

“Make Us Laugh at That: *Hamlet*’s Gravediggers”

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Though the “Clownes” in 5.1 appear only once in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s Gravediggers’ Scene has been called “the most extraordinary scene in this extraordinary play” (CN3189, Hibbard, 1987), a valuation that is surely a function of the proud professional undertaker, the First Clown, whose quick wit shines out in dialogue but who is intently focused and in his own world when at his proper task of digging. Does this clown speak more lines than have been “set down for him?”¹ Of course, such a question is one that textual evidence in itself can’t decide. But what it does point to is that even when intent on his digging, the Gravedigger enjoys the limelight and “performing” for himself and for any passers-by.

What is also clear is that the Gravedigger’s singing at his tasks intrigues Hamlet at a critical point of passage in the play. As an outsider first introduced in this scene of the play, the Gravedigger could be seen as a choric figure. In his initial dialogue with Second Clown, he unwittingly comments on the prior actions of the prince and the court of Denmark that have led them to seek the consecrated “ground” of his professional turf. For his part, the prince, now also an “outsider” who stumbles upon this site, becomes a kind of correlative choric figure as he comments to Horatio on the Gravedigger’s song and accompanying gestures and then draws out the Gravedigger concerning his trade. From this dual choric perspective grows what is to be a direct duel of wits between clown and prince that is prelude to the mortal duel of 5.2.

The unique life with which Shakespeare endowed the First Clown has inspired a rich afterlife in imitation, art, and commentary.² As early as 1615, Robert Armin wrote a scene in *The Valiant Welshman* parodying the dialogue of Shakespeare’s two clowns. Armin’s clown addresses his

neighbors with a task quite similar to the one First addresses to Second, that of determining whether Ophelia is to have “Christian burial”: “[W]e are to search out the course of law, whether this man that has hangde himselfe, be accessary to his own death or no.” The *reductio ad absurdum* proofs of Armin’s clown closely ape the wordplay of Shakespeare’s clowns: “I put this point to you, whether euery one that hangs himselfe, be willing to die or no? *2Neig.* I, I, sure he is willing. *Cl.* I say no, for the hangman hangs himselfe, and yet he is not willing to die” (see Armin, CN3192ff).

Apart from the practical issue of Shakespeare’s need to provide employment for his comic actors, it may well have been the overwhelmingly emblematic character of a gravedigger, and of “all that the gravedigger represents in the cycle of human mortality,” as Alan Young puts it,³ that was foremost in Shakespeare’s mind in crafting this richly iconic encounter. Bettie Anne Doeblner, explaining the scene’s merger of the Renaissance tropes of *memento mori* and *ars moriendi*, sees the entire scene—but especially Hamlet’s dialogue with the First clown—as “a dramatic enactment of *ars moriendi* in preparation for Hamlet’s final act of ‘dying well’” (68).

But as always with his comic characters, there is a contextual necessity, a local habitation that sparked Shakespeare’s brilliant shaping of his First Clown into a very specific person and personality, a role of “rude knave” (or the Quarto’s “madde knave”) that famed comic actors would continue to covet; the playwright needed to bring his hero back home, and what better place to set his incognito return than the iconic representational space of a graveyard? Moreover, the Gravediggers’ onstage presence creates what is arguably Shakespeare’s most artful mixture of high and low, tragic and comic matter.

Concerning the early stage history of the memorable “First,” Davies (1784, pp. 133-7) conjectures that “Augustine Sly, Tarleton, Kempe, or some old actor of the comic cast, was the original Grave-digger.” Fleay (1877), paying close attention to the chronology suggested in First’s exchange with Hamlet, suggests rather that Tarleton likely was not the Gravedigger but the original model for the long-gone Yorick (see below, p. 16 and CN3962), who, with his madcap jests, seems to have gone in especially for physical comedy.

Halliwell (ed. 1865) speculates that a comic stage tradition may have “come down by tradition” from the players of Shakespeare’s own time.” He tells us that

Until within a very recent period, it was customary for one of the gravediggers to preface his labours by divesting himself of about a dozen waistcoats, an operation which always created great merriment The Doctor, in the *Dutchess of Malfi*, according to a stage direction in ed. 1708, ‘puts off his four cloaks, one after another,’ a similar stratagem to create the laughter of the audience (CN3190).⁴

Even when *Hamlet* could no longer be played upon the stage during the Interregnum, a “gravediggers” fragment could still be glimpsed, for the “‘incomparable Robert Cox’ and his small company, ‘under pretense of rope-dancing, or the like,’ enacted vignettes from the old plays, among them the first part of the Hamlet graveyard scene, called for the purpose ‘The Grave makers’” (qtd. in Bell, 13). Bryant, a century later (1889), talks of the gravedigger roles as “excellently adapted to allow comedians of the better type. Macklin, Buckstone, and Placide are some of the great names associated with the First Gravedigger” (CN 3190).

In the 18th century, the scene’s low comedy incited the ire of neoclassicists and led to David Garrick’s notorious wholesale cutting of the scene after the debacle of the “Half-Price Riots” of 1763. When theater-goers, who had grown accustomed to half-price admission if they arrived after Act 3, responded to having this custom revoked by rioting in the streets, Garrick was searching for a way to continue financing the ever-growing magnificence of his stage spectacles. He also had been heavily influenced by the vituperative views of his friend Voltaire in France, who later wrote of “the English dramatist’s coarse taste and lack of art, of which the gravediggers’ scene is an obvious example,⁵ and excoriate[d] . . . the translator of *Hamlet* for maintaining [this scene] in the play, when even Garrick has done away with it” (qtd. in Willems).

Garrick initially relished his decision. Writing to Pierre-Antoine Laplace, he exulted, “I have destroyed the Grave Diggers (those favorites of the people)

and almost all of the fifth act . . . [which] has answered my most sanguine expectations” (qtd. in Bevington, *Murder Most Foul*, 100). Nevertheless, he soon “came to regard his renovation of *Hamlet* as the most imprudent thing he had ever done,” and indeed “his desperate attempt . . . to please Enlightenment tastes did not succeed” (Ibid.). And Davies, writing in 1784, still opined that the only worthy part of the Gravedigger’s scene was Hamlet’s “moral and pathetic reflections, on the skull of Yorick, [which] are, in my opinion, a compensation for all the oddities, or, if the critics please, the absurdities, of this extraordinary scene” (CN 3367-9).

Ironically, Garrick’s cutting of the scene might have contributed to its popularity in artistic representation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Alan Young informs us that

[t]he earliest visual rendition of Hamlet with the skull of Yorick that the first gravedigger hands him was a 1773 engraving by John Hall . . . in John Bell’s edition⁶ Bell included the text of the scene and offered readers what they were denied in Garrick’s performances at Drury Lane, although still able to see at Covent Garden and later at the Haymarket – Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull” (Young 2002 [c] 191).

A typical 19th century image of the encounter is this 1868 illustration by Selius, with Hamlet, as Young comments, “holding the skull up high before his face in the manner thought to have been introduced by Edmund Kean much earlier in the century” (Ibid.):



First Clown. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the
king's jester.
Hamlet. This?
First Clown. Even that.
Hamlet. Let me see. *Act V. Scene I.*

Selius emphasizes the moral elements of the scene. Hamlet, First Clown, and Yorick (albeit not in the flesh) are visually present, their triad dominated by Horatio, who looks down at the three others. Their lines of “sight” (or sightlessness) are also connected. Together Hamlet, Horatio, Yorick and the Gravedigger are conjoined in an oblique quadrangle by a wildness of skeletal tree boughs and moss-covered crypt entrances, with the yawning pit of clay beneath the gravedigger’s feet and the bones (left) and skulls (right) out in the foreground.

Whatever buffoonery is alluded to in the text is invisible here. “Yorick” as skull can scarcely be the “rogue” who “once poured a flagon of Renish” on the prince’s head. Both prince and Yorick are melancholic: one of Hamlet’s hands props up Yorick’s chapless top row of teeth and the other props up his own chin in a Rodin-like, “Thinker” pose. Similarly, The Gravedigger’s pointed index finger solemnly affirms the identity of the un-grinning clown. The Gravedigger’s right arm angling down under the pointing arm rests on his earth-piercing spade and moves forward visually toward viewers, the path of bone and skull further carrying these dynamic skeletal pieces toward the foreground, with its printed lines of dialogue.

