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Jesting with Death: Hamlet in the Graveyard

When Eric Morecambe appeared on stage dressed entirely in black, nursing a skull, even the slightly obtuse Ernie immediately realized what was in the offing: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The image of Hamlet holding a skull has become iconic for the play itself. In popular memory, it is linked to the other signpost of the play, the tagline 'To be or not to be'. What is often forgotten is the fact that the skull only surfaces in the graveyard scene, in which the Prince meditates on death and engages in a battle of wits with a gravedigger. Ironically, it is precisely the graveyard episode that drew the ire of generations of critics. Voltaire's comments on the scene are devastating. In his *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne* he writes, '[A] grave is dug on the stage; some gravediggers, holding skulls in their hands, make bad puns worthy of their sort; to their abominable scurrilities, Prince Hamlet makes nonsensical replies that are no less disgusting'.¹ For critics like Voltaire, macabre humour was a breach of decorum, an unforgivable transgression of the aesthetic code that called for a rigid divide between the genres of comedy and tragedy. Long before Voltaire, neoclassical critics such as Sir Philip Sidney had patrolled the boundaries between both genres, deploring the insertion of comic matter in tragedies as vulgar. To be sure, Dryden valiantly defended the mixture of tragic and comic in the English dramatic tradition by inventing the notion of comic relief, arguing, 'A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes . . .

A scene of mirth mixed with tragedy has the same effect upon us which our music has betwixt the acts, which we find a relief to us from the best plots and language of the stage, if the discourses have been long'.² But for Voltaire, it was the Prince's fooling around with death that placed the play firmly in the category of 'monstrous farces'.³ In the landmark 1772 Drury Lane production of the play David Garrick took Voltaire's strictures on board, drastically cutting the gravedigger scene.⁴ Death was no laughing matter. And when Morecambe and Wise debated the wisdom of switching to 'the serious stuff' like Shakespeare, they looked to their competitors Olivier and Gielgud, who played Shakespeare's tragedies to packed houses every single week. As Eric remarked in a mixture of envy and bemusement, 'They charge £3 per seat . . . and they don't get any laughs'.⁵

In point of fact, jesting about death was not a Shakespearean invention. It was what people had been doing for centuries. For Catherine Belsey, *Hamlet* re-enacts the Dance of Death, with the Prince playing the part of Death by unleashing the chain of deaths whose corpses litter the play.⁶ As she points out, the graveyard scene in particular draws heavily on Holbein's iconography of the Dance of Death, widely circulated in England in cheap print reproductions. Holbein's cycle of woodcuts was based on the murals on the cloister wall of the cemetery of Les Innocents in Paris stemming from the early fifteenth century. They depicted a dance of people from all estates, led by a grinning skeleton, and were accompanied by a set of moralizing verses.⁷ A number of similar mural paintings appeared all over Europe, including the Dance of Paul's in the cloister of St Paul's Cathedral, with the accompanying verses in a translation by John Lydgate. The painting was destroyed in 1559 but the memory of it remained alive and was described by John Stow in his *Survey of London* in 1598. As Michael Neill has shown, few motifs enjoyed more popularity in Northern Europe than the *danse macabre*. The depiction of death as a jester or 'antic' seems to derive from this tradition, echoes of which abound in Renaissance drama. In *Richard II*, with the bitter realization that his divinely ordained invulnerability is an illusion, Richard mockingly evokes the image of Death the jester, waiting to demolish a king: 'within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits, / Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp'.⁸

