

The Language of *Hamlet*

While *Hamlet* has come to be as famous for its language as for its drama, Shakespeare subordinated the poetry to the drama. He shaped the poetry to serve his dramatic purposes. Throughout *Hamlet*, we find "individual idioms" for the major characters. Each character speaks with his own voice, recognizable even when removed from the play.

Courtly speech: elevated and inflated diction
degrees of elevation exist for the several characters

Claudius must impress the court with his newly acquired dignity as monarch

(I.ii.1-39)

verse

elaborate syntax

circumlocution

"royal we"

Polonius sounds forced and nearly foolish in his courtly idiom

(II.ii.86-95)

verse

repetitious

nearly giddy in flow

calls attention to his own linguistic choices

Gertrude sounds innocent, yet aware of the requirements of courtly appearance

(II.ii.19-26)

unencumbered by pretentiousness

more or less direct syntax

praising in each sentence

slight elaboration of phrasing

Hamlet, as the most developed character, uses various idioms, suiting his situations

In court: I.ii.80-91

certainly cutting, yet fanciful in expression

crafted verse, rhyming couplet to conclude

"suspuration" "havior" "visage"

complex syntax in final sentence

Private meetings:

I.v.34-36

verse
direct syntax
biting imagery

II.ii.442-456

perfunctory prose
lines punctuated by running metaphors, similes, allusions
references clear, uncomplicated, often rather mundane
interspersed comparisons thoroughly enrich meaning

Soliloquies

rapidly shifting emotions
varied use of punctuation
exclamations

I.v.99-119

exceedingly clear, uncomplicated verse
soft terrified musing
torrid vows as realization becomes complete
clear simple running metaphors that cut to the core
quick snuffing of emotion; turn to reflection

III.i.64-98

string of ordinary metaphors make clear the depth of emotion
arrows
sea of troubles
to sleep, to dream
mortal coil
whips
fardels
hue
country
currents
dashes, exclamations marks, question marks