Obscured in such sobering illustrations is the fact that First Clown follows a long line of Shakespearean clowns and “corruptors of words.” Marvin Rosenberg adumbrates some of First’s dramatic prototypes:

First Clown has some of the social vision of Jack Cade, and the vanity of Bottom . . . [He] can outfence verbally the wittiest man we have met in Denmark: Hamlet. First is also a dedicated gravemaker, he lives with death and eternity as familiars, he is proud of his craft (827).

Rosenberg particularly emphasizes First Clown’s affiliation with Cade:

First Clown is . . . of Cade’s persuasion; the kind of man who would cheerfully gall any courtier’s kibe He instinctively champions the absolute democracy of the grave, where all humankind, men and women, great and common, jostle each other. His argument is well under way. How dare they! (829)

Aside from openly voicing such a dangerous political attitude, First is also a remarkable character in that he speaks two of the most arresting lines in *Hamlet*—one about Ophelia and one about King Hamlet.

In Hamlet's encounter with First, we see the prince's transformation from someone who has become so "benetted round with villainies" (TLN 3530) that he can grapple with death only jocularly or on an abstract, speculative level—to someone who, like First, becomes a familiar of death in a highly physical as well as metaphysical sense, getting the smell and the dust first of Yorick and then of Ophelia into his own body.

If the gravedigger and the prince are choric "doubles," they are doubles in another respect as well. As critics note, the prince had earlier vowed to "delve" below the "mines" of his adversaries (TLN 2577+7) and had taken pride in his abilities to outwit them; the clown is addressed as "goodman delver" (TLN3203), one whose "[s]tratagems of fooling, tergivisation, acting mirth making, and dissembling" according to Bell, mirror those of Hamlet. The prince, like the gravedigger, is thus a comic "delver," "a shrewed connoisseur of folly as well as a sly practitioner of fooling" (103). The Gravedigger may grapple with Hamlet toward the end of their encounter over who is to become the other's straight man, but as the scene opens, First starts out with his own straight man—the Other clown.

As for the Other gravedigger, though he has far fewer lines and they are often cut in production, he is not exactly devoid of his own ideas of how things should be. Other, in fact, has a modicum of wit; like First, he is somewhat troubled about the social inequities of ecclesiastical pardon, though uneasy speaking openly about them. In their initial dialogue, all the questions about will that have reverberated throughout the play, and particularly in Hamlet's soliloquies, return here to the leveling ground of the grave, the place where everyone's will has been annihilated—with the temporary exception of the Gravedigger, who, before the Final Judgment, has the last word in judgments he passes on those for whom he is digging.

John Russell Brown has examined the exchange between the two clowns, demonstrating how two actors sharing a scene can do it. He suggests that where "First is rather obsessed with time, referring back to the creation of the world and forward to doomsday," Other [or "Second"] Clowne "seems bent on thinking about crime, adding hangings to the immediate concern of suicide. . . . [First] may also be something of a know-it-all, an upstart intellectual. . . ." On the other hand, "Other[may] press all the time for

action, against a rock-like calm in the elder clown” that derives from his daily work.⁷

Whatever the precise coloration an actor gives his character, though, both clowns’ questions, observations and turns of phrase are thoroughly theological in nature, despite the fact that they are grounded in their pragmatic duties in the cemetery. There is a directness about the pronoun “she,” the First Clown’s second word in this scene,⁸ given the implied graveyard setting for a question posed that immediately follows Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s drowning:

Clowne. Is shee to be buried in Christian buriall, {when she}
<that>| wilfully seekes her owne saluation? (TLN 3190-91)

Like many of Hamlet’s interrogations, First Clown’s opening question is deeply inquisitive about the order of things in the next world as well as this one. “Salvation” has received much commentary as the first of the many puns that will, like his literal-mindedness, lace this clown’s future conversation with Hamlet. This self-conscious literal-mindedness combines with the fact that he is none too squeamish about examining the politics behind “Christian buriall.”

First’s use of “wilfully” seems at complete odds with what we have heard in Gertrude’s elaborate description of Ophelia’s drowning. The queen’s words have painted her as one “incapable of her own distress” (TLN3170). Gertrude’s ekphrasis creates an after-image of the departed Ophelia as floating between conscious thought and madness. The pregnant ellipsis between the end of Act IV and the beginning of Act V only enhances the ambiguities of the queen’s speech. “Wilfully,” however equivocal it is made to seem in First’s subsequent dissections of the term, indicates that the Gravedigger is a man who has made up his own mind and is not likely to be shaken in his opinions.

The Second Clown’s answer to First’s question of burial informs us that he has come on his own mission from the “crowner” or *coroner* and insists that the grave be made “straight” or straightaway. Earlier commentators on “straight” tended to interpret Second’s word as designating a specific orientation of the grave in a consecrated manner, and indeed, “straight” does

raise the association of “strait is the gate,” but the meaning of “straightaway” was such a commonplace in Shakespearean usage that modern commentators read the imperative as indicating Second’s insistence on promptness. In any case, as Jenkins (ed. 1982) argues (CN3192), Second Clown is likely punning on “straight” and “strait.” This insistence implies his awareness of the fact that there have been questions about the manner of Ophelia’s death and his wish to carry out orders without delay. But Second relays the further news that since the coroner has “sat on her” (with a possible bawdy meaning), the official verdict is that it will be “Christian Burial” (TLN3193-4).

Initially, whatever his private views of the matter, Second clearly expects prompt compliance from First Clown and his repetition of “she” and “Christian Burial” attempts to bring a degree of rhetorical finality to the question. Undaunted, however, First undermines Second’s insistence with a ludicrously legalistic question: “How can that be, vnlesse she drown’d herself in | her owne defence (TLN 3195-6).

Commentators have been quick to note that “her own defense”—the legal term used to counter a charge of homicide—could scarcely be used to justify a suicide. Similarly, First further pseudo-legalistic comment (in the Folio) that “It must be <*Se offendendo*>, it cannot be els”(TLN3198-9), is a comic misuse of the idea of self-defense. Spenser argues that the Q2 version, “‘so offended’, may be a further comic corruption of the phrase [i.e., *se defendendo*] rather than a misprint” [CN3198]. In either case, these rhetorical maneuvers once again highlight the issue of human will and agency in the face of the ineluctability of death; they prepare the ground in so many ways for the clown’s parsing of the question of will in suicide and all the related philosophical issues that Hamlet will again raise after he steps foot on these burial grounds.

Jenkins’ note cites Bradley, who finds First’s language to be typical of “Shakespeare’s delight in ‘the uneducated minds, and its tendency to express a sound meaning in an absurd form’” (ed. 1982, CN3195-6). But David Bevington (ed. 1988) finds wisdom as well as wit in this line of the gravedigger, “perhaps a suggestion that Ophelia was taking her own shortcut to heaven” (CN3191).

Second answers First's challenge insistently, by reference to authority: "Why, 'tis found so," and tries to interrupt First, calling him "goodman delver," from which appellation Walker (1860) first insisted that Second is "not a gravedigger" (CN4204, 3:270), distinguishing his line of word from First's.

First's indulgence in pseudo-legalistic language, while ostensibly seeking clarity, is theatrically attention-grabbing, a display of his linguistic *virtu*. His logic-chopping also foregrounds his argumentative skill. First's language moves from the hypothetical /generic "if" directly to the declarative—to the fact of "an act" which then can be explained as having "three branches." Theobald (1726, p. 124) jumps on the comic absurdity inherent in the Clown's only adducing two: "[T]o act and to do. Very notably made out! If an Act has *Three* Branches, as the honest Clown here defines it to have, it would puzzle a good Arithmetician to find them out from this Reading. . . . But, surely, to *do*, and to *perform*, can be but two Branches" (CN3200); indeed, if looked at closely, there seems to be one branch in total, considering that "to act" and "to do" aren't really distinguishable either.⁹

Yet though failing to make the distinctions he insists upon, First nevertheless goes on to defend his point. He explains the logic of suicide by parsing the watery element about which we have heard repeatedly in Gertrude's and Laertes' references to water and repetitions of "drown'd" in the prior scene. In his hypothetical/legalistic example, likely drawn from a contemporary coroner's verdict on the case of one Sir James Hales,¹⁰ First reverts to the first-person, ("If *I* drown myself wittingly) and then to "the man" (i.e., to the masculine) who might "go to the water and drown *himself*."

