Death - Michael Cohen (essay date 1987)

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SOURCE: "'To what base uses we may return': Class and Mortality in *Hamlet (5.1),*" in *Hamlet Studies,* Vol. 9, Nos. 1 and 2, Summer and Winter, 1987, pp. 78-85.

[*In the essay below, Cohen assesses the encounter between Hamlet and the gravedigger, reading it as a debate about whether death levels all social and economic distinctions.*]

Critics are in general agreement that the first scene of *Hamlet,* Act 5, derives its power from an almost exclusive concentration on death.[1] But none of the critics, so far as I know, points out that class considerations are hardly less important than death as the scene's subject matter, and that there are really two competing subtexts in the scene, one that argues that death is the ultimate leveller of all class distinctions, another that argues, with almost equal persuasiveness, that class distinctions continue even after death.

I

The First Clown begins, in the scene's and the play's dominant mode, with a question: "Is she to be buried in Christian burial when she willfully seeks her own salvation?" More than a third of the play's scenes begin with a question in the first speech, and each of this scene's sections is introduced by a question—from Hamlet:

> Has this fellow no feeling of his business a sings in grave-making?

and

> I will speak to this fellow.—Whose grave's this, sirrah?

from Laertes,

> What ceremony else?

and from Hamlet again,

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What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers?
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(lines 1-2, 62-3, 210, 241-44)[2]

As audience, we register the Clown's malapropism and infer the intended *damnation* for "salvation," infer also that Ophelia must be meant, and do so with surprise, since only twenty lines ago Gertrude described Ophelia's death as an accident. While the clowns discuss the mad idea that one can commit suicide in self-defense, we have time to assess this new mystery. Here the Second Clown pronounces the coroner's finding: it must be Christian burial—one of those reports in *Hamlet* that looks like evidence until it is undercut

by the next suggestion. In this case the Second Clown suggests, and later the priest confirms (215), that the Christian burial of Ophelia followed a "great command," presumably from Claudius. The king has suborned the coroner. That is the conclusion of the Second Clown—that Ophelia's burial in sanctified ground is a consequence of her rank:

> Will you ha' the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o' Christian burial.

(21-23)

The Second Clown is little more than the butt of the First Clown's jokes, and thus he has little chance to become a character of any weight. But here he speaks the first lines in the play that overtly criticize the class structure. At various times throughout *Hamlet* there are hints of how the play's events strike different classes differently. Examples are Marcellus's speech in 1.1 about how the war-watch "So nightly toils the subject of the land" and the conversation between the Captain and Hamlet in 4.4 over those many soldiers who will die because "a delicate and tender prince" wants a worthless piece of ground. In the play's last scene will come Hamlet's remarks about Osric: "Let a beast be lord of beasts, and his crib shall stand at the king's mess. 'Tis a chough, but, as I say, spacious in the possession of dirt" (87-89).

For the moment, however, the gravedigger's response turns the topic to the ridiculous:

> 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 their even-Christen.

(24-26)

The gravedigger then shifts the conversation to his own occupation. The gravemaker's work spans the whole of human history. Digging was Adam's profession, and the gravemaker's work lasts till doomsday. The fact that the houses he makes are being continually broken up and their present tenants ejected to make way for new ones does not get into the gravedigger's riddle. He has a talent for the paradoxical. His instances are the "permanent" dwelling from which he is even now throwing the bones of former residents, the suicide who acts in self-defense, and Adam who is no gentleman because he digs (according to the old poem, "When Adam digged and Eve span / Who was then the gentleman?"), but who *is* a gentleman because he bore arms, needing them to dig.

The paradoxical wit play may perhaps divert our attention momentarily from the topic that has been raised by one clown, confirmed in the other's opinion, and which will be further confirmed by what we hear from the priest later. It is that even death makes no revolution in the classes—there is privilege and no levelling even in matters funereal.

The clowns see the suborned coroner and priest as agents of an upper class conspiracy to make sure the rich and privileged are treated with class distinctions even after death. When Ophelia's funeral procession enters, however, we find that Laertes is unhappy with the priest's intervention in the ceremonies for Ophelia because he hasn't gone *far* enough in giving her her due. Laertes thus suggests another agency of exploitation—the church—which here makes a distinction God would not make, shunting the apparent suicide to a kind of underclass. But this is not to say that God espouses a classless society: rather, Laertes insists, this earthly discrimination will be rectified by God, who will restore *rightful* class distinctions:

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                                                    I tell
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be
When thou liest howling.
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(227-29)

Laertes has to be satisfied, in other words, with the traditional opiate of the underclass that these abuses will be righted after death.

