

## THE ANTI-CARNIVALESQUE HAMLET

Dominick M. Grace

No reader of *Hamlet* can miss the fact that there is an inordinate amount of comedy in it, despite its focus on regicide, fratricide, suicide (maybe), and good, old-fashioned homicide. Five characters (Polonius, Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet) die on stage, another three (Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern) off stage during the action, one of whom has an onstage funeral, and three more deaths (of Yorick, Fortinbras Senior, and Hamlet Senior), two of them violent, prior to the play's opening are central to the ongoing action; indeed, one of the pre-play victims appears as a ghost to exhort Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.25), while the ghost of another, longer-dead figure, the jester Yorick, hovers at the edge of our consciousness as Hamlet apostrophizes his skull. In addition to wishing not only to kill Claudius but also to damn his soul, an understandable enough desire under the circumstances, the hero of the play also coldly sends two college chums to their execution and murders the father of his beloved Ophelia, after heaping vicious verbal abuse (and in some productions physical abuse as well) on her, driving her to madness and probably to suicide. And yet, this grim action is liberally salted with comedy, most notably in the gravediggers' scene, perhaps, but at various places elsewhere, perhaps most disconcertingly in Hamlet's reactions to Polonius's death.<sup>1</sup>

This comedy is not too surprising, as the mixing of comedy and tragedy is common in Renaissance theater. As John Russell Brown notes,

Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists *exploited* laughter.... Although miracle and morality plays presented issues of life and death, destiny

---

<sup>1</sup> Completion of this paper was made possible in part by a travel and research grant from Algoma University College. I wish also to express my thanks to Lisa Macklem for editorial assistance.

and choice, good and evil—themes which in other ages have proved inimical to laughter—they had been given comic servants and midwives, coarse jokes, horseplay and grotesque combats; successive revisions augmented rather than pruned the low comedy. (103; emphasis added)

I place some emphasis on the word “exploited” to stress a complex point. The use of humour in serious drama is a conscious and deliberate strategy of the medieval and Renaissance English dramatist—but not simply to amuse the groundlings or to relieve the tension of the tragedy. The comic is of course exploited for its entertainment value by Shakespeare—part of the pleasure we take from the gravediggers’ scene derives from its sheer delight in language play, and Hamlet’s remarkable array of dirty puns appeals before all else to our salacious humour—but there is more to the exploitation, deriving from the medieval heritage of Renaissance drama. Comedy is used as a thematically central device in Renaissance drama and in the work of Shakespeare especially. The interpenetration of tragedy and comedy in the Renaissance is evident even from the title pages of many plays; as Susan Snyder notes, “Designations like ... ‘tragic comedy’ are not unusual” (17).

Nevertheless, *Hamlet* may seem rather more radical in its comic aesthetic than many other Renaissance plays, exploiting as ruthlessly as it does a clash of opposites, a collision between serious and tragic actions and wild, even grotesque comedy. Most of the comic devices mentioned by Brown occur in *Hamlet*, along with many others, including the use of pun, paradox, oxymoron, satire, parody, talking at cross purposes, mistaken identity, disguise, play-acting, and so on—a complete catalogue would run through a significant portion of the total number of comic techniques and devices. The play thrusts us into a world in which inimical situations and value systems, and ultimately plots, are juxtaposed. As Michael D. Bristol reminds us, “The funeral for Hamlet’s father is combined with a wedding feast, and this odd mingling of grief and of festive laughter is typical of the play” (350).

Such mingling participates in the idea of the carnivalesque, as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin. Though Bakhtin noted that Shakespeare employed the carnivalesque, he provides little exploration of the carnivalesque in Shakespeare in his own work. Scholars have only recently begun to apply Bakhtin to Shakespeare in any extensive way; indeed, Ronald Knowles asserts that *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, a 1998 essay collection he edited, is “the first [book] devoted to Shakespeare and Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque” (1). Michael Mangan’s slightly earlier *A Preface to*

*Shakespeare's Comedies: 1594-1603* (1996) also applies carnival to Shakespeare and offers a useful, brief summary of some of the main features of the carnivalesque:

The laughter of carnival involves bathos, bringing things down to the materialistic and bodily levels. The imagery of carnival involves food and drink, and a revelling in bodily parts and functions: bowels, buttocks, genitalia, urinating, defecating and copulating. Carnival speech and language, too, escapes exuberantly from the confines of official decorum; it is abusive or irreverent, parodic and vulgar, and characterized by variety. (34-35)

Mangan applies the carnivalesque to the world of Shakespeare's comedies, but recently, commentators such as Phyllis Gorfain and Michael Bristol have applied carnivalesque theory to *Hamlet*; Gorfain sees the play as Shakespeare's most carnivalesque, and Bristol likens Hamlet and Claudius to "two murderous clowns attempting to achieve strategic advantage over the other" (350). Though such parallels between protagonist and antagonist are significant, however, there are crucial distinctions, and though the play does invoke the carnivalesque, how Hamlet responds to Claudius's carnival qualifies the attitude towards carnival presented in the play. The play *Hamlet* may be Shakespeare's most carnivalesque, as Gorfain argues, but its central character is anti-carnivalesque.

Claudius celebrates the carnivalesque; *he* collapses the distinction between feast and funeral, sex and death, marriage and murder, from his opening speech onward:

Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death  
The memory be green, and that it us befitted  
To bear our hearts in grief, and our whole kingdom  
To be contracted in one brow of woe,  
Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature  
That we with wisest sorrow think on him  
Together with remembrance of ourselves.  
Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
Th'imperial jointress of our warlike state,  
Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,  
With an auspicious, and a dropping eye,  
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
Taken to wife.... (I.ii.1-14)

Even a cursory consideration of this passage exposes Claudius's carnivalesque conflation of grief and revelry; the oxymoronic nature of Claudius's imagery, the collapse of inimical categories underscored rather than elided by the singsong effect created by the alliteration of "delight" and "dole" (the juxtaposition of which two terms itself encapsulates Claudius's elimination of difference between

inimical states of mind), even the subtly grotesque pictures created by imagining the whole estate having a single brow, or even an individual having one dropping eye, make a serious response to the speech difficult. But the speech is consistent with Claudius's character, his desire to drown consideration of his brother's death—on the part of his subjects and, presumably, on his own part as well, in carnivalesque wassail.

Under Claudius's rule, however, the grotesque and humorous juxtaposition of opposed principles has become the rule, not the exception, the norm, not the temporary and celebratory inversion of it. Claudius is not a Lord of Misrule briefly substituted for the real king; he is a genuine usurper, a satyr permanently replacing a Hyperion and indulging in an ongoing orgy of feasting and excess, to which Hamlet objects; wassail, Hamlet avers, "is a custom / More honor'd in the breach than the observance. / This heavy-headed revel east and west / Makes us traduc'd and tax'd of other nations" (I.iv.15-18). In the face of celebratory indulgences, whether the feasting to accompany a marriage or simple revelry for no particular reason, Hamlet represents a critical, almost ascetic, response.

Hamlet, the filter through whom we perceive the action, invites us not to share in the world of revelry, to enjoy, as does the king, the pleasures of the flesh and of the table, but instead to stand outside it in the face of death and condemn that world. He is, from his first appearance, the black-clad figure who insists on the reality of death in the face of revelry. Bristol notes Hamlet's anti-carnavalesque stance at this point in the play: "His initial rejection of all forms of carnivalesque derangement, whether traditional or not, is symbolized by his black suit and his mournful attitude" (356). His rejection is not simply a matter of symbolism or stance, however; Hamlet's self-definition in the scene confirms his resistance to the carnivalesque world Claudius has established. Hamlet denies carnivalesque game as a valid response to the world when his mother asks him why the commonness of death seems so particular to him:

Seems, madam? nay, it is, I know not "seems."  
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspirations of forc'd breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play,  
But I have that within that passes show,  
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.76-86)

One cannot play at grief, Hamlet argues, collapsing the gap between seeming and being so easily. He demands congruency between seeming and being. This insistence recurs in his speeches throughout the play, perhaps most notably when he insists on the difference between his Hyperion father and his satyr uncle: “This was your husband. Look you now what follows: / Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear, / Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?” (III.iv.63-65). See what *is*, he insists; do not pretend. He never loses this insistent belief that playing is inherently problematic, as is evident in his performance of grief in Ophelia’s grave, when he rejects the mere performance of grief as mere rant: “and thou’lt mouth, /I’ll rant as well as thou” (V.i.283-84). To assume the role of griever proves nothing about what one really feels, Hamlet asserts; playing a part obscures, rather than reveals the truth.

