Hamlet's Quintessence of Dust
Author(s): Raymond H. Reno
Source: Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring, 1961), pp. 107-113
Published by: Folger Shakespeare Library in association with George Washington University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2867383
Accessed: 01-11-2016 13:32 UTC
Hamlet's Quintessence of Dust
RAYMOND H. RENO

In his Shakespeare and the Natural Condition, Geoffrey Bush makes a remark with which I think few students of Hamlet would disagree: "When Hamlet waits with Horatio before the fencing match, it is known to Hamlet and to us that whatever he does will be a consent to time and death."¹ In another place (p. 5), he speaks of this as being the most mysterious moment in the play, and of the impression it creates that Hamlet "seems to have come to terms with his world." It is indeed a mysterious moment, for the impression it produces seems to have no "objective correlative", no situation in the play itself sufficient to account for it; nevertheless it is there, part of the general feeling that at the end of the play Hamlet is an older and more mature person than he was when the play opened. Shakespeare seems to go out of his way to tell us that Hamlet is thirty, and no longer, as Theodore Spencer puts it, "the distracted undergraduate he was at the beginning".² Now "he is reconciled"; in Bush's words, "he has come to terms with his world."

No one, surely, who reads the play or sees it performed—certainly no one who hears Hamlet speak in V. i—is unaware that a change has occurred in him since the last time we saw him in IV. iv, a change indicated most strikingly by a new tone of voice. He had left for England determined that

from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth! (IV. iv. 65-66).³

But he returns to observe with wry humor and a kind of grim delight: "How the knave jowls it to the ground...!" (V. i. 84-85). The most significant change, of course, is that reflected in his new attitude of "religious resignation"⁴ and manifested in such passages as "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V. ii. 10-11) and "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V. ii. 230-231). If it is at all generally agreed that such passages indicate that Hamlet accepts his lot, is reconciled to "the world as it is";⁵ then certainly the most important question about the change is what has caused it.

Shakespeare gives us only one answer. The only thing that he tells us has happened to Hamlet between the time he left for England and the time he returns to Denmark is that he has escaped death. This escape, however, Hamlet

¹ Cambridge, Mass., 1956, p. 87.
³ All references to Hamlet are to the text in Kittredge's edition of the complete works (Boston, 1936).
definitely takes as the work of providence. His rashness in leaving his cabin on
the ship, he tells Horatio in V. ii, served him when his deep plot palled, and
from this fact we learn there is a divinity that shapes our ends. Heaven was
“ordinant” in that he happened to have his father’s signet in his purse to seal
the forged letter, and surely the pirate attack is felt by him to be further testi-
mony to the working of providence.

This is all we have to account for the change; but is it enough? Frankly, I
do not think it is, for the change is to be measured by the difference between
these two attitudes:

Now could I drink hot blood
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on. (III. ii. 408-410) —

and:

But thou wouldst not think how ill all’s here about my heart. But it is no
matter. (V. ii. 222-224)

And it is a more profound change than that which occurred earlier in Hamlet
and which is to be measured by the difference between his words of greeting
to the players and his first soliloquy, by the difference between the Hamlet re-
membered with such anguish of soul by Ophelia and the Hamlet we see lugging
the guts into the neighbor room. To effect the earlier change, the incestuous
marriage of his mother and uncle and the revelation of adultery and murder
were required. Are a handful of accidents enough, then, to effect the later and
the more profound change?

And yet the change is evident, and, what is more to the point, we accept it.
Why? The answer to this question, it seems to me, is that somehow we have
been prepared to meet a new Hamlet, perhaps we have even been led to anticipa-
ate not only a new Hamlet but the new Hamlet we actually meet in V. i, a
Hamlet reconciled, we have seen, to his world, one who has come to terms with
the world as it is.

The nature of this reconciliation we have been prepared for from nearly the
beginning of the play. In I. ii, Gertrude urges Hamlet to cast off his nighted
color and not for ever to seek his noble father “in the dust.”

Thou know’st ’tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity. (70-73)

His uncle preaches to him on the same text: death is “as common/ As any the
most vulgar thing to sense.” Peevishly to oppose the universal condition is a
fault to heaven and against the dead, a fault to nature, and

To reason most absurd, whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day,
“This must be so.” We pray you throw to earth
This unprevailing woe. (98-106)

The context aside, the advice given to Hamlet by Gertrude and Claudius is
sane, balanced common sense; but the point is, of course, that the context can-
not be put aside. Hamlet is aware of the universality of death, agreeing with his
mother that "it is common", but for him death is a particular. "Why seems it so particular to thee?" his mother asks. "Seems, madam? Nay," he answers, "it is." For this is his father who has died and whose life and death have been dishonored by Gertrude's o'erhasty and incestuous marriage.

