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Dying in Art in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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Many critics have commented on the underlying motif of the *memento mori* in *Hamlet*, which can even be heard in the Ghost's injunction: "Remember me". This article argues that the play must be read in the context of the death arts that flourished in the wake of the fifteenth-century *Ars Moriendi*. Using Christopher Sutton's 1600 treatise, *Disce Mori, Learne to Die*, it shows that concerns with the "bad death" offer a framework that can help us understand Hamlet's "crisis" and its partial resolution, from inordinate mourning to a form of acceptance of his own death.

Ars Moriendi, arts of death, dance of death, death, *memento mori*, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

Ars Moriendi, art de la mort, danse de la mort, mort, *memento mori*, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

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Sometimes an iconic scene becomes so successful that it ends up eclipsing the complexity of a literary work. This is the case with the image of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull, which captured the spirit of the age then, and has continued to fire the public's imagination since then. There was an early-modern craze for *vanitas* images associating the *contemptus mundi* topos – or rejection of the world, seen as a place of mutability and corruption – with the meditation on a skull.¹ Many images can illustrate this trend, from the famous skeleton leaning on a skull (and a tomb) in Vesalius's 1543 *De humani corporis fabrica* to Frans Hals's "Young man with a Skull" (c. 1626, National Portrait Gallery, London). The encounter with a skull in the graveyard seems to summarize Hamlet's plight: the excessive grief and mourning for his father's death, his perception of the world as fallen, and his yearning for "self-slaughter". Death is not just Hamlet's preoccupation, however, it is everywhere in the tragedy, one of the bloodiest written by Shakespeare, with nine characters dying offstage or on stage (and two skulls dug up in 5.1). Death literally cuts a swathe through the Danish court: after the murder of Old Hamlet, the play stages the suppression of both the older and the younger generations of Danish courtiers, by sword, poison, or drowning, with the violent deaths of Polonius, Claudius, and Gertrude, and their children, Ophelia, Laertes, and Hamlet, not to mention the collateral victims, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The play stages a variety of perspectives on death, whether it be death seen as universal, the death of a loved one, or the shocking prospect of one's own death; and it is discussed from complementary perspectives, that of the conventional *memento mori*, being undercut by metaphysical and eschatological questions, while we are constantly reminded of the physical reality of the rotting corpses. The main plot shows Hamlet confronted both with grief and with the injunction to revenge his murdered father – which generates a spiritual and existential crisis –, but seems to lose its impetus at the beginning of Act 5, which begins with the long digression in the graveyard. With their more socially-informed perspective on death and on the corruption of bodies, the unsentimental gravediggers offer a strikingly realistic counterpoint to Hamlet's earlier yearnings for the "melting" and "thawing" of his "too too solid flesh" (in 1.2.129),² or his sarcastic jibes

¹ See Frye, 1979 and 1984, and Neill, 1997: 51-101.

² All the references to *Hamlet* are to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition.

at Polonius's body being "at supper" ("not where he eats, but where he is eaten", 4.3.17, 19).

The emphasis on death and the macabre can partly be explained by the overbearing presence of death in everyday life in the early modern period, as studied by Philippe Ariès in his influential *Hour of Our Death*, and more recently by Ralph Houlbrooke and Clare Gittings, among others.³ Several critics have studied the underlying motif of the rhetoric of the *memento mori*, which seems suggested in the Ghost's very injunctions:⁴ "Remember me" (1.5.91) and "Do not forget" (3.4.110). Critic Grant Williams has recently suggested that *Hamlet* could be read as "the privileged expression and enactment of the Renaissance death arts so much so that it could be called a handbook or even a compendium of the *memento mori*" (Engel and Williams, 2022: 173). It is this premise that this article will put to the test.

Just before the final scene, Hamlet declares: "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no man of aught of he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be" (5.2.192-6). Can the rhetoric and aesthetic of the death arts help us account for Hamlet's extraordinary and puzzling conversion from melancholy and inordinate mourning in 1.2 to his patient acceptance of his own death? How is this "taming" of death (to use Ariès's phrase) achieved? The first section of this article focuses on the numerous instances of "bad death" and "maimèd rites" in the play, in opposition to the "good death" advocated by the contemporary death arts – which calls for redress or reform. In a second section, I show how Hamlet gradually weans himself from immoderate grief and from a perception of his predicament as unique by subverting the discourse of the *memento mori* through a self-consciously theatrical performance. Act 5, Scene 1 appears to be a pivotal moment in Hamlet's "progress", before he can face the prospect of his own death with a quiet resolve – and finally fulfil his revenge, as will be shown in a third section. *Hamlet* thus stages a fascinating intellectual and emotional experiment which borrows from the early-modern *artes moriendi*, but it puts them to use to create an intensely personal, secular experience.

1. "Maimèd Rites" and Bad Deaths

³ See Ariès, 1977 and 1981, and Gittings, 1984, and Houlbrooke, 1989 and 1998.

⁴ See for instance Altick, 1954, Fly, 1984, and Garber, 1981.