One might even argue that his insistent belief that one must be what one seems is Hamlet’s tragic flaw, as it leads him not to kill Claudius when he has his proof and his chance, because he believes his uncle to be praying and therefore earning forgiveness. Instead, and significantly, Hamlet prefers to slaughter Claudius

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
Or in th’ incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
At game a-swearing or about some act  
That has no relish of salvation in ‘t ... (III.ii.89-92)

That is, Hamlet will kill the king when he is what he *is*, a figure of excess; Hamlet wants to kill a carnivalesque king, not a pious one.

Nevertheless, Hamlet adopts play as his mode of bringing about vengeance, despite his antipathy to it. Ironically, Hamlet must put on a carnival mask in order to unthroned the Lord of Misrule. Bristol argues for Hamlet’s gradual acceptance of carnival; I argue instead that Hamlet only plays at such acceptance in order to accomplish his end. He remains the outsider, using carnival as an ironic weapon against itself.

Harry Levin, among others, compares Hamlet to the “dissembler of Aristophanic comedy, the eiron” (82), whose function is to expose and undermine the alazon, the figure of inflated self-importance who must be brought down to earth—as Claudius is, literally, by the end of Hamlet. Levin’s Aristotelean reading of Hamlet provides, I think, the appropriate lens through which to observe Hamlet’s appropriation of carnival. Claudius embodies carnival; Hamlet employs carnivalesque language in his abusive, violent, parodic, and ironic discourses to keep before us the absurdity of the world as it becomes if the Claudian carnival is allowed to dominate. That is,

Hamlet's use of carnivalesque devices serves to advance an anti-carnavalesque perspective. He uses carnival against itself.

Claudius invites us to laugh with him, to combine mirth and funeral and accept with a laugh the inevitable and undifferentiated end of all life in death. We all die, so eat, drink, and be merry, argues Claudius; we're all the same ultimately, so what difference does it make? Hamlet rejects vehemently such a view. As Richard Fly notes, in contrast to Claudius's, "Hamlet's intellect is militantly disjunctive, always insisting on the dissimilarity of things" (261). Hamlet is not amused by the gap between the world he perceives and the world he desires, but he is corrosively amusing in his commentary on that gap, as he requires us to laugh, sometimes in extreme discomfort, at the implications of the Claudian world. If we break down the wall between mirth and funeral, why stop there, Hamlet asks.

Nowhere, perhaps, is Hamlet's use of carnivalesque technique to undermine Claudius's perspective so evident as it is IV.iii. In this scene, Hamlet first collapses class by noting that all die and that "a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (29-30). Furthermore, and more significantly, he collapses the difference between man and woman by calling Claudius mother. When Claudius retorts that he's Hamlet's "loving father" (48), Hamlet insists "My mother: father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh—so, my mother" (49-50). Hamlet's initial strategy in this scene, his equation of eating and death, may seem carnivalesque, but in this context, a discussion of Polonius's death at Hamlet's hands—which included Hamlet's verbal speculation that he had killed the king—what is primary is its implied threat against Claudius. Hamlet's equation of father and mother, man and wife, is a more subtle expression of Hamlet's anti-carnavalesque stance, really, in that this reduction of Claudius, to Claudius's face, is manifestly not an expression of a genuine belief in the doctrine espoused but an evident insult to the king. Hamlet has, after all, been overly insistent on the gap between Claudius and his father throughout the play; here, he uses verbal equivocation to deny Claudius that role and to diminish Claudius by using Christian doctrine to get a dig in at Claudius's motivation in marrying Gertrude: not only union of the flesh, but also the consolidation of political power, as Claudius's first speech makes clear. The humour of Hamlet's insult is evident, and the Claudian perspective is its butt. We laugh, but not in carnivalesque celebration of the flesh.