Death as a general condition is of little importance to Hamlet at this point in the play: what is of concern to him is death as a particular, his father's death and his own. He yearns for his own death as a quietus, as an escape from a world grown weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable. Polonius takes his leave of him, and there is nothing Hamlet would more willingly part with—except his life. Death is to walk out of the air of Denmark—that congregation of vapors—into the grave, to be bounded in a nutshell but without bad dreams, and to find there the quiet sleep his heart aches for: "To die, to sleep...."

For the world has grown weary, and man—that quintessence of dust—delights him not. In the image, however, there is a kind of salvation, and we remember that Gertrude urged him not to seek his father forever in the dust. Claudius had besought him to cast to earth his unprevailing woe and lift his eyes to the sun. This advice Hamlet, in I. ii, could not take because a satyr now, rather than Hyperion, rules the kingdom of the sun, breeding maggots in a dead dog, a god kissing carrion. In a sense, however, Hamlet does follow the advice of his aunt-mother and uncle-father; at least he no longer seeks his father in the dust, for the object of his search is revealed to him high on the battlements of the castle.

No reconciliation, however, follows this revelation; in fact, it makes reconciliation nearly impossible, for it is a revelation of unnatural death, most foul, most unnatural. To accept this death as an aspect of the universal condition, to say of it with Claudius, "This must be so", would be to see the world as indeed a pestilent congregation of vapors; how would it be possible for a young man like Hamlet to grant that point of view? For Hamlet to accept his father's death would be to turn himself into a kind of Malevole or Vendice, seeing the earth as "the very muck-hill on which the sublunary orbs cast their excrements" and man as "the slime of this dung pit". As far as he has gone towards misanthropy, Hamlet never becomes a Malevole. The measure of difference lies in the balance achieved by Hamlet's intellect. For Malevole, "this earth is the only grave and Golgotha wherein all things that live must rot; 't is but the draught wherein the heavenly bodies discharge their corruption.... Man is the slime of this dung pit" (121-127). Coming from Malevole, these are statements of universal fact, and he would subscribe to Pietro's "All is damnation; wickedness extreme: / There is no faith in man" (IV. iv. 20-21). Hamlet, on the other hand, even in his most bitter moments retains a fuller awareness than Malevole (or Marston) possesses, and an ability to see, one might say, beyond the range of his own vision. The uses of this world "seem to me" weary, stale, flat and unprofitable. The earth seems a sterile promontory, the air "appeareth.... to me" a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, man—the quintessence of dust—"delights not me." Hamlet, unlike Malevole, is fully conscious of the subjectivity of his own point of view; at the same time, he is not only aware of what his eye fails to see but responds with all his fineness of soul to that other vision. As the

---

*Marston, The Malcontent IV. v. 124-127, in Elizabethan Plays, ed. Hazelton Spencer (Boston, 1933).*
quality of Malevole’s language testifies to his disgust with the world and man, so the quality of Hamlet’s reveals his admiration: “this goodly frame, the earth . . . this most excellent canopy, the air . . . this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire. . . .” And if man delights him not, yet man is still “in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!” It is this remarkable balance and wholeness of view that save Hamlet from the extravagance of Malevole, and for him the world never becomes a dung pit. Instead, the unweeded garden becomes a graveyard; man becomes, not slime, but dust: the distillation, the fifth essence, is converted back into its original form: dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return. Man—“dust that is a little gilt”—travels all his yesterdays the way to dusty death.

“Ay, madam,” Hamlet tells his mother in I.ii, death “is common”, and by V.i, he is aware of its universality, he knows just how common it is. To the list of the dead by that time he can add Polonius and, shortly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; in his nostrils is the smell of his own death, and, a little while before, he had watched twenty thousand souls “go to gain a little patch of ground” (IV.iv.18). Now he has returned “naked” and “alone”, conscious, as Lear becomes, of his own mortality. When the sexton spades up the skull at his feet, Hamlet sees what Lear sees in poor Tom: “the thing itself; unaccommodated man.” Like Lear, he too smells of mortality; his bones ache to think on’t. “Whose grave’s this, sirrah?” he asks the gravedigger. “Mine, sir”—yours, sir, anyone’s, sir… Here’s fine revolution, if we had the trick to see it.

