THE COMEDY OF *HAMLET*

Manfred Draudt

Universität Wien

Just before the end of the millenium, *The Sunday Times* declared *Hamlet the* outstanding masterwork of the past 1000 years. It may not be generally recognized that a defining characteristic of the world's most popular tragedy is, in fact, its comic elements —although discerning critics have long pointed to the significance of these comic elements. What "distinguishes [*Hamlet*] from the rest" of Shakespeare's plays is, according to the eighteenth-century critic Dr Johnson, its "variety.... The scenes are interchangeably diversified with merriment and solemnity", he argues, and continues that "the pretended madness of Hamlet causes much mirth", i.e. laughter (1968: 1010-11). Some modern critics and editors take a still firmer line on this issue. In her introduction to the New Penguin edition Anne Barton claims that "*Hamlet* contains many more comic characters and episodes than *Othello, Lear*, [and] *Macbeth*". She not only briefly surveys the comic characters of the tragedy but also comments on the uniqueness of the central character:

> Hamlet ... seems to be the only one of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists ... who possesses —and demonstrates— a sense of humour. Like the witty characters of the comedies, he likes to play games with language, to parody other characters' verbal styles, and he has a predilection for puns, bawdy double entendres, and sophisticated badinage which links him [even] with figures like ... Touchstone and Feste. (1980: 23)

One may add that Hamlet's wit and humour, which distinguish him from Claudius and Gertrude, contribute to the antagonism between him and the royal couple. In this paper I should like to pursue this element systematically, exploring some comic aspects of the protagonist, examining the various comic figures, and also commenting on the complex relationship between the play's comic and serious elements, the unique mixture of "merriment and solemnity". Comedy is, according to Susan Snyder, "the ground from which, or against which, tragedy develops.... Comedy and tragedy function ... as polar opposites, ... [or] as two sides of the same coin" (1979: 5).

ATLANTIS
Vol. XXIV Núm. 2 (Junio 2002): 85-107.
ISSN 0210-6124

The classic comic conflict between blocking father and young lovers, which underlies the actions of many Shakespearean comedies,[1] informs one strand of the action of *Hamlet*: the relationship between Polonius, Ophelia and the Prince. Also prominent in other tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, the conflict between old and young is significantly transformed in the revenge tragedy —though its comic origin cannot be denied.[2] Anne Barton is clearly aware of it when pointing out that Hamlet "is the only ... [tragic] hero [who] is unmarried and eligible" (1980: 24). Yet whereas the other lovers, and particularly the daughters, are all rebellious and defy their fathers' will, Ophelia meekly accepts Polonius's command, "from this time forth/ ... [not] to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" (1.3.132-134).[3] Her unquestioning obedience, which distinguishes her from the more spirited and independent young ladies in similar situations, causes —at least indirectly— her madness and tragic death; yet the Prince, too, is overawed by parental authority[4] and appears to resign himself to the will of the obstructive father. As Harold Jenkins puts it, Ophelia's "tragedy ... is that Hamlet has left her [chaste] treasure [i.e. her virginity] with her" (1982: 152).

Whereas the (potentially comic) lovers' conflict with the father takes a tragic turn, Polonius is clearly conceived by Shakespeare as a comic figure, a classic *senex*, as the stage-direction at the opening of act 2, scene 1, in the Second Quarto (1605) shows: "*Enter old Polonius*" (sig.E [1r]).[5] A stock comic type, Polonius is nevertheless a composite figure, combining features derived from Roman comedy, where the *senex* was the father of a son, with others from the Italian *commedia erudita*, in which the *vecchio* could be the father of a daughter.[6]

At the end of the fishmonger scene, when he has deflated Polonius's self-esteem and dignity, Hamlet aptly characterizes him as a "tedious old fool" (2.2.212), an opinion he is going to confirm after having inadvertently killed him. Deliberately playing the role of a fool to the old dotard, Hamlet exposes Polonius's physical failings and holds up an unflattering mirror to his advanced age:

> The satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plumtree gum, and that they have plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. (2.2.193-96)

---

[1] See, for example, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

[2] For the tradition of the motif and a brief survey of Shakespeare's use compare Miola 2000: 87-97.