When Hamlet appears on stage for the first time in 1.2, his melancholy appears to be linked to what he perceives as the “maimèd rites” that have followed his father’s death – a phrase he only uses later to comment upon Ophelia’s hurried burial (5.1.186)⁵: “That it should come to this! / But two months death – nay not so much, not two” (1.2.137-8). These two months become “a little month” a few lines down (1.2.147). Not only has Hamlet’s mother scandalously married his uncle, but this too was done at an inordinate speed, after the funerals and the rites of mourning (which, for a king, should have been elaborate) were abridged: “O most wicked speed” (1.2.156). This is neatly summarized by Hamlet’s conflation of two very different social rites, the funeral and the marriage banquets, which were indiscriminately amalgamated: “Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.180-1). In this play in which all the main characters die, no one is given a full and proper burial, however: the customary rites of burial and mourning are all in some way distorted. Ophelia’s “maimèd” rites are the most obvious ones, because we witness them onstage in 5.1; but other burials are also expedited: Claudius has thus Polonius buried “hugger-mugger” to avoid scandal (4.5.83), while Hamlet tells Horatio how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were sent to their deaths without “shriving time allow’d” (5.2.47). Finally, only Hamlet’s funeral is provided for in the denouement – leaving the bodies of Claudius, Gertrud and Laertes to be hastily buried.

In the early modern period, preoccupations with the proper burial of the dead, adequate mourning, and respect for the remains of deceased persons were considered of paramount importance. Before the Reformation (and after the Reformation for Catholics), the rituals of death were most particularly meant to bring solace to the dead, to pray for their souls, so as to limit their fixed time in Purgatory. In reformed countries like England (where Purgatory had been suppressed), these rites were intended both to comfort the living, and to assist those dying. For the idea of a “good death” was an early modern obsession. The funerals of princes led to elaborate rites of public and collective mourning; but even people from the lower orders generally received decent funerals.⁶ The two famous related, anonymous fifteenth-century

⁵ On two different interpretations of the “maimèd rites” in the play, see Holleran, 1989 and Lander, 2018. See also Cummings, 2019. On Hamlet’s melancholy, see Griffin, 2022.

⁶ Cressy, 1997.

treatises entitled *Ars Moriendi* – dated, for the first, longer version, 1415 and for the shorter, illustrated one, 1448 – offered rules for the dying man to avoid last-minute temptations, as well as consolation for the living.⁷ In the age of print, these treatises were repeatedly printed, translated, and imitated. The deathbed was often seen as the locus of a spiritual drama, a battle for the dying individual’s soul between the forces of God and Satan. Although in reformed countries, it was widely believed that the prayers of the living could do nothing to change the destiny of the dying man’s soul (because of predestination),⁸ the emphasis was on reading his last moments as revealing signs of his election or damnation. If the individual died well, *i.e.* peacefully, surrounded by family and priest, his election was confirmed; conversely, a bad death, in solitude, or in painful agony, or without the sacrament of the last rites, could be interpreted as a sign of damnation.

The early-modern death arts, especially in reformed countries, tended to focus more on preparing the living for death at all times, however, since it was no longer necessary to pray for the souls of the dead: a good death started with a good life. They emphasized the importance of meditating on one’s end, which could come at any time. Christopher Sutton’s *Disce mori. Learne to Die. A Religious Discourse, Mooving Every Christian Man to Enter Into a Serious Remembrance of his Ende* (1600) is representative of this early-modern emphasis on the living. It is very close in date to *Hamlet* (which was first performed in 1600 or 1601), although it is not known whether Shakespeare could have read it. Most of Sutton’s treatise is addressed to the ordinary Christian: it aims at encouraging the living to meditate on death (Chapter 3: “How behoovefull it is for every Christian man, soberly to meditate on his end”), and not fear death (Chapter 6, “That we need not feare Death”). This preparation is also material; it implies putting one’s worldly affairs in order, in particular by writing one’s will (Chapter 12: “How he shold dispose of wordly goods and possessions”). Sutton also

⁷ In the longer version of *Ars moriendi*, the first chapter argues that death must not be feared and offers a consolation to the dying. The second chapter describes the five temptations (lack of faith, despair, impatience, pride and avarice) that can harass a dying man, and how to avoid them. The third chapter lists seven questions to ask a dying man to prepare him for death, and reminds him of the blessing of Christ’s love. The fourth chapter is addressed to all Christians and not just the dying, and encourages them to imitate Christ’s life. The fifth chapter is addressed to the dying man’s friends and family, and sets out rules about how they should behave at the deathbed. The sixth chapter offers prayers appropriate for the dying and the dead.

