

## Commonplaces, Aristophanes, and Clouds in Hamlet

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### **COMMONPLACES, ARISTOPHANES, AND CLOUDS IN *HAMLET***

Though the humanist foundations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* have long been recognised, its debt to Plutarch and Erasmus has overshadowed a further debt, to Aristophanes, in the library of commonplaces and allusions from which it draws.

Shakespeare's character of Hamlet is presented as a university student with a particular fondness for the collection and use of commonplaces.<sup>1</sup> One hundred and forty proverbs have been identified in the play, and no less than seventy-one of these are spoken by Hamlet.<sup>2</sup> The play also features an explicit instance of commonplace-gathering. After his encounter with the Ghost in Act 1 Scene 5, Hamlet resolves to keep 'the table of [his] memory' free from the learning of his youth, but cannot resist setting down the observation that 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villaine' (I. v, 716) in

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<sup>1</sup> For Hamlet and humanism, see Rhodri Lewis, *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness* (New Jersey, 2017). The authors are grateful to Quentin Skinner and David Colclough for their comments on the research from which this note is taken.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore, 1978), 130 and Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of Proverbs in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries* (Michigan, 1950) more generally.

reference to Claudius's behaviour before the court earlier in the same scene.<sup>3</sup>

Hamlet also appears to particularly enjoy mocking Polonius with a number of commonplace jibes.<sup>4</sup> In an aside, for instance, he refers to Polonius as a 'great baby' who is 'not yet out of his swathing clouts' (II. ii, 1313-14). As Erasmus tells readers in his *Adagia*, the expression *bis pueri senes* [old men are children twice] is suited for describing those who 'in advanced age cling to some childish preoccupations, unseemly and inopportune though they may be', or 'old men doddering with senility, turning back as it were to childhood'.<sup>5</sup> Here, Erasmus cites Aristophanes' *Clouds*: 'You will say you think this is the work of a child, / But I retort that old men are children twice over'.<sup>6</sup> This reference is something that Rosencrans recognises and picks up on in his response: 'Happily he's the second time come to them, for they say an old man is twice a child' (II. ii, 1315-16).

In addition to Erasmus's *Adagia*, another source for commonplaces was the work of classical writers. One of the most popular, especially in regards to some of the topics with which Hamlet most often has to contend – the nature of true friendship as opposed to deceitful flattery – was that of the Greek philosopher Plutarch.<sup>7</sup> Plutarch's *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* was ubiquitous during the Renaissance, and as Joanne Paul has previously shown, was a source for Hamlet's 'tests' of the courtiers around

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<sup>3</sup> For this point, see Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2014), 300-2. Quotations from the play are from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works: Original Spelling Edition*, eds Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> For the commonplace origin of Hamlet's 'fishmonger' remark in Act 2 Scene 2, see Quentin Skinner, *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford, 2014), 232.

<sup>5</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Adages*, trans. Margaret Mann Philips (Toronto, 1982), *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Volume XXXI*, 414.

<sup>6</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Adages*, trans. Margaret Mann Philips (Toronto, 1982), *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Volume XXXI*, 414.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Hale Shackford, *Plutarch in Renaissance England: with Special Reference to Shakespeare* (California, 1929), 22-30; Robert C. Evans, 'Flattery in Shakespeare's *Othello*: The Relevance of Plutarch and Sir Thomas Elyot', *Comparative Drama* xxxv, (2001): 1-4; Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources* (London, 2001), 428.

him.<sup>8</sup> In particular, tricking Polonius into agreeing that the same cloud looks like three different animals:

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in a shape of a Camel?

POLONIUS: By'th masse, and tis, like a Camell indeed.

HAMLET: Mee thinks it is like a Wezell.

POLONIUS: It is backt like a Wezell.

HAMLET: Or like a Whale.

POLONIUS: Very like a Whale.