All the tortured questions of will and law lead Second to voice his own disapprobation of the proceedings, withheld till now probably in his earlier anxiety to have the coroner's verdict executed: "Will you ha' the truth on't. If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial" (TLN 3191). And First now affirms the rightness of Second's "secret" declaration: "Why there thou say'st. And the more pity that great folk should have count'nance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than they euen {Christen:}<Christi|an.>" (TLN 3917-18).

First Clown may be joking about the unfair advantage of gentlefolk in being free to commit suicide, but, as Kliman and Lake remind us, “[K]ings did not overrule the clergy about burial in sacred ground for souls of commoners” (133, N. 30). This point becomes apparent later, when the priest comments to Laertes that “great Command o’ersways the order” (TLN 3417).

Class and hierarchy having been introduced, the segue to First’s heraldry joke about Adam digging as “the first [gentleman] that ever bore arms” is also beautifully natural here, once again conflating nobleman and commoner into perpetuity, with humanity’s first common ancestor construed as a gentleman. The Gravedigger’s joke reinforces the subversively egalitarian viewpoint of the “delver” reference. His conflation of heraldic and digging “arms” leads, in turn, to his riddle involving professional rivalry: “What is he that builds strong than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?” Second’s “gallows maker” is an honorable try, but First, as we by now expect, has the best answer, as he instructs Second: “When you are asked this question next, say ‘a grave-maker. The houses he makes lasts till doomsday’” (TLN 3238-9). With this joke, First completes the Doomsday reflections and the arc from Eden to The End of Days, which many commentators have noted.

First has now consolidated his triumph, and he sends Second off for a stoup of liquor to *Yaughan* (a problematic name appearing only in the Folio, and one which sets off a flurry of critical conjecture¹¹); at this point, thinking himself alone, First withdraws into himself, bounding himself in the grave he is digging and in the old song that accompanies his labors by “custom.” The Clown’s work-accompanying song testifies to what Rosenberg sees as First’s “‘industry’: He has a firm objective: getting his job done, while protesting discrimination, educating Other, and proclaiming the glory of the gravemaker” (832).

As alluded to above, Hamlet and Horatio’s entry is the point at which the Gravedigger’s song and “actions of battery” provide a comically macabre *basso continuo* that undergirds Hamlet’s meditative comments about *him* and about the dead for whom he is busy digging.

Doebler argues that the song also “continues the *momento mori* image taken from a poem on Tottle’s popular *Miscellany* (printed in 1447), and entitled “A dyttye or sonnet made by the lord Vaus in the time of the noble queen Marye, representing the image of Death” (“Hamlet: A Grave Scene and its Audience, *Hamlet Studies* III, No. 2, Winter 1981); the words are also attributed “with a slight Variation,” to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey” (CN3252-55, Theobald, ed. 1733). They are interspersed with “Oh and Ah” which Dowden conjectures “are perhaps grunts of the digger at work” (CN3252-55), and in that vein also serve to keep audiences in mind of the leveling factor of digging for any prospective tenant.

With further implications about the singer’s character, Jenkins (CN3252-55) discusses some of the changes Shakespeare makes in the source song:

The first stanza, instead of a philosophic acceptance of time’s passing, has become expressive of regret. The transposition of *In youth* to the beginning puts the emphasis firmly on youthful love. . . . [and] the song in its new third lines shows a wish to *contract* the time. . . . “And hath shipp’d me intil the land . . . fits in with the irony of applying the song to Ophelia’s death. . . .” (CN3252-55, 1982).

Rewritten, then, as a song of lost love that thus connects the singer to the prince, the Gravedigger’s song is interwoven in three parts with Hamlet’s commentary. As Hamlet and Horatio enter, First’s initial stanza foregrounds the fact that the Hamlet/Ophelia connection is now once again physically present (for Ophelia’s part, posthumously) within the representational stage space, enhancing the irony of the fact that Hamlet is standing unknowingly at the grave of his youthful love.

Listening and watching, Hamlet and Horatio begin to give us their own perspective on First, adding to the one audiences have already been forming. Hamlet remarks that this “fellow” seems to have no “feeling of his business” and Horatio that “Custome hath made it in him a propertie of ease.”¹²

The second part of the Gravedigger's song picks up on Hamlet's critique by showing further evidence of this ease with the "custom" of the grave, but now the Gravedigger blames "age" itself for his lost love:

3263 But age with his stealing steppes {Song.}
3264 hath {clawed} <caught> me in his clutch,
3265 And hath shipped me {into} <intill> the land,
3266 as if I had neuer been such.

Glossing these lines, Johnson (ed. 1765) insists (and in the 20th Century, Wilson [1934] concurs) that the Folio variant ("caught" rather than "clawed") is much less effective in this instance, and again, that Shakespeare's divergences from the source ballad make for a specific shaping of this character, one whom Age indeed has mangled, and "shipped" "into the land," i.e., of the dead, "as if" he could possibly be construed as anything but a denizen of that land ("as if I had neuer been such"). J. Anthony Burton observes that "'stealing steppes' and 'clawed . . . clutch'" is also "the old-fashioned alliterative style of the conservative rural type with artistic pretensions that Shakespeare parodies in *MND*" (Personal Communication, Dec. 10, 2014).

The Gravedigger's obliviousness in his work and the ancientness of the task now begins to create the occasion for what will be Hamlet's extended speculations on the bones that the Gravedigger is obviously flinging about.

Hamlet's initial simile that First violently—and like "an ass"—tosses around a jawbone as if it were "Cain's jawbone" is a comment on First that has evoked much critical discussion. Edwards mentions Skeat's 1880 reference to a medieval tradition that Cain killed Abel with an ass's jawbone (CN 3269), but dismisses the idea that it is "Cain's skull—so contemptuously dropped—that Hamlet means" (CN 3269). Bernice W. Kliman, in her own notation on Edwards' commentary, applauds Bonnell's astute commentary of 1924 on this debate:

In view of the widespread appearance of the legend in medieval drama and iconography ((see J.K. Bonnell, *PMLA* 39 ((1924)), 140-

6)) it seems certain that it was in Shakespeare's mind as he wrote, because of the 'ass' in [3270]. Both Samson and ((it was thought)) Cain wielded an ass's jawbone; now an ass wields a human jawbone. (1985, CN 3269)

Further evidence about the Gravedigger's crudeness occurs in Hamlet's long passage of commentary on the bones of the Politician, Courtier, and court lady—the imagined dead—that ensues; the prince now informs us that “this ass now o'erreaches” the “pate of the politician (TLN 3268) and has also been so indelicate as to have “knocked about “my Lady Worm's chapless” skull with his “sexton's spade” TLN 3279-80) as well as to have played “at loggets” with her bones (TLN3282).

Almost on direct cue, the Gravedigger takes up his song a third time, echoing Hamlet's comment on his own wielding of implements:

O a pit of Clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet. (TLN 3284-88)

Having sized up the gravedigger and completed his grand speculations to Horatio about man's final end, the prince is clearly arrested by this rude/mad knave and has determined to speak to “this fellow” (TLN 3308). He asks him “Whose graue's | this {sirra} <Sir>? (TLN 3308-9). Whether with “Sir” or “sirra,” there is a simplicity and directness in Hamlet's discourse that further shows audiences his common touch and that he is rather drawn to this particular commoner, whose very rudeness, it would seem, appeals to him. (Compare Hamlet's abhorrent reaction to the courtly affectations of Osric). Furness (ed. 1877) points out that the characters' pronouns reinforce class distinctions (“Hamlet addresses the Clown in the second person singular, while the Clown replies in the second person plural” [CN 3313-14]); however, the subsequent dialogue will put them on even footing of verbal dexterity.

