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Sarah Boyle April 13, 2011

Memento Mori: Shakespeare Revivifies the Moribund

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Abstract

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By keeping in mind how Shakespeare and his audience may have perceived memento mori, we are better able to grasp the religious concerns of these works which may appear less obvious to the modern reader. When considered as part of a society very well versed in concepts of religion and yet simultaneously becoming increasingly secular and desensitized to death, Shakespeare's plays take on a didactic quality. They are meant to entertain, certainly, but they also appear to encourage moral behavior by frightening the audience with the gruesomeness of death (causing them to pay close attention) as well as focusing on the importance of the afterlife.

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Introduction

"I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily."

-- 1 Corinthians 15:31

The skulls in *Hamlet*'s gravedigger scene appear to be the first skulls used as props on stage in the early modern period.[1] People who know absolutely nothing about Shakespeare are familiar with this scene. It is instantly recognizable, and today it is referenced and parodied to the point where this once innovative use of props has become a cliché. But why is this scene so famous? Where did it come from? Of all the gruesomeness in Renaissance drama, the scene with Yorick's skull is relatively tame, so we cannot blame all of its renown (in Shakespeare's day and in our own) on the audience's morbid curiosity about death. Yorick has predecessors in both medieval and early modern drama, though the introduction of the isolated human skull on stage was unique to *Hamlet*. In the middle ages, morality plays incorporated figures of death, often depicted as animated skeletons. In the early modern period, religious plays based on the lives of St. John the Baptist and Thomas More appeared, plays where the audience fully expected the severed heads which appeared on stage. Off-stage, beheadings were fairly common too. Scholar Steven Greenblatt notes the famous beheading of the rebellion leader the Earl of Essex in 1601. Greenblatt hypothesizes Shakespeare would have feared a similar fate for his own patron, the Earl of Southampton, who was imprisoned in connection with the uprising (Greenblatt, *Will in*

[1] Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson's *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* has no mention of any play including a skull before *Hamlet*.
A search of the *English Drama* database (which contains the text of 3,900 plays) for the word "skull" and its variants (scull, skul, skulle, skuls, skulles, skulls, scull) from 1280 to 1620 returns no stage directions involving skulls predating *Hamlet*. No lines seem to suggest the need for an actual skull as a prop either.
The Oxford English Dictionary's results for a skull as "The bony case or frame containing or enclosing the brain of man or other vertebrate animals," "the cranium," and "the whole bony framework or skeleton of the head" returned no examples of plays prior to 1620 which would require skulls as props.

the World 308). I also owe thanks to Dr. Gretchen Schulz who reminded me that the severed heads of supposed traitors (dipped in tar to preserve them) were very publicly displayed on London Bridge. Thus, the people of London were no strangers to heads *sans* bodies, both theatrical and real. But Yorick has his origins within Shakespeare's other works as well, works which show a cohesive effort on Shakespeare's part to shock the audience with images which combined both physical and spiritual concerns. It would seem that the intention of these skulls is morally didactic. Hamlet ascribes a teaching function to the theater, saying

> I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
> Have by the very cunning of the scene
> Been struck so to the soul that presently
> They have proclaimed their malefactions (2.2.566-569).

When Shakespeare's audience was struck by the stark image of a skull on stage, they too (like the guilty party Hamlet wishes to ensnare) were meant to look at their sins, to reflect on their own failings, and to better prepare themselves for death and the afterlife to follow. Through theater, and particularly through skulls, Shakespeare is taking part in the Christianized tradition of the *memento mori*, wherein images of death act as reminders of the frailty of human existence and the superiority of divine concerns.

In order to help understand the *memento mori* theme which pervades *Hamlet*, it is helpful to look backwards. Three earlier plays, *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *2*, shed light on *Hamlet* and the contemplation of death it evokes, reflecting on themes of moral action in this life and preparation for life after death. The image of the skull, the ultimate *memento mori*, permeates *Richard II* and both parts of *Henry IV*, reminding the viewer through references that death (and death's spiritual ramifications) should be a constant concern. In *Hamlet*, these references still persist, but their importance is further heightened by the inclusion of a physical

human skull. The prevalence of allusions to death would act as a religious prompt, a reminder of the need for spiritual preparedness. Death means not only physical decay, but also judgment by God and eternal spiritual life in heaven or hell. Hence, the skull is the perfect reminder of death: not only is it an example of the physical destruction wrought by death, but it is a reminder of the insubstantiality of fleshly concerns in the face of religious considerations. No matter how important a human being may seem in life, death makes a mockery of earthly achievements. The divine, the good, and the permanent, these are qualities which will continue to matter beyond the grave. Human vanities and ambitions will eventually be rendered insubstantial, but, as the skull reminds us, a more permanent fate awaits, one for which mortals hope to be prepared. Depending on one's preparations in this life, Heaven (or possibly purgatory before Heaven) or Hell awaited to house the soul for eternity.

Combined with these concerns about death were the socio-political transformations of the day. The gap between the creation of *Titus Andronicus* and the creation of *Hamlet* was a time of readjustment for England. There were, of course, the shifts related to and caused by the most obvious happenings in the realms of religion, government, and geographical discovery: the Reformation, the particulars of Queen Elizabeth I's ongoing reign, and exploration in the new world. Other, less obvious shifts were also occurring, ones which were having a profound impact on the thinking and literature of the time. These changes involved the increasingly secular attitudes of English men and women as their nation moved beyond the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, an age of greater wealth, increased self-interest, and renewed interest in the individual's place in society.

The works of playwrights, clerics, essayists, and others, works which survive today, indicate that there existed a great deal of concern in Shakespeare's England that the world of the

material was coming to dominate the world of the spiritual, overturning tradition and order. Scholar Michael Neill paints a picture of fear amongst traditionalists in a society so long dependent upon the now crumbling structure of feudalism. In place of feudalism a system had arisen which was very much based in the secular world. For many, London was "a place [of] swarming crowds and subjection to the universal solvent, money" and a place of moral turpitude (Neill 24). Great cities, according to Neill, fulfilled their inhabitants' desire to be part of a great nation (Neill 23). Great though London might have appeared, it "was also a place of dirt, corruption, and disease… whose sheer size and amorphousness was felt to undermine the traditional social order" (Neill 24). In the surviving literature, especially sermons and plays, cities like London are associated with corruption and disorder, places where moral structure is either missing or perverted. In this setting, so full of vice, Shakespeare's plays came into being. They may and often do celebrate the pleasures of life in this world. Still, his plays bear the mark of a man concerned with the next world and so, with morality. Though they can be (and certainly have been) interpreted in various ways, his plays often concern moral men and women surrounded by and fighting against worldly corruption.

