

## **The Comedy of Death in *Hamlet*: Everyone Dies in the End**

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In my reading of *Hamlet*, there are two key moments which take death out of its strict placement within the plot, and into a place of universal deliberation where it is treated as an *idea*, a component of the human condition. I'm speaking of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy and his encounter with the gravediggers. In experiencing *Hamlet* as a play deemed 'tragic,' these philosophic and existential musings of death seem to embolden the distressing morbidity of *Hamlet's* concluding scene. However, it is possible to interpret these and other moments as disarming the 'tragedy' of *Hamlet* and transforming death into an object of absurdity, comedy, and perhaps, to be extreme, ridicule.

To begin, I'd like, for the time being, to liberate *Hamlet* from its historical and literary context, as well as disregard its author's intentions. Though I may defend this somewhat postmodern move by citing my ignorance of the rich historical situation of *Hamlet's* audience and the author's body of work as well as argue such knowledge would be more or less speculative, I'd rather justify my approach as follows: the experience of *Hamlet* changes with the times. It is an object molded by its viewer/reader, and its meaning and effect do not, in this essay, exist independently of the psychology of a contemporary audience. With the permission of my reader, I'd like to pursue my interpretation of death in *Hamlet* within such a

frame.

Before diving into the aforementioned 'philosophical' encounters with death, I would like to introduce two straightforward, actual moments of death in *Hamlet* which may serve to prime the interpretation of the philosophical expositions. The first appearance of death in *Hamlet* is the ghost of King Hamlet. Though this moment is likely designed to be frightening, there are some additional possible impressions to note. For one, death has not eliminated its victim. The King, or his spirit, retains his/its ability to act within the world of the living. In a way, death here is not so severe, as even if the King assumes a ghostly form *solely* because the circumstances of his death require a settlement of sorts, *it is still generous* to be given this opportunity for resolution. Additionally, the particular act of this dead man is to incite *more* death, as it is the spirit's demand for revenge (I.v, l. 25) that spurs Hamlet's plot and the ensuing violence. In this way, the question Hamlet asks the ghost, "Be thy intents wicked or charitable [?]" (I.iv, l. 42) has almost a comedic foreshadowing: by spurring the death of many in asking for the death of one (the death of Claudius, that is), the ghost's demand for death is both wicked, and charitably executed.

Among those 'charitably' included in death's reign is Polonius, the first to go. It probably does not take much to argue that Polonius' incidental death is not treated very heavily. For one, he is an unlikeable character, regarded by Hamlet as an overly talkative, "baby... not yet out of his swaddling clouts" (II.ii, l. 353), and likely regarded by the audience as a snoop and a plotter. He dies in a comedic fashion, accidentally stabbed while eavesdropping behind a curtain, and mocked by Hamlet afterwards. There is no effort to evoke sympathy from the audience on account of his death; the only semblances of such an effort are delivered by

antagonists, save the grief of Ophelia, in which case the audience likely only sympathizes with her rather than Polonius. And with no explicit textual indication that one *ought* to experience sympathy for Polonius, where else is the incentive to feel for his death? – as with the other antagonists, the deepest textually supportable psychological and emotional encounter with his death lies in the contemplative, philosophic expositions of death as delivered by the protagonist, Hamlet. But do they really only lead to a place where death is tragedy?

In the famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy (III.i, ll. 56-89), Hamlet contemplates death in the abstract, as a general thing affecting humanity at large. Hamlet asks whether it is right to pursue death rather than live a life of pain, or, in his words, “Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them” (III.i, ll. 57-60). Hamlet does not ever tell us whether or not suicide is permitted, and instead arrives at why it is we do not choose death. He laments, “The undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will, / and makes us rather bear those ills we have” (III.i, ll. 78-81), or, simply put, we do not try death because it is permanent and unknown. Here, in admitting the mystery of death, one may leverage that Hamlet resigns his ability to argue that death is necessarily tragic for the individual who suffers it – if we do not know it, how may we say anything of it? Also, and more interestingly, it is *life* rather than death that is the essential tragic component in this soliloquy. Life, Hamlet knows for sure, is suffering. The possibility of death is portrayed as an enforcer of the tragic life, threatening the living with the unknown, should they be enticed to escape. In this sense, death may indeed liberate those with enough gumption to try it. But how does one

choose such a thing?

Here, in addition to the tragedy of *life*, it is the *choice of death* that is the frightening, unresolvable subject of Hamlet's words, not simply death itself. This distinction provides an interesting lens with which to view the death of the characters mentioned earlier. If *intending* to die is the difficult thing, death by the hand of others may be said to liberate one from tragedies of life *and* the choice of death. This is arguably an ideal solution to the tragic tension of the "to be or not to be" soliloquy, and a solution the action of the play champions. Of all the deaths, only Ophelia is not murdered, but it may be argued that her sudden, overwhelming grief was in a way her 'murderer,' similarly taking from her the burden of lucidly choosing death.

