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NEITHER METAPHOR NOR SIMILE:
LEXICAL FIELD IMAGERY IN SHAKESPEAREAN TEXTS

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We are, of course, familiar with overt forms of imagery such as metaphor and simile; we are aware that many words which originated as literal descriptions have figurative use; A. H. King in Reading Through Shakespeare examines imagery he terms word-chains, words without the syntactical links necessary to give them a reasoned connection, but which enliven the metaphorical meaning of other words in a context. Frequently this interanimation involves words from a specific lexical field, and the terminology of a human activity such as religion, finance, or medicine.

1. The briefest form of lexical field imagery is a word link.¹

1.1. In Hamlet 2.02.209-211 Polonius says of Hamlet:

> How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason, and (sanity) could not so prosperously be deliver’d of.²

One sense of pregnant and deliver’d of refers to argument, another to childbearing (see Appendix for documentation of senses).

1.2. Childbearing is again the lexical field in OTH 2.03.366-367 where Roderigo remarks to Iago

> I think the issue will be, I shall have so much experience for my pains;

issue and pains are the word links.

1.3. Barnardo says to Horatio in HAM 1.01.31-32

> And let us once again assail your ears, That are so fortified against our story.

assail and fortified both have military senses.

Word links are very common in Shakespeare’s plays, and, as may be seen from the example, cannot be considered fully formed images, though each word may have common literal and figurative senses.

2. Lexical field imagery involving three or more words from one lexical field form simple word chains.
2.1. Emilia says to Othello, OTH 4.02.11-12:

I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest;
Lay down my soul at stake.

wager, Lay down, and stake are from gambling.

2.2. Gertrude uses a simple word chain in HAM 4.05.110-111:

How cheerfully on the false trail they cry!
0, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!

false trail, counter, dogs refer to hunting with dogs.

2.3. A word chain may be shared between speakers, as in MAC 4.03.196-198, lines spoken by Macduff and Rosse:

Mac. or is it a fee-grief
Due to some single breast?

Rosse. No mind that's honest
But in it shares some woe,

fee-grief, due and shares are linked by the financial senses of the words.

2.4. In LR 4.07.56-58 Lear and Cordelia produce a religious word chain with their use of benediction, kneel, and pray:

Cor. 0 look upon me, sir,
And hold your hand in benediction o'er me
(No, sir,) you must not kneel.

Lear. Pray do not mock me.

2.5. When the word links or word chains are used by one person it may be difficult to determine whether the image is intentional. Frequently when a speaker's word chain is extended by another speaker, the lexical field imagery appears to be part of the rhetorical style, as in the exchange between Isabella and the Duke in MM 3.01.232-236:

Isa. What corruption in this life, that it will let this man live! But how out of this can she avail?

Duke. It is a rupture that you may easily heal;
and the cure of it not only saves your brother,
but keeps you from dishonor in doing it.

corruption, live, rupture, heal, cure, and save, have senses referring to the practice of medicine.
3. Complex word chains occur when a word in a word link or a simple chain interanimates in two senses, with a second word chain triggered by the second sense of that word, as in TMP 2.01.251-254:

We all were sea-swallowed, though some cast again
(And by that destiny) to perform an act
Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come
In yours and my discharge.

sea-swallow and cast are linked with the meaning of swallowing and regurgitation; cast, perform, act, prologue, and discharge are a word chain dealing with the theatre.

4. Lexical field imagery is related to sense play in that two senses of the words involved will usually be functioning.

In MM 2.01.23-26 stoop and tread function as descriptions of human action, but as terms referring to the behavior of bird are linked:

Ang. 'Tis very pregnant
The jewel that we find, we stoop and tak't
Because we see it; but what we do not see
We tread upon, and never think of it.

Since tread refers to the sexual behavior of birds, does that interanimate the sexual senses of pregnant and take in this play about bartering for sex?

This imagery may serve to subtly shape the background of a play, as in 1.3, where Barnardo, a soldier, uses assail and fortified.

It may be a restatement, or link with similar images elsewhere in the play, as in 1.1 (above), a childbearing image referring in some sense back thirty lines (184-5) to conception and conceive.

The imagery may serve to highlight the action on the stage, as in 2.4 (above), which is generally played so that Lear kneels, and the image of praying is before us as benediction, kneel and pray are spoken.

Lexical field imagery may also contradict a character's overt actions and intentions as in 4 (above), where Angelo's hypocrisy and lust are foreshadowed as he speaks of his own innocence.

Claudius's speech about Ophelia's madness reveals his own guilt in his brother's death—the brother he killed by pouring poison into his ears—and repeats imagery, and plot action occurring elsewhere in the play.

5. HAM 4.05.75-96

0, this is the poison of deep grief, it springs
All from her father's death—and now behold!
O Gertrude, Gertrude,
When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
But in battalions: first, her father slain;
Next, your son gone, and he most violent author
Of his own just remove; the people muddied,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers
For good Polonius’ death; and we have done but greenly
In hugger-mugger to inter him; poor Ophelia
Divided from herself and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts;
Last, and as much containing as all these,
Her brother is in secret come from France,
Feeds on this wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father’s death,
Wherein necessity, of matter beggar’d,
Will nothing stick our person to arraign
In ear and ear. O my dear Gertrude, this,
Like to a murd’ring-piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.