The critic John Danby provides an interesting examination of the cultural clashes of Shakespeare's time. In a discussion of *King Lear* (which was written several years after *Hamlet* and which will not be the focus of this honors thesis) Danby examines concerns which are very much observable in *Hamlet* and in Shakespeare's earlier plays. Danby put it well so many years ago when he asserted that Shakespeare's *King Lear* presents us with anthropomorphized versions of the two major contemporary worldviews (referring to these two worldviews as "Natures"). There is the more orthodox outlook (represented by Lear) devoted to piety and honor, drawing its values from those of the Middle Ages. According to Danby

> Lear's Nature… is a structure ascending from primordial matter up to God. It… takes for granted that parents are to be honoured and human decencies observed. It assumes as the absolute shape for man an image of tenderness, comfort, generosity, charity, courtesy, gratitude (Danby 28)

Lear's medieval worldview is dominated by fear of God and a resultant determination to follow the moral principles associated with one's God-given place in society. These beliefs are countered by the more modern, secular, self-interested outlook (represented by Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester) that was becoming widespread during the Renaissance, especially in cities.[2]

Edmund's Nature is one in which "In place of the King the new symbol is the 'politician': the man who can play on human nature… better than any other" (Danby 45). Edmund is Machiavellian, believing that might makes right. For Edmund there are no "good" men, only powerful men, and they make the rules. While more traditional views may conceive of him as a cold-hearted monster, he certainly does not think of himself as such. Edmund "belongs to the new age of scientific inquiry and industrial development, of bureaucratic organization and social regimentation, the age of mining and merchant-venturing, of monopoly and Empire-making, the age of the sixteenth century and after" (Danby 46). He is cold, calculating, and, for those who subscribe to the orthodox view, utterly villainous. But in his view, he is rational, competent, and successful in serving his own ends. Edmund is without the sense of honor and duty towards country that drives Bolingbroke in *Richard II* or Hal in *Henry IV*. Both Bolingbroke and Hal have been accused of Machiavellian ideals and behaviors. Hal especially has been the subject of criticism for his cold, calculating abandonment of Falstaff. In

[2] It should be noted that *King Lear* takes place in pre-Roman Britain. The play's Christian sentiments are anachronistic, but they allow the play to reflect all the better on late sixteen hundreds England.

Shakespeare's handling of the history, however, Bolingbroke and Hal both frame their ambition in terms of aiding their country and serving God. Edmund never has such lofty, traditional goals. His interest in his own wellbeing only destroys the lives of many. This is the man Shakespeare has chosen to represent the new views which clash with the old.

Edmund represents not merely evil in general, but, rather, the specific failings of the newly secular culture of Shakespeare's time. Danby states "[Edmund] is not part of the playwright's dream. He is a direct imaging of the times. If we see him in the Shakespearian context of the Natures we can regard him as a symbol. If we think in terms of the historical setting Shakespeare himself belonged to, he is an actuality" (Danby 46). When Danby states that Edmund is not part of Shakespeare's "dream," he means that Edmund is not just an imagining of what might be. He is a character based in reality, not merely an iconic villain created from thin air, but a reflection of attitudes and behaviors which Shakespeare would have viewed as evil. Edmund warns of the dangers of this newly self-interested way of existence.[3] Edmund would have been unnerving for Shakespeare's traditionally minded audience because he has rejected "another society not yet outgrown. This is the society of the sixteenth century and before. The standards Edmund rejects have come down from the Middle Ages" (Danby 46). Edmund has rejected England's past and its values, values still part of Shakespeare's present, in spite of shifts to newer ideals. This rejection makes it easy for him to manipulate others. He has no qualms about misleading others, playing one "friend" against another,[4] or even plotting murders. He has no investment in religion and so, he has no fear of being damned for his actions. The world he

[3] Edmund's soliloquy at the start of Act One, scene two ends with the words "Now Gods, stand up for Bastards" (1.2.1-22). Of the entire speech Danby says "No medieval devil ever bounced on to the stage with a more scandalous self-announcement" (Danby 32).

[4] As he most notably does with his father, Gloucester, his brother, Edgar, Regan , and Goneril.

believes in represents nightmarish Machiavellianism, wherein every man could (without compunction) lie and cheat his way to power.

True, Shakespeare makes Edmund as an underdog appealing to us. Edmund is a capable man dismissed as a "bastard" by his society. The man is fascinating and wronged.[5] He is also terribly intelligent in his manipulations to assert his place in the society which has mistreated him. Shakespeare, however, presents him in this way in order to demonstrate the dangerousness of men like Edmund. Like Lucifer in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Edmund is seductive in his eloquence. Edmund demands our sympathy with his righteous-sounding indignation at the unfairness of his lot. At their core, however, both Lucifer and Edmund represent selfish, destructive forces. They are wolves (or as Machiavelli would have put it, foxes) in sheep's clothing, all the more dangerous for appearing trustworthy or attractive (Machiavelli 79).

In Shakespeare's England, men like Edmund pushed the country farther and farther from medieval values, and a rift was appearing as the traditional worldview (focused on the spiritual) and the secular worldview (focused on the temporal) clashed. The view of the individual and his or her death was one of the key areas of contention. In the past, the individual had been seen as a significant part of the larger structure of the community, but his or her significance was well understood to be limited by mortality. Death was understood to be inevitable and all-destroying, putting an impersonal end to the ambitions of people, regardless of their status in this world. (Neill 13-15) By the sixteenth century, several factors were converging to change this perception of death, life after death, and the individual. New wealth was creating a greater emphasis on the material in society and on the pleasures of this world. This new emphasis created distractions from the spiritual, rendering the *memento mori* less powerful. The image of the death's-head

[5] *King Lear*. 1.2.2-9. Edmund complains that his bastardy has unfairly branded him as depraved.

used to remind people of Heaven and Hell is useless if they continue to pay more attention to worldly pleasures than to the state of their souls.

Protestantism meant an end to the belief in purgatory,[6] and so prayers on the behalf of the dead were no longer necessary (Neill 38). According to Neill, with no need to pay the clergy for intercessions to ensure a loved one's eventual admittance into heaven, funerals became more elaborate, with grandiose tombs serving as a new way of honoring the deceased. Shows of wealth replaced prayers for the dead, trading religious acts of remembrance for secular ones. Neill points out that "Whilst the iconography of tombs often incorporated elements of the macabre, in the form of skulls and *transi* sculptures, illustrating the grotesque reality of mortal decay, such details increasingly served only as a necessary counterpoint to the display of defiant secular pride criticized by contemporary moralists" (Neill 41). That is, these depictions of traditional and supposedly humbling themes of death, originally meant to urge morality in survivors, were no longer meant as true displays of piety, but rather, as socially acceptable, somewhat grudging, assertions of modesty in these otherwise ostentatiously lavish constructions. The *memento mori* figures, originally included to remind viewers of the inevitability of death and life after death in order to encourage moral behavior in this life, had lost their meaning. Elaborately carved monuments still inherently belong to the physical world and were prideful

[6] It is true, though, that the Ghost in *Hamlet* seems to strongly suggest that he is in purgatory, a place where Catholics believe that some souls undergo purgation in preparation for heaven, causing Stephen Greenblatt to conjecture that William Shakespeare retained at least parts of his father's (John Shakespeare's) Catholicism (Greenblatt 319-321):

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
> To tell the secrets of my prison-house
> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul…" (1.4.9-16)

displays of wealth. They subverted the purpose of the *memento mori*, which was to instill disdain for this world in the viewer, to demonstrate the transitory nature of life and of secular ambitions. The *memento mori* is not meant to add decoration to monuments which glorify worldly achievement. Critic Phoebe Spinrad refers to the ornate representations of death in tombs and other artwork from this period as "the abused imagery of skeletons and worms" (Spinrad 16). "Abused" seems the right word as it would seem such overuse of death imagery had led to apathy, not just concerning death, but the afterlife as well. Clearly, representations of death on tombs and elsewhere were coming to invoke less terror concerning mortality and less concern about spiritual well being, hence, less motivation to live as morally as possible.

If art can provide us with any indication of a culture's attitudes towards death, the increasingly shocking imagery which decorated tombs and appeared in the art and literature related to dying suggests a great deal about the increasingly dismissive attitude toward calls for moral reform evoked by contemplation of mortality, an attitude which artists and their patrons periodically felt the need to revitalize by increasing the shock value of mortality represented in their works. Spinrad does an excellent job of charting the progression of Death imagery in her book *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Renaissance English Stage*. Spinrad details the evolution of Death's depiction in the Middle Ages: the leader of the dance of Death, the corpse mimicking and mocking life (often by wearing the same clothes as his depicted victim), the skeleton in the background menacing the unsuspecting (Spinrad 7-11, 9, 19). In each new incarnation Death is imagined as a more threatening presence, and yet the threat was felt less fully. Spinrad describes one of the first major changes to Death's depictions in this way: "From the beginning of the sixteenth century, it almost seems as though the skeleton, in order to retain its meaning, had to be taken to pieces, [so] the skull alone, that age-old symbol of mortality,

[could hold] its own as the dreadful warning—for a while" (Spinrad 22). Parts of the skeleton (especially when rendered realistically) have a more powerful visual effect than the familiar comic image of the whole skeleton. The bony hand and the eyeless skull are more difficult to anthropomorphize (and thus more difficult to dismiss) than is an entire skeleton that gestures amusingly.