The Gravedigger answers Hamlet's all-important initial question (about whose grave it is) both riddlingly and pridefully: “Mine, sir.” Certainly this is so in that he is the maker, and therefore also the “host” of the corpse the pit is being dug for. But his response to Hamlet's questions is also obscurely bi-partite. The second part of the Clown's answer lies in the echoing refrain of the

gravedigger's own song, two lines of which he resumes (in the Q2 version): "O a pit of Clay for to be made| for such a guest is meet." As the gravedigger has already proven before the prince arrives on the scene, the "meet"-ness of this particular guest is quite problematic, certainly much more so than the other "guests" about whom Hamlet has speculated. The gravedigger's circumlocutions and equivocations here provoke, in turn, a witty stichomythia that starts with Hamlet's giving the Gravedigger the lie:

Ham. I thinke it be thine indeede, for thou lyeest in't.

Clown. You lie out ont, sir, and therefore {tis} <it is> not yours; |for my part I do not lie in't, <and> yet it is mine.

Ham. Thou doost lie in't to be in't & say {it is} <'tis> thine, | tis for the dead, not for the quicke, therefore thou | lyeest.

Clow. Tis a quicke lye sir, twill away againe from me | to you. (TLN 3313-20)

Spencer (ed., 1980) comments that "Hamlet uses the formula of insult among gentlemen" (CN3313), and Kittredge (ed. 1939) remarks on the advantage the Clown takes of this implied liberty. Despite the inequality implicit in their diverse pronouns, the "inevitable pun on lie is elaborated into a game of Repartee." Kittredge further stresses that the Sexton wins by punning on "quick," which Hamlet has used in the sense of "living." Concerning the Clown's "'twill away again from me to you," it becomes clear that the Clown "gives him the lie back again" and thus gets the better of the prince (CN3319-20).

Andrews (ed. 1989) sees in this exchange a linguistic instantiation of the "leveling" aspect of this repartee in the clown's quicksilver ripostes, and he emphasizes their sexual innuendo:

The Clown probably means a lie that spurts back and forth with the rapidity of quicksilver ((mercury)). In lines [3319-26], he and Hamlet have used *lie* to mean ((a))tell a lie, ((b))stand, and ((c)) lie down, thereby demonstrating that *lie* is not a word to lie still. Since *Quick Lie* was a term for the kind of woman with whom one could have a quick sexual encounter ((whence the name Mistress

Quickly, a pun on ‘Quick-lie,’ in [*1* and *2H4*], the Clown is probably implying that the word *Lie* is itself a wanton. (CN3319-20)

Nevertheless, this skirmishing is still prelude, for Hamlet’s first question “Who’s grave is this?” remains unanswered. As with the Other Clown, First forces his interlocutor “to’t againe” with questions about what man and then what woman he digs the grave for. When these questions yield nothing but flat negatives, Hamlet tries once more, and gets a devastating answer:

“One that was a woman sir, but rest her soule | shee’s dead.” (TLN 3326-7)

With a single direct shot, the clown outdoes the prince in his adumbration of human loss in death, for the clown’s distinction between the living and the dead strips dead humanity in general and Ophelia in particular of the very first distinction of human life—namely gender. “The last word [i.e., “dead”] can have an awful finality to it, still often draws a laugh” comments Rosenberg (840).

The dramatic ironies here involve both characters. The audience is aware of who the “she” is and her relationship to Hamlet, while Hamlet remains blithely unaware. And while the Gravedigger generally knows her class and (perhaps) her identity, he is unaware of her relationship to Hamlet as well as of the princely identity of his interlocutor.

Having lost this game of words, Hamlet falls back upon an exclamation about the gravedigger’s literal-mindedness—and upon a generalizing critique of the man as a commoner who treads too closely on the heels of a courtier. Rosenberg cites Guilgud’s annoyance at being sifted by this “impudent nobody” (840) which resulted in his feeling “obliged to test the Gravedigger” with the question “How long is that since?” (TLN3333).

First’s answer is astonishing: “Of <all> the dayes i’th yere I came too’t that day | that our last king Hamlet {ouercame}< o’recame> *Fortenbrasse*” (TLN 3334-5).

Hibbard comments on the thematic punch that the Gravedigger's everyday expressions deliver:

[W]hether the words spring from the poet's recalling his earlier tragedy or not, they lead into one of the most remarkable moments in the entire play, a powerful union of common experience and high art. The common experience is there in the common phrases: 'Of all the days i'th'year', 'It was the very day', and 'man and boy, thirty years'. . . .The first takes us back to the beginning of the Hamlet saga and to the opening scene. Also the mention of old Fortinbras reminds us of the existence of young Fortinbras with whom the play will end. The second suggests that the paths of the Grave-digger and the Prince have been converging ever since Hamlet was born, even, perhaps, that the next grave to be dug will be Hamlet's. And what of 'man and boy, thirty years'? Like the other two expressions, it authenticates matter of the first importance: the detailed knowledge of dead bodies, including Yorick's, which the Clown now displays, and thus provides the opening for a superb flash-back to Hamlet's boyhood. The poet's concern is not with arithmetic and Hamlet's age, but with much larger matters." (Hibbard, ed. 1987)

The Gravedigger's answer to Hamlet's questioning of his credentials has the same colloquial force as his previous answer—but it issues forth both a challenge to another "fool" and an astonishing fact:

Clow. Cannot you tell that? euey foole can tell that, | it was
{that} <the> very day that young *Hamlet* was borne: hee | that
{is} <was> mad and sent into England (TLN 3337-8)

First's lines give rise to a torrent of critical controversy concerning all the inconsistencies about Hamlet's age that necessarily arise here with this sudden new chronology, but Jenkins (ed. 1982, Longer Notes, 351-4) reminds us, commonsensically, that "The sexton's thirty years belong to his role, not to Hamlet's" (CN3338-9).

Hibbard's comment stresses the sexton's completely casual and jesting way of throwing out the remarkable information that Hamlet's day of birth was the same day that old Fortinbras engaged in single combat with Hamlet's father and was slain by the old king! Spencer (1980) sees "a curious symbolism in the gravedigger's having entered upon his occupation at the same time as Hamlet entered into being, as if preparation for death began from the day of birth" (CN3338). With this line, the Gravedigger has casually hit a double: Gertrude's "delivery" of the infant Hamlet and King Hamlet's "delivery" of the disputed territory via his overthrow of the Norwegian king in single combat.

The Gravedigger's is contemptuous in his tone, for this temporal fact is something, he insists, that every fool in the kingdom knows about (though it has never before been mentioned in the play)! And with these remarkable coincidences, the Gravedigger extends his double into a triple: this day, he tells us, was same day that he took up his own occupation as a "delver." His bringing together of these major facts of Danish history and kingship on the one hand and his professional/ personal history on the other creates a grand doppelganger of Prince and commoner.

Jenkins, making light of the critical quarrels that the Gravedigger's lines give rise to about the play's inconsistencies concerning Hamlet's age, puts the stress rightfully back on Shakespeare's aesthetic design, his successful linking of

the end with the beginning, so that the activity of the grave-digger, despite the lateness of his entry, is found to span the whole play and with it the whole career of Hamlet since he was born into a world of strife. Exactly how old the prince is may seem of less moment than this." (554)

In short, the Gravedigger's lines enfold the entire chronology of the main events in the play's prehistory into a climactic in-the-moment speech act—and in ways ever more profound, crown Shakespeare's dramatization of the Gravedigger as a shadowy double of his princely interlocutor.