The Dance of Death motif draws on the medieval tradition of comic evil. Medieval art reverberates with laughter about horror, death, and the devil.⁹ The Devil was a ludicrous figure. In the mystery plays, he was a grotesque, obscene, bestial character who evoked mocking laughter. The idea of comic evil was rooted in medieval theology, particularly in the idea of privative evil: since God was the creator of all perfection, he could hardly have created evil. Church Fathers such as Origen argued that evil was an illusion and could only be defined negatively. St Augustine explained, 'Those things we call evil, are defects in good things, and quite incapable of existing in their own right outside good things'.¹⁰ Or as Thomas Aquinas put it, *Malum est non ens*, evil is not essence. Evil was defined as a lack, an absence rather than substance. It had no reality, but existed only negatively, as the privation of reality. Similarly, death was illusory. The human fear of mortality was rooted in our attachment to physical existence, instead of our realizing that life on

earth was transitory and it was spiritual life that needed to be attended to. To the medieval mind, laughter marked one's triumph over the specious threat of evil and the illusion of death. It was a defence strategy against the human fear of dying, intended to expose its absurdity. Laughter has, of course, always been a key weapon in the human arsenal to counter anxiety and fear. It serves the function of defusing a potential threat. We laugh to take control of what we fear might take control of us.

For a later generation, however, the black humour of the graveyard scene did not merely offend aesthetic sensibilities. It violated the norms of social decorum as well. It was in the early modern age that a gradual divide between elite and popular culture became discernible.¹¹ An elaborate culture of civility evolved, serving to furnish an increasingly disempowered aristocracy with a sense of legitimacy and self-definition. The foundation for this aristocratic code of manners was laid in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528); it was continually rehearsed in a string of similar works such as Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo* (1558) and Stefano Guazzo's *The Civil Conversation* (1574). One of the markers of civility was decorum in all modes of behaviour. By Voltaire's time, there was a clear divide between forms of humour. Princes (and certainly princes on stage) were expected to eschew vulgar japes such as clowning about in open graves. Ironically, Hamlet itself reflects the influence of the emerging code of manners in Hamlet's objections to the gravedigger's singing as indecorous: 'Has this fellow no feeling of his business?' A sings in grave-making' (5.1.61–2).¹² At the same time, bested by the clown in their contest of wits, Hamlet complains that 'the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe' (5.1.132–133). What might appear to us to be an ethical question was above all a question of class aesthetics. Laughter became an index of social identity – how you laughed and what you laughed about defined who you were.¹³

Interestingly, the Dance of Death motif becomes popular precisely at the same time as a concern for individuality displaced the early Christian notion of collective death. Philippe Arie's describes the shift from an age of charnel houses where the bones of the rich and poor mingled indiscriminately to the personalization of death and an increasing interest in tombs, inscriptions, and plaques. As Arie's puts it, 'Beginning with the eleventh century a formerly unknown relationship developed between the death of each individual and his awareness of being an individual . . . Since the High Middle Ages Western man has come to see himself in his own death: he has discovered *la mort de soi*, one's own death'.¹⁴ Death certainly played a decisive role in the definition of early modern identity. The early modern age saw a radical shift in attitudes towards death. For later historians, it is less the rise of individualism than changes in religious beliefs that are of central importance in this connection. ¹⁵ Particularly the Protestant denial of purgatory severed the ties between the living and the dead. No longer was it possible to plead to God on behalf of one's deceased loved ones and hope they would be spared the pain of eternal punishment. Death now marked a rift, a radical rupture with life. Perhaps, it was the changing experience of death in the early modern age that produced such an intense focus on individualism in this period. Funerals and monuments became increasingly sumptuous.¹⁶ Michael Neill has argued that the real horror of death was felt to be the annihilation of identity, a fear that was exacerbated by the negation of purgatory. In a status-conscious and increasingly competitive society, death constituted a social outrage – the levelling of all distinction. The theatre was a site where these cultural anxieties were explored and dramatized. Indeed, Neill sees Renaissance tragedy as the way a society attempted to defy death and salvage a sense of personal identity. Death on stage became the occasion for fantasizing extravagant acts of selfmemorialization, with the theatre creating ever more sumptuous monuments to the memory of fictive heroes.

