

Denmark's Distemperment: The Medical and Physical Representations of Political Strife in *Hamlet*

Sam Karp '18
Collegiate School
New York, USA

Abstract

In Elizabethan England, writers conceived of social structures, governments, and monarchies through the prism of the human body. The metaphorical body politic was invested with cosmic significance, shaping correspondences between the physical body of a man and the larger body of the universe. These analogies were particularly dominant in theories of kingship, which sought to reconcile monarchical infallibility with the imperfections and mortality of the physical body. This essay argues that in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare fuses ancient Greek concepts of pathology, particularly the four humors of human temperament, with medieval political theory, which emphasized the inseparability of the king's political and natural bodies, to depict the conflicts within and illegitimacy of the Danish court. In his deployment of medical imbalances, corporal sickness, and bodily sins as metaphors for Denmark's political and moral corruption, Shakespeare shows how the dysfunction of the state can be represented through the reification of the human body. As we see throughout the play, the emphasis on physical, corporal transgression serves to channel a larger social anxiety about the crisis that has befallen the Danish state. These metaphors help distill the philosophical and legalistic complexities of political illegitimacy into an aesthetically absorbing theatrical form.

In Elizabethan England, the medical understanding of the human body, anatomy, and sickness revolved around the four humors and their varying proportions in the body. The prevailing understanding of the monarchy held that the king controlled two bodies: the body natural, or his regular human body, and the body politic, or the state as a whole. In *Hamlet*, using this belief of kingship and monarchical government, along with knowledge of the prevailing medical theories of the time, Shakespeare employs medical imbalances, corporal sickness, and bodily sins as metaphors for Denmark's political corruption and illegitimacy. Instead of directly discussing the political ramifications of Claudius's usurpation of power, Shakespeare views the issue through individual bodily problems: Gertrude's lust, Claudius's thievery and greed, and Hamlet's own personal melancholic disposition. Hamlet concerns himself more with his mother's infidelity than he does with his father's murder, as his mother's corporal, flesh-based transgressions are more readily apparent than the abstract political crimes committed by Claudius. Similarly, Hamlet becomes enraged at Claudius because Claudius took his father's bed and stole his wife; Hamlet focuses on these physical, bodily possessions as symbols for the abstract concepts of the throne and kingship. Hamlet, as the rightful heir to the Danish throne, is both a person and a manifestation of the body politic. Thus, Hamlet's personal psychological imbalances and his inability to act reflect the debilitated condition of Denmark. In each of these reifications of problems within the body politic, the sicknesses that plague each of the characters in *Hamlet* come from some sort of imbalance or inconsistency. Claudius's appearance as a strong leader goes against his nature as a murderous usurper, Gertrude's lustful and adulterous actions discredit her position as a noble queen, and Hamlet's desire to avenge his father cannot exist alongside his indecisive, melancholic personality. These individual inconsistencies represent the flaws of the Danish court on a personal, bodily level. These illnesses go unchecked and weaken Denmark until the end of the play when every member of the royal family dies. Ultimately only Fortinbras, a foreign, levelheaded leader who does not suffer from any of the illnesses of the royal family can lead Denmark and begin to restore the country with strength.

The understanding of medicine, sickness, and human anatomy in Shakespearean England provides a scientific base for the metaphorical representation of the political structure in *Hamlet*. Elizabethan England centered on the Pythagorean concepts of the four elements, earth, water, air, and fire, and their corresponding humors, melancholy, phlegm, blood, and choler respectively.[1] According to this Pythagorean logic, the four elements compose the food that man eats; the liver then converts

[1] E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, New York, vintage, p. 63.