⁸ All these texts are only about men, exclusive of women.

deals with issue of mourning, blaming those who are unduly afflicted by “the departure of others,” or “the crosses of this world,” as bad Christians, and offers several consolatory admonitions.⁹

Even before he hears about his father’s murder, Hamlet interprets the news of the ghost’s visits as a sign that “all is not well” (1.2.254), and that there might have been “foul play” (255). The revelation of the murder only confirms Old Hamlet’s “bad death” for Hamlet: “O my prophetic soul!” (1.5.40) – “[t]he time is out of joint” (1.5.189). His perception of an anomaly is thus confirmed by the Ghost’s revelation. When C. S. Lewis famously remarked in 1942 that the subject of *Hamlet* was death, he added that the play focused not on dying, but more particularly on “being dead” (Lewis, 1942). This perceptive remark is verified in the play’s dominant retrospective perspective on death – the ghost’s very existence is a posthumous one. Hamlet’s hesitation to act on his command is due in part to his doubts about the ghost’s nature, which introduces the central question of where souls go after death. Given that the Reformation had ruled out the existence of Purgatory, can the ghost, who says he is “[d]oomed for a certain term to walk the night, / [...] Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away” (1.5.10, 12-3), be licit – if we accept that he could be a transitional relic from a recent Catholic past? Or is he a satanic spirit come to tempt Hamlet? Whatever he is, he is not simply a literary convention out of contemporary revenge plays. In Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), the ghost does not play an active part in the plot – he is a choric figure who howls for revenge at the beginning, and gloats that revenge is done at the end.¹⁰ Here the Ghost of Hamlet’s father triggers the action in Act 1 and fuels it in the closet scene (by reminding Hamlet of his duty to revenge); he also literally

⁹ A similarity in wording in particular suggests that there might be a direct connection between Sutton’s treatise and *Hamlet*, although it is impossible to know which came first. Hamlet describes his mission as more universal than just a personal revenge: “The time is out of joint” – in the sense of disordered or perverted, unless we retain the physiological acception, “dislocated.” (1.5. 189). Sutton’s treatise begins with a similar diagnosis, couched in similar terms, although, according to him, it is because men have lost sight of the true religion that society is diseased: “That Religion is somewhat out of joynt, when Christian conversation goes not even, as it ought with Christian profession, it is so apparent it cannot be denied” (sig. [¶8]) – where conversation means “behaviour, mode or course of life” (*OED* 6), and “profession”, “what one professes”.

¹⁰ Spinrad, 2005: 458.

haunts Hamlet throughout: it is perhaps not surprising that the prince should be the only one to see him in 3.4.

But to make matters more grievous, Hamlet's father was murdered, in the Ghost's own words, "even in the blossoms of [his] sin, / Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled; / No reckoning made, but sent to [his] account / With all [his] imperfections on [his] head. / Oh horrible, Oh horrible, most horrible!" (1.5.76-80). The prefixes of deprivation and the repetition of "horrible" convey Old Hamlet's horrified indignation at being deprived of all the sacraments and rituals of the Church at the moment of his death: "unhouseled" refers to the missing eucharist; "dis-appointed" indicates that he was unable to confess before death; "unaneled", that he did not receive the last rites. In other words, he died unprepared and in a state of impurity, "[n]o reckoning made", without being able to come clean before dying – which made his death unhallowed. That this was taken seriously is obvious in 3.3, when Hamlet abstains from killing Claudius precisely because he thinks he has been praying: "And am I then revenged / To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?" (3.3.84-6). To revenge his father's death properly, Hamlet must mete out the same treatment to the murderer; he must kill Claudius when he is "about some act / That has no relish of salvation in't" (3.3.91-2), when his soul is "damned and black / As hell" (3.3.91-2, 94-5).

Hamlet's grief, however, is interpreted by Gertrude and Claudius as "obstinate condolment" (1.2.93), both unnatural and unreasonable. All the death arts of the period offered admonitions against excessive grief, which was seen as lack of faith. In his long speech which offers a threefold consolation to the grieving, Claudius seems to echo their consolatory rhetoric:

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
 To give these mourning duties to your father;
 But you must know, your father lost a father,
 That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
 In filial obligation for some term
 To do obsequious sorrow; but to persevere
 In obstinate condolment is a course
 Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
 It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
 A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
 An understanding simple and unschooled.
 For what we know must be, and is as common
 As any the most vulgar thing to sense,

Why should we in our peevish opposition
 Take it to heart? Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
 A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
 To reason most absurd, whose common theme
 Is death of fathers [...]. (1.2.87-104)

Claudius's sentiment calls to mind Sutton's chapter 22, "An exhortation to comfort those who lament & mourne for the departure of others" (Sutton, 1600: 269), which concedes the need to grieve, but admonishes the readers to moderate their grief: "We blame not the affection it selfe, but the excess or want of moderation" (272). For excess "is most inhumane [...], very barbarous" (275), and leads to despair and impiety: "to sorrow as men without hope, is farre distant from the rule of faith" (275). The person who yields to excessive grief is forgetting that the dead are "gone unto their mercifull redeemer" (277). Instead of giving way to immoderate grief, the good Christian should therefore express his faith in divine providence and pray: "Thy will be done" (278, 280). Claudius, as a spokesman for faith, nature and reason, is right, although, of course, he is a hypocrite: Hamlet's stubborn grief verges on "impious", and implies indeed "a fault to heaven." It is highly significant that, in this play, Hamlet should never consider the consolations of religion; and not once does he express faith in his father's salvation, or trust in a future reunion.