Identity is, of course, at the heart of Hamlet – a play that might be regarded as marking a milestone in the history of modern subjectivity. Catherine Belsey's work has been path-breaking in tracing the construction of the modern subject since the early modern period. In *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985), she draws attention to the way literature is a crucial location in the production of definitions of subjectivity.¹⁷ Belsey describes the modern subject as distinguished by three main characteristics: unity, knowledge, and autonomy. The modern individual is seen as coherent and unified, determined by a sense of inwardness – a belief in an authentic inner reality. Furthermore, modern subjectivity is shaped by empirical knowledge, grounded in a sense of separation from one's surroundings and disengagement from the world around us. Finally, the subject is endowed with autonomy, which involves both the freedom to act and responsibility for our actions. In his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989), Charles Taylor substantiates Belsey's argument, adding a further aspect: a focus on life in the here and now, not in the hereafter. ¹⁸ As Belsey demonstrates, Renaissance drama offers us a site where we can observe a range of models of subjectivity in conflict. In numerous plays, the fragmented, dispersed subject of medieval drama collides with the emerging concept of the unified, autonomous subject. The plays move between emblematic and

illusionist modes, 'generating a radical uncertainty precisely by withholding from the spectator the single position from which a single and unified meaning is produced'.¹⁹

Not only does the theatre produce a range of contradictory meanings for the audience. The plays themselves are riven with contrary viewpoints. The critical tradition has ceaselessly tried to pin down the truth of Hamlet's subjectivity. As Belsey remarks caustically, 'The quest is, of course, endless, because the object of it is not there'.²⁰ Belsey's model of literature as a site of conflicting discourses opens up an avenue for reading Hamlet itself as exploring the notion of a fragmented subjectivity. As I hope to show, nowhere in the play is the contest of meanings on offer at a given historical moment more apparent than when Hamlet jests with death in the graveyard scene.

Hamlet is obsessed with his own identity, with plucking out the heart of his own mystery, with uncovering the truth, both about the past and about himself. Who or what is Hamlet is one of the infinite questions that resonates through the play. Few characters are so preoccupied with who they are, with whether they are fake or authentic, good sons or secretly glad to be rid of the ghosts of the past, true lovers or betrayers of those they love, brave or cowards. 'Am I a coward?' he demands of himself. 'Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across, / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face, / Tweaks me by the nose, gives me the lie i'th' throat / As deep as to the lungs?' (2.2.506–10). Incessantly exploring his own selfhood, he selfconsciously comments on his very soul-searching, in searing, self-lacerating lines: 'Why, what an ass am I: this is most brave, / That I . . . Must like a whore unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab' (2.2.517–521). Hamlet is haunted by the fear that he has no true identity to reveal.

In his very first appearance, Hamlet makes a point of advertising his inward self: "'Seems", madam – nay, it is, I know not "seems"'. He dismisses outward signs as theatrical: 'For they are actions that a man might play, / But I have that within which passes show' (1.2.76–85). Ironically, however, the play reveals him to be constantly trying out other roles. The range of parts he plays encompasses the student, soldier, courtier, lover, prince, devoted son, friend, madman, disillusioned cynic, passionate avenger, theatre-lover, Machiavellian plotter, and usurper's nemesis. Hamlet's secret fear is of waking up one morning and finding he has no core identity – that he is just a congeries of the roles he has been playing. He anxiously compares notes with other players, professional and amateur. Only half in jest he remarks to Horatio that he might as well become a professional actor himself: 'Would not this, sir, . . . get me a fellowship in a cry of players?' (3.2.267–70). One of the most brilliant roles he adopts is that of a court jester. He pretends to be mad as a selfprotective device. But acting the fool is a fitting disguise for a character who, as Bradley observes, is the only Shakespearean tragic hero who doubles as a joker.²¹ At the time, there was no clear distinction between madness and foolery, or in early modern parlance, between natural fools and artificial fools. Natural fools were often thought to be capable of delivering nuggets of wisdom buried in their nonsensical babble, while wandering performers, strolling comedians, or actors out of a job might turn themselves into professional entertainers or artificial fools, who made people laugh by imitating the absurd behaviour of the genuinely feeble-minded.²² In this play without a clown, it is the Prince who takes on the part of a court fool. Hamlet puts on 'an antic disposition' (1.5.170) to expose a court riddled with hypocrisy and spies. He exploits the freedom of a licensed fool to skewer the culture of lies and the corruption of court society. With his bitter wit, he mocks tedious old politicians like Polonius and inept spies like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even weak, misguided young things like Ophelia. When Polonius inquires of him solicitously, 'Do you know me, my lord?', he responds, 'Excellent well, you are a fishmonger'. Not only does this remark serve to puncture Polonius's pomposity, but Hamlet makes a hidden allusion to Polonius's behaviour with regard to his daughter, Ophelia. It remains a moot point whether or not fishmonger was a euphemistic term for a bawd, as various editors have argued.²³ What is clear is that with his next remark, 'I would you were so honest a man' (2.2.170–73), Hamlet implies that Polonius is a fawning flatterer, fully capable of selling his own daughter to advance his position at court. Addressing his boyhood friends turned traitors, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he demands that they play a recorder, and when they protest that they cannot play a musical instrument, he remarks, 'Why, look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me: you would play upon me! You would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery . . . Do you think that I am easier to be played on than a pipe?' (3.2.355–62). In these mocking lines, Hamlet un masks the two courtiers as sycophantic spies whose bluff he has called.