But even skulls (and other bones separated from the rest of the skeleton) soon lost their power to evoke a strong response. After 1550, Spinrad notes that the skull appears in full view in portraits of the wealthy, "at the subject's elbow or in his hand" (Spinrad 22). It had become a clichéd prop in spite of the attempts to reinstate its former power. It was an expected detail in lavish paintings for the wealthy and not an especially meaningful one. In the same way that skulls on elaborate tombs no longer had the same visual impact, neither did the painted skull inspire the reflection intended to by *memento mori*. Spinrad points out that the object is "a warning only, not a threat" (Spinrad 22). Eventually it was not even a warning. Spinrad conveys that the horror of the skull was weakening; the reminder of the afterlife (and the possible punishment or reward there) was becoming less effective.

The example of death's-head jewelry also illustrates how little the emblem of the skull meant to many by the 1590s, the time when Shakespeare began to write his plays. Skull jewelry was immensely fashionable amongst the wealthy in later sixteenth century England. Apparently, the trend was so popular that even prostitutes (seeking to appear high-class) began to wear these reminders of the inevitability of death (Frye 210, Spinrad 223). The fashion was, perhaps, ironically fitting in that prostitutes often hastened the very death that this jewelry was meant to signify: prostitutes were well known for spreading venereal diseases to their clients. According to Spinrad, the use of the death's-head rings by prostitutes was so prevalent that "the association

of bawds with death's-head rings had become standard comic fare" (Spinrad 223). Clearly, the skull meant little or nothing in terms of moral message.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare eventually presents the desensitized members of his audience with a re-empowered use of the *memento mori*, but *Titus Andronicus* is where he began his play-writing career (or perhaps his tragedy-writing career, depending on the chronology of the works), and in *Titus Andronicus* he seems as desensitized to the real horrors of death as many of his contemporaries. What then connects Hamlet's lamentations over Yorick's skull to *Titus Andronicus*? The fully fleshed severed heads of Titus' sons, Quintus and Martius, [7] at first seem too disgusting, too crude, too horrifying, and simplistically entertaining to act as the predecessors to Yorick's skull. And, of course, such heads were familiar props as well. As mentioned above, public executions and severed heads on London Bridge were not uncommon sights. Severed heads on stage would also have been well established[8] by the 1580s (Owens 183). The appearance of Quintus and Martius' heads in *Titus Andronicus* would hardly have been innovative to Shakespeare's audience, and the shock value of these heads would have been mitigated by the frequency of such sights in Elizabethan Theater. The heads of Quintus and Martius are clichéd, included in order to add yet another ostensibly horrifying touch to *Titus Andronicus*' nightmare world. They lack clear meaning. Questions of government abound in the work, but the concept of the body politic and the head it needs in order to function is conspicuously missing or at least heavily muddled. The executed men are Roman citizens, not rulers, who might typically be expected to be represented by heads. Yes, the heads may provide

[7] Titus also claims that he will bake Chiron and Demetrius' heads into pies (5.2.188). Depending, however, on the staging, these severed heads are not necessarily shown to us, whereas the appearance of Quintus and Martius' heads is called for in the stage directions and dialogue (stage directions [s.d.] after 3.1. 232 and 3.1.235).

[8] Reginald Scot's 1584 book ***Discoverie of Witchcraft*** explains a contraption which jugglers could have used to appear before a crowd with an actual actor's head (placed through an opening) seemingly separated from the body and on display (117 Owens).

some commentary on the mutilation of the Roman, state or they may reveal the disrespect shown towards reason, often symbolized by heads. And yes, the heads drive the action of the play: Titus seeks revenge on Saturninus and Tamora because his sons' heads have been cut off, and he punishes the two rulers with the heads of their sons in pies.[9] The fact remains, though, that the message of the heads is somewhat confused and not necessarily important to any morality promoted by the work. In later plays, Shakespeare manages to interweave severed heads (in the form of skulls) into plays (in references and finally, in fact) as *memento mori* with a moral message meant to be taken seriously. However, he hasn't done so here.

But perhaps the level of gross excess in *Titus Andronicus* set the wheels in motion for shocking and yet meaningful appearances of skulls in *Hamlet*'s graveyard scene. In the years between *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* we see Shakespeare moving away from empty and clichéd severed heads towards more understated, verbal depictions of skulls, that are in fact more powerful for their subtlety because they are more apt to be taken seriously. *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *2,* all verbally allude to the human skull, the symbol of death, with mentions more profound than decapitated, bleeding heads on stage could ever be. Skulls poke their ghastly visages into the language of all three of these plays in passages that would have been easily identifiable to an audience well versed in *memento mori*. Shakespeare empowers death's-head imagery again and revivifies the capacity of such a symbol to enjoin morality. How ironic given that Puritans were especially fond of objecting to theaters as places of sin and decadence. Regardless, in Shakespeare's work we see evidence of attempts to express and evoke deeply religious and often traditional beliefs about death and the afterlife in his use of *memento mori*.

[9] See footnote 7

Unlike the body parts of *Titus Andronicus*, the death's-heads of *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *2*, are, first, and most importantly, not physical manifestations. They exist as words, usually allusions to skulls, and are nuanced in a way that heads fresh from a corpse and dripping with blood cannot be. It is almost as if Shakespeare has taken those grisly heads from his first tragedy and peeled their skin off in order to better examine death, the skull beneath the flesh, through words. For example, *Richard II* uses the word "skull" only twice, but includes references to Golgotha, "the place of the skull," where Christ was crucified, and to Lucian's *Dialogue of the Dead*, wherein a character stands in the underworld, holding Helen of Troy's skull in his hand (Heckscher 295). These two images, evoked by skulls, can be closely related to concerns with the limits of human power and the inevitability of death in *Richard II*. Though Shakespeare does not often employ the word "skull," he conjures skulls up as images of death and terror that force the viewer to contemplate the ugly nature of mortality and the necessity of moral preparation for the afterlife.

Both parts of *Henry IV* accomplish goals similar to those of *Richard II*. In *Henry IV* death and morality are dealt with abstractly, but they also become concretely realized in the figure of Falstaff. Falstaff is closely associated with death because of his sinful nature. As he swaggers, eats, drinks, and whores, his connection to the world of the flesh acts as a reminder of all human frailty. Shakespeare reveals the skull beneath Falstaff's jovial face, and his audience would have been forced to realize that flesh, weak and transitory flesh, cannot stop Falstaff from becoming a *memento mori*. In spite of his vitality, Falstaff acts as a reminder of the spiritual implications of living and dying without moral contemplation.

