

Yorick's Ghost

by David P. Gontar (July 2014)

... and the fool shall look to the madman. – Feste

1. Introduction

In the catalogue of fools and clowns who animate Shakespeare's plays, the most significant are thought to be *Twelfth Night's* Feste and Lear's fool, whose teasing jibes often bear precious insight. These are jesters of rare adroitness and sensibility, camouflaging criticism in endearing silliness, that remonstrations may be sufficiently palatable to testy nobles to be assimilated. Yet before we crown this pair as Shakespeare's supreme lords of barbed banter, we might ask whether all candidates have been given a "fair shake." Not customarily included in standard lists of Shakespeare's stand-up comics is Yorick, the "joculator" belonging to old King Hamlet the Dane. (Halvorson, 2) The omission is, of course, understandable. Yorick, whose muddy skull is tossed up by a grave digger in Act V of *The Tragedy of Hamlet* – though he bore the child Prince Hamlet on his back "a thousand times" (V, i, 182) – never appears in the play, speaks no lines there, nor is he so much as quoted. What possible credentials has he? Having poured a "flagon of Rhenish" on the head of a future gravedigger? (V, i, 175) What of that? Of all his gibes, his gambols, songs and "flashes of merriment," (V, i, 185-186), not a single one survives. Is he not then but a name? Yet, if so, why mention that name? Could it be he lives on still, a revenant whose spirit pulses in textual heirs?

There is a general consensus that Shakespeare's "fools" compose a special subset of his clowns. Indeed, the gravediggers themselves are designated by the text as "two Clowns." The first of these is a wrangling sexton (V, i, 157) whose repartee gives the hyper-articulate Prince a run for his money. (V, i, 119-158) Yet the most representative clowns in Shakespeare are not wits, but rather clodpoles and simpletons whose bumbling miscomprehensions of life and language make them beguiling. We find classic instances of clowning in the malapropisms of Dogberry, Costard, and Froth. The typical Shakespearean clown delights and illuminates by way of inadvertence. The fool, on the other hand, is not hobbled by words and ideas; he is their master. Hence the first grave digger (the sexton) in *Hamlet* is actually more fool than clown, and seems to have imbibed something of the art from Yorick himself. But more of that anon.

Situated on the margins of the court, the jester often takes notice of things more acutely than preoccupied lords and ladies vying with one another for advantages and privileges. Those sharper perceptions can be used in subtle or oblique edification of lord or sovereign. Such is

the "wise fool," who scatters within his badinage seeds of insight that they might reach a fertile mind and germinate. Feste, Lear's fool, and to a more sober and modest degree, Lavatch, in *All's Well That Ends Well*, exemplify this trait. As we will see, there is some reason to view Yorick retrospectively as having been a member of this rare fraternity.

2. Lear's Fool

Foolery in Shakespeare is more than cap and bells, more than chiming chorus. No daffy riddler or pointless punster, Lear's fool is a loving shadow (cp. I, iv, 213) who accompanies the King through most of his spiritual journey, a peripatetic blogger commenting on royal foibles. His passionate devotion to the retiring monarch and his youngest daughter entails a frigid season in hell and eventual death. Unlike careless courtiers, who would take their lives in their hands to directly challenge the King (as does the Earl of Kent) the fool has liberty to speak freely, serving up *sanchismos* on even the most sensitive of topics, e.g., the succession and Lear's relationships with his miscreant elder daughters. Often fools assume the role of cryptic counselor. This goes so far that, like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Lear's fool makes no hesitation in calling his boss a fool. (*Quarto*, 1.4, 143-145; *Folio*, I, iv, 37-44; See, *Twelfth Night*, I, v, 53-68) As is well known, that connection between Feste and Lear's fool is deepened by having them both sing verses of the same song: "the rain it raineth every day," pointing at the essential link between tragedy and comedy. (*Lear*, III, ii, 74-77; *Twelfth Night*, V, i, 385-404)

Somewhere on the heath we lose him. In the *Quarto* version, the fool is last on stage when he is promoted to play magistrate in the three-judge panel of the mock trial of Goneril put on by the prosecutor, King Lear. (Sc. 13, 3.5, 31-75)

LEAR

I'll see their trial first. Bring in the evidence.