[3] References are to *Hamlet*. Ed. Philip Edwards.

[4] Edwards argues that "Ophelia's tragedy, like Hamlet's, is the tragedy of obedience to a father" (1985: 46).

[5] "*old* gives a clue to Shakespeare's conception of the character", according to Jenkins 1982 (Note on stage-direction 2.1). In his "Polonius, der Typus des Senilen" B. Scherer (1930) confirms Shakespeare's type-casting from a psychological point of view.

[6] For the classical tradition and the distinction between the two types of *senex* see Hosley 1966: 137-38.

Hamlet again harps on his age when, to the actors, he contemptuously refers to "That great baby ... not yet out of his swaddling clouts" (2.2.351).[7] Polonius's senility also becomes palpable when he is giving directions to Reynaldo and gets lost in mid-sentence:

> And then sir does a this—a does—what was I about to say?
> By the mass I was about to say something. Where did I leave?
> (2.1.49-50)[8]

In the same scene he shows another trait associated with old age, pedantry, by splitting hairs (or words) when proposing to accuse Laertes of "drabbing", i.e. whoring, but not of "incontinency", i.e. sexual excess (2.1.26-30). Polonius always attempts to appear learned and witty, yet his pride in his own skill, cunning, and wisdom makes him appear all the more ridiculous. In addition to his "laboured quibbling" (Hibbard 1987: 34), his tediousness and long-windedness are hallmarks of his character. His twenty-three-line-instruction to his son Laertes opens with "And these few precepts in thy memory" (1.3.58), and he again promises to "be brief", "since brevity is the soul of wit/ And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes" (2.2.90-92), when he believes that he "ha[s] found/ The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (2.2.48-49). Yet his preliminary "expostulation" and circular reasoning[9] ("for to define true madness,/ What is't but to be nothing else but mad?", 2.2.92-94) bore the Queen so much that she impatiently tries to interrupt him: "More matter with less art" (95). She fails, however, much like Lady Capulet, who is equally unable to stop the officious loquacity of the Nurse.[10]

Romeo and Juliet is echoed again when in his exaggerated show of paternal affection and anxiety for his daughter's honour the blocking father behaves exactly like old Capulet,[11] cruelly ridiculing his daughter by picking up a word from her speech and repeating it in different senses:

> Do you believe his [Hamlet's] tenders as you call them?
> ...
> Marry I'll teach you. Think yourself a baby
> That you have tane these tenders for true pay,

[7] Rosencrantz backs Hamlet's mockery with the proverbial saying "an old man is twice a child" (2.2.352). Compare Jaques in *As You Like It*, who describes the last scene of life as "second childishness" (2.7.165).

[8] His servant assists with the cue, "At 'closes at the consequence'", which is eagerly picked up by Polonius. When expounding the cause of Hamlet's madness, Polonius again appears to lose the thread of his argument and nonsensically repeats himself: "Thus it remains, and the remainder thus" (2.2.104).

[9] According to Dr Johnson, Polonius's rhetorical style was meant "to ridicule the practice of those times" (in Hibbard 1987, Note on 2.2.86-104).

[10] After her "Enough of this, I pray thee hold thy peace", the Nurse carries on for another eight lines so that even Juliet interferes: "And stint thou too, I pray thee, Nurse". Yet she, too, fails to stop her (1.2.50-59).

[11] Compare 3.5.149-152: "How how, how how, chopt-logic? What is this?/ 'Proud', and 'I thank you', and 'I thank you not',/ And yet 'not proud', mistress minion you?/ Thank me thankings, nor proud me no prouds".