As First has done with Second at the scene's opening, Hamlet now becomes the interrogator: This time he asks a question to which he well knows the

answer, though he wants to hear what the king has “given out” to explain his exile to the ear of rumor: i.e., why was he sent into *England*? (TLN 3340). Hamlet’s questioning produces another fabulous series of the gravedigger’s jokes on madness, especially on the trope of “mad as an Englishman” that was a commonplace in Elizabethan drama: Hamlet’s madness will “not be seene in him {there}, there the men are as |mad as he” (TLN 3344-5). How delightful joke for an English audience! The comical go-around of “How came he mad” and “even with losing his wits” takes us back to Hamlet’s comment on the gravedigger’s being so “absolute,” but also prepares us for another literal-minded jest when Hamlet asks “upon what ground” the prince has lost his wits and the gravedigger replies, “Why here in Denmark.” Fascinated, Hamlet continues his queries: “How long will a man lie i’th earth ere he rot? (TLN 3353). Jenkins (ed. 1982) sees this question as creating a “physical variation on the theme of how long a man is remembered after his death ((I.ii.87-108, 145-57; II.ii.124-33))” (CN 3353). But in his final exchanges with First, Hamlet’s questions broaden out to take in details of grave-digging and thus tread further upon the Gravedigger’s grounds. Indeed, the last part of the interchange with the Gravedigger becomes more and more “particular” and grounded in the reality of physical decay, though no less gravely jocular for that.

Miles’s (ed. 1870) comment on this exchange suggests not just the usual idea of the encounter as preparing Hamlet for the finale of the play but also a kind of “melting” of the Sexton in his exchanges with the prince:

Hamlet’s tilt with the sexton is not the least enjoyable of his encounters, or the easiest of his victories. In a trial of wit between prince and clown, as in a battle between a lion and a fly, insignificance is apt to have the best of it. But even at this disadvantage, Hamlet’s patient courtesy is eventually an overmatch for the sexton’s shrewd and superhumanly aggravating incivility. The caustic old curmudgeon absolutely grows genial beneath the calm unruffled smile of him that was mad and sent into England. [CN 3361-73]

The sexton’s assertion of his knowledge of his trade at this point “renumbers” his years at the job as 23, which for Fleay (1877) points conclusively to

Tarleton as the biographical model for the Yorick whom the Gravedigger is about to conjure:

For the original Yorick was undoubtedly Tarleton the jester to the Queen's Company of players. It was Tarleton that was a fellow of infinite mirth, that carried his fellow actor Burbadge on his back a hundred times that poured flagons of Rhenish on clowns heads for a joke, mad rogue as he was. Tarleton died in 1588. In 1599 he had been dead 11 1/2 years, in round numbers a dozen; in 1604 exactly sixteen, years. (CN 3962)

The Gravedigger has in any case established his 23-year credentials as one piece of a set of actions that have affected the whole kingdom. At this point he "plays his trump card—the sure audience-pleaser. He selects the particular skull that had lain in the earth three and twenty years" (Rosenberg 841) and asks: "Whose [skull] do you think it was?" When Hamlet confesses he has no idea, the Gravedigger remains casually jocular in his delivery of a shocking disclosure: his last lines in the play finally finish up his one-two punch with a reminiscence that brings Yorick alive again: "A pestilence on him for a madde rogue, a poured a | flagon of Renish on my head once; this same skull | sir, <this same Scull sir,> was {sir} Yoricks skull, the Kings jester" (TLN3367-9), to which Hamlet can manage only an astonished "This?" (TLN 3370). First's last jest has worked its effect. Rosenberg tells of Gielgud's rendering of Hamlet's monosyllabic question: "Gielgud's shock is caught and impaled on the word ["This?"]. He stares at the skull incredulously. Talk of death and decay is one thing: the presence of a friend in this disguise is another" (842).

First adds a final verification, "Een that" (3371). By implication yielding "his" skull up to the Prince for his extended meditation on the Yorick he knew, the Gravedigger now slips back into silence and obscurity. He has done his preparatory work of initiating Hamlet into the mysteries of the graveyard. In the second part of the scene, Hamlet is at last ready to find out the answer to his very first question to the Gravedigger—that it is Ophelia's grave at which the usurping King and the court mourners have arrived. But immediately after deducing the identity of the grave's occupant, Hamlet reveals his presence to these mourners at this grave site by proclaiming a new identity of kingship in

terms of the “ground” on which he stands: “It is I, Hamlet the Dane” (TLN 3452-3). First’s dialogue with the prince has initiated him into the land of the dead and simultaneously has taught Hamlet his rightful role in Denmark, as well as who he is as a man—however short the time left to him before he will himself come to the same earthly end that, alas, awaits us all.

1. Marvin Rosenberg discusses “actors and directors [who] have sometimes, to gild the playwright’s dramatic structure, given First particularly somewhat more than is set down for him” (881), but concludes that “The problem with any of these visual jests . . . is that they may ‘set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too. . . .’ This scene is about death, and the harsh reality of what mortality is reduced to in after life. The fresh grave is for the Ophelia we cherish—no mistaking the references to *she* and *gentlewoman*. . . .” (882).

2. There may also be an earlier imitation scene. Tourneur (1611, but possibly even earlier) tells of J. N. Hetherington’s opinion that the churchyard scene of *The Atheist’s Tragedy* “is suggestive of the churchyard scene in *Hamlet*, and the speech of Charlemont . . . seems an echo of Hamlet’s meditations” (CN3189). However, Bernice W. Kliman’s editorial note demurs, stating that “the passage in question “seems a commonplace of medieval thought rather than a reference to *Hamlet*.”

3. See “The Graveyard Scene (5.1): Nineteenth-Century Book Illustrators” in “Essays on *Hamlet*.”

4. Such a stage tradition might be part of another motif of the clown-prince doubling, for Hamlet, too is stripped, “set naked” (TLN 3055) on Denmark’s ground, once again.

5. But he also sweetly apologizes on Shakespeare’s behalf for this scene, reminding “Candid foreigners . . . that, when this man wrote, the English stage was in its infancy; that plays written according to time, place, and action, were then almost unknown; and writers, who had the skill to combine the unities, had little else to recommend them to their audiences (qtd. in Willems 131).

6. Tiffany Stern, arguing that the 16th Century text of *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* was likely a traveling puppet show, also argues that a puppet holding what appears to be someone’s head or scull was actually a puppet Hamlet holding the puppet head of Yorick, which, if it could be validated, would be the first “image” of Hamlet and Yorick. “If I could see the Puppets

Dallying": *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and Hamlet's Encounters with the Puppets." *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Volume 31, Number 3, Fall 2013 pp. 337-352 | 10.1353/shb.2013.0051.

7. John Russell Brown, *Shakescenes: Shakespeare for Two*. New York: Applause Theatre Book Co., 1992, p. 261.

8. Along this line, Jenkins' longer CN takes in various shades of meaning in "wilfully seeks her own salvation." He focuses on the problematic "wilfully" and then reminds us to think about 4.7. 171-82 (TLN3190-91), which makes clear that her death was

due to accident and the mad mind's helplessness in it. If the dramatist nevertheless allows scope for different opinions in Elsinore, that is a sign not of inconsistency ((as maintained in SQ, xv, 345-8)) but art. Cf. [4.7.165-82] LN [Longer Notes]. The rustics believe she committed suicide, but the coroner finds otherwise ((l. 4)), while still leaving room for doubt [3416]. In BB [*Der bestrafte Brudermord*] Ophelia does commit suicide—by throwing herself from a cliff. (CN3190-91)

9. The clown's arithmetic reminds me of the old mathematicians' joke: There are three kinds of mathematicians: those who can count and those who can't count! For an adumbration of faulty math performed by other clown figures, see also Stephen Booth's afterword to *Who Hears in Shakespeare?* (Magnus and Cannon, eds.) entitled "Who Doesn't Listen in Shakespeare?" the answer being "the audience," who often overlook mathematical inconsistencies and therefore don't always get the clown's jokes.

10. According to Plowden's Reports. See CN 3211 of Plowden (1650), who cites the case of "Dame Hales against Petit" (pp. 153-159/fol.258-63).

11. One easy and likely possibility is that the name referred to a tavern or tavern keeper near the Globe. See the commentary notes (TLN3249-50) on Yaughan.

12. A further situational irony accrues in Hamlet's comment to Horatio's observation that the gravedigger takes death in stride, while he and Horatio are taken aback: "the hand of little imploiment hath | the {dintier} <daintier> sence" (TLN 3260-61). Despite the way the scene builds up our further understanding of the prince as having the common touch, it is because Hamlet's is the "daintier sense" that the blow of recognition being built up to here will land with an even more forceful punch.