The concept of the wise fool is one that Shakespeare seems to have adopted from Erasmus, who was the first to give it a literary shape in his *Praise of Folly* (1511).²⁴ *Praise of Folly* marks a crucial departure from previous fool literature. This becomes apparent when one compares Erasmus's text with another contemporary exemplar of fool literature, Sebastian Brandt's *The Ship of Fools* (*Das Narrenschiff*), which was first published in 1494 and gained immediate popularity. Brandt's book might be categorized under the literature of estates, a genre that appeared in the fourteenth century and caricatured different social types.

Written in a satirical vein, it castigated above all the sin of social ambition and the desire to rise above one's estate. Brandt used the image of fools gathered on a ship as a trope for *vanitas*, life as a fool's journey leading to an illusory land of material pleasures.²⁵ Erasmus, by contrast, uses the image of the fool to hold up a mirror to our own follies. The classic question that the wise fool asks is 'Who is the real fool?'. In other words, what the fool does is expose every one of us as a fool. For Shakespeare, the idea of the wise fool meant introducing a figure who commented ironically on the doings of the main protagonists. The fool was in the business of posing questions, not offering answers. Nor was the fool immune from his own skeptical stance. Self-mockery was a standard ploy of the fool – based on the self-conscious knowledge of being an outsider in the world of the play, straddling both the world of the audience and that of the play. In the first half of the play, Hamlet takes on the typical role of a fool. He shares many traits with Shakespeare's other wise fools. He is an ironic outsider, a cynical commentator who delights in mocking forms of language games.

However, from the middle of the play onwards, Hamlet displays decidedly less pleasant traits. In his rationalization for not killing Claudius, in his callous murder of Polonius, and in his castigation of his mother, he reveals a self-righteous, zealous streak that verges on the self-deluded. His response to the gratuitous murder of Polonius is to claim, 'heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this, and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister' (3.4.171–3). G. Wilson Knight sees shades of a Nietzschean manic solipsism in Hamlet and speaks of 'the nihilism of the superman'.²⁶ To be sure, Hamlet is not the only fool in the play. It is striking that in the graveyard for the first time it is Hamlet who plays straight man to the superior comedian – the gravedigger.²⁷ Hamlet tries to find out whose grave it is that is being dug, but with no success:

Hamlet. . . . Whose grave's this, sirrah?

Gravedigger. Mine, sir.

He tries again:

Hamlet. What man dost thou dig it for?

Gravedigger. For no man, sir.

Hamlet. What woman, then?

Gravedigger. For none, neither.

Hamlet. Who is to be buried in't?