the elements into their corresponding humors, which are the "life-giving moisture of the body".[2] When a person is healthy and functioning normally, the humors pass through the veins to the heart and liver in specific, balanced proportions. This balance is important for growth and continued bodily function, just as a proper balance of the four elements is necessary to create the "permanent substances"[3] of the world. The small variations in this equilibrium determine each man's specific personality and character. An individual's temperament or complexion does not merely refer to the skin but is a specific medical term relating to origin, race, body type, composition, and diet, and it reflects a person's most abundant humor.[4] A man of choleric temperament would be angry yet valiant, while a melancholic man would be sorrowful yet witty; men of sanguine and phlegmatic temperaments would be primarily cheerful and dull respectfully. When the humors of a body or individual organ are not in balance, meaning that "any one of the four humors [is] present in too great or too small an amount," the person becomes "distempered" or "diseased," and "the body's constitution [suffers]".[5] A distemperment can manifest itself as a physical illness or as a psychological issue, such as an inability to find understanding or, as is the case with Hamlet, a lack of will.[6] In order to re-achieve balance in a distempered body, Elizabethan doctors most commonly employed purging, the removal of the excess humor causing the distemperment, as "the first line of therapy in any disease".[7] The very specific relationships between the four humors and the importance of balance in Elizabethan medicine shape the representation of illness and outline the metaphorical connections between physical health and politics in *Hamlet*.

Along with knowledge of contemporary medical beliefs, Shakespeare uses the medieval understanding of the dual nature of the monarch, containing both his personal body and the body politic of his kingdom, to construct analogies between the health of individual members of the Danish royal family and the health of Denmark as a whole. Medieval European political theory holds that the king's "natural body is conjoined to his body politic, which contains his royal Estate and Dignity".[8] The concept that the king has a political body and a natural body that cannot be divided from one another sets up a strong

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[2] Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 63.
[3] Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 63.
[4] S. Iyengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language: A Dictionary*, London, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014, p. 73.
[5] Ivengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 100.
[6] Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 66.
[7] Ivengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 281.
[8] E.H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 9.

correlation between Hamlet's mental and physical state and Denmark's state as a political entity. The king's two bodies are not equally important, even though they form "one unit indivisible;" the body politic of the king is "more ample and large than the [b]ody natural".[9] Furthermore, the body politic of the king removes the human frailty and imperfection from the inferior body natural. Because "the worthier" body politic pulls up the "less worthy" body natural, the king ultimately contains "no folly or weakness" within himself, and he is "not only incapable of *doing* wrong but even of *thinking* wrong".[10]

This understanding of the king as absolutely infallible and his two bodies as indivisible, however, creates some inherent contradictions for the political thinkers of the era. First, the concept that the king's body has "two very distinct capacities" but at the same time is a "perfect union" of the body natural and body politic forces writers of political theory to contort their ideas to explain away the seeming contradictions, saying "the capacity of one [kingly body] does not confound that of the other, but they remain distinct capacities. *Ergo*, the [b]ody natural and the [b]ody politic are not distinct but united, and as one [b]ody".[11] Similarly, political theorists had to accept the king's infallibility while simultaneously recognizing that his "[b]ody natural" is "subject to all infirmities that come by Nature or Accident".[12] Just as the balance of the humors determines the health of any individual, so the balance of these conflicting political ideals and a "cooperative harmony"[13] determine the health of any kingdom. When a king is benevolent and easily lines up with the complicated ideology of the dual body, he allows "mutual charity [to reign] everywhere" and ensures that justice, which is the "guarantor of the [political] body's health," will exist in the kingdom.[14] However, when a king makes a certain contradiction in the political logic obvious, either by suffering from a human sickness or weakness or by acting despotically against the kingdom's best interests despite being infallible, he creates disharmony in his kingdom. Medieval political philosophers see tyrants, the extreme antitheses of noble kings, as criminals trespassing against "the body of justice itself".[15] While the metaphor of the body politic allowed writers to describe and dissect the constituent parts of politics and political life, it also points to the difficulties that attend any attempt by a monarch or government to

[9] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 9.
[10] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 4 and 10.
[11] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 12.
[12] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 7.
[13] K. Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury', *Stanford University*, Stanford, CA, 2016, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/john-salisbury/, (accessed 18 November 2016).
[14] Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury'.
[15] Bollermann, 'John of Salisbury'.

successfully combine the virtues of leadership with morality in a healthy polity. Shakespeare was well aware of the belief that tyranny and a lack of justice subvert the health of the body politic, just as a poison or disease threatens the well-being of the body natural. Thus, throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare investigates the horrible effects of rampant injustice in a kingdom by showing Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet to be individually weak rulers who deviate from the concept of the ideal monarch.