> Which are no sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,
> Or —not to crack the wind of a poor phrase,
> Roaming it thus —you'll tender me a fool. (1.3.103-109)

The discrepancy between Polonius's benign appearance and his real nature as a hypocrite, opportunist and flatterer —indirectly suggested by his trite and hollow sententiousness[12]— is relentlessly exposed by Hamlet. In his first private encounter he immediately questions Polonius's honesty: "I would you were so honest a man [as a fishmonger]. ... To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (2.2.174-77). There is good reason to assume that Polonius has already served Hamlet Senior as lord chamberlain, yet he eagerly supports the new King —or whoever is in power. In his remarks to Laertes, Claudius leaves no doubt that he is heavily indebted to his trusted counsellor, whose age and experience may well have contributed to authorising his claim to the throne:

> The head is not more native to the heart,
> The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father. (1.2.47-49)

Therefore we should not be surprised that, in contrast to Hamlet, Claudius calls the chamberlain "faithful and honourable" (2.2.128).

His meddlesomeness, to which Hamlet draws attention in his contemptuous epitaph, "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell" (3.4.31), is another major comic trait, for which Lily B. Campbell has identified a specific classical model, Plutarch's "De curiositate" from the *Moralia.* Plutarch's description of the overly curious in many respects anticipates the character of Polonius: he is so busy looking for the hidden that he misses the overt; he has too much confidence in his wisdom, but cannot apply it; he must bleat out what he knows; and his espionage leads him into trouble (295-313).

His tendency to eavesdrop, to spy and to meddle in other people's lives is another comic device that Shakespeare inherited from classical comedy (Miola 2000: 72). Spying on his own son, he shows his deviousness in instructing Reynaldo to slander Laertes, for he believes that the end justifies the means: "Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth" (2.1.61); and he concludes his directions with what can stand as the motto of his whole existence: "By indirections find directions out" (64). Characterized by "opportunist shifts, deceit and distorted ingenuity" (Wickham 1969: 212), Polonius proves an outright hypocrite, accusing the Prince of the very immorality of which he himself is guilty: Hamlet's "vows ... are [but] brokers/ [or pimps, serving] ... mere[ly] ... The better to beguile" (1.3.127-31).

Polonius tries to sound Hamlet in the fishmonger-scene ("I'll board him presently", 2.2.168), uses Ophelia as a decoy when overhearing their conversation

[12] Compare his advice to Laertes (1.3.55-81), his instructions to Reynaldo (2.1.1-72) and his lecturing to the King and Queen (2.2.85-157). According to Draper 1935, "his pithy moralistic sayings have often been described as stupid and illtimed" (82).

(3.1.43ff.), and again spies on the Prince in Gertrude's closet (3.4.1-25); yet he foolishly believes that Hamlet's (seeming) lunacy is caused by "the very ecstasy of love" (2.1.100) and thus fails to discover Hamlet's "mystery". The Prince not only makes him look ridiculous in the fishmonger scene but also outwits him throughout so that the lord chamberlain is reduced to a comic butt for his jests. In this he is associated with another comic stereotype, the deceiver deceived, whose fall will be precipitated by excessive confidence in his own wisdom and cunning.[13]

Polonius's petty intrigues and abortive attempts to find out the truth about Hamlet "fall on th'inventor's head" (cf. 5.2.364) in the Queen's closet, where he is mistaken for "[his] better" (i.e. Claudius) and finds his sudden but appropriate ending during his favourite occupation —spying: "Polonius mistook and was mistaken", observes Susan Snyder (1979: 131). His pathetic death, however, becomes a turning-point in the play's action, precipitating the catastrophe: Hamlet's banishment, Ophelia's madness and suicide, and, last but not least, Laertes's revenge.