Hamlet employs carnivalesque devices to deny the carnivalesque perspective. Hamlet recognizes the vanity of human pretensions and

laughs at the fates of beggars and emperors, but his is not celebratory laughter. Even when he can laugh at death, he is quickly called back to a serious meditation of it, as in V.i, wherein Hamlet's badinage with the gravediggers turns serious when he discovers that he knew the original possessor of the skull he holds. He recognizes that the joke is deadly, and that even the joker dies, in his apostrophe to Yorick's skull: "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-fall'n. Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that" (V.i.177-82). One might laugh at a carnivalesque image of death, but to laugh at the real thing, Hamlet suggests, is far more difficult. He speaks of Yorick, the dead jester, but he might as well be speaking of Claudius, not only because, as Claudius himself has already acknowledged, everyone dies, but also because Claudius now is the jester figure who gambols, who insists on merriment, and who occupies his lady's chamber. Hamlet's graveyard humour is ironic in the extreme; he laughs, but he laughs at those who laugh at death, defying them to laugh when confronted with its reality.

Hamlet's humour requires us to recognize the disjunction between opposites, to see the absurdity in combining dole and delight and therefore to laugh at the folly of Claudius, who invites such a combination. Claudius cannot erase his crime by perpetuating the inversion of order it represents. The very attempt is ridiculous. When dole and delight are collapsed, the world does not proceed as it should; the story of Hamlet, which should be a comic one of love in the face of absurd and restrictive parental authority, in which Hamlet and Ophelia overcome Polonius—an absent comic outcome dragged back to our minds by Gertrude's graveside farewell, "I hoped thou shouldn't have been my Hamlet's wife" (V.ii.230)—becomes instead an ironic one of funeral rather than wedding,

of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,  
And in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads....  
(V.ii.364-67)

Take out the references to slaughter and death here, and Horatio could be describing a comedy rather than a tragedy. The line between the two is a fine one, as thin and keen as a knife-blade, but it is a line nonetheless. It is a line that Hamlet always sees and forces us to see; it is a line that Claudius wants to obliterate. Hamlet invites us to laugh at the folly of such an attempt.

There is, then, much to laugh at in Hamlet. The play's own exploitation of humour itself invites the comedic responses to the play I discussed at the beginning of the paper. But the play itself exploits humour to underscore the status of Hamlet as the figure whose perspective must prevail. That perspective allows for a comedic response to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but it demands as well a clear recognition that the time cannot be left out of joint, and that the jester cannot keep his crown. In his study of carnivalesque elements in *1* and *2 Henry IV*, François Laroque argues that "Carnival, like the king, never dies" (95). Hamlet, and *Hamlet*, demonstrate the opposite.

Dominick M. Grace  
English Department  
Algoma University College

### Works Cited

- Bristol, Michael D. "Funeral-Bak'd Meats': Carnival and the Carnivalesque in *Hamlet*." *Shakespeare* 348-67.
- Brown, John Russell. "Laughter in the Last Plays." *Later Shakespeare. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies* 8. London: Edward Arnold, 1966. 103-26.
- Fly, Richard. "Accommodating Death: The Ending of Hamlet." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 24 (1984): 257-74.
- Gorfain, Phyllis. "Toward a Theory of Play and the Carnivalesque in *Hamlet*." *Hamlet Studies* 13 (1991): 25-49.
- Knowles, Ronald. "Introduction." *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*. Ed. Ronald Knowles. London: Macmillan, 1998. 1-12.
- Laroque, François. "Shakespeare's 'Battle of carnival and Lent': The Falstaff Scenes Reconsidered (*1* & *2 Henry IV*)." *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*. Ed. Ronald Knowles. London: Macmillan, 1998. 83-96.
- Levin, Harry. *The Question of Hamlet*. 1959. New York: Viking, 1961.
- Mangan, Michael. *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies: 1594-1603*. London: Longman, 1996.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. Boston: Bedford, 1994.
- Snyder, Susan. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.