Gertrude's infidelity and lust for Claudius act as physical, corporal representations of the frailty of the Danish throne and the tarnished legitimacy of the royal family's power. Hamlet introduces the problems with his mother by referring to his family as "an unweeded garden".[16] Instead of directly speaking about the political ramifications of Gertrude's and Claudius's different schemes, Hamlet decides to address these issues through the natural metaphor of a garden filled with "things rank and gross in nature,"[17] providing an easily intelligible allegory for the larger monarchical consequences of Gertrude's marriage to Claudius. The "too, too solid flesh" that he wishes "would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" reflects Hamlet's disgust at corporality itself.[18] Gertrude's sexuality channels Hamlet's distaste for the corruption of bodily flesh in evil, illness, sin, and death. Furthermore, by pointing out that a "beast, that wants discourse of reason,/would have mourned longer"[19] than Gertrude, Hamlet brings his monologue about the abstract concepts of loyalty, frailty, and deceit down to a more corporeal, animalistic metaphor that is easy to understand. Hamlet filters his hatred for the state of affairs in Denmark into a concentrated, physical attack on his mother's decision to remarry before "the salt of most unrighteous tears/had left the flushing in her galled eyes" and the "wicked speed" with which she posts to "incestuous sheets".[20] Since he spends this soliloquy on the actual object of his anger, meaning his mother, as opposed to the less tangible crimes against his father, Hamlet allows his feeling that "any remarriage by Gertrude shows her inconstant"[21] to parallel a much deeper emotion that Denmark as a whole is in a state of inconstancy. When Hamlet finally confronts his mother, he strictly speaks about her comprehensible, physical problems, such as her lack of "blush" and the fact that her "sense/ is apoplex'd".[22] Hamlet only mentions the medical problems specifically affecting Gertrude such as

[16] W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, New York, Dover Publications, 1992, I.2.139.
[17] Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* I.2.140.
[18] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.134.
[19] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.154-55.
[20] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2-159-60, 162.
[21] M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, New York, Summit, 1981, p. 148.
[22] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.82-83, 91.

apoplexy, which is a technical term to describe an excess of phlegm or melancholy that causes blindness and deafness, and lack of blush, signifying both an imbalance of the rational sanguine humor and a deficit of conscience.[23] He describes his mother's action as one that "blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love / And sets a blister there…".[24] The "blister" here serves as an allusion to the symptoms of syphilis and also to the branding of prostitutes that sometimes occurred in Elizabethan England. Thus, Hamlet demonstrates how a single person's physical appearance can act as a simple and useful allegory for the more complicated political issues plaguing Denmark as a whole. Hamlet's obsession with Gertrude's bodily transgressions serves to channel his anxiety about Denmark's monarchy and present the Danish governmental troubles through the resonant metaphor of an individual's body.

The characters in *Hamlet* discuss Claudius's weaknesses as a ruler through corporal symbolism, showing the importance of the link between physiology and governmental ideology for Renaissance thinkers and writers. Claudius first introduces himself with a soliloquy filled with contradictions such as "defeated joy" and "an auspicious and a drooping eye" that mirror his internal contradiction as a usurping murderer and as a king.[25] Claudius's paradoxical linking of "mirth in funeral" with "dirge in marriage" reflects the dissonance between Claudius as a king containing a supposedly omnibenevolent body politic and as a man who has committed the worst physical atrocity against his own brother.[26] Even though Claudius is actually "an effective public ruler," he loses overall efficiency because an internal, bodily force "rebels at his own rebellion," as he knows that he is illegitimate.[27] Claudius's uncertainty comes from his illegitimate status as ruler, as "certitude resides only with legitimacy, which seems to have vanished"[28] from Denmark. Hamlet shows his "real hatred...for [Claudius's] illegitimacy"[29] by using simplified analogies for his theft of the throne. Just as the prince becomes furious at Gertrude's infidelity instead of at the underlying governmental problems, Hamlet attacks Claudius not as a politician but as a simple "cutpurse of the empire" who steals a physical "precious diadem," which