COMMENTARY NOTES:

- 1710 **GILDON** (1710, p. 404): “The Discourse betwixt Hamlet and the Grave Maker is full of moral Reflections and worthy minding, tho’ that Discourse it self has nothing to do there, where it is, nor of any use to the Design, and may be as well left out; and what ever can be left out has no Business in a Play, but this being low Comedy has still less to do here” (CN3256-3404).
- 1726 **THEOBALD** (1726, p. 124): “Very notably made out! If an Act has *Three* Branches, as the honest Clown here defines it to have, it would puzzle a good Arithmeticism to find them out from this Reading” (CN3200-02).
- 1730 **THEOBALD** (26 Mar. 1730, [fol. 122r] [Nichols 2:576-7]): “I have found that the stanzas sung by the Grave-digger are not of Shakespeare’s composition, but owe their original to the old Earl of Surrey’s Poems. Many others of his occasional little Songs I doubt not but he purposely copied from his contemporary Writers, either as they happened to be ridiculous to those times, or as he had a mind to do them honour” (CN3252-55).
- 1747 **WARBURTON** (ed. 1747): “Ridicule on scholastic divisions without distinction; and of distinctions without difference” (CN3200).
- 1773 **JENNENS** (ed. 1773): “. . . Dr. JOHNSON thinks that burying east and west is *Christian burial*, north and south not *Christian burial*: But who ever heard of this distinction? To be buried in a Christian manner is to be buried in consecrated ground and with the rites of the church. So Dr. JOHNSON may take my word that *Shakespeare* meant; She is to be buried in consecrated ground, therefore make her grave *straight*, i.e. forthwith, immediately” (CN3102).
- 1773 **JENNENS** (ed. 1773): “All but the qu’s [Qq] omit these *a*’s; which are no part of the song, but only the breath forced out by the strokes of the mattock” (CN3255).

1774-79? CAPELL: “Just so many years had king James been in England, bringing with him a Danish queen, when the quarto that is our guide in this play made it’s appearance; the aspect of the court was much different from that it wore in the days of Elizabeth, as is noted by all historians, and, it is likely, was not so polish’d: by combining these circumstances together, the editor is led to imagine,— that the play, in its new dress, and that the observation in this place has allusion to that time’s manners” (CN3330).

1784 DAVIES (1784, pp. 131-3): “The moral and pathetic reflections, on the skull of Yorick, are, in my opinion, a compensation for all the oddities, or, if the critics please, the absurdities, of this extraordinary scene. . . . It is very probable, that the Yorick here described was one of the court-fools hired to divert the leisure-hours of Queen Elizabeth. And it is most likely that our author celebrates the famous Clod, who died some time before the accession of K. James. Clod was a clown of uncommon wit and ready observation. Fuller records a jest of his, which, it was said, proved fatal to Dean Perne, who, in the space of twelve years, had changed his religion four times. Queen Elizabeth, in company with Archbishop Whitgift, Dean Perne, and her jester, Clod, was desirous to go abroad on a wet day. Clod used the following argument to prevent her majesty from going out: ‘Heaven,’ says he, ‘madam, dissuades you, for it is cold and wet; and earth dissuades you, for it is moist and dirty. Heaven dissuades you, too, by this heavenly man, Archbishop Whitgift; and earth dissuades you,—your fool, Clod, such a lump of clay as myself. And, if neither will prevail with you, *here is one that is neither heaven nor earth, but hangs between both*,—Dr. Perne; and he also dissuades you.’” (CN3367-9).

1793 STEEVENS (ed. 1793): “Dr. PERCY is of opinion that the different corruptions in these stanzas [i.e., of the gravedigger’s song], might have been ‘designed by the poet himself, the better to paint the character of an illiterate clown’” (CN3252-55).

1808 **SCHLEGEL** (1808, rpt. 1811, tr. 1846, p. 349-50): “The distinction of ranks was as yet strongly marked: a state of things ardently to be desired by the dramatic poet. In conversation they took pleasure in quick and unexpected answers; and the witty sally passed rapidly like a ball from mouth to mouth, till the merry game could no longer be kept up. This, and the abuse of the play on words, (of which King James was himself very fond, and we need not therefore wonder at the universality of the mode,) may, doubtless, be considered as instances of a bad taste; but to take them [. . . as] symptoms of rudeness and barbarity, is not less absurd than to infer the poverty of a people from their luxurious extravagance. These strained repartees are frequently employed by Shakespeare, with the view of painting the actual tone of the society in his day; it does not, however, follow, that they [. . .] with his approbation; on the contrary, it clearly appears that he held them in derision. Hamlet says, in the scene with the Gravedigger, ‘By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken note of it: the age is grown so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe.’”

1819 **COLERIDGE** (ms. notes 1819 in AYS COUGH, ed. 1807; rpt. COLERIDGE, 1998, 12.4:859 “Sh. seems to mean all Hamlet’s character to be brought together before his final disappearance from the scene—his med. excess in the grave-digging—his yielding to passion—his Love for Ophelia blazing out—his tendency to generalize on all occasions in the dialogue with Horatio—his fine gentlemanly manners with Osrick . . . (CN3256).

1843 **COLLIER** (ed. 1843): “The Oh and the Ah in this line are, of course, only the interjections of the Clown, in the double exertion of singing and digging” (CN3254).

1855 **HUNTER** “In the cause Taylor and Lambert, Court of King’s Bench 3 May 1825, the lord Chief Abbott is reported to have said referring to the case of Sir James Hales in Plowden’s *Reports* ‘This case certainly furnished a very celebrated poet with material for one of his most entertaining scenes. It was quite impossible not to suppose that Shakspeare was poised at the argument,

and drew from it the reflection of his grave-digger on the death of Ophelia. (CN33191)

1868 **CLARKE & CLARKE** (ed. 1868): “If proof were wanted of the exquisite propriety and force of effect with which Shakespeare uses words, and words of even homely fashion, there could hardly be a more pointed instance cited than the mode in which he employs the verb ‘jowls’ here. What strength it gives to the impression of the head and cheek-bone smiting against the earth; and how it makes the imagination feel the bruise in sympathy! The poet himself so evidently put his whole intense sensitiveness into the passage as he wrote it, that he soon afterwards makes his hero exclaim, ‘Mine ache to think on’t’” (CN3268).

1870 **MILES** (1870, 73): “Hamlet’s tilt with the sexton is not the least enjoyable of his encounters, or the easiest of his victories. In a trial of wit between prince and clown, as in a battle between a lion and a fly, insignificance is apt to have the best of it. But even at this disadvantage, Hamlet’s patient courtesy is eventually an overmatch for the sexton’s shrewd and superhumanly aggravating incivility. The caustic old curmudgeon absolutely grows genial beneath the calm unruffled smile of him that was mad and sent into England [cites 3361-73]. “And at the first full cadence of that divine voice, the sexton is mute forever!” (CN3361-73)

1872 **CLARK & WRIGHT** (ed. 1872): “It is scarcely necessary to remark that the clowns here use words [i.e., “salvation”] conveying the opposite meaning to that intended, as Launcelot, Mrs. Quickly, Dogberry and Verges, &c., do” (CN3191).

1875 **Marshall**: “When Hamlet enters with Horatio we find him more than ever disposed to avail himself of any temporary distraction which may offer itself. . . . All the time that he is moralising on the skulls which the unfeeling grave-digger ‘jowls on the ground;’ while politician, courtier, lawyer, fine lady, jester, all in turn are the subjects of his cynical sermons; while he bandies jests with the rude but ready sexton; not for one moment is he able

to escape from the cloud that hangs over him: he may smile at the pragmatism of the ‘absolute knave’ who answers his questions with so little respect, but the heavy weight at his heart grows none the lighter. There is something infinitely more tragic in these vain attempts to escape, though by means of the most trivial distractions, from the oppressive shadow of the rapidly approaching catastrophe, than in all the grand sonorous groanings of heroic tragedy.

“There are one or two points worth remarking in this scene: one is that the grave-digger, although he had been so long employed near Elsinore, evidently does not recognise Hamlet; we may conclude that his cloak would partially conceal him, and that as he would probably be in the same dress as that which he wore when taken by the pirates, his appearance would not show many signs of his princely rank. Another point is that from the words which this ‘clown’ uses in speaking of Hamlet—‘He that is mad and sent into England—’ it would seem that the common people knew nothing more of the reason why he had been sent out of Denmark but that it was on account of his madness.