Like the gravedigger, Hamlet now has no feeling of the business, for custom has made it in him a property of easiness. Perhaps he cannot sing at grave-making, but he can pun to a skull: “Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall’n?” He can trace the dust of a world-conqueror until he finds it stopping a bung-hole—and without considering a jot too curiously. His imagination turns from nothing. Earlier he had exclaimed, “What a piece of work is a man!” Now he asks the pointed question: “How long will a man lie i’ th’ earth ere he rot?”

The accumulation at this point of images connecting death and dirt has the effect of making death what Claudius had earlier said it is—“as common / As any the most vulgar thing to sense”—and of familiarizing us with the smell of death. “Examples gross as earth exhort” us, modify our perceptions until we agree with the sexton that the gravedigger is your ancient gentleman, holding up Adam’s profession, and that “the houses he makes lasts till doomsday.” We know that his song is about us as well as about himself and Hamlet: “But age…”

hath shipped me intil the land,
As if I had never been such.

For us, as for everyone, “a pit of clay . . . is meet.” Nor does this pattern of

? That this passage in Hamlet is crucial for the difference between Hamlet’s view of the world and man and Malevole’s is evident from Marston’s parody of it in Mendoza’s panegyric on woman: “In body how delicate, in soul how witty, in discourse how pregnant, in life, how wary, in favors how judicious, in day how sociable, and in night—O pleasure unutterable!” (I. v. 53-56 [p. 569]). The parallelism is noted by H. Harvey Wood in his edition of Marston’s plays (Edinburgh, 1934), I, 240, and is discussed by Alfred Harbage in Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (New York, 1952), pp. 166-168.
imagery come as altogether a surprise to us, for we have been prepared for the equation of death and dirt from very early in the play. It began in Gertrude's words in I.ii:

Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.

And it was continued by means of direct or indirect references throughout the scenes that followed. We have heard Hamlet say in IV. ii, that he has “compounded” Polonius' body “with dust, whereto 'tis kin” (6). We have been shown “how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (IV. iii. 32-33), and we have learned that a body will not last as long under the stairs that lead to the lobby as the sexton claims it will in the grave. We have seen Ophelia's madness fasten itself on death and earth: “At his head a grass-green turf....” “But I cannot choose but weep to think they would lay him i' th' cold ground....” (IV. v. 31, 69-70). And we have been told of her own “muddy death” (IV. vii. 185).

Most of all, perhaps, we have been prepared by the spectacle of Fortinbras' army going “to their graves like beds”, twenty thousand men “for a fantasy and trick of fame” going to “fight for a plot / ... Which is not tomb enough and continent / To hide the slain.” “We go to gain”, the Captain has told Hamlet, “a little patch of ground.”

There is little wonder, then, that we find Hamlet's speculations perfectly appropriate when, along with a spadeful of dirt, a skull is tossed up at his feet: “Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt?” What may have escaped notice, however, is the distinct tenor of much of Hamlet's commentary here: that is, his dwelling on, nearly his obsession with, the dead man as one who was once lord of much real estate. The second skull may be that of a lawyer or of one who was “in's time a great buyer of land.” The skull of Yorick raises the question whether “Alexander look'd o' this fashion i' th' earth.” Did he smell so—he who wept there were no more lands to conquer? Nor is it considering too curiously to trace the world conqueror's “noble dust”—“noble” in the sense that alive it is the distillation to the fifth essence—until we find it “converted” to loam and “stopping a bung-hole.” Or the imagination might track down the clay of Caesar—“that earth which kept the world in awe”—to a patch in a wall to keep out the cold.

To the buyer of land, and perhaps to Yorick as well, we might relate Osric. His name recalls Yorick, and he appears somewhat a fool. More to the point, however, “he hath much land.... ’Tis a chough; but ... spacious in the possession of dirt” (V. ii. 87-90). For comparison with Alexander and Caesar, obviously Fortinbras suggests himself. Like them, he is a soldier, and he aspires to be something of a conqueror. “Of unimproved mettle”, he is hardly, of course, a world shaker, and indeed there is something infinitely comic in old Norway's pulling him up short in his plans to battle Denmark and then giving him “three thousand crowns” to lead his twenty thousand “lawless resolutes” to war with the Polacks who have already been “smote” by the elder Hamlet. Nevertheless, this tender and delicate prince is a warrior puffed with divine ambition and leads an army of great mass and charge. To what base uses, then, may his dust return?
There is in the play, though, a conqueror of more renown than Fortinbras, and one much more comparable to Alexander and Caesar—the elder Hamlet himself. Indeed, the comparison is fundamental to our perception of the elder Hamlet, and it is Horatio who first makes it. Pondering what the import might be of the Ghost’s apparition, he calls the attention of Bernardo and Marcellus to similar occurrences in “the most high and palmy state of Rome, / A little ere the mightiest Julius fell. . . .” (I. i. 113–114). Hamlet, a scene later, compares his father to Hyperion and, in III. iv. 56–57, to Jove and Mars: “An eye like Mars, to threaten and command.” Further passages in the play’s first scene expand the image of the former King into a figure of heroic proportions: A “fair and warlike form”, it wears the very armor the elder Hamlet wore in battle with Norway and frowns as the King did