[23] Ivengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 21.
[24] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.42-45.
[25] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.10-11.
[26] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.2.12.
[27] M. Mack, *Killing the King: Three Studies in Shakespeare's Tragic Structure*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973, p. 189.
[28] M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, p. 153.
[29] M. French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, p. 152.

represents the abstract concept of power.[30] Old Hamlet introduces the problem of Claudius to Hamlet through a similar metaphor of theft, saying that "his brother's hand," a metonymy for the idea of fratricide and regicide, had "at once dispatch'd" him "of life, of crown, of queen".[31] In his interactions with Claudius, Hamlet's mind also continually reverts to images of disease and decay. He is encouraged to perceive Claudius in these terms after his early conversation with the Ghost, who tells him that Claudius "in the porches of my ear did pour / The leprous distilment…".[32] Claudius has not only poisoned Claudius but also the entire body politic. The quick spread of the poison through "the natural gates and alleys of the body" reflects the way in which the metaphorical infection of regicide spreads throughout society.

The Ghost's striking description of the manner in which he died compounds Hamlet's awareness of the ubiquity of bodily and political corruption. After being quizzed by Claudius about the whereabouts of Polonius, Hamlet replies, "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".[33] In this pun on the political convocation of the Diet of Worms in 1521, Hamlet likens "worms" to the emperors of our human bodies. Ultimately we do no more than prepare ourselves to decay in death. Hamlet also compares Claudius to a "mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother".[34] Here the state is compared to a garden or field, and the corrupt usurper to a diseased ear of corn that infects the one next to it, thus ruining the entire crop. Hamlet eventually comes to view Claudius through purely medical terms; indeed, Guildenstern discusses with Hamlet how Claudius "is...marvelous distempered...with choler".[35] When Hamlet says if he puts Claudius "to his purgation," Claudius will "plunge...into far/more choler"[36], Hamlet shows the double understanding of Claudius through the two ways of interpreting the vague use of purgation: here, Claudius is both a regular sick man who needs to be purged of his humoral imbalance and a manifestation of a problem that needs to be purged out from the body politic. By viewing Claudius and his crimes as creating a corporeal imbalance for Denmark as a whole and for himself, the characters in *Hamlet* manifest Shakespeare's tendency to use physical, bodily imagery to represent more complicated political commentary.

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[30] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.113-14.
[31] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.1.82.
[32] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.5.63-64.
[33] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV.3.21-24.
[34] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.4.65-66.
[35] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.2.327, 330.
[36] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.2.333-34.

Shakespeare's readiness to describe Hamlet through his physical frailty and humoral weaknesses as opposed to his political inabilities further proves that the concept of the body of a king or prince truly represents the larger political scope for medieval and Renaissance thinkers. Even though Hamlet as the rightful heir to the throne should possess all of the perfection and infallibility of a king, he realizes and laments that he "is pigeon-liver'd and lack[s] gall".[37] According to contemporary medical thought, a person's body requires gall to perform any physical action; thus Hamlet's lack of gall results in diminished "military prowess…, courage…, and determination" that reflect these enervated aspects of the country as a whole.[38] Hamlet's "weakness" as a man and the fact that he remains "unpregnant of [his] cause,/and can say nothing" conflict with his royal standing and thus manifest the frailties and inconstancies plaguing the Danish kingdom.[39] He is unable to perceive his physical reality in concrete terms, telling Rosencrantz, "this brave / o'erhanging firmament, this majestical room fretted / with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to / me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors".[40] The sky, which appears to others as a sublime canopy filled with sunlight, is to Hamlet nothing more than air filled with disease. Hamlet's suffering from "melancholy," which Renaissance medicine perceives as an ailment in which "cognitive faculties are literally darkened...and slowed by the workings of the melancholy humours," parallels Denmark's suffering from inaction and unpunished crimes.[41] Contemporaries of Shakespeare hold in a very real sense that "a darknes & cloudes of melancholie vapours rising from that pudle of the splene obscure the clearenes, which our spirites are indued with".[42] Therefore, Shakespeare uses Hamlet, the reification of the body politic who suffers from this melancholic disease, as a contained, bodily metaphor for the more complex figurative vapours that obscure the clearness and efficacy of Denmark's politic. Hamlet's view of himself as a "muddy-mettled rascal" shows further discrepancies between himself and a proper prince, since "princes such as Hamlet" are supposed to have real "precious metal...innate in [their] finer natures".[43] Utilizing the concept of solid metal and the lack thereof in Hamlet, Shakespeare points out an integral quality of successful nations that is missing in Denmark. Hamlet even contrasts heavily with Pyrrhus, the fictional prince in the play that Hamlet puts on to prove Claudius's guilt. The