Although he is mainly a butt and outlet for the Prince's pent-up feelings, several traits of Polonius show surprising parallels with Hamlet: both have a university education and close associations with the theatre, so that both feel qualified to comment extensively on the travelling actors and their court performance. Yet whereas Hamlet proves an accomplished actor, gives sophisticated instructions to the players, and even composes a speech for "The Murder of Gonzago" (2.2.493), Polonius's pretensions to wit, erudition and literary taste appear a mere parody of the Prince's intellectuality (Snyder 1979: 109). His alleged love of "jig[s] or ... tale[s] of bawdry" (2.2.458) is ridiculed by Hamlet, as is his pride on having been "accounted a good actor" (3.2.89). Boasting that he "did enact Julius Caesar ... [who] was killed i'th'Capitol" (91), he only feeds Hamlet's scathing quibble: "so capital a calf". His mock death as Caesar has both comic and tragic implications: in the Globe theatre the actor of Polonius may jokingly refer to the role he has just been performing in Shakespeare's previous tragedy, *Julius Caesar*, yet there is also an anticipation of the "real" stabbing of Polonius —the "brute part" in which will be taken by Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are employed by Claudius to find out the true reason of Hamlet's "transformation"[14] and to entertain him, appear as identical twins (Snyder 1979: 113) who never are seen separately:

> *King:* Thanks Rosencrantz, and gentle Guildenstern.
> *Queen:* Thanks Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz. (2.2.33-34)

Gertrude's repetition, or rather correction (with the names reversed), of Claudius's acknowledgment suggests that the two courtiers are "so indistinguishable that the King ha[s] mistaken one for the other" (David 1978: 78) on their first

---

[13] He prides himself, for example, to the Queen: "I'd fain know that,/ That I have positively said, 'tis so,/ When it proved otherwise?" (2.2.151-53).

[14] "Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him" (2.2.5, 7).

appearance. They are faceless tools who comply unquestioningly with the King's commands —in some productions "sweeping off their hats" in servile but meaningless politeness,[15] very muck like Osric (Tom Stoppard exploits these comic aspects in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*).

In spite of being welcomed by the Prince as his friends from the university, they do not deal honestly with him, evade his questions (2.2.261-274) and clearly rank their allegiance towards the new King higher[16] than their loyalty towards the Prince. In his characteristic enigmatic manner Hamlet tells them not to interfere in matters they do not understand and also warns them that his behaviour may be deceptive: "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (2.2.347-48). Nevertheless, they continue in their attempts to "pluck out the heart of [Hamlet's] ... mystery" (3.2.330-31) —which are as amateurish as those of Polonius— and so arouse the Prince's scorn and contempt (Hibbard 1987: 54). After the abortive performance of "The Murder of Gonzago", Hamlet fools them by deliberately misinterpreting their reproach concerning the "distempered" (3.2.273), i.e. annoyed, King as if they were referring to his excessive drinking. Hamlet also implies that they are lying[17] and sarcastically reproves Guildenstern:

> 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me. (3.2.334-36)

Having openly sided with the King, Rosencrantz is rudely insulted by Hamlet as a flatterer and sycophant, compared with a "sponge" (4.2.12), i.e. Claudius's willing instrument, and derided for his stupidity: "A knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear" (4.2.21). Hamlet even plays hide-and-seek with them instead of telling them the whereabouts of Polonius's corpse. Their deaths, which are brought about by the forgery that saves his own life, "are not near ... [his] conscience", for, as he later confesses to Horatio, they loved their "employment" (5.2.57-58).

Whereas Hamlet has become increasingly impatient and scornful with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he rather seems to smile at the "waterfly" (5.2.82) Osric, whom he ridicules more mildly and whose foibles he exposes by parodying his style.[18] Osric's affected praise of Laertes, "you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see", Hamlet mocks by echoing him:

[15] For example in the National Theatre production of 1976 (David 1978: 78).

[16] See 2.2.30-32: "[we] here give up ourselves in the full bent/ To lay our service freely at your feet/ To be commanded".

[17] "play[ing] upon this pipe ... is as easy as lying" (3.2.318-24).

[18] Hamlet's versatility as a parodist is unique. He also mocks the hollow rhetoric of Claudius and Laertes at Ophelia's grave: "I'll rant as well as you" (5.1.278). Compare Barton 1980: 44.