Line 75 poison

Line 76 Her father’s death--ultimately due to his own murdering of his brother.

Line 81 remove

Line 82 Thick and unwholesome--compare Hamlet Sr.’s account of his poisoning, HAM 1.05.65-72.


Line 90 infect his ear

Line 91 his father’s death

Lines 93-94 our person to arraign/In ear and ear. Note in particular his insistence upon ear.

Military images occur to Claudius’s paranoid mind. In his very first speech in the play, speaks of discretion fought with nature (1.02.5) and a defeated joy (line 10).

Here, we have spies (78)

Line 79 battalions

Line 79 slain

Line 80 violent
Line 95 murd'ring-piece

Equally characteristic of Claudius's state of mind is the series about spies (line 78).

Line 82 thoughts and whispers
Line 84 hugger-mugger
Line 88 in secret
Line 89 keeps himself in clouds

Two minor chains illustrate Claudius's fear:

Line 81 muddied
Line 82 thick and unwholesome
Line 83 greenly
Line 84 hugger-mugger to inter

The other one is of insect pests:

Line 89 Feeds
Line 90 buzzers, infect his ear
Line 91 pestilent.

The sexual word chains with which first scene of Measure for Measure is saturated undercut the integrity of Angelo, the Duke, and even Escalus, giving the tone for the rest of the play.

6. I. 1. 16-21

(DUKE). What figure, of us think you he will bear?
For you must know, we have with special soul
Elected him our absence to supply,
Lent our terror, dress'd him with our love,
And given his deputation all the organs
Of our own pow'r. What think you of it?

.................. ..........................
Look where he comes.

I come to know your pleasure.

There is a kind of character in thy life,
That to th' observer doth thy history
Fully unfold. Thyself and thy belongings
Are not thine own so proper as to waste
Thyself upon thy virtues, they thee.

Sh (Lucr. 338; Sonn. 129.14)
Heaven doth with us as we with torches do.
Not for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touch'd
But to fine issues, nor Nature never lends
The smallest scruple of her excellence,
But like a thrifty goddess, she determines
Herself the glory of a creditor,
Both thanks and use. But I do bend my speech
To one that can in him advertise.
Hold therefore, Angelo:
In our remove be thou at full.
Mortality and mercy in Vienna
Live in thy tongue and heart. Old Escalus,
Though first in question, is thy secondary.
Take thy commission.

Now, good my lord,
Let there by some more test made of my mettle
Before so noble and so great a figure
Be stamp'd upon it.
(ESCAL.) I shall desire you, sir, to give me leave to have free speech with you; and it concerns me to look into the bottom of my place. (Troil. III. ii. 18-39; HAM III. i.110)
A pow'r Sh I have, but of what strength and nature I am not yet instructed. (ANG.) 'Tis so with me. Let us withdraw together, and we may soon our satisfaction have. Touching that point.
(ESCAL.) I'll wait upon your honor.

Recognizing lexical field imagery may better help us understand how images are created, and help us to better establish the kinds of interpretations we give a character, a speech or a play.
NOTES

1. The terms are from Arthur Henry King, *Reading Through Shakespeare*, unpublished manuscript, Brigham Young University, pp. 267-279. I have drawn heavily on this source.


3. Key to superscripted references in the speeches:

Equivocal words are underlined with a solid line and references superscripted; those words which seem, in this context, to be equivocal, but are not established as such, are underlined with a broken line. References are not repeated for a word occurring more than once within a few lines.

Superscripted References are as follows:

A--The Arden Edition of Measure for Measure
F--Farmer and Henley's *Slang and Its Analogues*
Ham.--The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark
2H4--The Second Part of Henry the Fourth
LLL--Love's Labor Lost
Lucr.--The Rape of Lucrece
P--Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy*
O--Oxford English Dictionary
On--C. T. Onion's *Shakespeare Glossary*
Sh--Shakespeare
Sonn.--Sonnets
Troil.--The History of Troilus and Cressida

Unless otherwise noted, the word or one of its forms will be found in the cited reference according to alphabetical listings.
APPENDIX

1.1. pregnant = with child (1545); (pregnancy 1598; pregnancy 1548).
    deliver'd of = give birth. 2H4 2.02.90; ERR 1.01.54; TIT 5.03.120.
    delivered = give birth. OTH 1.03.370; WT 2.02.23; TIT 4.02.61; H8 5.01.162.

1.2. issue = child. OED 6.
    pains = labor pains.

1.3. assail = fig. OED 8.
    fortified = fig. cf. fortify. OED 7.

2.1. wager = bet.
    lay down = place a bet.
    stake = wager.

2.2. counter = wrong way on the scent. OED sb. 4 1.

2.3. shares = Cf. share. OED sb. 3 (1601).

2.5. corruption = OED 2. 3.
    rupture = OED 2 (1539).

3. cast = (1) regurgitate. OED 19; MM 3.01.92; H5 3.02.53; TIM 4.03.41; (2) actors. OED 26.
    discharge = play a part. MND 1.02.88-94; OED 1f.

    tread. OED 8. LLL 5.02.905.
REFERENCES