[37] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.604.
[38] G.K. Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 2004, p. 48; Ivengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language*, p. 146.
[39] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.595-96, 630.
[40] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.295-98.
[41] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.630; Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 47.
[42] Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 47.
[43] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2.594; Paster, *Humoring the Body*, p. 46.

contrast between the rugged and hard-bodied Pyrrhus, who is able to maintain bodily agency, and the weak-willed Hamlet, who will not act despite suffering the same injustices as Pyrrhus, illustrates the difference between Denmark and other, stronger nations.

When Hamlet sees the skull of Yorick, his father's jester who was "a fellow of most excellent fancy" during Hamlet's childhood, without "gibes," "gambols," "songs," or "merriment," he realizes that even the noblest men suffer the same mortal fate as everyone else.[44] Hamlet's revelation that even "Alexander" the Great eventually "looked o' this fashion i'/the earth...and smelt so" leads him to understand that kings die despite the "dogmatic unity of the two bodies" and their elevated status as incorporations of the body politic.[45] This newfound understanding of monarchs' mortality allows Hamlet to finally take action and kill Claudius. However, Hamlet's physical imbalances and inadequacies as a ruler make him hesitate for so long that his deed results in a "mist of confusion,"[46] in which Hamlet indirectly kills himself and his mother along with Claudius. By using Hamlet's personal weaknesses, his failure to become a perfect prince, and the subsequent destruction of his family's dynasty as metonymies for the failure of the Danish monarchy as a whole, Shakespeare proves that the medieval understandings of medicine and the king's dual physiology can serve as useful tools to describe complex governmental issues.

Throughout *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the well-documented connection between physiological and medical knowledge and contemporary political doctrine when describing Gertrude, Claudius, and Hamlet to transform his complex political ideas into easily understandable and interesting metaphors that can be visually compelling accessories on a stage. Gertrude's raw, primal, and flesh-based crimes of lust and infidelity stand in for a more complex conversation about the correct behavior of a queen and the failing of Denmark's integrity as a whole. The image of Claudius as a mere thief and as a man sickened by choler creates an ironic contrast with his position as a supposedly benevolent ruler; the ability of such an immoral man to contain the body politic exhibits the failings of the Danish kingdom. Finally, Hamlet's inability to act until the final scene and his overly melancholic disposition despite his position as heir to the throne represents the weakness that plagues the state of Denmark. Denmark is only cured of its sickness and frailty when Hamlet finally pushes himself to act and kills Claudius,

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[44] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.1.191, 196-97.
[45] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.1.204-05, 207; Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 12.
[46] J. Alvis, and T.G. West, *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, Wilmington, DE, ISI, 2000, p.294.

Gertrude, and even himself, just as the body kills and disposes of dead and poisoned parts.[47] Fortinbras serves as the political and physical foil for Hamlet, as Fortinbras's "mettle" is "hot and full" in contrast to Hamlet's sickened metal; additionally, Fortinbras is capable of commanding a group that "hath a stomach in't".[48] Fortinbras, who externally recognizes from the beginning of the play that the "worth" of Denmark is "weak" and sickly, is strong enough to lead Denmark, "which now...doth invite" him.[49] By ending the play with Fortinbras taking control of Denmark as Hamlet dies, Shakespeare shows that action against bad rulers and movement toward stronger ones in a sickly kingdom can allow a country to regain strength, just as curing a sickly body lets it regain strength.

[47] M. Eppich-Harris, "*Hamlet*, Art, and Apoptosis: The Shakespearean Artwork of Julie Newdoll." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2015, p. 549.
[48] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.1.108, 112.
[49] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V.2.433

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