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

(5.1.110–28)

In their battle of wits, the slippery gravedigger outscores Hamlet in every single round. In the graveyard scene, Hamlet's wit veers into the sententious. Even the quip about Alexander stopping a bung-hole is not on a par with his earlier jest about the dead Polonius, delivered shortly after having murdered the old counsellor. This cruel joke contains some of the funniest lines of the play. In response to the King's demand, 'where's Polonius?' Hamlet replies, 'At supper', and goes on to explain, 'Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him' (4.3.16–20). For one brief hilarious moment what he conjures up is an absurd image of worldly-wise worms busy chomping their way through a state banquet consisting of the dead Polonius. He even drops an oblique allusion to the Diet of Worms in 1521 where worthies from all over the Holy Roman Empire gathered to discuss the controversial 95 theses of Luther. The quip sparkles with layers of irony and includes a sly dig at Polonius, who was both a state politician and a crafty, scheming political animal, as well as a fleeting, mocking reference to the Catholic practice of the Holy Communion.²⁸ All human pretensions are subjected to Hamlet's deflationary wit, insistently drawing attention to the absurdity of the human condition.

By contrast, the comments Hamlet makes in the graveyard about the vanity of human life are pompous platitudes. 'This might be the pate of a politician, . . . might it not?' (4.3.73–75); 'Why, may that not be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now – his quillets, his cases, his tenures and his tricks?' (4.3.93–95). What is more remarkable is the way he is anxious to individualize the dead, attaching name tags to the indistinguishable skulls scattered across the graveyard. His humour seems to circle obsessively around the fear of the negation of identity in death. Significantly, his thoughts revolve around dead heroes: 'Dost thou think Alexander looked o'this fashion i'th'earth?' (4.3.187–188). For in his urgent quest for the essence of his identity, there is nothing Hamlet yearns for more than to be a hero like his father.

As Catherine Belsey has argued, in the graveyard Hamlet seeks to gain control over death. Yet the play refuses to concede mastery, either to him or to us.²⁹ Belsey's observation is borne out by the fact that it is not just any skull he is holding up, but that of another fool – the dead court jester, Yorick. Indeed, as she

reminds us, in the danse macabre the figure of Death was often the double of the victim. The image of Hamlet gazing at Yorick is curiously reminiscent of one of Holbein's marginal illustrations to Erasmus's Praise of Folly. Among the earliest surviving work by Holbein, the pen-and-ink drawings in the margins of a 1515 edition of the volume illustrate themes from Erasmus's work. In one of the illustrations, Holbein depicts a fool holding up his own image in the shape of a bauble. In contrast to the other baubles hanging over the parapet, the one held by the fool seems strangely animated.³⁰ There are other similar images, for instance, that of a non-fool looking into a mirror to find a fool sticking out his tongue at him. Paradoxically, in early modern iconography, mirrors were symbols both of vanity and of self-knowledge. A similar idea is evoked by the ancient Indian story of the fool who looks into a mirror with closed eyes to see what he looks like sleeping.³¹ Like all fool lore, it consists of a mixture of absurdity and wisdom. On the commonsensical level it is absurd to try and see oneself with one's eyes shut. Only a fool would dream of doing so. On another level, however, the fool's deed debunks the human fantasy that there is any secure observer perspective from which we can watch ourselves. It undermines the notion of a stable viewpoint that would offer us a sense of visual mastery. Since knowledge is only ever partial, the fool seems to say, we might as well close our eyes as open them.³²



Figure 1 : Holbein's marginal illustration to Erasmus's Praise of Folly (1515).

What both the gravedigger and the dead fool seem to mock is Hamlet himself – his obsession with his own subjectivity and his hunt for an authentic self that he can identify. The point that Hamlet, in his desperate search for a role to play, does not realize is that he is already in a play – but not one of his own making. He will never find the core of his own identity. He will never find out exactly who he is, because who he is made up of all the roles he is playing in the attempt to find out who he is. You too, Hamlet, his mirror-image seems to say, are a fool. You might be brilliant at making a fool of everyone else. But what you don't realize is that you are not in control – neither of your own destiny, nor of that of others. You are not in possession of the truth, you are not self-determined – you are a product of your age and time, haunted by the past, by bullying dead fathers and outdated codes of chivalry and honour. You are not even in full possession of language: you might be a master of the pun, but the meaning of the lowly gravedigger's riddles and quibbles escapes you. Instead, you are a bit player, an actor in search of a part, trying on different roles without finding one to fit. Indeed, you are not very different from myself, dead Yorick, a professional comedian in the business of playing different roles.