Hamlet's graveyard scene is the culmination of this examination of skulls. By 1601, when the play was supposedly first performed, the *memento mori* in visual art and literary

language had lost much of its potency for the people of England. The death's-head had become a commonplace, rather than the terrifying reminder of human mortality and the afterlife which it must have once been. In *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part 1* and *2,* Shakespeare reinstates its power as a symbol, by reinforcing its severe messages of death and the possibility of damnation. With *Hamlet,* Shakespeare confers physicality on the skull after having examined the power of verbal reference to the skull in earlier plays. Shakespeare has not forgotten the meaning of *memento mori* and is clearly seeking to inspire traditional religious piety and moral behavior in his audience. Sometimes Shakespeare is blatant about this desire: the Ghost in *Hamlet* speaks of the unsavory effects of being "Cut off even in the blossoms of …sin, / Unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled" (1.5.76-77).[10] With *Hamlet* there is no ambiguity concerning the meaning of the skull in Hamlet's hand: it is an absolute representation of the inescapability of death. During *Hamlet,* at least, death cannot be ignored, the afterlife cannot be avoided, and the need for morality in this life gains a new sense of urgency.

[10] Greenblatt's note in *The Norton Shakespeare* explains lines 76-77. He glosses the lines as "Without the sacrament of the Eucharist, without death-bed confession and absolution, and without extreme unction, the ritual anointing of those who are close to death" (Greenblatt 1713). The Ghost expresses the importance of making a final reckoning before death.

Remembrance in *Richard II*

Richard II denies the audience certainty: both Richard and Bolingbroke's fitness to rule are established, the one by divine right, the other by ability, but both rights are subverted, and death becomes the only constant in a shifting political scenario. *Richard II* is meant to be an upsetting and unsettling play because its subject matter (the overthrow of kings) is upsetting and unsettling. Shakespeare manages to make the world of *Richard II* not only unpredictable, but menacing as well by incorporating references to skulls into passages important to the play. The inclusion of skulls darkens the play, acting as a form of *memento mori* in a work where the futility of human ambitions is a central theme. In the world of *Richard II*, men struggle for power and earthly glory as England becomes a battlefield. But the skull mocks all these actions and aspirations. These men may struggle all they please, but their efforts, win or lose, offer only transitory results. What should concern them more is the spiritual death that will follow their physical death if they do not focus on the morality of their behavior in this morally confusing life.

The question of right or wrong in *Richard II* is a difficult one. For those in the play and those in the audience, the two competitors for the right to rule England each seem sometimes admirable and sometimes deeply flawed. Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke contend for the crown as Richard abuses his God-given powers and Bolingbroke threatens God's representative on earth. According to the "Tudor Myth," Bolingbroke's overthrow of Richard caused the War of the Roses, the long period wherein civil war and strife gripped England until the Tudors came to power. The myth cast the Tudors in the role of England's saviors, while the enemies of the Tudors were maligned, their history twisted for the purposes of propaganda. Perhaps the most famous example of a play promoting the Tudor view of history is Shakespeare's earlier history,

Richard III. In this play the historical Richard III (who fought against the Tudor who would become Henry VII) was portrayed as a humpbacked villain. *Richard II*, however, is a less simplistic approach to the complex subject matter of the period. The play does not merely pit good men against evil ones. Richard clearly wrongs his subjects: he banishes Bolingbroke for six years rather than let him fight to prove Thomas Mowbrey a traitor. When John of Gaunt dies, Richard seizes Bolingbroke's land (2.1.210-211), imposes excessive taxes (2.1.247-8), and fines nobles for disputes long forgotten (2.1.248-9). Yet Richard becomes incredibly sympathetic when he abdicates the throne. The deposed Richard is much more introspective and wise than one might expect a formerly power-hungry monarch to be. Shakespeare even grants Richard a hero's death as he defends himself against assassins.

Bolingbroke is an equally complicated character. He does have a legitimate grievance against Richard, and Richard's policies are harming England as whole. Bolingbroke's honor, however, is tainted by having deposed a king. Although Bolingbroke expresses regret for the death of Richard, he may have engineered it, despite his later protestations that he did not want Richard dead. Bolingbroke may be a Machiavel who counts on Exton killing Richard, leaving himself blameless, as he banishes the man who helpfully eliminated his rival. The remorse Bolingbroke, who has become Henry IV, expresses at the end of *Richard II*, however, seems genuine as does his expression of his belief in *Henry IV, Part 1* that Hal's poor behavior is Henry IV's punishment for deposing Richard. Any sympathy we might have for Bolingbroke is counter to the views advanced by the "Tudor Myth," and yet Shakespeare definitely allows us to sympathize with, even admire, this usurper.

Given Shakespeare's deliberate complication of the moral issues in the play—and the lack of clarity about right and wrong—it is tempting for those in the play (as for those in its

audience) to think in terms of standards more secular than spiritual. It is easier to identify the good with the effective, the eloquent, or the sympathetic than with the virtuous. But in *Richard II* Shakespeare refuses to allow the audience to forget what God's view of human behavior might be. References to skulls as *memento mori* remind us that what is appealing may *not* be good and that the final judgment of souls will reflect who has served God best. We are reminded that the spiritual realm does matter above all, even though we may occasionally forget that fact.

The first reference to skulls in *Richard II* appears after Richard banishes Bolingbroke for six years. The sentence was originally banishment for ten years, but upon seeing the pain this causes John of Gaunt, Bolingbroke's father, Richard shortens the length of the exile. Still, John of Gaunt knows he may not live to see his son's return and tells Richard of his unhappiness. Gaunt's speech is rife with metaphorical allusions to death, conveyed through light and dark imagery, but he concludes much more explicitly. Darkness overpowers light, and the image of a skull extinguishes all hope for further life in this world.

> I thank my liege, that in regard of me
> He shortens four years of my son's exile:
> But little vantage shall I reap thereby;
> For, ere the six years that he hath to spend
> Can change their moons and bring their times about
> My oil-dried lamp and time-bewasted light
> Shall be extinct with age and endless night;
> My inch of taper will be burnt and done,
> And blindfold death not let me see my son. (I.iii. 209-217)

Gaunt compares his life to two sources of light: a lamp and a taper (candle). Their extinguishing obviously leads to a lack of light, death. Shakespeare, however, heightens the horror of dying by ending the somewhat abstract and non-frightening imagery of light and dark with a very concrete example of the transformational power of death, a skull, called "blindfold death." The reference

to the physical reality of the body, decayed after death, ends John of Gaunt's plea abruptly and forces us to change our understanding of the passage as a whole. Gaunt's earlier use of the word "reap" especially takes on new meaning. On its own, the word "reap" merely means "to harvest," an activity associated with autumn, a time metaphorically connected to the later years of life ("reap" v.[1], def.1, OED). When combined with the emphasis that the reference to a skull places on death, "reap" must also be associated with Death himself, often portrayed as a "Grim Reaper" carrying a scythe ("scythe" n. def. 2, OED). Death has found its way into Gaunt's very language.

The suddenness of the skull's appearance in the passage mimics the unexpected nature of death itself, creating in the viewer a shock similar to the terror one might feel upon being presented with a real skull. We are not spared from the gruesome emptiness of the skull's eye sockets (Maus 980). Death is not "blindfolded" by any physical covering of his eyes. Rather, he is effectively blindfolded because he has no eyes at all. Gaunt's metaphorical lamp and candle, referenced earlier in his speech, have no significance at all for Death. These sources of light lose their power in the face of Death, much as temporal life loses its significance in the face of mortality.

John of Gaunt's allusions to death only grow stronger when Richard insists that Gaunt has many years left to live (1.3.218). Gaunt replies "But not a minute, King, that thou canst give" (1.3.219). In the following lines, Gaunt acknowledges Richard's power to take life, his right to have a man executed or not, but Gaunt simultaneously reminds Richard that, king though he may be, no man has the power to grant life. Gaunt casts all of Richard's power into a harsh light, exposing the necessarily temporal nature of a king's might. Gaunt states that once he is dead, "thy kingdom cannot buy my breath" (1.3.225). Richard seems unwilling to acknowledge his limitations. He quickly changes the subject, failing to acknowledge that what Gaunt says is true.