> Sir, his [Laertes's] definement suffers no perdition in you ... in the verity of extolment, I take ... his infusion of such dearth ... who else would trace his umbrage? (5.2.106-11)

Osric is a younger counterpart to Polonius,[19] a superficial busybody and go-between, possibly a nouveau riche thanks to the King's favour: "he hath much land and fertile", observes Hamlet (5.2.85). Not only his affected manners and fashionable jargon but also the stage-direction of the First Quarto (1603), "*Enter a Bragart Gentleman*" (I2[r]), leave no doubt that he originated from another comic type, the braggart soldier: the *miles gloriosus* of Latin comedy and the *capitano* of the *commedia dell'arte* or the *soldato* of the *commedia erudita*. It may even be possible that Osric is a prominent instance of Shakespeare's self-borrowing[20] because of his striking resemblance with Monsieur Le Beau, the pretentious and foppish courtier attending on Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*. Since *Hamlet* was probably written in 1600 and the comedy between 1599 and 1600, it seems likely that Le Beau was Shakespeare's original creation, also because Osric's appearance and language are much more elaborate. In any case the striking similarity in character and situation indicates the closeness in composition.

Both Le Beau and Osric are servants to a usurper, gossipy conveyers of news,[21] who prepare and announce the wrestling/ fencing match in which the hero is involved (and in which the odds are heavily against him) and who also officiate at and comment on the fight. In keeping with their role as (cowardly) braggarts, they prove their expertise by pompously talking about weapons, dangers, and odds. Their affected manners and ceremonious speech are clearly intended to impress others; yet in fact they are ridiculed by the superior wits of Rosalind and Hamlet, who not only make fun of their diction[22] but also deliberately baffle and confuse them and thus expose their slow wits (again the deceiver deceived comes to mind). Both therefore serve as foils to the heroine/ hero, contrasting with their genuine wit, their straightforward honesty and their aversion to the usurper. The Prince gives a piercing analysis of Osric's character after he has left the stage:

> Thus has he ... only got the tune of the time and outward habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection ... do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out. (5.2.165-70)

According to *A Shakespeare Encyclopedia*, "Osric is a minor gem of Shakespearean delineation, who, in a few short lines, emerges unforgettably as a typical fawning, sycophantic Elizabethan courtier" (s.v. Osric). With this comic figure and his model or counterpart Le Beau, Shakespeare provides an important

---

[19] "*young Osricke*", according to the Folio stage-direction and the Second Quarto (compare 5.2.171).

[20] Compare Draudt 2001.

[21] Compare Rosalind's, "his mouth full of news ... Then shall we be news-crammed" (*As You Like It* 1.2.86-88), and Osric's "sir, here is newly come to court Laertes" (*Hamlet* 5.2.100-01).

[22] Rosalind picks up Le Beau's "presence" and puns on legal jargon "... by these presents-" (1.2.109-11).

link between the classical braggart figure and the affected, pretentious, and fawning fop, a character type that was to become enormously popular in the Restoration comedy of manners.

As time-servers who outwardly defer to the Prince all these comic characters lack a backbone and unthinkingly accommodate to any political change: this makes them the antithesis of the morally principled hero, whose mockery and contempt they provoke. A comparison of Hamlet's conversations with Polonius and Osric (Snyder 1979: 111-12) again shows the striking parallel between the two courtiers:

> *Hamlet*: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
> *Polonius*: By th'mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.
> *Hamlet*: Methinks it is like a weasel.
> *Polonius*: It is backed like a weasel.
> *Hamlet*: Or like a whale?
> *Polonius*: Very like a whale. (3.2.339-44)

Osric changes his opinion as quickly as Polonius does:

> *Osric*: ... it is very hot.
> *Hamlet:* No, believe me, 'tis very cold, the wind is northerly.
> *Osric*: It is indifferent cold my lord, indeed.
> *Hamlet*: But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.
> *Osric*: Exceedingly my lord, it is very sultry, as 'twere —I cannot tell how. (5.2.92-97)

All four comic type-characters share an ignorance of what is going on around them, and three of them will pay with their lives for interfering in spheres beyond their understanding:

> 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
> Between the pass and fell incensèd points
> Of mighty opposites. (5.2.60-62)

Finally, I should like to look at the hero himself. Hamlet's very first words in the play, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65),[23] with which he satirically attacks Claudius's claim that the Prince is both his "cousin" (i.e. kinsman) and his "son", are a quibbling aside. In this way Hamlet immediately establishes his role as a bitter court jester exposing the hollowness of political talk; at the same time, he sets up an intimate relationship with the audience, who are induced to see the action from his point of view (Davison 1983: 32). Both his critical spirit and his wit show again in the ensuing wordplay in which he contradicts Claudius with the observation that "the clouds" no longer hang on him but that he rather is "too much i'the'sun" (punning on the literal and metaphorical meaning of sun as an emblem of royalty and on the homophone *son*, that is, *offspring*).

[23] Alluding to the proverb "The nearer in kin, the less in kindness" (Tilley K38).

Throughout Hamlet's wit is indicative of his intellectual superiority. He is a true "university wit", a student of Wittenberg, the university associated with Luther and Dr Faustus, the very name of which appears to play on *wit* (Davison 1983: 32). Only because of his intellectual brilliance can he play the fool and "put [on] an antic disposition" (1.5.172), i.e. a fantastic behaviour. This assumed madness gives him the license of a court jester who is not held accountable for his jibes at the mighty, and who can utter the truth about the King, the Queen, and the courtiers to their faces. In exposing his antagonists' foibles and vices he simultaneously gives vent to his own pent-up frustrations, to his disgust with hypocrisy, flattery and moral corruption. Furthermore, he wins time to find out whether the Ghost was honest and even provokes the King into action, so that he can eventually trap him with the performance of a play that resembles his crime.

Under cover of his pretended madness he resorts mainly to using puns, which show his "relentless literal-mindedness" (Barton 1980: 44), his desire to deflate the puffed-up courtly discourse and to reduce it to its plain meaning. In this respect Hamlet's verbal strategies closely resemble those of the insolent servants and the fools of the comedies, who deliberately misconstrue the meaning intended by others. In addition, he employs scornful irony, for example when he remarks on his mother's remarriage immediately after his father's death:

> Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats
> Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables. (1.2.180-81)

Throughout, his linguistic tactics show him an outsider who constantly baffles the people he talks to —as well as the audience. Although he appears to be overawed when facing his father's Ghost,[24] his second encounter with the supernatural apparition in the company of Horatio and Marcellus borders on burlesque or low comedy (Davison 1983: 27), since he then rudely addresses his father as the "fellow in the cellarage":

> Ha, ha, boy, sayst thou so? art thou there truepenny?
> ...
> Well said, old mole, canst work i'th'earth so fast?
> A worthy pioneer. (1.5.155-63)

This incongruous behaviour immediately preceding his admission that he will be pretending madness may well itself be an instance of play-acting, an attempt to disguise how seriously the Ghost's revelation and command have affected him. Characteristic of this particular scene, and of the play as a whole, is the curious combination of awe-inspiring happenings with comic elements. Later instances are the murder of Polonius with Hamlet's callous response (act 4, scene 2) and the grotesque gravedigger scene.

[24] "Remember thee?/ Ay thou poor ghost" (1.5.95-96).