[*To Edgar*] Thou robèd man of justice, take thy place;

[*To Fool*] And thou, his yokefellow of equity,

Bench by his side. [*To Kent*] You are o' th' commission.

Sit you too.

EDGAR

Let us deal justly.

Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?

Thy sheep be in the corn,

And for one blast of thy minikin mouth
Thy sheep shall take no harm.
Purr, the cat is grey.

LEAR

Arraign her first. 'Tis Goneril. I here take my oath
before this honourable assembly she kicked the poor
King her father.

FOOL

Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

LEAR

She cannot deny it.

FOOL

Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.
(Sc. 12 (3.5) 31-47)

In this scene the fool has transcended his limited role of royal Jiminy Cricket and appears to enter Lear's own world of incipient madness. Whether this is mere sympathetic patronizing on the part of the fool, or his own derangement being brought on by recent conflicts and their attendant stress, is not certain. We are reminded that in the Elizabethan lexicon a so-called "natural fool" was regarded as one whose limited mental capacity prompted him to utterances that seemed to savor of second sight or inspiration, a view derived from Plato. The connection between folly and madness is also touched on by Feste in *Twelfth Night*, when he is asked about what the drunken man is like.

OLIVIA

What's a drunken man like, fool?

FESTE

Like a drowned man, a fool and a madman – one
draught above heat makes him a fool, the second mads
him, and the third drowns him.

(I, v, 126-128)

Of course, this spectrum of mental instability is reminiscent of the observations made by Duke Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* about the lover, lunatic and poet.

THESEUS

The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(V, i, 7-17)

These psychological taxonomies tend to suggest that to be a successful jester or court fool required an odd mental apparatus tuned to frequencies associated with aberrant behaviors, and that, given sufficient alterations in conditions, one might pass to other forms, as occurs in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. One may start as a mere fool, suggests Feste, but it is just a single step to madness.

3. Feste

Lady Olivia in *Twelfth Night* has inherited her fool from her late father, a count. Feste gives the distinct impression of being someone who regards bourgeois consciousness as a species of quotidian madness, a proposition we associate now with the work of British analyst R. D. Laing in the 20th century. Prominent among instances of evidently "sane" people who are in Feste's view actually crazy are (i) Duke Orsino, hopelessly in love with a woman who repeatedly rejects him, (ii) static Olivia herself, and (iii) the major domo of her household, the melancholy and obsessive Malvolio, whose very name is emblematic of his conventional dysthymia. As the play opens, we learn that Olivia is in mourning for her deceased brother. She has veiled her face and intends to wear black and have no company for seven grieving years. When she seeks to dismiss "the fool" from her presence, Feste (like Lear's fool) immediately counters that it is she, the self-absorbed aristocrat, not he, who is the true

fool and, to the pleasure of the audience, offers to prove it.

FESTE

Good madonna, why mournest thou?

OLIVIA

Good fool, for my brother's death.

FESTE

I think his soul is in hell, madonna.

OLIVIA

I know his soul is in heaven, fool.

FESTE

The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your
brother's soul, being in heaven. Take away the fool,
gentlemen.

(I, v, 62-68)

What seems a simple syllogistic deduction is, in fact, a telling diagnosis by Feste of socially induced neurosis. The irrationality of Olivia's protracted mourning is neatly exposed, providing her with a conceptual tool she may employ to eventually free herself from self-imposed isolation.

Throughout the play, this jester, whose ostensible job is to give mere relief of ennui to Olivia and her retinue, serves as a shaman or sage, pointing to emotionally based ideas adopted by afflicted individuals as though they were rational imperatives. Feste's psychiatric armamentarium is not restricted to logical essays such as the one above. A wide range of instruments is brought to bear by him on the self-imposed presumptions and confusions of Illyrian society, including such devices as song, poetry, epigram, paradox, argument, non-verbal communication and just plain nonsense. These darkling stratagems and tropes make him one of the most subtle and opaque of Shakespeare's characters. For where reason itself is believed tainted or corrupt, it may be necessary to have recourse to non-rational acts designed to jolt the deluded person into a more functional and salutary standpoint. An early example is found in Act Two, when Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Feste get together.