This avoidance on Richard's part is habitual. He has forgotten the true place of kings, to rule in the temporal world while simultaneously acknowledging that their power is limited by their mortality. King or not, no man can master death. What comes after death is also out of the hands of men, no matter what their earthly power may be.

Gaunt himself actually becomes a *memento mori*, a reminder of death, for Richard. In Act Two, scene one, Richard comes to visit Gaunt, inquiring about his health. Shakespeare reveals the dying man's mental and physical transformation into a death-like state. Asked about his health, Gaunt quibbles on his name: "Gaunt am I for the grave, gaunt as a grave, / Whose hollow womb inherits naught but bones" (2.1.82-83). Gaunt's failing health and grief at the banishment of his son have made him thin, presumably skeletal, his face skull-like. His words acknowledge that he, like all human beings, is inevitably destined for the grave. Moreover, in the truest sense of the *memento mori*, he conveys that death is not the end. The grave inherits "naught but bones"; the afterlife inherits the soul, the essence of John Gaunt. In this scene, he is the living dead, balanced between life and death, warning Richard to consider his own mortality and the state of his soul, lest Richard spend his own afterlife in hell rather than heaven. He instructs Richard to treat his country with more care, saying "But, for thy world, enjoying but this land, / Is it not more than shame to shame it so?" (2.1.111-112) Gaunt is clearly admonishing Richard for using his power as king to collect unreasonable amounts of money from his subjects. But present in his words is a reminder of the limits of Richard's power. The king enjoys "but this land," which belongs to the temporal world only, and not the spiritual. He seems to have forgotten the spiritual world in his desire for wealth and power.

Later in the play, other characters make the same mistake as Richard, misunderstanding the spiritual implications of mortality. As Northumberland, Willoughby, and Ross discuss the

fate of England and the return of Bolingbroke, Northumberland says "Even through the hollow eyes of death / I spy life peering" (2.1. 271-272). Critic Clayton G. MacKenzie links this passage to art works by Claude Paradin (1561), Joachim Camerarius (1595), Joannes Sambucus (1564), and Juan de Horozco y Covarrubias (1591), all of which depict plant life (usually wheat) growing from within skulls, a supposedly positive symbol (MacKenzie 321-322). The "life," however, which Northumberland claims to see through the eyes of death is actually an England where many men will lose their lives in the civil war to come, a future suggested the darker implications of plant life used to represent budding hope. MacKenzie fails to acknowledge that most plants (and wheat especially) are short-lived, seasonal forms of life: even if they obtain their nourishment from decaying flesh, they too are bound to die, much like the dead organism from which they draw life. Thus, we may view Northumberland's use of an image of life springing from death as telling irony on Shakespeare's part. Northumberland himself will flourish from the death of Richard, but his victory will be short-lived, as he is bound to death, too. The kind of hope meant to be spied through the eyes of death involves eternal life with God in heaven—if one is moral while alive in this world. The reward that the afterlife brings is purely spiritual. The earthly power men aspire to is transient and thus, not part of the *memento mori*'s message, which focuses on the spiritual and the eternal.

In Act Three King Richard comes to understand the mockery Death makes of all men's earthly aspirations too late. While Richard is in Ireland, Bolingbroke uses the opportunity to return to England and, with the help of disaffected nobles, overpowers Richard's remaining forces. But even before he learns that he has lost to Bolingbroke, Richard finally grasps the transitory nature of this world, achieving the same understanding which John of Gaunt attempted to impart to him earlier. Power hungry and avaricious, Richard had abused his kingly duties

towards his people and his God. Convinced now that he is about to learn bad news, Richard displays the maturity and piety that might have served him well, had he demonstrated these qualities earlier in his reign. He says

> Mine ear is open and my heart prepared
> The worst is worldly loss thou canst unfold.
> Say, is my kingdom lost? Why 'twas my care,
> And what loss is it to be rid of care?
> Strives Bolingbroke to be as great as we?
> Greater he shall not be. If he serve God
> We'll serve Him too, and be his fellow so….
> …The worst is death, and death will have his day (3.2.89-99).

Richard now understands the insignificance of this world and the inescapability of death, with punishment to follow if one does not serve God while alive. Richard finally acknowledges that the best a man can do (king or not) is to serve God. The claim that "The worst is death" is somewhat problematic because damnation is truly the "worst" fate. Richard's words concerning death, however, seem an appropriately pious dismissal of death's power since death is only the most terrible thing that can happen in *this* life. The good man (which Richard certainly believes he is) has nothing to fear from death as he will be reunited with God in the afterlife.

When he learns of Bolingbroke's victory, Richard's response reveals that he now sees his faith has been self-centered. The certain knowledge that he has lost reinforces the inevitability of death and decay for Richard, but he now understands the hope which is key to *memento mori*. He acknowledges the tenuous grip on life of even the most powerful, saying "Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs / Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes / Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth" (3.2.141-3). Richard reflects on the impermanence of life as he mentions making "dust our paper" and using tears to write "sorrow on the bosom of the earth." Both actions produce only temporary effects: words written on dust will soon blow away with the wind and tears on

the bosom of the earth are, likewise, impermanent. Through these metaphors, Richard denies the ultimate importance of his suffering. His losses are no more significant than these symbols of impermanence; the monument he wished to leave behind (the memory of his reign) will soon be all but erased from the earth.

Richard finally understands part of John of Gaunt's point in Act Two, scene one, when Richard here continues,

> Let's choose executors and talk of wills—
> And yet not so, for what can we bequeath
> Save our deposed bodies to the ground?
> Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke's;
> And nothing can we call our own but death…. (3.2.144-8)

Richard echoes Gaunt's claim that the grave "inherits naught but bones." Yet, faced with the incontrovertible news of his defeat by Bolingbroke, Richard forgets the religious implications of Gaunt's words. When Gaunt speaks of the frailty of man, he also speaks of man's redemption. In the same scene Gaunt mentioned "The world's ransom, blessed Mary's son," (2.1.56) and described his "brother Gloucester [as a] plain well-meaning soul—Whom fair befall in heaven 'mongst happy souls…" (2.1.129-30). Here, Richard never mentions hope or anything like the redemptive aspects of Christianity of which Gaunt speaks. In this scene, he momentarily allows misfortune to derail his understanding of religion. All of his mentions of God involve God protecting Richard's right as king, rather than a genuine awe of God or acceptance for His plan, whatever it may be.

Ignoring the hope for the afterlife inherent in *memento mori* in his references to death, here Richard focuses on the insignificance of human life:

> … [W]ithin 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,
> Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
> To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,
> Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
> As if this flesh which walls about our life
> Were brass impregnable (3.2.141-59).

At least Richard fully grasps human frailty. Abandoning his earlier insistence that God would protect his right as king, he calls the crown (as a metonymy for kingship in general) "hollow," implying that both the crown and greatness lack real substance ("hollow" adj. def 1.a. OED). The Arden edition of *Richard II* points out that "hollow crown" sounds similar to "hollow ground," reinforcing Richard's focus on death in this world (Arden 3.2. n. for 140). The fact that a king's temples are "mortal" also emphasizes the temporary nature of life and power. Furthermore, a physical crown may sit atop a king's head, but it is an ornament that can be easily removed. What is left behind is only the crown that everyone possesses: a skull, a symbol of death, the end to which all humans are subject. He understands that Death (which he anthropomorphizes) is not content with destroying royalty; it ridicules the very process of ruling, acting as an antic or jester. The antic Death grins at "pomp" for Death destroys all reasons for pomp, as Death destroys all human creations. Death also grins because his face is a skull, and therefore he cannot help but smile eternally. If Death may mock a king and make a joke of ruling over a court, then Death truly is triumphant and is justified in grinning. Richard's failure to understand the spiritual aspects of death (the possibility of damnation or salvation to follow) reveals Richard's reasoning is flawed still. He, as well as Bolingbroke, is rebelling against God. He will not show he remembers the afterlife in which he is supposed to believe until he has been deposed.