Moreover, Hamlet's grief for his father seems intricately linked with a fascination for suicide. Hamlet is drawn to "self-slaughter" early in 1.2.132 (although he admits "the Everlasting" had forbidden it), and again in the monologue of 3.1, where death is seen as a source of anxiety, not deliverance. Yet he sees the world as fallen, and corrupt, in terms reminiscent of a Calvinistic worldview: "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world! / Fie on't! O fie, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (1.2.133-8). He sees the world as an unkept garden. This reminds us that Old Hamlet was murdered in his orchard (1.5.58) – which suggests a desecration of the Garden of Eden. In this context, Old Hamlet's insistence in 1.5 that Hamlet must "[r]emember [him]" (1.5.91) rings not just like a morbid injunction both to keep grieving and to revenge, but also like a personal *memento mori* for Hamlet (who bears the same name as his father). But the conventional spiritual message of the *memento mori* is overlooked: Hamlet yields to a morbid lament on the corruption of the world. This is an attitude that Sutton associates with despair in his consolatory

admonition to those who are “overmuch grieved at the crosses of the world” (294-300)

In his thoughts on suicide, Hamlet intriguingly focuses on what it would be like to be dead already (which confirms Lewis’s intuition). In his famous monologue of 3.1, he thus considers himself as posthumous already, but here his perspective is not eschatological. He muses on the uncertainty of what lies after death, that “undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns” (3.1.79-80). If the conventional image of death as sleep (“To die, to sleep”, 3.1.64) first raises a prospect of consolation (“by a sleep to say we end / The heart-ache [...] – ‘tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished” 3.1.61-2, 63-4), the thought of comfort is immediately contradicted by that of nightmare: “perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub” (3.1.64) – and then comes the “dread of something after death” (3.1.78). Seen from the perspective of Sutton’s death art treatise, this emphasis on uncertainty makes of Hamlet a dubious Christian. And indeed, Hamlet repeatedly asserts the singular, subjective nature of his experience – he is “himself alone,”¹¹ setting himself apart, including by wearing a distinctive suit of “solemn black” (1.2.77), and constantly asserting his irreducible singularity. Every time he broaches the theme of the *contemptus mundi*, he describes his perception as unique and singular: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem *to me* all the uses of this world” (1.2.133, italics mine); in 2.2., when he describes Denmark, “*to me* it is a prison” (2.2.240; italics mine), and man, “the paragon of animals,” “*to me*,” nothing but a “quintessence of dust” (2.2.290). Hamlet cultivates this singularity and cuts himself off from what is “common,” whether the “customary suits of solemn black” – his are distinctive (1.2.78) –, or the common consolations offered by religion. When Gertrude admonishes Hamlet to moderation, she describes death as a common predicament: “Thou know’st ‘tis common, all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (1.2.72-3). But Hamlet fails to feel this common bond with mankind; his guarded repetition of the word is full of insinuations (“Ay, madam, it is common,” 1.2.74), and releases negative connotations – the thought is too vulgar or coarse, or even unclean (*OED* 15) for him. This refusal to espouse what is common in Hamlet is also blamed by Claudius in the speech quoted above: Hamlet’s experience is a “common theme” (he has lost his father), which should mark his kinship with all mankind “from the first corse

¹¹ To paraphrase Richard of Gloucester in *3 Henry VI*: “I am myself alone” (5.6.84).

till he that died today” (1.2.103, 105). Yet Hamlet refuses to submit to the common rules of conduct; he cannot or will not commune with his fellow human beings – be they his family, his nation or the Christian community at large.

2. Subverting and performing the *memento mori*

From the perspective of the arts of death, therefore, the death of Hamlet’s father is a bad death, like all deaths in the play, while Hamlet’s obstinate melancholy makes of him a bad Christian in need of reform. This is all the more the case as his speech teems with references to the repertoire of the *memento mori*, which he uses not to think about saving his soul, but as a macabre form of wit – to jest sarcastically about uses of the world. As I will show, Hamlet self-consciously *performs* the role of a satirical jester – ignoring the spiritual or Christian message of the *memento mori*. Thus, after killing Polonius by mistake he treats his body with indignity, using his corpse both as the subject of a practical joke (by hiding it) and as a visual aid to deliver a subversive lecture on a *vanitas* theme. When Claudius asks him where he has hidden the body, Hamlet equivocates: “At supper. [...] Not where he eats, but where a is eaten [...]” (4.3.17,19). Earlier he had turned the conventional argument about the vanity of beauty and the senses into a violently puritan diatribe against women by playing the role of a malcontent, telling Ophelia: “for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery go” (3.1.134-5). Earlier still, in a scene in which she was being used as a bait for her father to spy on him, he had suggested she was akin to “a good kissing carrion” (2.2.179-80) – a variation on the *memento mori* iconography which juxtaposes images of beauty and youth with rotting corpses to warn the beholder against the seduction of the senses. We can contrast these playful and macabre uses of the *memento mori* to other literary uses of the same theme in other early modern works. In “Upon a Dead-Man’s Head”, an early sixteenth-century poet, John Skelton, thus describes a deathhead in an advanced state of decomposition, but eventually focusses on the need to think on one’s souls.

With synnews wyderyd,
 With bonys shyderyd,
 With hys worme etyn maw,
 And his gastly jaw,
 Gaspyng aside
 Nakyd of hyde,

Neyther flesh nor fell.
 [...]