SIR TOBY

Welcome, ass. Now let's have a catch.

SIR ANDREW

By my troth, the fool has an excellent breast.

I had rather than forty shillings I had such a leg, and so sweet a breath to sing, as the fool has. In sooth, thou wast in very gracious fooling last night, when thou spokest of Pigrogromitus, of the Vapians passing the equinoctial of Queubus. 'Twas very goodn 'faith. I sent thee sixpence for thy leman. Hadst it?

FESTE

I did impetico thy gratility; for Malvolio's nose is no whipstock. My lady has a white hand, and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses.

SIR ANDREW

Excellent! Why, this is the best fooling, when all is done. Now a song.

(II, iii, 17-27)

If, dear reader, some of this colloquy seems a bit obscure, no need to worry; it's meant to be. RSC editors Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen note that the line beginning "Pigrogromitus" and ending "Queubus" are "words invented by Feste as examples of his feigned wisdom." So is "gratility," and the whole assemblage might be compared with the elegant nonsense of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear. (Bate, 663, n. 12-22, emphasis added) By "feigned wisdom" is meant a satire on sententious utterances that pass for wisdom among the educated fools of society. Giving echo to the seat of such pomposity is for Feste great fun and a restorative to those fortunate enough to hear it. Putting down vain verbosity is a reversion to one of the central themes of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Feste displays the keen ear of a child who senses that adults with their swollen vocabularies make themselves ridiculous and alienated from the rudiments of life and authentic communication. Think of Mr. Darling in Barrie's *Peter Pan*. That way misery lies.

Later in the same Act, Feste sings for the obsessive lover Orsino, who hands him a coin.

ORSINO

There's for thy pains.

FESTE

No pains, sir. I take pleasure in singing, sir.

ORSINO

I'll pay thy pleasure then.

FESTE

Truly, sir, and pleasure will be paid, one time or another.

ORSINO

Give me now leave to leave thee.

FESTE

Now, the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal. I would have men of such constancy put to sea, that their business might be everything, and their intent everywhere, for that's it that always makes a good voyage of nothing. Farewell.

(II, iv, 66-77)

Here we are in double-talk mode once again, as Feste the magus addresses the narcissistic Duke, who seems to almost revel in the coils of hopeless ardor. Though human consciousness is constantly changing, Feste implies Orsino is the victim of fixed ideas. As his quest for one who disdains him is nugatory, he is like a man deliberately cast on an empty sea. Though Feste's words have the form of nonsense, they resonate, and remain with us.

This parting exchange of Feste and Orsino is reminiscent of a something in *Hamlet*.

POLONIUS

How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could

not so prosperously be delivered of. I will leave him, and suddenly contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter. – My lord, I will take my leave of you.

HAMLET

You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal – except my life, my life, my life.

(II, ii, 210-219)

Here the Prince appears to morph effortlessly into Harlequin, surpassing even the soaring Feste in comedic brilliance. The tedious Polonius, crawling between heaven and earth, senses that there is method in Hamlet's "madness," and yet cannot quite grasp its purport. Hamlet's intentions are different too; where Feste would minister to a mind diseased, Hamlet's irony is so pervasive that it cannot condescend to take its interlocutor seriously and thus attend to his needs. As has often been noted, Hamlet speaks often for his own amusement and therefore for ours. He has no problem making others look – and feel – stupid, and that tart tendency is part of what makes him unwelcome in the court of King Claudius. Such persons on occasion must drink hemlock. The question we should ask is, How did Prince Hamlet acquire this art of fiendish foolery? Was he to this manner born? Or was he, perhaps, understudy to some personage of infinite jest . . . ?