Laertes' twice-repeated question “What ceremony else?” brings the Doctor's response:

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                                                                Her dea
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged
Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers,
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her.
Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,
Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
Of bell and burial.
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(214-21)

Our response to the dispute between Laertes and the Doctor has more complexity than mere sympathy with the bereaved brother. The Doctor can be seen as one of the king's toadies who was influenced to bury Ophelia in sanctified ground but who would not go farther to allow her the burial service; against this figure we side with Laertes, and find the “shards, flints, and pebbles” speech gratuitously cruel and “churlish.” On the other hand, the clowns have suspected that the rules applying to all the rest of us have been lifted for this woman because she is “great folk,” and now Laertes is demanding even more. The Doctor thus can become a conservative representative of the people against the corruption of power, while Laertes and Claudius are now together on the other side from our sympathies. This shift is made more possible because of Laertes' ambivalent position in our sympathies, even before he opens his mouth. His bereavement seems to demand our sympathy, but his conspiracy with the king pushes him to the side of villainy. At either hand, we see privilege and great command affecting the treatment of even the dead. But this is not the prince's subtext.

II

Hamlet's opening question asks how the First Clown can sing at gravemaking. Horatio's answer might be taken to apply to more than the gravedigger's experience: “Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness” (64). Horatio may say the line as referring purely to the gravedigger (“this man is different from us”), or he may say it, with some feeling, as applying to Hamlet's situation (“you can or should be like this man”). That is, he may speak kindly (“thank heaven you have reached some similar easiness”), wishfully (“would that you had achieved such easiness”), or warily (“are you about to relapse from what serenity you have achieved?”). In any case, the opening exchange concerns getting used to death, and the gravedigger obliges by singing an apt verse and throwing up a skull. The gravedigger's song, which had sounded merry enough at its opening, turns lugubrious:

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But age with his stealing steps
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me intil the land,
As if I had never been such.
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(67-70)

The gravedigger's adoption of a song persona who is already dead is only one of the paradoxical features defining his relation to the others in the scene. He digs a grave that is his and not his; he “lies” in it while the dead Ophelia and the soon-to-be-dead Hamlet and Laertes “lie out on't.” As wit pretender, he bandies words with real wit, and wins. His presence in the grave is by custom, choice, and long profession. The others are

there by extraordinary happenstance to bury one who died by accident, or if by choice, only by deranged choice. He takes the role of current jester; the real jester is long dead, now providing only a foul smell and a *memento mori.* The gravedigger survives and prevails; he will bury Hamlet, too.

It is not *to* the gravedigger, but *of* him and of the skull that he throws up that Hamlet speaks to Horatio:

> How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if 'twere Cain's jawbone, that did the first murther! This might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?

(71-75)

Hamlet first observes that it is a *knave* who handles the skull, though it might have been a politician's—"this ass," the knave of a gravemaker, now "o'erreaches" the height of his better in life, possibly one who, Hamlet ironically speculates, might himself have circumvented God—letting the defiance of rank move up the scale. Knowing one's place in the scheme of things is hard not only for the knaves; humility is required of the exalted as well as the low. The skull might have belonged to a courtier, might even have been a lord's, and as Hamlet moves quickly up the social and economic scale until he is musing on the dust of an emperor and a world conqueror, he points out that the skull is *now* a mere vassal of "my Lady Worm's." "Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't" (84).

Hamlet's first set of applications has to do with power and station: the politician who would circumvent God, the courtier and the lord. The second set has to do with occupations of law and land-buying. Hamlet compares the situation of the dead with the exercise of power by the living, with the delights of station and of occupation, of acquisition, of making small distinctions (quiddities, quillities, and tricks). The dead have suffered a revolution; equal and powerless, they are "my Lady Worm's" subjects, "Knocked about the mazzard with a sexton's spade," without influence, without property beyond the dirt in their skulls, evicted even from the grave to make room for another of their number. In Hamlet's subtext, death *does* make a revolution.

There is a small difference of opinion between the workers and the idle gentlemen who stand above them making puns. Can this difference be resolved by an encounter between the gravemaker and the prince, a dialectic between the classes?

III

Hamlet is interested in graves. He has perhaps heard the old advice that before setting out on revenge one should first dig two of them. But he does not find out from the sexton whom this grave is for. He changes tack and asks how long the gravemaker has been at his occupation. The answer comes back in pieces: "I came to't that day our last king Hamlet overcame Fortinbras. … It was the very day that young Hamlet was born … I have been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years" (134-35, 137-38, 151-52). The coincidence—not the first in the play—means that the motive of young Fortinbras's revenge is just as old as young Hamlet. It means that the story of his father's heroism has been with Hamlet since his birth—helping to explain his hyperboles about his father at 1.2.139-153 and 3.4.56-64.