Oure eyen synkyng,
 Oure bodys stykyng,
 Oure gummys grynnyng,
 Oure soullys brynnyng. (cited in Morris, 1970: 1036)

The poem progresses from the observation of the skull to his and the reader's souls, *via* a shift to the first-person plural. Closer in date to *Hamlet*, French baroque poet Chassignet writes about a rotting corpse to emphasise the mutability and vanity of all things, and the need to think about one's salvation. This poem manifests a horrified fascination with the physicality of death:

Mortel pense quel est dessous la couverture
 D'un charnier mortuaire un cors mangé de vers,
 Descharné, desnervé, ou les os decouverts,
 Depoulez, desnouez delaisent leur jointure :
 Icy l'une des mains tombe de pourriture,
 Les yeus d'autre costé destournez à l'envers
 Se distillent en glaire & les muscles divers
 Servent aux vers goulus d'ordinaire pasture :
 [...]

Puis connaissant l'estat de ta fragilité,
 Fonde en DIEU seulement, estimant vanité
 Tout ce qui ne te rend plus scavant & plus sage. (Chassignet, 1594: 116)

In the same years, as argued by Guillaume Fourcade, John Donne “loved to imagine himself dead, to contemplate his own corpse and to give pride of place in his poems to voices coming literally from the grave” (Fourcade, 2002). In “A Valediction on the Window,” he muses on the problematic “re-compacting” of his scattered atoms at the Resurrection.¹² There was obviously a paradoxical kind of pleasure, both intellectual and aesthetic, to be drawn from the elaborate depiction of horrifying, putrefying corpses. In funerary monuments of the period, in Germany, France or England, the inclusion of *transis* – realistic statues representing the corpses of the deceased in various stages of decomposition – served as reminders for the observer of the vanity of all worldly pursuits; the subtext was that if the body was transient, the soul was immortal, if Christians cared enough about salvation to prepare themselves.

¹² Donne, 1985: 71.

Hamlet's emphasis on bodily corruption, his readiness to jest about the rotting flesh, can be read in this perspective, but they are purely horizontal – showing no spiritual aspiration. In *Hamlet*, elements of the *memento mori* are used in a misanthropic and secular perspective. Throughout the play, as Hamlet plays the part of the jester-cum-madman, his puns tend to revolve around death and the macabre. For instance, when Polonius asks him if he will “walk out of the air”, he retorts: “Into my grave?” (2.2.202), showing his literal obsession with death. And after killing Polonius, he uses his corpse as a pretext for a lecture on vanity – revisiting the topos of the chain of being as a chain of eating: “Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fate creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, but to one table” (4.3.20-23). Here, Hamlet plays the part of a satirical jester, to oppose the enigmatic mask of macabre wit to the tyranny of his uncle; but in doing so, he specifically goes against the Christian message that should accompany the *memento mori*. This cue sounds particularly cruel and tasteless, as Hamlet “lugs the guts” of Polonius into a dark corner without further ceremony (3.4.213). It is as if he were doomed to repeat the injustice from which he suffered, by making another son, and a daughter, experience inordinate mourning in their own turn.¹³ The plot replicates itself, and this in turn triggers Laertes's revenge. Since heaven has played a bad joke on Hamlet in making of him heaven's “scourge and minister” (3.4.176), his solace seems to be to laugh about it in a sardonic manner, as a metaphysical jester. In fact, it is as if Hamlet played the part of the figure of Death leading a *danse macabre* of his own invention, sardonically laughing at all and sundry, but without the spiritual message attached to the latter.¹⁴

3. “Fine revolution”: Towards a good death?

5.1 offers the most substantial revision of the *memento mori* grammar in the play, as Hamlet meditates on a skull, invoking the

¹³ Polonius's death is presented as Hamlet's burden (“For this same lord, / I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so, / To punish me with this, and this with me”, 3.4.173-5). Although he later claims he will take full responsibility for this misdeed, he never does so, eventually attributing it to a fit of madness he had earlier described as deceitful (3.4.175-6: “I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft”).

¹⁴ On the similarity between the figure of Death and that of the jester, see Warda, 2011.

iconography of the *danse macabre*.¹⁵ It can be argued that Hamlet goes through an experience that leads to what looks very much like a final “conversion.” This is achieved through the encounter with the gravedigging “clown”, a sexton, whose unsentimental and happy-go-lucky approach to death, offers a realistic counterpoint to Hamlet’s rather formulaic invocation of the *memento mori*. The gravedigger is singing, as he is digging a tomb (which will prove only later to be Ophelia’s), and throws up two skulls.¹⁶ Hamlet seems shocked, perhaps because he has a “daintier sense” than the clown (5.1.58), as he is not inured to the manipulation of corpses: “Has this fellow no feeling of his business that he sings at grave-making?” (5.1.65) He grabs a skull, and launches, for the benefit of Horatio, into a playful mock-sermon, using the skull as a prop (or a kind of puppet) to perform and ventriloquize the various characters to whom he imagines it might have belonged: “This might be the pate of a politician [...]. Or of a courtier, which could say, ‘Good morrow, sweet lord’ [...] This might be my Lord Such-a-one, [...] now my Lady Worm’s, chopless, and knocked about the mazard with a sexton’s spade” (5.1.66, 69, 71, 74). Hamlet plays here with the theme of death as the great leveller, offering a series of variations on a well-known topos: “Here’s fine revolution” (5.1.75-6) – where revolution means change or alteration. Death awaits everyone, even the high and mighty, seems to be the message. But Hamlet immediately qualifies this idea of equality in death: his own “dance of death” in fact only includes representatives of the higher orders (lords, ladies, a lawyer, a land-owner, Alexander, Caesar). His disgust seems therefore linked to the fact that death abolishes all distinction between the dead, and exposes the high and mighty to the irreverence of the lower orders, as skulls are “knocked about the mazard with a sexton’s spade” (74). A few lines down, Hamlet further comments on the insolence of the gravedigger, which manifests itself in the way he contradicts him by obstinately resisting figurative speech. In fact, the gravedigger is the only one who resists him in the play: “How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us [...]; the age is grown so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so