But let us return to Feste. Towards the end of the play, Olivia's fool is promoted to become Malvolio's psychoanalyst. The reader will recall how Maria dupes him into believing that haughty Lady Olivia is in love with him. He is led by deceitful instructions he thinks are from his employer to dress "cross gartered and in yellow stockings" and appear before her as a grinning pseudo-aristocrat. He does so, and is promptly taken for a lunatic. In those days a popular treatment of dementia was confinement in an unlit chamber, a condition imposed forthwith at the instigation of Sir Toby on the babbling steward. (III, iv, 133-139) With Maria and Sir Toby in support, Feste, disguised as "Sir Topas, the curate," launches into a psychotherapeutic dialogue with his patient. This includes a scientific test of his sanity.

MALVOLIO

I say this house is as dark as ignorance, though ignorance were as dark as hell; and I say there was never man thus abused. I am no more mad than you are. Make the trial of it in any constant question.

FESTE

What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning
wildfowl?

MALVOLIO

That the soul of our grandam might haply
inhabit a bird.

FESTE

What thinkest thou of his opinion?

MALVOLIO

I think nobly of the soul, and in no way approve
his opinion.

FESTE

Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness. Thou
shalt hold th' opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of
thy wits, and fear to kill a woodcock lest thou dispossess
the soul of thy grandam. Fare thee well.

(IV, ii, 48-60)

* * *

FESTE

Master Malvolio?

MALVOLIO

Ay, good fool.

FESTE

Alas, sir, how fell you besides your five wits?

MALVOLIO

Fool there was never man so notoriously
abused. I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art.

FESTE

But as well? Then you are mad indeed, if you be
no better in your wits than a fool.

MALVOLIO

They have here propertied me, keep me in
darkness, send ministers to me, asses, and do all they
can to face me out of my wits.

(IV, ii, 86-95)

Feste is, of course, neither psychologist nor angel. Angered by his treatment at the hands of the household steward, he takes advantage of Malvolio's captivity to torment him. No analysis of counter-transference here, just fuel for the fire. Feeling daily the sting of a role in which he is regarded as a thing ridiculous and of small account, Feste takes advantage of the opportunity to turn tables and subject Malvolio to the indignities of foolery. With pen and paper received from the fool, he sends an anguished appeal to his Lady, who releases him, and the sessions with Dr. Topas end without resolution.

4. Yorick

The only allusions to Hamlet's childhood are his remembrances of Yorick. If anyone else made a comparable impact on him we are not told.

HAMLET

Let me see.

He takes the skull

Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio – a fellow of
infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me
on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred
my imagination is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung
those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where
be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your
flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table
on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?

Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber
and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour
she must come. Make her laugh at that.

(V, i, 179-190)

Infinite jest . . . But isn't Prince Hamlet the fellow who would be king of "infinite space," did he not have bad dreams? (II, ii, 256-258) What better equipment to face infinite space than infinite jest, *n'est-ce pas*? For what is infinite space itself but our bad dream, a wry jest of uneasy humanity?

In [Hamlet Made Simple](#) we found persuasive reasons to view Prince Hamlet as a court bastard whose actual identity as the biological son of his uncle Claudius is never vouchsafed to him. We confronted the possibility that the liaison of Gertrude and Claudius was of long-standing vintage. For, after all, where was Prince Claudius when King Hamlet the Dane was busy smiting the sledded Polacks on the ice? (I, i, 62) Fighting in the vaward beside his brother, or tucked neatly in incestuous sheets beside his brother's wife? Or, think historically: how do we imagine young Prince Henry felt in 1501 when he had to dance at the wedding of Prince Arthur and Katherine of Aragon? There is a tale of two brothers Hamlet's *outré* behavior, his nausea and self-hatred, are best explained as functions of his doubts about his own identity, and the unconscious feeling that he has been sired by his detested uncle. (For a full account, See Gontar, 377 ff) Let us for the sake of argument situate Yorick in that context. What kind of jester would he have been?

With hawk-like gaze, he would have seen that King Hamlet was being cuckolded by his own brother. For the fool sees more than the sober-minded.

This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And, like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art,
For folly that he wisely shows is fit,
But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit.

(*Twelfth Night*, III, i, 59-67)

But that information carelessly disclosed could backfire. The challenge would have been great.