In Act Four, Richard's dethroning drives him towards a less self-centered view of death, one which takes into account more than just his personal suffering. Once Richard is deposed he

surrenders his crown and scepter to Bolingbroke (4.1.194, 195) and then demands to see a mirror (4.1.255). When Richard is presented with one, he claims that the mirror flatters him at first, but that it cannot reflect the abuse inflicted on him by time and by life (4.1.269). As he considers his past, he asks,

> …Was this face the face
> That every day under his household roof
> Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
> That like the sun did make beholders wink? (4.1.271-274)

The allusion to Faustus's famous speech to Helen of Troy is obvious ("Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?") (*Dr. Faustus*, Marlowe 5.1.90-1). The original source for Marlowe's memorable line is found in Lucian's *Dialogue of the Dead* (Heckscher 295). The scene occurs between Menippus and Hermes in Hades. In his essay "Was This the Face…?" W.S. Heckscher quotes F.G. Fowler's translation of Lucian in order to explain the scene (Heckscher 296). For my purposes, I think it is best that I follow suit:

> Hermes: But look over there to your right, and you will see Hyacinth, Narcissus, Nireus, Achilles, Tyro, Helen, Leda, all the beauties of old.
> Menippus: I can only see bones, and bare skulls; most of them are exactly alike.
> Hermes: Those bones, of which you seem to think so lightly, have been the theme of admiring poets.
> Menippus: Well, but show me Helen; I shall never be able to make her out by myself.
> Hermes: This skull is Helen.
> Menippus: And for this a thousand ships carried warriors from every part of Greece; Greeks and barbarians were slain, and cities made desolate... (Quoted by Heckscher 296).

We know that Marlowe was familiar with Lucian's work; the similarities between the two passages are too great to be coincidental. The question here, though, is whether Shakespeare had knowledge of Lucian. It is quite possible that Shakespeare would have had access to this work in translation. Erasmus of Rotterdam's Latin version was published in 1535 (Heckscher 296). E.P.

Goldschmidt's essay "The First Edition of Lucian of Samosata" claims that Lucian's *Timon* or *The Misanthrope* influenced *Timon of Athens* (Goldschmidt 12). Thus, Shakespeare probably used Lucian as a source in at least one other work. It therefore seems quite possible that Shakespeare was referencing two authors simultaneously (Marlowe and Lucian), rather than just one. The connection of Helen of Troy to Richard reflects Richard's new appreciation for the insignificance of the transitory world. Like Helen of Troy's beauty, Richard's power has been only temporary.

If the words "Was this face the face" did indeed evoke Menippus' speech for Shakespeare's audience as well as Shakespeare himself, then Richard is not only gazing into a mirror. His words are also meant to call to mind Helen of Troy's skull. The scene includes a reminder of vanity's gruesome end: death and decay. According to critic Roland Mushat Frye, mirrors were often connected with death imagery. He quotes John B. Knipping's explanation of common items for higher class women: mirrors etched with skulls. In these mirrors, traditionally items of vanity, the *memento mori* made its presence known: "Beauty and finery could only be contemplated through the image of decay" (Quoted by Fry 210). Scholar Jeffery Triggs points out a Renaissance theater tradition of associating mirrors with skulls because both reflect reality (Triggs 71). Mirrors reflect the truth about one's present appearance; skulls reflect the truth about one's future appearance.

Finally, when Richard shatters the mirror, he performs a sort of beheading of himself. The mirror, which held a reflection of his face, is "cracked in an hundred shivers" (4.1.279). Richard is associated with headlessness as he destroys the image of his own head. England, too, is left "headless," without a king for a moment. Three images of death (the mirror, the skull Shakespeare alludes to, and the "beheading") would seem to reflect some sort of religious

realization on Richard's part. Perhaps it is freedom from the role of king that allows Richard to reach a fuller understanding of death and the afterlife. Before, as king, Richard only spoke of God protecting the rights of kings and punishing those who threatened the crown. After he is deposed he sees three images of himself (three images also related to earthly vanity) destroyed, confirming the frailty of human existence. Viewing this destruction leads Richard out of the self-centered view of religion he had been relying upon, wherein God's only function was to aid Richard. In the very next scene, he speaks to his wife of their exile, saying "Our holy lives must win a new world's crown" (5.1.24). Of course, the "new world" he speaks of is heaven, and a life there is a reward far more important than anything to be had on earth. Richard demonstrates a matured understanding of death and what follows. He faces death in a straight-forward way, but does not merely dwell on its grisly aspects as he did in Act Three, scene two. He acknowledges hope for the afterlife, the afterlife which will provide him with a crown more meaningful than the one he wore as king of England.

But even if Richard has reached a deeper spiritual understanding, the question remains: what will England's fate be for having deposed its supposedly God-given monarch? Upon learning that Bolingbroke will be king, the Bishop of Carlisle (who has been one of Richard's strongest supporters) issues a prophecy regarding the future of England. Believing that deposing Richard, a king by divine right, means directly flouting God's will, he warns that the country will come to be called "The field of Golgotha and dead men's skulls" (4.1.135). Here the skull as a symbol of death threatens an entire nation. England's fate is connected with the crucifixion of Christ, when death seemed to be at its most powerful, appearing to conquer the hope of immortal life symbolized by Christ. Death no longer threatens individual men (John of Gaunt or Richard), but rather, everyone. The Bishop of Carlisle's words make England's situation seem particularly

dire. Without a Christ figure to redeem it, England will be, like Golgotha was before Christ's resurrection, a "field of… dead men's skulls," a horrifying testament to the power of death. Yet the mention of Golgotha would have been intimately linked with resurrection for Shakespeare's audience, for without Christ's death at Golgotha there would have been no hope for redemption in the afterlife. Thus, although the bishop's words seem hopeless, they hint at hope in the future. Shakespeare may well have had the "Tudor myth" in mind again, for it cast the Tudors in the role of saviors. Their propaganda insisted that they had saved England from seemingly endless years of war brought on by Bolingbroke's usurpation. Thus, perhaps they are meant to represent hope and redemption for England, to act as Christ-like figures. Or perhaps this reference suggests the role of "savior" will be filled sooner rather than later, by Hal, Bolingbroke's son as he sacrifices his life of earthly pleasures to reign well as Henry V and keep England whole and safe. England's internal wars under Henry IV (depicted in *Henry IV*, *Parts 1* and *2*) fulfill Carlisle's prophecy of death and destruction. But the relative peace in England which will accompany Henry V's reign could well be an indicator of Hal's fitness to rule as savior of the kingdom. Most compelling in the argument concerning Hal's status as a Christ-like figure is Hal's concern over what makes a good ruler and what makes a good man. As we shall see, his insistence on the value of the spiritual world and his simultaneous success in governing indicate that he is indeed the type of thoughtful, but effective leader that England needs to lead it to glory.

Richard II forces the viewer to focus on the disturbing realities of death by downplaying abstract metaphors, such as light and dark to represent life and death, in favor of references which conjure up the grotesque image of a skull. When confronted with death, there is no refuge in pretty metaphors or abstract images. Like a skull, death waits inside us, mocking life. *Richard II*'s skull imagery is meant to alert the audience (which would seem to have grown desensitized

to traditional images of death and *memento mori*) of death's power to destroy worldly attachments and ambitions. Unlike the severed heads of *Titus Andronicus*, the skulls have a deeper purpose than merely frightening the viewer (though the images are indeed frightening). Every being is subject to death and must accept this fact, but merely understanding the inevitability of death and the temporary nature of human achievements is not enough. Shakespeare's audience would have recognized the hopeful aspect of these *memento mori*: salvation. The possibility of life after death is meant to give hope, even in the midst of a world permeated by mortality. We are meant to fear damnation, and the images of death force the audience to reflect on the state of their own souls. Still, the gruesomeness of the *memento mori* and the fear of hell are never meant to make the audience forget the possibility of perfect happiness in heaven for those who live well.