¹⁵ On the graveyard scene, see Neill, 1997: 233-37, Altick, 1954, Sofer, 1998, and Green, 2016.

¹⁶ It was a common practice in the Middle Ages and early modern period to bury several bodies into the same tombs over time; and gravediggers were paid to remove the bones of the dead to the charnel house, when the time had come, to make room for newcomers (Ariès, 1981: 84).

near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe” (5.1.115-6, 117-8). For the comedic gravediggers, all corpses are equal, as they cheerfully go about their business; yet they too are keenly aware that men and women are not equal in the face of death. Before Hamlet’s entrance, they had commented on Ophelia’s burial as evidencing blatant social inequalities. Ophelia, whose death was “doubtful”, even according to the priest (5.1.194), should not have received a Christian burial; if she does, it is only because she is an aristocrat: “If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o’ Christian burial”, the second Clown concludes (5.1.20-1). The first Clown goes further in his anatomy of social inequality by famously making a claim for basic social equality based on the Bible – an echo of John Ball’s famous slogan of the time of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt,¹⁷ which Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have identified as deeply subversive: “there is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and gravemakers; they hold up Adam’s profession” (5.1.24-6). The gravediggers’ social agenda sheds an ironic light on the clichéd universality of death in the topos of the *danse macabre* as teased out by Hamlet.

Adding Alexander and Caesar to his gallery of social types, Hamlet appropriates and revisits the formulaic *danse macabre* to create a witty performance for the benefit of his audience on stage, Horatio. If this *danse macabre* can be described as an entertaining, comic interlude, which occupies a lull in the play, it also qualifies as a form of *divertissement* in the Pascalian sense of the term,¹⁸ coming as it does as a response to Hamlet’s unease at seeing how the gravediggers mishandle the corpses they are digging up to make some room for new

¹⁷ “When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman”. Quoted in Hamlin, 2019: 42.

¹⁸ “Mais quand j’ai pensé de plus près et qu’après avoir trouvé la cause de tous nos malheurs j’ai voulu en découvrir la raison, j’ai trouvé qu’il y en a une bien effective et qui consiste dans le malheur naturel de notre condition faible et mortelle, et si misérable que rien ne peut nous consoler lorsque nous y pensons de près. / Quelque condition qu’on se figure, où l’on assemble tous les biens qui peuvent nous appartenir, la royauté est le plus beau poste du monde. Et cependant, qu’on s’en imagine accompagné de toutes les satisfactions qui peuvent le toucher. S’il est sans divertissement et qu’on le laisse considérer et faire réflexion sur ce qu’il est, cette félicité languissante ne le soutiendra point. Il tombera par nécessité dans les vues qui le menacent des révoltes qui peuvent arriver et enfin de la mort et des maladies, qui sont inévitables. De sorte que s’il est sans ce qu’on appelle divertissement, le voilà malheureux, et plus malheureux que le moindre de ses sujets qui joue et qui se divertit” (Fragment *Divertissement*, Pensée n°168).

ones. For when Hamlet thinks that one day sextons might play “at loggats” (a form of bowling) with his own bones, he comments: “Mine ache to think on’t” (5.1.77-8).

When Hamlet interviews the gravedigger, he is confronted with a very different approach to death and the dead than his own. For the Clown (as a technician of death) is an expert in the physiology of death, and the issue of putrefaction. He offers a materialistic perspective on those “carrions” which Hamlet had so unthinkingly jested about earlier. In stark contrast with this, however, the gravedigger’s down-to earth speech is totally free of the influence of the *memento mori*; and his own materialism throws the prince’s performance into relief. For the Clown, a man, when he dies, is no longer a man, but a corpse, but there is nothing sentimental or emotional about this fact; hence his no-nonsense insistence on literalism, which turns the dialogue into a series of witty enigmas in which Hamlet loses the upper hand:¹⁹

Hamlet	Who is to be buried in’t?
Clown	One that was a woman sir, but rest her soul she’s dead. (5.1.114)