Praise of Folly is as elusive as Hamlet. Part of it is a satire of the abuses of society, especially of the follies of various estates. This is the part that caused the scandalous success of the book in its time. But the greater part of the text is given over to demonstrating universal folly, not class-specific faults. The fool is not other people, but ourselves. The book consists of a mock-encomium of folly – delivered by Folly herself. Mock-encomia were a standard genre in the classical literature – encomia in praise of baldness, in praise of a fly, and so on. But what was radically new was the idea of having Folly herself as the orator. This opened up dizzying vistas of selfregression.³³ For one thing, nothing that Folly says can be taken at face value – after all, it is the epitome of foolishness who is delivering these insights. Thus even what is generally taken as Erasmus's own message, the Christian idea that worldly wisdom amounts to nothing but folly – true wisdom would be following in the path of Christ – this message is so hedged about with disclaimers that the reader can never be quite certain how to pluck out the heart of the text.

Instead of simply castigating folly, the entire text is imbued with a playful and ironic sense of humour. Erasmus writes in the spirit of *serio ludere*, the Renaissance tradition of discussing serious matters in a playful manner. Indeed, Erasmus seems to argue that not only is folly a universal condition, but also inescapable – without a measure of illusion and self-delusion we would not be able to face the truth of our absurdity. Our civilization is a web of fictions. The narrator, Folly herself, points out that without a healthy modicum of self-deception we would never fall in love, no marriage would hold, and no friendship would last. We would never behave in a noble manner were we not of the belief that somehow we were innately good. One story that Folly recounts concerns the classical tale of Lycas, one that Erasmus is clearly fond of, and uses in his *Adages* as well. Montaigne, too, recounts the story at greater length in 'An Apology of Raymond Sebond':

[Lycas] was a man of very orderly habits, living quietly and peaceably at home; he failed in none of the duties he owed to family and strangers; he guarded himself effectively from harm; however, some defect in his sense led him to imprint a mad fantasy on his brain: he always thought he was in the theatre watching games, plays and the finest comedies in the world. Being cured of this corrupt humour, he nearly took his doctors to court to make them restore those sweet fantasies to him:

...

'You have killed me, my friends, not cured me', he said. 'You have wrenched my pleasure from me and taken away by force that most delightful wandering of my mind'.³⁴

Drawing on the *theatrum mundi* topos, the story serves to suggest that human beings need illusions in order to live. We might be fools to do so, but it is equally an illusion to believe that we can free ourselves from our self-constructed myths. Folly proceeds to explain that being a fool is not necessarily a slur, pointing to St Paul's dictum, 'We are fools for Christ's sake' (1 Corinthians 4: 10). Being a true follower of Christ meant being a fool in the eyes of a worldly-wise and hypocritical world. These ideas are shaped by Erasmus's adherence to the notion of learned ignorance, first formulated by Nicholas of Cusa. True wisdom consisted in realizing our ignorance, knowing that we do not know, realizing the partiality of all knowledge – which is precisely why we need to expand our inquiry for knowledge.³⁵