Another point, which I should have thought would have attracted the attention, at least of the more modern commentators, is that we have here the same joke about the madness of all Englishmen, which has so long been a cardinal point of most foreigners’ creeds with regard to us, and which the eccentricity of some of our fellow-countrymen, when travelling, has helped to confirm. It would be curious to know whether the same opinion of us prevailed generally in Shakespeare’s time, and what was the origin of it” (CN3245). 1877: COLERIDGE (*apud* **Furness**, ed. 1877): “O, the rich contrast between the Clowns and Ham. as two extremes! You see in the former the mockery of logic, and a traditional wit valued, like truth, for its antiquity, and treasured up, like a tune, for use” (CN 3309-9).

1877: **LOWELL** (*apud* **Furness**, ed. 1877): “This Grave-diggers’ scene always impresses me as one of the most pathetic in the whole tragedy. That Sh. introduced such scenes and such characters with deliberate intention, and with a view to artistic relief and contrast, there can hardly be a doubt. We must take it for granted that a man whose works show everywhere the results of judgement sometimes aced with forethought. I find the springs of the profoundest sorrow and pity in this hardened indifference of the Grave-diggers, in their careless discussion as to whether Ophelia’s death was by suicide or no, in their singing and jesting at their dreary work. *We* know who is to be the guest of this earthen hospitality,—how much beauty, love, and heart-break are to be covered in that pit of clay. All we remember of Oph. reacts upon us with tenfold force, and we recoil from our amusement at the ghastly drolery of the two delvers with a shock of horror. That the unconscious Ham. should stumble on *this* grave of all others, that it should be *here* that he should pause to muse humourously on death and decay,—all this prepares us for the revulsion of passion in the next scene, and for the frantic confession: ‘I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers Could not with all *their* quantity of love Make up my sum!’ And it is only here that such an asseveration would be true even to the feeling of the moment; for it is plain from all we know of Ham. that he could not so have loved Oph., that he was incapable of the self-abandonment of a true passion, that he would have analyzed this emotion as he does all others, would have peeped and botanized upon it till it became to him a mere matter of scientific interest. All this force of contrast, and this horror of surprise, were necessary so to intensify his remorseful regret that he should believe himself for once in earnest. The speech of the King, ‘Oh, he is mad, Lartes,’ recalls him to himself, and he at once begins to rave” (CN3284ff.).

1877 **Furness** (ed. 1877): “TSCHISCHWITZ says that this threefold tautological form belongs to the most ancient Germanic legal usage, and cites Grimm as an authority that it is also true of the Old French. A parallel to the present passage is to be found in Grimm: ‘egeris, feceris, gesserisve’” (CN3303).

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- 1877 **Furness** (ed. 1877): “Note that throughout this dialogue Ham. addresses the Clown in the second person singular, while the Clown replies in the second person plural” (CN3313-14).
- 1877 **Furness** (ed. 1877): Ham. says, ‘whose scull was this?’ It is by no means certain that the former skull is here referred to; the Clown may have just turned up another. It does not follow, therefore, of necessity that it was Yorick’s skull that had lain in the ground a dozen years, and Q1 fails us here at the most important point (CN3351-2).
- 1877 **Fleay** (ed. 1877): “But in the 1599 version we read ‘here’s a scull hath been here this dozen year’ another confirmation of my reading. For the original Yorick was undoubtedly Tarleton the hesty to the Queen’s Company of players. It was Tarleton that was a fellow of infinite mirth, that carried his fellow actor Burbadge on his back a hundred times that poured flagons of Rhenish on clowns heds for a joke, mad rogue as he was. Tarleton died in 1588. In 1599 he has been dead 11^{1/2} years, in round numbers a dozen; in 1604 exactly sixteen, years. All the allusions agree (if my reading be adopted) with the present texts; the Editions of 1603 and 1604 are otherwise irreconcilably at variance (CN3351-2, 3362).
- 1882 **ELZE** (ed. 1882): “These three-fold tautological forms of speech which originally belong to legal usage and abound in the legal instruments of Shakespeare’s day, frequently occur also in The Hystorie of Hamblet and seem to justify the inference, that this translation from Belleforest was done by some clerk or scrivener” (CN3300-02).
- 1882 **ELZE** (ed. 1882): “Compare Greene’s Tu Quoque (Dodsley, ed. Hazlitt, XI, 266): ‘*they say, they that are mad lose their wits.* May not this and similar jests have belonged to the common stock of club-jokes?” (CN3349)
- 1888 **Bryant** (ed. 1888): "The characters of the grave-diggers, and especially the First Grave-digger, are excellently adapted to flow comedians of the better type. Macklin, Buckstone, and Placide are some of the great names

associated in the past with the part of the First Grave-Digger" [Bernice W Kliman adds that Bryant "also mentions the recent performances by Joseph Jefferson and William J. Florence as the 2 GDs."] (CN3190).

1899 **DOWDEN** (ed. 1899): "Shakespeare seems to have read or heard of Plowden's report of Hales v. Petit. Sir James Hales had drowned himself; the coroner's jury returned a verdict of *felo de se*. Dame Hales's counsel argues that the act of suicide cannot be completed in a man's lifetime. Walsh, Serjeant, *contra* replied that 'the act consists of three parts'—the imagination, the resolution, and the execution (CN3200).

1917 **DOWDEN**: The sexton still holding out, resorts to his own peculiar method of reasoning, whereby, as commentators commonly suppose, the Poet intended to parody an inquest held in his day on a certain Sir James Hales. His suicide in a fit of insanity was an admitted fact; but at the inquest arose much quibbling as to the activity or passivity of Sir James in his own death. . . . grave is to be made "straight"The words are clear to every Catholic Ophelia's grave in the church-yard was "to be made straight" that is from east to west, or parallel with the church itself (CN3211).

1917 **BLACKMORE**: According to a universal custom dating back to the earliest days of Christianity, Catholics are wont whenever it is possible, to erect their churches facing the Orient, or the Holy Land in honor of the Savior, the Blessed Founder of their religion. In modern Catholic cemeteries, where there is no sacred temple, the Church erects in its stead a great cross which also faces the Orient, and round about it she consigns to their long sleep her faithful children, all turned towards the East, whence in their Christian hope of a glorious resurrection, they await the second coming of the Savior, their God and King. (See Simon Augustine Blackmore. *The Riddles of Hamlet*. Boston: Stratford & company, 1917. Shakespeare Online. 2 Aug. 2011.<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/opheliaburial.html>.)

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- 1934 **WILSON** (ed. 1934): “Ham. implies that it is now the ass’s turn to ‘o’er-reach’ Cain, v. next note [3271].” CN32601936 **KITTREDGE** (ed. 1936): “The Clown knows that self-defence is a justification for homicide, and he ludicrously infers that it may justify suicide also” (CN3191).
- 1934 **WILSON** (1934, 2:257): “Once again, the stage-memory of Scribe C and his habit of repeating himself will explain everything . . . the player can never have enough of a good thing. Accordingly eight lines further on F1 repeats the repetition; and we may justifiably suspect that the actor who placed the Clown spoke more than was set down for him, and that Scribe C remembered his addition” (CN3361-62, 3368-69).
- 1939 **KITTREDGE** (ed. 1939): “The antecedent is *Cain’s*: ‘the jawbone of Cain, who,’ etc. Skeat, however, thinks that *jawbone* is the antecedent and reports an old tradition that Cain’s weapon was the jawbone of an ass” (6 *Notes and Queries*, II [1880], 143; *Academy*, October 26, 1895, p. 343), (CN3269).
- 1947 **RYLANDS**: “It is dramatic irony that Hamlet reproaches the sexton for indifference when he is himself unaware that this grave is the grave of the girl whose heart his own indifference broke” (CN3256-7).
- 1951 **CRAIG** (ed. 1951): “Nicholson regarded the reference [to Yorick] as a compliment to Kemp’s great predecessor, the clown Will Tarlton” (CN3369).
- 1980 **SPENCER** (ed. 1980): “Hamlet jestingly uses the formula of insult among gentlemen” (CN3313).
- 1982 **JENKINS** (ed. 1982, Longer Notes, 550-1): “This passage on the *skull* and the indignities suffered by the dead is especially reminiscent of one in a popular book of meditation by Luis de Granada, comparison with which shows Shakespeare characteristically elaborating and revitalizing a traditional reflection. See *Of Prayer and Meditation*, trans. Hopkins, 1582, fols. 202-4: ‘Then do they make a hole in the earth of seven or eight foot long . . . Then