The opposition between Hamlet and the Clown is also one of style: the self-consciously dramatic (and metaphorical) style of Hamlet’s oration is opposed to the literal and matter-of-fact nature of the Clown’s utterances. Hamlet treats the skull he is holding as visual aid for a largely comic *danse macabre*, a generic prop available for a series of playful metaphorical exchanges; but when he digs up the second skull, the Clown, always the literal mind, insists on identifying its owner. His approach to death here is unsentimental, but he nevertheless fondly remembers the individual to whom these human remains belonged as he was when he was alive: “This same skull sir, was Yorick’s skull, the king’s jester” (5.1.152-3). The identification of the second skull’s owner causes a radical shift of perspectives in the scene: had the skull remained anonymous, Hamlet could have continued treating it as he did the first, *i.e.* as a prop, a generic and impersonal *memento mori*. But as soon as the skull is attributed to its (former) owner, then the interchangeable, generic emblem becomes the personal remains of someone who was close to him when he was a boy (the “it” becomes a “he”), and it is no longer possible to jest. The physical encounter with the skull of someone who “hath borne [him] on

¹⁹ Sofer notes how the sexton’s “relentless literalism outsmarts Hamlet’s verbal sallies” which are “nullified one by one” (Sofer, 1998: 53).

his back a thousand times” (5.1.176) causes shock and nausea: “My gorge rises at it” (5.1.159). Besides, Yorick can be seen as a surrogate father figure for a father Hamlet has only too recently lost. Like the skull in Holbein’s famous painting, *The Ambassadors*, the skull functions here as an anamorphosis which displaces the meaning of the rest of the scene. Sofer describes its effect as an “unmetaphoring” of the iconic emblem of the *memento mori*, the skull (Sofer, 1998: 54). Hamlet’s reaction shows a degree of pity and empathy for Yorick (“Alas, poor Yorick,” 5.1.156), but also self-pity, as he feels nausea. He immediately returns to the familiar *Ubi sunt* motif of lament, however (“Where be your gibes now? your gambols, your songs...”, 5.1.160-1), and resumes the dizzying performance of the *danse macabre*, seemingly picking up where he had left earlier by adding Alexander and Caesar to the list. This rhetorical digression, which seems mechanical, leaves Horatio almost silent. The shocking experience of encountering Yorick’s skull is self-reflexive; the skull can be seen as a mirror held up to Hamlet, who has been playing the role of the jester since the end of Act 1 (and in the absence of an official kingly jester). It is also, of course, Hamlet’s personal *memento mori*, an unpleasant reminder, for Hamlet, of his own death to come – and he will be dead soon, although this he does not know. The shock of recognition is digested and tamed, however, by the integration of Yorick into Hamlet’s long dramatic performance on the theme of the dance of death, whose reassuringly formulaic structure seems to allow him a sense of control, as evidenced in the amplification and the final performance of a quatrain in rhymed pentameters (180-4).

A second shock of recognition comes for Hamlet with the revelation that the tomb the gravedigger has been digging since the beginning of the scene is Ophelia’s, which is followed by his confrontation with Laertes’s passionate grief. In Act 4, Scene 1 of John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand, who has been watching his sister the Duchess being submitted to a form of psychological torture by Bosola, rejoices: “She’s plagued in art” (4.1.108). Ferdinand means that the Duchess has been tormented with refined cruelty; but a secondary meaning is suggested, if we take “art” as relating to creative pursuits or skills: cruelty here has been raised to the level of an art form.

I would like to suggest that Hamlet dies “in art,”²⁰ after he has self-consciously performed his own dance of death in order to distance himself from a series of traumatic experiences – the encounter with his father’s ghost, the surprise anagnorisis felt in front of Yorick’s stinking skull, and his shocking encounter with Ophelia’s grave and corpse, and with her mourning brother. All these involve doubles or alter egos towards whom Hamlet is made gradually to feel empathy or rivalry through deeply unsettling experiences which imply an element of surprise. These experiences engage his senses (sight, touch and smell), his emotions and passions, rather than his intellect, as in the shocking encounter with Yorick.

But does Hamlet finally reconcile himself with death? Hamlet’s development is by no means dialectical, and Hamlet can be interpreted as a discontinuous, non-Aristotelian character, in that he baffles logic, contradicting himself. At the end of 5.1, Hamlet is again overcome with rage, when he witnesses Laertes’s excessive manifestation of grief (and he leaps into Ophelia’s grave to vie with the latter’s grief). It is as if the grand style of Laertes’s hyperbolic grief had struck him as inauthentic, as “actions that a man might play,” a performance of grief, (1.2.84): “I will fight with him upon this theme” (5.1.233), Hamlet retorts. The word “theme” suggests here that Hamlet, who elsewhere describes himself as a “chameleon” (3.2.83), is adept at spotting rhetorical (and literary) conventions, “actions that a man might play” (1.2.84), but that he also endlessly shifts roles, discarding one mask after the other. To the last, Hamlet evades psychological analysis, even finally eluding his responsibility when he asks for Laertes’s forgiveness: “What I have done, [...] I here proclaim was madness” (5.2.202, 204).

Hamlet’s quiet resolve at the beginning of 5.2 sounds all the more surprising, as a new part he has not played yet. Telling Horatio about his adventures in England, and about how he contrived to send Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their executions as proxies, he interprets these events as the workings of providence: “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will” (5.2.10-1). Critics like Spinrad and Lander have interpreted Hamlet’s final moments in 5.2 as a religious conversion;²¹ yet such a reading is difficult to sustain: Hamlet’s active plotting belies the single operation

²⁰ In *Hamlet*, the word “art” is used in the sense of rhetoric or artifice, when Gertrude comments on Polonius’s excessively long-winded use of rhetoric: “More matter with less art”, she pleads, asking him to go to the point (2.2.95).