Half a century later, performance theorists have come up with remarkably similar insights.³⁶ Critics such as Ervin Goffman and Judith Butler have been at pains to point out that we are always acting, living in illusions of our own device – and that without these illusions we would not be able to survive.³⁷ We are created by our acts – and then set out to inhabit the roles we have created to the best of our ability. As Goffman explains, the self is a product: 'it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is

presented'.³⁸ Nevertheless, one of the main myths our subjectivity is grounded in is the notion of a unified, autonomous identity, capable of independent thought and agency. Belsey encapsulates the wider significance of Hamlet in the following words: 'The tragic hero of humanism, subject of empiricist knowledge, who has taken the place of God, is an isolated figure, uncertain of the knowledge of the self, the world and others which legitimates its lonely dominion'.³⁹ For the more the Prince attempts to achieve secure knowledge about himself, the more elusive his identity becomes. Recently, William Miller has pointed out that there is no escape from acting roles – we are always faking it.⁴⁰ We are all Hamlets, anxiously cross-examining ourselves about our authenticity. The reason lies in our congenital condition – there is always a divide between the acting and the reflecting self. Self-distance is a feature of human nature: we are always watching ourselves acting.

While the concept of the wise fool in Shakespeare's play draws on the Erasmian notion of folly, Hamlet's relentless quest for self-knowledge seems to echo a somewhat later, more sceptical strain of thought, that of Montaigne. In the wake of the Reformation, Europe was torn by warring religious beliefs. It was against this backdrop that sceptical ideas swept the Continent, revived by humanist efforts to rediscover the classics. The play itself resonates with infinite questions. As Maynard Mack has argued persuasively, the opening line of Hamlet, 'Who's there?' (1.1.1), sets the keynote of the play, pervaded as it is by inscrutability and doubt.⁴¹ The plot revolves relentlessly around a series of questions: Why does Hamlet delay? Is the ghost real? How should he act?, without offering us any answers. Hamlet's world is a world 'where uncertainties are of the essence'.⁴² It is a world of radical instability, no longer governed by a providential power whose workings, however mysterious, all tended towards the good. Hamlet's soliloquies are permeated with the spirit of scepticism. Hamlet might accuse himself of being a coward, but it is not really the terror of dying which exercises him. 'I do not set my life at a pin's fee', he declares (1.4.65), and the play bears him out. Nor is it merely the thought of the torments of the afterworld that troubles him. What haunts him is the impossibility of certain knowledge. He articulates this anxiety in his 'To Be or Not to Be' soliloquy:

. . . the dread of something after death
(The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns) puzzles the will
And rather makes us bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.
(3.1.77–82)

How, he wonders, do you know what to expect after death? The greatest fear is that of uncertainty. This is the fear that makes him hesitate where avenging angels such as Laertes rush in.

For Montaigne, life was a theatrical performance in which we might not write the script, but in which we have a limited range of roles at our disposal. He was clearly influenced by the Senecan idea of death as the final act in a play in which dying well was of the essence.⁴³ In the last moments of the play, Hamlet might have arrived at a similar conclusion. When Horatio urges him to give in to his misgivings about the duel with Laertes, Hamlet replies, 'If it be, '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, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes' (5.2.198–201). He may well have realized that while we are not self-determined and will never be in possession of the truth, we have a certain choice of the roles we wish to play to fulfil our expectations of ourselves. Certainty remains elusive, but death can be converted into an occasion of style and grace. When Hamlet's own moment of death arrives, he turns himself into what he has always wanted to be, a noble prince dying a hero's death. Never mind that until the end he reacts to events rather than setting them in action. He has become noble Hamlet the Dane, the 'courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword, / Th'expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form' (3.1.150–52).

Nothing is what it seems in the world of Hamlet. The play circulates persistently around issues of appearance and reality.⁴⁴ There are, for instance, the ghost, the play within the play, the discussions about acting, the eavesdropping scenes, and Hamlet's 'antic disposition'. Everyone is acting a part. Even the kings in the play are all players. Either they are imposters, like Claudius, or ghosts, whose honesty is in doubt, like old Hamlet, or actors, like the Player King, or characters in plays within plays, or usurpers, like young Fortinbras.⁴⁵ If everyone in Hamlet is playing, the implications spill over to encompass the audience. We, too, are always playing roles, in search of an authentic identity that we can never quite pin down. If this is the case, the gravediggers and the dead jester Yorick mock us as much as they mock Hamlet. Perhaps it is during the graveyard scene, while he is jesting with death, that Hamlet begins to suspect that