So far I have shown that the tragedy of death can at least be disarmed by Hamlet's musings. But it is possible *Hamlet* goes further and uses death as a pleasurable resolution, and perhaps even as an object of comedy. This is, of course, most directly approached by the clown gravediggers in the beginning of Act V. When experiencing this scene in Hamlet's shoes, it is quite moving. Hamlet witnesses a chummy gravedigger indifferently tossing away skulls he's dug up. Hamlet responds, in crisis, "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone..." (V.i, ll. 66-67). Here Hamlet encounters firsthand the universality of death. He goes on to imagine the character of the skull's former owner, disgusted and confused by the possibility that a respectable human ends up "full of fine dirt" (V.i, l. 93).

But if the reader/viewer is not moved to (solely) inhabit Hamlet's character in this scene, a different perspective pervades. To take a cue from Hamlet's crisis, it is not the fact

that people die that is confounding here, it is that the dead's remains are handled so indifferently by the gravedigger. Or, to extrapolate the metaphor: the thing which ultimately handles the stuff of death does so without consideration of its victims and witnesses, without the ritual and respect they expect in compensation for the inevitable loss. This is tragic. I do not aim to argue otherwise. But what is to be made of its delivery in *Hamlet*? Well, for one, the gravedigger is a clown, singing playfully as he fulfills his office. Hamlet confronts this behavior for us, asking Horatio, "Has this fellow no feeling of his business, that 'a sings in grave-making?" To which Horatio responds, on behalf of a sad truth, "Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness" (V.i, ll. 57-59). As a symbol of death, it is indeed a heavy statement: that death continues on to such a degree that it just happens without difficulty or meaning. But in terms of the characters in a society, a taboo is being transgressed by the clown, that of disrespecting death. Aside from the gravedigger being a clown, a fairly direct insinuation of comedy, one may leverage that comedy often relies on the breaking of taboos, and thereby further assume the presence of comedy via form. In transgressing a taboo, one asks, "why is this forbidden?" Hamlet cannot answer. How silly, then, to have a rule, the foundation of which is so difficult to identify. More comedically, how absurd that in the business of handling death, the very rule which aims to preserve its respect is represented as inevitably deteriorating, as the gravedigger's "custom" gives this transgression "a property of easiness." It is if the closer one is to the stuff of death, the more indifferently one behaves in its presence. I will further explore this possibility in my analysis of the rapid-fire deaths in the final scene.

Ophelia's burial further develops the questions of respect and death as raised by the

clown. When Laertes and the doctor argue over how Ophelia ought to be buried, the foundations of their rituals are front and center for the critical eye to interrogate (V.i, ll. 195-213). What does it mean that one of the antagonists chooses to bury Ophelia in a way which transgresses their traditions? What does it mean that the viewer/reader also likely wants Ophelia to have a proper burial despite the traditions? If exceptions to the rules are so readily made, and their strict enforcement is so antithetical to the reader/viewer's emotions, is the foundation of the ritual truly applicable to the reality of death and its circumstances? But, what does it matter! If one were to see the clown in the background, whistling merrily and juggling skulls, the whole question of ritual would be annihilated. The moment of burial is a pinpoint compared to the eternity of death, which asserts itself as a fact; the victim in the hands of the handler of death, unaffected by ritual. Or so says the clown.

In terms of my analysis so far, the ending of the play begins to resemble less a tragic, emotional crescendo, and more a satisfyingly swift, amoral orchestration of death by circumstance. In terms of the "to be or not to be" universe, each character is liberated from the pain of life and the choice of death via a seemingly impossibly efficient act of mutual destruction. In fact, the overall sensation feels very suicidal – all the remaining main characters, each complicit in their own ways, *die together because of each other*, in a thrilling, hurried succession, as if the play suddenly turned on itself in favor of self-destruction. One may easily re-imagine this sequence as such: each character's life thrown around indifferently and briskly by the hand of the clown. *This* is the resolution; that everyone dies in the end. And it is delivered in such an ornamental fashion as to invite from the audience a certain taking-of-pleasure in this sight. It is possible the lessons of indifference taught by the clown, as well as

the imperative for death expressed in “to be or not to be,” are attempts to prepare the viewer/reader for this experience of pleasure and excitement by death.

Whether the comedy here is laugh-out-loud, sub-consciously mildly pleasurable, or rather dark and disturbing, is a question of individual temperament. But I believe it has been sufficiently argued that the tragedy of death in Hamlet may be at least disarmed by the moments in which Shakespeare intentionally address death as an idea, and at best is transformed by these musings into a sort of playful statement, or even a joke. Perhaps the comedy of death heightens its tragedy, especially if the comedy plays with an impossible, deep choice, the consequence of which is drenched in inescapable indifference. And perhaps it is not so much a joke as it is a trick. In the gravediggers scene, one clown asks the other, “Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?” (V.i, ll. 43-44), to which the other responds unsure. The clown explains, “...‘a grave-maker.’ The houses he makes lasts till doomsday” (V.i, ll. 51-52), but his riddle was truly malicious, as its answer was not even presented as an option. In the same way, perhaps, Shakespeare constructs his own riddle, “to be or not to be,” to which the audience might respond, “neither.”