Hamlet's response to the gravedigger's remark that he has "been sexton here, man and boy, thirty years" is to ask "How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?" Hamlet may be thinking of his own body, having taken to heart the contemporaneity and symbolic association of his life with the gravedigger's trade. On the other hand, he may just be looking for an expert opinion, now that he is on the ground and on the subject, from a man who has made it his work for so long. Or he may be thinking of his father. Could one of these skulls be old Hamlet? When scholars defend the discrepancy between Hamlet's youth at the beginning of the play and

his obvious age of thirty here, they say it gives the effect of Hamlet's emotional growth and maturity. They do not mention that it also may suggest that old Hamlet has been in his grave quite a long time. But whether the time has been long or short, Hamlet does know, or ought to know, that a man rots before “eight or nine year,” even in a cold country (“But if indeed you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby”—4.3. 35-36).

The encounter between the gravemaker / sexton and Hamlet can be pleasant enough; the two friends are patient and indulgent with a working man who aspires to wit and entertains them and himself while he works at a job most would consider unsavory. The spotlight stays on the prince. Another reading places more emphasis on the gravedigger's jokes, not as knee-slapping humor, but as a very well-played set of the game called *getting the best of the gentleman.* A fairly complex shift of sympathies can take place in this part of the scene, to the extent that we may not be seeing it at all from Hamlet's class viewpoint when we hear him say “By the Lord, Horatio, this 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.” In the wordplay, Hamlet is bested on *lie*—“You lie out on't sir”—which can simply mean “you are not in it,” but also gives Hamlet the lie without committing the sexton; he is bested on *quick;* on *man* and *woman;* on *came to be mad* and *ground.* In the meantime, Hamlet has been called a fool or worse (137), and the gravedigger has gotten off at least one shot about “pocky corses” with the upper classes in general as its target. Finally, it is at least likely that the gravedigger's figure for how long a body will lie in the earth before it rots is so outrageously long just to see if the gentleman will buy it—and he apparently does. The encounter is a fine revolution in wit, if we have the wit to see it, but less surprising and certainly not revolutionary in its more symbolic aspects—the overreaching of youth by age as well as the more specific, predictive besting of Hamlet by death disguised as a games-player or jester.

IV

It is instructive to compare this conversation with Hamlet's encounter with Osric in the next scene. Osric advances the plot in summoning Hamlet to the contest set up by the king and Laertes; he is also a conspirator himself, as may be seen at 5.2.295; but he is first a clown who engages unwillingly and apparently unknowingly in wit-combat with Hamlet. His function and that of the gravedigger in 5.1 are thus parallel, but the characters are antithetical: the gravedigger is innocent, plain, of mature years and lower class; he gets the best of his verbal bouts with Hamlet. Osric is an accomplice, fancy in his language and, by stage tradition, his dress; he is young and if not titled at least rich, “spacious in the possession of dirt”; and he is bested by Hamlet and Horatio without ever quite knowing what is happening.

Osric survives too, and shows something about the way the world will continue to be, with or without Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude, and those who die even earlier in the play. As long as the Osrics are “spacious in the possession of dirt,” they will remain pretty much as they are, and however many wit battles may be won by the gravediggers, they are going to continue to be the underclass—and we could hardly ask for a better symbolic representative of the underclass than a man who is mostly below ground when we first see him. The gravedigger bests Hamlet on the particular topics they joust upon, but Hamlet is right and the gravedigger and his assistant wrong about privilege: it does not continue after death, in any way that can matter. Hamlet both abhors and rejoices in the classlessness of death: it amuses him to think that “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” when the king is Claudius, but it tears at him when the king is his father. In this play, though, there is never much question about real revolution on *this* side of the grave. Whichever revenger triumphs in the end, not much will have changed. The play's most ironic moment is, indeed, when it looks as if the most lowborn of the high and mighty may take the throne. An obsequious messenger announces Laertes and his “riotous head” breaking their way into the castle:

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And, as the world were now but to begin,
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Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
The ratifiers and props of every word,
They cry, 'Choose we! Laertes shall be king!'
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
'Laertes shall be king. Laertes king!'
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(4.5.102-108)

The irony comes from the straightfaced invocation of a conservative myth to defend an upstart "vice of kings" and "cutpurse of the empire," as if Claudius had been on the throne by old heredity and as if he had not, just before Laertes went to France, taken over by a process as subversive, as antiquity—and custom—defying as this of Laertes just now.

But of course Laertes does not succeed. Nor does Hamlet, but it *is* another prince who steps in with a soft word, "I have some rights of memory in this kingdom," and an army behind him. There is no evidence that his own pronouncement of death's triumph over the highborn is more than conventional:

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This quarry cries on havoc. O proud Death,
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell
That thou so many princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck?
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(5.2.353-56)

He was an infant when his father died. He has yet to feel just what a leveller death can be.

Notes

1. See, for example, Maynard Mack, "The World of *Hamlet,*" *The Yale Review,* 41 (1952), 502-23; Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
2. All quotations are from *Hamlet,* ed. Willard Farnham. (Baltimore: The Pelican Shakespeare, Penguin Books, 1957).