he will never discover his true self. The riddling equivocation of the gravedigger and the memory of the infinite jest of Yorick might have made him realize that with our obsessive urge to find our true identity, we are a huge joke. He might have abandoned the emerging Cartesian notion of the unified self, the self as the agent of action and the source of knowledge, for an idea of identity as fragmented, perpetually in flux, and ever elusive, as suggested by Montaigne.⁴⁶ In Montaigne's conception of identity, we are all players, inextricably bound up in illusions we create for ourselves. Nevertheless, we need not remain unaware of our role-playing. He suggests that we cultivate an ironic sense of distance to the roles we are playing, watching ourselves play with amused detachment. For as he once pointed out, 'Our specific property is to be equally laughable and able to laugh'.⁴⁷ We are not only a joke; we are the only animal capable of laughter.

Notes

1 Quoted in Helen Phelps Bailey, *Hamlet in France: From Voltaire to Laforgue* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964), p. 3.

2 John Dryden, 'Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay', in James Kinsley and George Parfitt (eds), *Selected Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), pp. 16–76, 50.

3 Quoted in Bailey, p. 4.

4 Ann Thompson, 'Infinite Jest: The Comedy of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*', in Peter Holland (ed.), *Shakespeare Survey* 56 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 93–104, 97.

5 *The Best of Morecambe & Wise*, dir. Vic Meredith, perf. Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, DVD, BBC, 2001.

6 Catherine Belsey, 'Sibling Rivalry: *Hamlet* and the First Murder', *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 129–174.

7 See Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 51–101, to which I am indebted in the following.

8 William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Peter Ure, The Arden Shakespeare, Second Series (London: Methuen, 1961), 3.2.160–63.

9 See Charlotte Spivack, *The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978).

10 Quoted in Spivack, p. 16.

11 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978).

12 All quotations from the play taken from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

13 See my *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

14 Philippe Arie's, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 51–52.

15 See, for instance, Claire Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), and Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

16 Gittings, pp. 25–26. Also see David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

17 Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985).

18 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

19 Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, p. 29.

20 Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, p. 41.

21 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; New York: Premier Books, 1965), p. 128.

22 See Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984).

23 See Harold Jenkins, Longer Notes, in Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 464–466.

24 On the concept of the Erasmian fool see especially Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

25 On Brandt see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 61–63.

26 G. Wilson Knight, 'The Embassy of Death', *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*, 4th ed. (1930; London: Methuen, 1954), pp. 17–46, 40.

27 Harry Levin, 'The Antic Disposition', in John Jump (ed.), *Shakespeare: Hamlet*, Casebook Series, (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 122–136, 132.

28 Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 241.

29 See Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, pp. 129–174.

30 See Erika Michael, *The Drawings by Hans Holbein the Younger for Erasmus' 'Praise of Folly'* (New York: Garland, 1986), pp. 216–229, and F. Saxl, 'Holbein's Illustrations to the *Praise of Folly* by Erasmus', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 83.488 (1943), pp. 274–279.

- 31 William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 234.
- 32 On similar games with spectatorship in Shakespeare see Barbara Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
- 33 See Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 3–40.
- 34 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1987), book 2, chap. 12, p. 552.
- 35 On Cusa and the concept of learned ignorance see Ronald Levaio, *Renaissance Minds and Their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- 36 For an overview see Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 37 See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959; London: Penguin, 1990), and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 38 Goffman, p. 245.
- 39 Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, p. 86.
- 40 William Ian Miller, *Faking It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 41 See Maynard Mack, 'The World of Hamlet', *The Yale Review*, 41 (1952), pp. 502–523.
- 42 Mack, p. 507.
- 43 See Neill, pp. 35–36.
- 44 See Mack, p. 507ff.
- 45 Miller, p. 111.
- 46 See in particular Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 47 Montaigne, 'On Democritus and Heraclitus', *The Complete Essays*, book 1, chap. 50, p. 340.