The significance of the graveyard scene is underlined by its length: with its 266 lines it is in fact the longest penultimate scene of any of Shakespeare's tragedies. Right from the first appearance of the Ghost in act 1, scene 1, and Claudius's reference to "our dear brother's death" (1.2.1) *Hamlet* is a play about death: the protagonist appears to have been living under this shadow all the time. It is in the graveyard scene where the subject of death becomes absolutely central. Not only in the famous soliloquy (3.1.56) but already at the end of the second scene, "O ... that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129-32), Hamlet has pondered on suicide and death; now, in the graveyard (act 5, scene 1), two Clowns are commenting on the issue of suicide —Ophelia's, but in a way that makes complete nonsense of conventional logic and legal argument: "[Has] she drowned herself in her own defence? ... Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life" (5.1.5-17). The gravediggers, who are critical of their betters,[25] are acutely aware of potential social injustice: "the more pity that great folk should have countenance in this world to drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christians" (22). With their quibbles and riddles (Adam was the first gentleman to bear arms),[26] they prove to be genuine English rustics who combine shrewd wit and bluntness with a careless ignorance of the conventions of language, logic and propriety. Hamlet wonders whether "this fellow [has] no feeling of his business" (55), because he sings while throwing up skulls and digging a grave. Yet it is the seemingly dull gravedigger —at first disparagingly compared to an "ass" (67) by Hamlet— who eventually outwits the sophisticated intellectual: "How absolute the knave is!", the Prince remarks to Horatio, "We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" (115-16).

The Clown brings about a radical change of perspective in the play, from the metaphysical concerns associated with the protagonist to the macabre physical reality of digging a grave, knocking about skulls and the question of a corpse rotting in the earth:

> ... if a be not rotten before a die ... a tanner will last you nine year ... [because] his hide is so tanned with his trade, that a will keep out water a great while. (140-45)

This change of perspective also entails a profound change in Hamlet himself. Through his new awareness of the great levelling power of death, he finally comes to terms with all the fears, qualms and obsessions that have troubled him for so long. Whereas in the great soliloquy he felt almost paralysed by thoughts of "the law's delay/ [and] The insolence of office" (3.1.72-73), now, facing the reality of death, he laughs at the absurdities of lawyers: "Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer the rude knave to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?"

---

[25] If the mad young Hamlet does not recover his wits in England, "'tis no great matter [, because] there the men are as mad as he [is]" (5.1.124-31).

[26] Compare also the gallows-maker, who builds the strongest frame (5.1.35-37).

(5.1.84-87). In the grotesque panorama of the dead, including politicians, fashionable courtiers and ladies, as well as the "mad" (149) jester Yorick who is equated with great conquerors such as Alexander and Caesar, Hamlet becomes aware of a "comic relativism" (Snyder 1979: 127). He is struck by the "fine revolution" (75) which turns a beautiful lady into a grinning skull and changes emperors "who kept the world in awe" into the dust that can be used to "stop a beer-barrel" or patch a hole in the wall (179-83).

Here Hamlet is, in fact, picking up a thread of thought that he first pursued in his shockingly macabre replies as to the whereabouts of Polonius's corpse:

> At supper ... not where he eats, but where he is eaten ... 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 one table.... A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of this worm, [which means] ... that a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar. (4.3.18-28)

In the confrontation with the hated Claudius, danger sharpened his tongue (Hibbard 1987: 60), and he employed his sarcastic wit to provoke the King: "If your messenger find him not there [in heaven], seek him i'th'other place yourself" (4.3.31-32); now, in the graveyard scene, we encounter a totally new Prince who is calm, composed, and emotionally detached so that he can laugh at absurdities instead of desperately railing at them. Earlier it was he who put King Claudius in his place; now it is a foolish gravedigger who puts the Prince in his place. Intellectually superior to anybody else at court, he is finally outwitted by a clown. Just like the clever Touchstone is defeated by the simple shepherd Corin in *As You Like It* (act 3, scene 2), so Hamlet meets his match in the gravedigger, who treats him in exactly the same way as Hamlet has treated the other members of the court of Elsinore. Just as he had reduced discourse to its "non-metaphoric" meaning (Barton 1980: 45), so now the gravedigger reduces everything, including death, to the merely physical and literal (Snyder 1979: 128): he does not lie in the grave, yet it is his, and he digs it neither for a man nor for a woman but "one that was a woman" (5.1.105-14).