Memento Falstaff

Henry IV, Parts 1 and *2* include a great deal more humor than *Richard II*, but the plays are no less concerned with serious matters. Righteousness in an unrighteous world is still a major theme. With Falstaff, Shakespeare explores the meaning of death for a man entirely focused on life, as too many of Shakespeare's contemporaries had come to be. Falstaff acts as an anti-*memento mori* for the audience as he ignores the prospect of his mortality, indulging in worldly pleasures. And yet, Falstaff's disregard for the seriousness of death often makes him into an ironic form of *memento mori*. Falstaff downplays the importance of death and the afterlife to follow, and yet he quite often exposes himself to the possibility of physical death. By eating and drinking to excess, having sex with prostitutes who carry various venereal diseases, and engaging in crimes like robbery, Falstaff willingly puts himself in danger. But the danger to Falstaff is not just physical. It is also spiritual. His lack of morals exposes him to the very real possibility of damnation, yet his attitude towards morality and mortality is one of continual mockery. Falstaff's will not realize that one day he will die and face judgment. One must accept death in order to be a fully mature individual, and Falstaff's refusal to respect death shows his immaturity as well as his immorality. By ignoring the reality of death and that which follows, Falstaff is not just flouting convention: he is also flouting God's law.

Skulls and other reminders of death are often thoroughly misconstrued by Falstaff. While his failure to acknowledge the intent of these *memento mori* is comical, his blindness to the seriousness of the subject matter they represent is telling. The lack of self-reflection (a quality which the *memento mori* is inherently intended to inspire) reveals that while Eastcheap is full of enjoyable, vibrant characters like Falstaff, its inhabitants are not suitable long-term companions for the son of Bolingbroke (now Henry IV), Prince Hal (the future Henry V). Falstaff's mockery

of death as he celebrates life makes Hal's final rejection of Falstaff not only understandable, but also reasonable and even commendable in a young man who must enforce God's justice on earth when he becomes king. Hal will be expected to serve as a moral example for his people and act as God's representative on earth. Falstaff refuses to accept the mature and responsible attitude, the traditional pious belief, with which Hal must serve England.

At first glance, Falstaff seems a harmless, maybe even benevolent character. Despite his faults, Falstaff's irreverence and lust for life present alternatives to the deadly seriousness of a society which is clearly rife with its own failings and falling into civil war. Without Falstaff, the world of *Henry IV* would seem much grimmer. Henry IV has deposed Richard II, throwing into doubt the entire question of divine right. Henry IV's son Hal, who will become Henry V, appears uninterested in the kingly concerns which his aged father will pass on to him. In soliloquy, Hal claims that he is only putting on a show by acting like a scoundrel and fraternizing with drunken fools like Falstaff, in order to make his ostensible reformation all the more impressive. Still, there seems to be a chance that he will choose to continue living an unruly, unreflective life, like the one he is living with Falstaff, a possibility which would have disastrous consequences for the country. *Part 2* sees Hal supposedly reformed, but he still associates with Falstaff and the inhabitants of Eastcheap, causing Hal's father to accuse him of not really mending his ways. The country is still fighting a civil war, and Shakespeare's audience would have known that Henry V's reign would be followed by the even worse civil strife of the War of the Roses. Turmoil would grip England for years. Falstaff's determination to make merry presents the audience with a welcome relief from the serious matters which pervade *Henry IV, Parts 1* and *2*.

Scholar Kenneth MacLeish points out Falstaff's value for a world that has grown dishonest and humorless: Falstaff is both "frank" and "aware that life is a charade,"

characteristics which give Falstaff an air of wisdom amongst men bent on squabbling for power (MacLeish 87). He is determined to enjoy life. But unlike the characters of Shakespeare's comedies who endorse temporal happiness in moderation, Falstaff is consumed with carnal pleasures, even in deadly serious situations. Still, it is easy to forget Falstaff's uglier moments, precisely because he is *so* likable. Critic Elmer Edgar Stoll points that a desire to defend Falstaff is deeply ingrained in many of us, though Stoll takes one particular critic, Maurice Morgann, to task for his love of Falstaff: "So firmly has this notion of Falstaff as a real person taken hold of [Morgann] that now and then he breaks out into exclamations against the 'malice' from which Falstaff's reputation suffers,…as if he were a friend in trouble" (Stoll 67). It *is* quite tempting to overlook Falstaff's transgressions as merely joyous interactions with life, rather than willful sinning, which may even be intended to harm others.

When considered objectively, Falstaff's sinfulness is so great that, in spite of his insistence on living life to the fullest, he often acts as a reminder of death. Critic Harry Levin best sums up how Falstaff can be simultaneously an embodiment of sensual pleasure and a reminder of mortality and the pain of eternal punishment which may follow death:

> In the life of the senses, so keenly felt by the Renaissance, at such times the carnal aspect comes poignantly near to the charnel. The bodily appetites, eating, drinking, and sexuality, are sensitively edged by the prospect of death. So it is with this fat and bawdy old man, fighting and foining his way to the next world (Levin 14).

To the Renaissance mentality, this overindulgence on Falstaff's part could not be separated from the spiritual ramifications his actions would have. Thus, he represents a warning for Shakespeare's audience. Each time he commits a sin (and there are many times) he simultaneously makes us laugh and yet also reminds us of the spiritual danger his behavior entails. The Seven Deadly Sins (of which Falstaff commits at least five) are not deadly because

of their temporal ramifications; they are deadly because they may lead to the damnation of one's soul, spiritual death. In addition to embodying a great deal of sin, Falstaff himself functions as a *memento mori* by being too invested in the material world. Because of, rather than in spite of, his excess flesh, Falstaff's bony corpse accompanies him wherever he goes; however much he denies it, his mortality especially is constantly visible to the audience. Thus, Shakespeare reminds us of death in every act of drinking or whoring or fighting. And it is not just physical death that threatens Falstaff; it is the death of the soul as well.

Falstaff's close connection to both the pleasures of this world and the possible pains of the next is made explicit in *Henry IV, Part 1,* Act Two, scene five, the tavern scene. Hal and Falstaff play out a hypothetical conversation between Hal and his father, Henry IV, wherein Hal must account for his debauched ways. Hal (playing his father) accuses Falstaff (playing Hal) of encouraging Hal's misbehavior. Though the enactment is meant to be farcical, the accusations "Henry IV" levels at Falstaff are of a very serious nature. "Henry IV" tells "Hal" that "There is a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an old fat man" (*Part 1* 2.5.407-8) and that he is associating with "that reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity, that father Ruffian, that Vanity in Years" (*Part 1* 2.5.413-14). Falstaff is referred to as "That villainous, abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff; that old white-bearded Satan" (*Part 1* 2.5.421-22). These accusations might easily be dismissed as good-natured ribbing on Hal's part. Surely Falstaff, delinquent but loveable old Falstaff, cannot represent so much evil for Hal. Falstaff (still playing Hal) begs "Henry IV" not to banish Falstaff. He makes reasonable arguments for Falstaff's overall goodness: he claims that "If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is damned. If to be fat be is to be hated, then Pharaoh's lean kine are to be loved" (*Part 1* 2.5.429-32). But Falstaff's excuses are beside the point. It is not Falstaff's joviality or even his fatness that Hal is condemning. There is

a time and a place for both of these qualities, as Shakespeare's comedies demonstrate. Hal is criticizing Falstaff's love for the temporal world above all other concerns. Falstaff has allowed his worldly interests to cloud his sense of right and wrong, and he happily does wrong to indulge these interests. When Falstaff is called "reverend Vice," the name "Vice" is not a hyperbole. Falstaff's sinfulness is bound up with his very identity, and when he is considered as the new embodiment of the medieval Vice character or as an "old white-bearded Satan", it not surprising that Hal must reject him (*Part 1* 2.5. 422). Falstaff may be much easier to like than the character of the Vice (whose very name betrays his wickedness) or Satan himself but Falstaff still embodies sinful qualities.