²¹ Spinrad, 2005 and Lander, 2018.

of providence. His behaviour at Ophelia's grave in the previous scene – his sudden, uncontrolled rage at Laertes, and his scandalous behaviour at the funeral of someone whose father he has killed –, seems in direct contradiction with his final invocation of patience: “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be” (5.2. 192-6). The reference to the sparrow is an echo of the Gospels, and does suggest faith in the immanent manifestation of providence: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?” (Matthew 10.29, Geneva Bible) But Hamlet's invocation of patience is remarkable for its focus on the present, for the first time in the play – not on what lies in wait after death, not on the past, about which “no man [...] aught [...] knows”, but simply on “now.” It is Hamlet's attitude to time, if anything, that seems to have changed here, and this can be interpreted not so much as a religious conversion as a conversion to stoicism. This sentence is indeed a direct echo of Seneca's Epistle 69:

If you will give ear to my advice, ponder and practise this, – how to welcome death, or even, if circumstances commend that course, to invite it. There is no difference whether death comes to us, or whether we go to death. Make yourself believe that all ignorant men are wrong when they say: “It is a beautiful thing to die one's own death.” But there is no man who does not die his own death. What is more, you may reflect on this thought: No one dies except on his own day. You are throwing away none of your own time; for what you leave behind does not belong to you. Farewell. (Seneca, 1925: 55)

Turning to the consolation of stoicism, Hamlet the Stoic is finally no longer “passion's slave” (3.1.62). He even seems to have forgotten about his revenge at this point, and accepts the wager to fight with Laertes with equanimity – but a fight which we know is rigged, and put by Claudius under the sinister auspices of a mysterious Norman knight called Lamord (4.7.91). When Hamlet finally accomplishes his revenge, it is almost indirectly, by turning Claudius's own poison against himself, wounding him with the sword he has poisoned, and making him drink some of his poisoned drink.

As he lies dying, Hamlet finally seems ready, as indicated through the repetition of “I am dead” (5.2.312, 317). The crucial moment of what constitutes his last dying speech (5.2.311-37) helps us measure

how Shakespeare rewrites the moralists' good death, by staging a secularized, personal variant of a good death, with no priest required, and no Christian prayer recited. Hamlet's death stands indeed in sharp contrast with what is prescribed as the proper attitude towards death in Sutton's *Disce mori*. One of his final sections, entitled "A shorte Dialogue betweene Faith, and the Naturall man: concerning mans estate in the world, and his departure from the world" (341-45), is preceded with a woodcut (one of three in the volume) which features a figure of Death as a skeleton leaning on a spade (Sutton, 1600: sig. P3; Fig. 1), which is itself derived from the image of a skeleton with a spade in Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*.²²



Fig. 1: Christopher Sutton, *Disce Mori* (London, 1600), sig. P3. © Private collection.

It is tempting to interpret the sexton in *Hamlet* as a variant of this iconic figure of Death. In this section, Sutton emphasizes the need to "bid all trust in earthly vanities fare well", to "hope for the life to come", and admonishes: "Lift up thy mind to God, in him onely is thy eternall welfare" (345). Hamlet, however, does not respect this formula, but invents his own version of a good death: before drawing his last breath, assisted by his closest friend, he has publicly confessed his sins, (5.2.198-216), he has been forgiven by and has forgiven Laertes (308-10). He has said farewell to his mother ("Wetched queen adieu", 312).

²² Reproduced in Neill 1997: 107.

He also settles his worldly affairs by making his last will known to Horatio, who is designated as his executor: he thus bequeathes his “dying voice” to Fortinbras in the upcoming election for the crown of Denmark (5.2.335), while Horatio must be his spokesman and make his voice resonate beyond the grave by “tell[ing] [his] story” (328). As his friend, “more an antique Roman than a Dane” (320), expresses his desire to follow him in death by committing suicide, Hamlet pleads: “Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story” (5.2.326-9). Many critics have interpreted “felicity” as expressing faith in a life after death – a final deathbed conversion, as it were; but it could refer to the moment of death, seen as “end[ing] / The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” (3.1.60-2). Hamlet’s very final words remain enigmatic: “the rest is silence” (337). No prayers are said, apart from Horatio’s elegiac, poetic tribute, which does not necessarily reflect a specific belief (“Good night sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”, 338-9). I suggest therefore that we can read *Hamlet*’s puzzling ending not as a Christian death, but as a stoic one, when he finally stops worrying about what is beyond his control: “let it be” (316) – a secular version of “amen”. All we can say with certainty about his end is that death no longer inspires “dread” in Hamlet; but this “silence” does not tell us anything about whether there is anything after death. Hamlet, after he has “shuffle[d] off” his role as a revenger together with “his mortal coil”, seems to have (ever so imperfectly) learnt to tame his passions, but he cannot say, like Gertrude, that life is a mere “passing through nature to eternity”, beyond death (1.2.72-73). In its final lines, *Hamlet* introduces another lead, suggesting yet another scenario, which turns the play into a Roman (stoic) play set in Christian Denmark.

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