In the confrontation with the gravedigger, Hamlet has come to new understanding of death and of himself that is characterized by detachment as well as by a new humility. He no longer longs for death as a release nor shuns it out of the dread of what comes after but accepts it as the unavoidable, common destiny of all men, whether good or bad, great or ridiculous. This totally new perception of death —as well as of life— finds its ultimate expression in the ensuing scene in which with Stoic calm he consciously submits to a higher order:[27]

---

[27] See Draudt 1983, where —in addition to biblical reminiscences (Matthew 10.29 and 29.44)— Seneca's Epistle 24 is identified as the source of this passage.

> We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come —the readiness is all. (5.2.192-95)

Hamlet's comment on his salvation from imminent death, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends/ Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11), suggests that his miraculous return to Denmark, brought about by Fate or coincidence as well as his encounter with the pirates, has brought him to a resignation to God's will. Nevertheless, it was his confrontation with the comic gravediggers that has effected the most decisive change in his development, his readiness for death —as well as for the final action of revenge. Although death and suicide have been on his mind for a long time, Hamlet is exceptional in that he does not take his own life in the end; by contrast, the tragic heroes in the immediately preceding and following tragedies Romeo, Brutus and Othello, all kill themselves.

The comedy of *Hamlet* contributes to the play's uniqueness on many different levels: the Prince's sharp wit and his puns add to his complexity and convey his intellectual brilliance, enhancing his attractiveness to audiences. On the other hand, the very limitation and unawareness of the comic characters —Polonius, Osric, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern— direct the audience's attention to the deeper issues and darker aspects of the play. Like the travesties, which I have examined elsewhere (Draudt 1994), they make us reconsider the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy from a new or unfamiliar perspective. There may yet be a grain of truth in the judgment of Thomas Rymer, who tended to condemn Shakespeare's tragedies from a neoclassical point of view, when he remarked that "*Shakespears* genius lay for Comedy and Humour" (1995: 156).

WORKS CITED

Campbell, Lily B. 1948: "Polonius: The Tyrant's Ears". *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*. Ed. James G. McManaway, Giles E. Dawson, and Edwin E. Willoughby. Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library. 295-313.

Campbell, Oscar James and Edward G. Quinn, eds. 1966: *A Shakespeare Encyclopedia*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd.

David, Richard 1978: *Shakespeare in the Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davison, Peter 1983: *Hamlet: Text and Performance*. Hong Kong: Methuen.

Draudt, Manfred 1983: "Another Senecan Echo in *Hamlet*". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34: 216-17.

——— 1998: "Nineteenth-Century Burlesques of *Hamlet* in London and Vienna". *Hamlet East-West.* Eds. Gibinska Marta and Jerzy Limon. Gdansk: Theatrum Gedanese Foundation. 64-84.

——— 2001: "The Same Within: Intertextuality in *Twelfth Night*". *the other within.* Ed. Ruth Parkin-Gounelas. Vol. 1: Literature and Culture. Thessaloniki: Athanasios A. Altintzis. 191-200.

Draper, John W. 1935: "Lord Chamberlain Polonius". *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 71: 78-93.

Hosley, Richard 1966: "The Formal Influence of Plautus and Terence". *Elizabethan Theatre.* Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 9. Eds. John Russel Brown and Bernard Harris. London: Edward Arnold. 130-45.

Johnson, Samuel 1968: "Johnson on Shakespeare". *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 8. Ed. Arthur Sherbo. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Miola, Robert 2000: *Shakespeare's Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rymer, Thomas 1995*: The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*. Reprint of the 1963 edition. With a new Introduction by John Vladimir Price. London: Routledge/ Thoemmes Press.

Scherer, Bernhard 1930: "Polonius, der Typus des Senilen". *Anglia* 54: 149-67.

Shakespeare, William 1994: *As You Like It.* Ed. Alan Brissenden. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— 1985: *Hamlet*. Ed. Philip Edwards. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——— 1987: *Hamlet*. Ed. G. R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— 1982: *Hamlet*. Ed. Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen & Co.

——— 1980: *Hamlet*. Ed. T. J. B. Spencer, with an Introduction by Anne Barton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

——— 1984: *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Snyder, Susan 1979: *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *and King Lear*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wickham, Glynne 1969: "Hamlet". *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 191-213.