Without directly blurting out unpleasant facts, a faithful jester, like Lear's fool, would yet be at pains to open the King's eyes to adultery and treachery. Did he come too close to his aim and suffer liquidation? Or was he not able to employ indirection and subtlety with sufficient skill to warn King Hamlet of what was afoot? Of course, *pace* Saxo Grammaticus, *The Tragedy of Hamlet* as we have it in text today is a work of fiction; such questions are often regarded as idle speculation. We cannot know what messages Yorick, positioned as he would have been, might have sought to convey to his sovereign. But Lear's fool's behavior gives us clues.

Regardless, the text provides ample evidence that Hamlet is a schooled fool, and uses foolery to deal with his dilemma, shield himself from harm, and expose the King's guilt. In Act One, scene five, Hamlet swears Marcellus and Horatio to absolute secrecy about the appearance of the ghost and about his plan "to put an antic disposition on" to conceal his vengeful designs. (I, v, 173) And it is significant that he does not declare that he will, like Edgar, feign a state of Bedlam-like insanity, but rather put on an "antic disposition." What means this? For we have already seen abundant indications that folly and madness, though they lie cheek by jowl in relation to each other, are not identical.

Here is what our dictionary says:

Antic

1. A foolish or ludicrous act; a caper; 2. *Archaic* A buffoon, especially a performing clown. (*American Heritage*, 5th. ed., 77)

That is Hamlet's stated intent. He will jest, he will sing, he will gambol, and by such indirections he will find direction out.

Not one but two characters in the play reflect beyond doubt the influence of Yorick: the bantering sexton in the graveyard scene, and Prince Hamlet himself. Gravediggers are not commonly known for their wit or riposte. Yet this one leads Prince Hamlet on a merry verbal chase. How is it possible? Both Hamlet and the sexton manifest the comic influence of Yorick. Their skills mirror one another's.

HAMLET

Whose grave's this, sirrah?

FIRST CLOWN

Mine, sir.

(sings)

O, a pit of clay for to be made
For a guest is meet.

HAMLET

I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't.

FIRST CLOWN

You lie out on't, sir, and therefore it is not
yours. For my part, I do not lie in't, and yet it is mine.

HAMLET

Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say 'tis thine.
'Tis for the dead, not for the quick; therefore thou liest.

FIRST CLOWN

'Tis a quick lie, sir, 'twill away again from me to you.

HAMLET

What man dost thou dig it for?

FIRST CLOWN

For no man, sir.

HAMLET

What woman, then?

FIRST CLOWN

For none, neither.

HAMLET

Who is to be buried in't?

FIRST CLOWN

One that was a woman, sir; but rest her
soul, she's dead.

HAMLET

How absolute the knave is! We must speak by
the card, or equivocation will undo us.

(V, i, 115-134)

Here is exemplary foolery, to be sure. And the sexton assures us that Yorick was not just a wit, but "a whoreson mad fellow." (V, i, 171) Of course, "mad" here may be nothing more than a hyperbolic way of referring to Yorick's infinite (resourceful and unrestrained) sense of humor.

Of one thing we may be sure: Prince Hamlet is a skilled jester. His targets are the stodgy and self-deluded, even those who preach that to our own selves we must be true. (I, iii, 78)

POLONIUS

How does my good Lord Hamlet?

HAMLET

Well, God-'a'-mercy.

POLONIUS

Do you know me, my lord?

HAMLET

Excellent, excellent well. You're a fishmonger.

POLONIUS

Not I, my lord.

HAMLET

Then I would you were so honest a man.

POLONIUS

Honest, my lord?

HAMLET

Ay, sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

POLONIUS

That's very true, my lord.

HAMLET

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion – have you a daughter?

POLONIUS

I have, my lord.

HAMLET

Let her not walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive. Friend, look to't.

POLONIUS

(aside) How say you that? Still harping on my daughter. Yet he knew me not at first – a said I was a fishmonger. A is far gone, far gone, and truly, in my youth I suffered much extremity for love, very near this. I'll speak to him again – What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET

Words, words, words.