the grave maker taketh the spade, and pickaxe into his hand, and beginneth to tumble down bones upon bones [[cf. 90-1]] [3282-3], and to tread down the earth very hard upon him. Insomuch that . . . the rude grave maker . . . will not stick to lay him on the face, and rap him on the skull [[cf. 88, 99-100]] [3279-80, 3291-3] . . . And the fine dappered gentleman [[cf. 81-2]] [3273-4] who whiles he lived might in no wise abide the wind to blow upon him . . ., here they lay and hurl upon him a dunghill of filthiness and dirt [[cf. 105-6]] [3297-8]. And that sweet minion gentleman also that was wont forsooth to go perfumed with amber . . . must be contented here to lie covered all over with earth, and foul crawling worms, and maggots [[cf. 87, 191-4.]] [3278, 3385-8]” (CN326).

- 1982 JENKINS (ed. 1982, Longer Notes, 548-9): “The *verses sung by the grave-digger* continue motifs from Ophelia’s songs in IV.v. Apt to the singer’s occupation and, with their variation on the theme of the death of love, to the grave he is now digging, they have also a poignant irony in that sentiments appropriate to age are here offered to the grave of youth. [cites Vaux’s *Tottel’s Miscellany*; Percy’s *Reliques*, cites stanzas as found in v1877]. Some of the grave-digger’s corruptions show a memory anticipating later passages of the poem. The opening words *In youth* are brought forward from the second line, where the resultant gap is supplied from the fourth. In the third line, *To contract the time* appears to be a garbling of a phrase from the third line of Vaux’s second stanza, ‘And tract of time begins to weave’. . . . The third line of the grave-digger’s second stanza [see 3265], *And hath shipp’d me intil the land*(with the failure to rhyme remarked on by Dr. JOHNSON [see n. 3263-6]), is imported from Vaux’s thirteenth stanza, which reads: ‘13. For beauty with her bande These croked cares hath wrought: And shipped me into the lande, From whence I first was brought.’ These and other perversions of the original may, but of course need not, have been designed by Shakespeare in fitting the song to the dramatic occasion and singer. A *pit* [3287] instead of a *house* of clay suggests the mind of the grave-digger, as Noble points out; but his idea that the repetition in the first line of the stanza is occasioned by faltering memory (rather than musical exigencies) obviously will not stand” (CN3252-55).

1982 JENKINS (ed. 1982): “Christian funeral rites were denied to suicides ((see below, [3416]n)), who were buried out of consecrated ground ((cf. [3418])), usually at a cross-roads under a pile of stones [3420] and with a stake through the body, a practice which continued into the 19th century” (CN3190).

1982 JENKINS (ed. 1982): “But see [4.7.171-82], which makes clear that her death was due to accident and the mad mind’s helplessness in it. If the dramatist nevertheless allows scope for different opinions in Elsinore, that is a sign not of inconsistency ((as maintained in *SQ*, xv, 345-8)) but art. Cf. [4.7.165-82] LN [Longer Notes]. The rustics believe she committed suicide, but the coroner finds otherwise ((l. 4)), while still leaving room for doubt [3416]. In *BB* [*Der bestrafte Brudermord*] Ophelia does commit suicide—by throwing herself from a cliff” (CN 3190).

1982 JENKINS (ed. 1982): “[T]he reporter (of the anecdote about Yorick) had a poor memory for numbers, as indeed other instances in this same scene confirm (([3330], three years, Q1 seven years; [3374], a thousand times, Q1 twenty times; [3376] I know not how oft, Q1 a hundred times; [3466], forty thousand brothers, Q1 twenty brothers)). [Jenkins mentions many earlier instances of comic paired characters], “low comics who appear with like companions when their play moves towards its close, and they give hint of a dramatic tradition to which the Clown in *Hamlet* adheres. The sexton’s thirty years belong to his role, not to Hamlet’s. . . . The time the grave-digger has been at work and Yorick’s skull in the earth relates to Hamlet only in so far as their roles impinge on his—as of course they significantly do . . . The grave-digger’s numbers are less important for themselves than for the pattern of a life which they evoke. What matters is that when Hamlet came into the world a man began to dig graves and has now been at it for a lifetime. For let no one rise up and assure us that to have been a grave-digger ‘man and boy, thirty years’ one need not be much more than forty. As Hamlet’s talk with the grave-digger thus links the grave-digger’s occupation with the term of Hamlet’s life, will it not seem to us that the hero has come face to face with his own destiny? . . . [Shakespeare’s intent was] to link the end with the

beginning, so that the activity of the grave-digger, despite the lateness of his entry, is found to span the whole play and with it the whole career of Hamlet since he was born into a world of strife” (pp. 553-4, CN 3338-9).

1985 **Kliman** [comment on Edwards’ CN]: “In view of the widespread appearance of the legend in medieval drama and iconography ((see J.K. Bonnell, PMLA 39 ((1924)), 140-6)) it seems certain that it was in Shakespeare’s mind as he wrote, because of the ‘ass’ in [3270]. Both Samson and ((it was thought)) Cain wielded an ass’s jawbone; now an ass wields a human jawbone” (CN 3269).

1987 **HIBBARD**: ”The Gravediggers’ Scene has been called ‘the most extraordinary scene in this extraordinary play’” (CN3189, Hibbard, 1987).

1987 **HIBBARD** (ed. 1987): “The resemblance may be significant; for whether the words spring from the poet’s recalling his earlier tragedy or not, they lead into one of the most remarkable moments in the entire play, a powerful union of common experience and high art. The common experience is there in the common phrases: ‘Of all the days i’th’year’, ‘It was the very day’, and ‘man and boy, thirty years’. It is thus that we all remember things that happened in the past. But what do these expressions authenticate. The first takes us back to the beginning of the Hamlet saga and to the opening scene. Also the mention of old Fortinbras reminds us of the existence of young Fortinbras with whom the play will end. The second suggests that the paths of the Grave-digger and the Prince have been converging ever since Hamlet was born, even, perhaps, that the next grave to be dug will be Hamlet’s. And what of ‘man and boy, thirty years’? Like the other two expressions, it authenticates matter of the first importance: the detailed knowledge of dead bodies, including Yorick’s, which the Clown now displays, and thus provides the opening for a superb flash-back to Hamlet’s boyhood. The poet’s concern is not with arithmetic and Hamlet’s age, but with much larger matters” (CN3335).

1988 **BEVINGTON** (ed. 1988): “perhaps a suggestion that Ophelia was taking her own shortcut to heaven” (CN3191).

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- 1989 **ANDREWS** (ed. 1989): “The Clown probably means a lie that spurts back and forth with the rapidity of quicksilver ((mercury)). In lines [3319-26], he and Hamlet have used *lie* to mean ((a))tell a lie, ((b))stand, and ((c)) lie down, thereby demonstrating that *lie* is not a word to lie still. Since *Quick Lie* was a term for the kind of woman with whom one could have a quick sexual encounter ((whence the name Mistress Quickly, a pun on ‘Quick-lie,’ in [1 and 2H4], the Clown is probably implying that the word *Lie* is itself a wanton.” (CN 3319).
- 1992 **MOWAT & WERSTINE** (ed. 1992): “i.e. a stupid donkey does not move more quickly because it is beaten” (CN 3246-7).
- 1993 **ANDREWS** (ed. 1993): “release. If the clown is a genuine bumpkin, he probably means to say ‘damnation.’ At issue is whether Ophelia committed suicide; if it had been determined that she did, she would be regarded as one who was guilty of mortal sin ((as Hamlet notes in I.ii.131-32 and III.i.53-86)) and would thus not be entitled to Christian burial rites” (CN3190-91).