when, in an angry parle,
He smote the sleded Polacks on the ice.

He was “our valiant Hamlet”—and esteemed for his valor by “this side of our known world.” In formal and single combat, he slew the elder Norway, Fortinbras. He “was and is the question of these wars.” Finally, he was “the conqueror” of “all those . . . lands.” Like the buyer of land whose skull it might be that lies at Hamlet’s feet in V. i, like Osric, and like Alexander and Caesar, the elder Hamlet had “much land”, was “spacious . . . in the possession of dirt.”

Is it going too far to suggest, then, that in the first scene of the last act Hamlet finds his noble father where Gertrude told him not to look—“in the dust”? To suggest that Hamlet has come somehow to see the death of his father in relation to the universal condition that is represented by the graveyard and the symbol of dust? That he has somehow become aware of how false were his terms of comparison earlier in the play—“Hyperion’s curls; the front of Jove himself; An eye like Mars . . . / A station like the herald Mercury”—and that he spoke more wisely than perhaps he knew when in I. ii, he said of his father, “He was a man, take him for all in all”? If these suggestions are allowed, then it may be admitted that Hamlet unknowingly echoes Horatio’s comparison in the play’s first scene when he phrases the line: “Imperious Caesar, dead and turn’d to clay.”

These suggestions do not, of course, have to be allowed, for they refer obviously to what can only be called Hamlet’s subconscious—although I cannot see how a coherent picture of his personality can be drawn without taking that element of him into account. Nevertheless, the suggestions may be disallowed without weakening the thesis of this paper, for the concern here is not so much with what Hamlet feels as with what we—readers and spectators—feel. And surely what we feel is the spell of mortality that dominates the last act. If Hamlet does not equate his father with the clay of imperious Caesar, we are ready to do so. Freed, too, from the necessity of insisting on what must be Hamlet’s point of view, we can go on to make other equations: Claudius and the politician “that would circumvent God” and, finally, Hamlet and Yorick. There is, it seems to me, something of a man standing before a mirror in the picture of Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull and looking into its vacant sockets. Like Yorick, Hamlet himself is “a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy”, of “gibes” and “gambols” and “flashes of merriment”. As he would have Yorick’s skull do, he
has himself preached on the theme of women's painting their faces (III. i. 148-150). Yorick was a "whoreson mad fellow", and Hamlet, a fool of nature, has put on an antic disposition at court; indeed during the play-within-the-play scene he becomes a veritable court jester. "You are merry, my lord", Ophelia observes as he lies with his head in her lap. "Who, I?" responds Hamlet. "Ay, my lord", Ophelia answers. "O God," Hamlet says, in perhaps the most bitter line in the play, "your only jig-maker!" If the skull tossed up at Hamlet's feet might be the pate of a politician, the one he holds in his hand might be his own.

Relating these impressions now to our initial problem, that of a Hamlet "come to terms with his world", we can say, I believe, that although the vision of man as dust does not dissuade Hamlet from his revenge, it does in a way adjust his task to the universal perspective offered by the graveyard. After all, Claudius is no more able than the nameless politician to circumvent God—"if it be not now, yet it will come." And the death of the elder Hamlet too is seen in relation to a universal fiat—"this must be so." Fratricide is still unnatural, but death no longer is, and Hamlet is perhaps able to say with Macbeth, although not so coldly, he "should have died hereafter; There would have been a time for such a word." Finally, the vision prepares us for Hamlet's new mood of resignation. If this is the fine of all fines, to have fine pates full of fine dirt, if the breathing time of man's day is "no more than to say, 'one'", then what is it indeed "to leave betimes?" And Hamlet gives us the answer: "It is no matter."

Georgetown University
Washington, D. C.

Is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damn'd
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil? (V. ii. 67-70).