POLONIUS

What is the matter, my lord?

HAMLET

Between who?

POLONIUS

I mean the matter you read, my lord.

HAMLET

Slanders, sir; for the satirical slave says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber, or plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. All which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down; for you yourself, sir, should be as old as I am – if, like a crab, you could go backward.

POLONIUS

Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.

(II, ii, 173-207)

That is, Hamlet suggests that in the frankness of youth lies virtue, while age is marred by the vices of compromise. Thus Polonius could only become decent if he could reverse the course of time, and become young once more. All this sails over this courtier's grey head like the jet stream. The fool's wisdom is Greek to Polonius.

In Act Three, Sc. two, Hamlet, Claudius and Polonius discuss the expected theatrical performance.

KING CLAUDIUS

How fares our cousin Hamlet?

HAMLET

Excellent, i'faith, of the the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so.

KING CLAUDIUS

I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet.
These words are not mine.

HAMLET

No, nor mine, now. (*To Polonius*) My lord, you
played once i'th' university, you say.

POLONIUS

That I did, my lord, and was accounted a good
actor.

HAMLET

And what did you enact?

POLONIUS

I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th'
Capitol. Brutus killed me.

HAMLET

It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf
there.

(III, ii, 90-102)

It is interesting to note, by the way, that the court of King Claudius, unlike that of his late brother, has no appointed fool. None is of record following the death of Yorick. Thus, as Nature abhors a vacuum, so Hamlet steps into the vacancy of folly.

Two more examples will suffice.

OPHELIA

You are merry, my lord.

HAMLET

Who, I?

OPHELIA

Ay, my lord.

HAMLET

O God, your only jig-maker! What should a man do but be merry? For look you how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within's two hours.

OPHELIA

Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord.

HAMLET

So long? Nay, then, let the devil wear black, for I'll have a suit of sables. O, heavens, die two months ago and not forgotten yet! Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year. But by'r Lady, a must build churches then, or else shall a suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is, 'For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot.

(III, ii, 119-129)

Surely Claudius would have nothing in this foolish answer too, though Hamlet's impassioned grief and resentment bleed through easily.

Then we find this vaudeville routine, with Claudius assigned the role of straight man.

KING CLAUDIUS

Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET

At supper.

KING CLAUDIUS

At supper? Where?

HAMLET

Not where he eats but where a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service – two dishes, but to one table. That's the end.

KING CLAUDIUS

Alas, alas!

HAMLET

A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING CLAUDIUS

What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET

Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

KING CLAUDIUS

Where is Polonius?

HAMLET

In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself. But indeed, if you find him not this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby.

(IV, iii, 17-36)

One is tempted to ask after all this, Was Prince Hamlet majoring in Foolish Arts in

Wittenberg? What is the efficient cause of his irony, his droll style constantly slipping into the meaningful nonsense of madness?

5. Yorick's Ghost

Hamlet is Yorick's ghost. And so too is the sexton, as there is nothing to prevent an ectoplasmic juggler of words from manipulating two bodies. Any other acceptation of the text founders for lack of explanation. Both the sexton and Hamlet knew and were deeply influenced by Yorick, who seems to have sent distress signals to the aging King that he was being cuckolded by his lay-about brother, Prince Claudius. Hamlet was at an impressionable age when he came under Yorick's spell. Imagine how Yorick's sympathy must have been aroused by this brilliant boy, treated by all the world as the offspring of the infirm King, but so obviously of a different provenance. Under the King's very nose the Claudius-and-Gertrude affair continued to rage. Perhaps, as was suggested in *Hamlet Made Simple*, the King knew, but chose to turn a blind eye to his betrayal. To the question of what Yorick may have known about what the King knew, there can be no answer.

In the graveyard scene, two jesters clash, each bearing the spirit of their mentor, the "whoreson mad fellow," Yorick. The result is a verbal draw. The brave Prince will soon himself be food for worms and will, by inference, be interred by this same resilient sexton. One might say that Hamlet tumbles into the grave of Yorick, whose ghost finally expires with the death of their gravedigger.

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David P. Gontar's latest book is