(III. ii, 2247-53)

This shows Polonius as a flatterer, for the flatterer, mimicking friendship, 'composeth his nature (as it were) some unformed matter ready to receive all sorts of impressions, studying to frame and accommodate himselfe wholly to all those things that he taketh in hand; yea and to resemble those persons just by way of imitation whom he meaneth to set upon and deceive, as being souple, soft, and pliable, to represent them lively in everie point.'<sup>9</sup> It also alludes to Polonius's role as the camel as described in contemporary emblem literature: a 'clumsy, ridiculous-looking' animal, and one who joins other animals in Barthélemy Aneau's *Picta Poesis* (1552) symbolizing 'a crowd of ferocious and barbarous Sophists, word-wasters to a man, the biggest brutes under the sky, who argue about Chimaeras and Tragelaphs, and dispute pointless matters that do not exist, or are useless in the normal course of life'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Joanne Paul, 'The best counsellors are the dead: counsel and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*', *Renaissance Studies*, xxx (2015), 646-65.

<sup>9</sup> 'the flatterer takes note of this fact, and adjusts and shapes himself, as though he were so much inert matter, endeavouring to adapt and mould himself to fit those whom he attacks through imitation; and he is so supple in changes and so plausible in his copyings', Plutarch, *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA, 1927), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Paul, 'The best counsellors', 654; Barthélemy Aneau, *Picta Poesis* (Lyons, 1552), 40. Translation from *French Emblem Project at Glasgow* [online]: < <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/> > (accessed December 2014); original reads: *Turbam Sophistarum ferocem, & barbaram, Grandissimarum bestiarum sub polo. Qui de Chimera, Tragelaphoque disputant. His nempe de nugalibus, quae sunt nihil. Vel inutilia communis ad vitae statum.* The camel also makes an appearance

The caption in Aneau's *Picta Poesis* on the pointlessness of disputing that which does not exist also overlaps with another saying collected in Erasmus's *Adagia*, one which has been entirely overlooked in the interpretation of this often-puzzling passage.<sup>11</sup> Citing Aristophanes' *Clouds* once again, Erasmus tells us that *de fumo disceptare* [to dispute about smoke] is a 'dig at philosophers, who discuss with great earnestness about smoke, that is, things of no importance', and one might say the same about clouds.<sup>12</sup> There is 'a spice of comic wit', Erasmus notes, in the words that Aristophanes uses to convey both the discussion of 'silly and frivolous things' and the state of being 'tormented with care and anxiety about sheer nonsense'.<sup>13</sup> It is this sense of 'comic wit' which underpins Hamlet's testing of Polonius and others, as well as Plutarch's advice and Erasmus's own approach to philosophising.<sup>14</sup> It is ironic that Polonius can regurgitate a list of commonplaces in advising Laertes earlier in the play, but entirely fails to recognise when such *loci communes* are deployed against him.

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in Guillaume La Perrière's *Le theatre des bons engins* (Paris, 1544), fols. K2v-K3r on the failure of eloquence amongst contemporaries.

<sup>11</sup> Roger J. Trienens, 'The Symbolic Cloud in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, v (1954), 211-3; David R. Cheney, 'The Meaning of the Cloud in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, x (1959), 446-7.

<sup>12</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Adages*, trans. Margaret Mann Philips (Toronto, 1982), *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Volume XXXI*, 281.

<sup>13</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Adages*, trans. Margaret Mann Philips (Toronto, 1982), *Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Volume XXXI*, 414. This point overlaps with the suggestion in Rhodri Lewis, 'Shakespeare's Clouds and the Image Made by Chance', *Essays in Criticism*, lxii (2012), 1-24, that Erasmus's colloquy, *Exorcismus, sive Spectrum*, is an 'indubitable analogue' for this exchange. As Lewis points out, the colloquy suggests that the act of seeing images in the clouds is 'emblematic of the vanity and credulousness that underpin a certain kind of faux-worldly posturing'. This is precisely the point that the saying *de fumo disceptare* encapsulates.

<sup>14</sup> For this point, see David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 169.

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