Falstaff's excessive love for the temporal world is revealed at the very end of his and Hal's farcical conversation. After "Henry IV" has condemned Hal's companion, Falstaff begs "Banish not him thy Harry's company, / Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world" to which Hal responds "I do; I will" (*Part 1* 2.5. 437-39). Hal acknowledges that Falstaff is indeed representative of the temporal world, the world Hal must disdain if he is to become a moral king and an example for his people. Hal cannot leave the secular world behind entirely if he is to rule England well. He can, however, reject the excessive focus on the world which Falstaff espouses. Falstaff speaks more truly than he knows when he conflates himself with "all the world." He underestimates how important it will be for Hal to set aside carnal desires to accept the role of a moral king. In order to that role well, Hal will need to cast aside selfish desires, the same selfish desires Falstaff embodies.

Of Falstaff's many transgressions, his greatest sin is knowing that he is doing wrong and still continuing to sin regardless. In spite of his occasional pretended ignorance regarding morality and death and the punishment for immorality which may follow, Falstaff is actually

very well versed in arguments about why one should lead a moral life and avoid the spiritual death that can come after physical death. Falstaff's simultaneous knowledge and rejection of the lesson of the *memento mori* are well exemplified in *Part 1,* Act Three, scene three. In response to Falstaff's taunts regarding Bardolph's red face, Bardolph replies "Why, Sir John, my face does you no harm" (*Part 1* 3.3. 24). To this, Falstaff says

> No, I'll be sworn; I make as good use of it as many a man doth of a death's head, or a *memento mori*. I never see thy face but I think upon hell-fire and Dives that lived in purple – for there he is in his robes, burning, burning" (*Part 1* 3.3. 25-28)

Falstaff's humor is spot on; his morality, however, is obviously faulty. Any other method of insulting Bardolph would not put so much emphasis on Falstaff's moral turpitude, but by having Falstaff use a Biblical parable to make his point, Shakespeare shifts the audience's focus back to morality. Falstaff *ought* to grasp the irony of his jest: he is an intelligent man, clearly familiar with the Biblical story of Lazarus and Dives, wherein a rich man fails to take pity on a beggar and is damned for it.[11] This story warns that a man should not eschew goodness in favor of worldly goods because earthly possessions can provide no comfort in the afterlife. Hell awaits those who value temporal happiness over the wellbeing of their souls. If any parable should remind Falstaff of the ephemeral nature of earthly life it should be this one. Yet the moral of the story has somehow not penetrated into Falstaff's understanding. He continues to live his materialistic life of excessive eating, drinking, and whoring.

When Hal reproaches Falstaff for his villainy, his reproofs are often disguised in humor. In this way, Hal can convey to Falstaff concerns about the old man's morality, concerns which Falstaff chooses to ignore. In discussing the robbery at Gadshill, Hal insults Falstaff's amoral

[11] Luke 19-30 King James Bible. Dives' name is apocryphal.

nature in the midst of what appears to be amusing verbal sparring between two friends. Hal states "[S]irrah, there's no room for faith, truth, nor honesty in this bosom of thine; it is all filled up with guts and midriff" (*Part 1* 3.3. 142- 43). Hal further insults Falstaff's rascally nature and his girth, but in spite of this banter Falstaff is ready to defend himself against Hal's most serious charge. Falstaff stands accused of being a bad person, ignoring God's laws concerning morality. Falstaff responds "Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell, and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy? Thou seest I have more flesh than another man, and therefore more frailty" (*Part1*, 3.3. 151-154). Falstaff acknowledges that what he does is sinful, simultaneously referencing Adam, whose sin is intimately connected with death. Because Adam ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, death was allowed into the world. According to Genesis 2:17 "[O]f the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." Furthermore, Falstaff acknowledges that he is sinful in the "days of villainy." Thus, his crime is not merely his own personal sin, but also refusing to do good in a day and age which is in need of good men. He cannot be bothered to act righteously even in dire situations.

Falstaff's lack of respect for death, is made disturbingly clear on the way to the Battle of Shrewsbury. When Bardolph asks about the ragtag soldiers following Falstaff, he recounts, "A mad fellow met me on the way and told me I had unloaded all the gibbets [gallows] and pressed the dead bodies" (*Part 1* 4.2. 32-33). Here, Falstaff is not just acting as the Vice from the medieval morality plays (Grady 611). Falstaff is Death too, leading men to their doom. Though Death is never a *named* character in Shakespeare's plays, critic Marjorie Garber notes several occasions when Shakespeare includes Death-like figures in his works. "One in armor" in *Troilus and Cressida*, the apothecary of *Romeo and Juliet,* and Marcade, the messenger of *Love's*

Labor's Lost (and I might add the third murderer in *Macbeth* to this list) are all named by Garber as figures who act as Death's messengers or helpers (Garber 204- 207). Falstaff also acts here as a manifestation of Death, Death not merely as a silent, lurking shadow, but also as the laughing leader of the dance of death (Spinrad 7). His lack of morality allows Falstaff to intentionally lead his men into death without any qualms. Falstaff directs his soldiers into battle, but he never attempts to conscript able men who could aid Hal's cause. He profits by conscripting men willing to pay to avoid going to war (*Part 1* 4.3.14-21). He then collects the worst soldiers possible (*Part 1* 4.3.11-12) and intentionally leads them into the most dangerous areas of battle (*Part 1* 5.3.35-6). We later learn that the vast majority of his men have been killed in battle: "there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive" (5.3.36). The high number of casualties reflects (at the very least) negligence on Falstaff's part. He does not value the lives of others because he cannot conceive of the significance of death. Falstaff definitely wants to save his own skin, but he refuses to see his own likeness in the corpses of his dead men. He believes he has nothing in common with the dead. Falstaff knows that all men must die but does want to apply this understanding to himself.

Though Falstaff continues to ignore his duty to be good, Hal continues to remind Falstaff of the soul he is endangering by not acting morally. Before the Battle of Shrewsbury, Falstaff (probably in jest) asks Hal to stand over and defend him if Falstaff should fall down on the battlefield (*Part 1,* 5.1.121-22). Hal jokingly answers that to stand over Falstaff's large body, Hal would have to be a "colossus" (*Part 1,* 5.1.123-24). But Hal's humor gives way to serious advice when he counsels Falstaff "Say thy prayers…" (*Part 1* 5.1.124). Falstaff fails to see that Hal is no longer joking. He responds with "I would 'twere bed-time, Hal, and all well," intentionally misconstruing Hal's mention of prayers as the kind one might say before bed (*Part 1,* 5.1.125).

Falstaff (as is his wont) is making fun of a rather serious situation, wherein he and Hal are heading into a battle in which they both might very well die. Hal advises Falstaff to pray so that, in the event that Falstaff is killed, his soul will reach heaven. Falstaff ignores the somber implications of praying before battle and recalls a less serious situation: prayers before bed. But Hal does not want Falstaff to wiggle out of acknowledging mortality. In order to impress upon Falstaff the seriousness of the situation he says "[T]hou owest God a death" as he leaves (*Part 1*, 5.1. 126). Hal's statement carries the meaning that all men must die and that one's entire life belongs to God, to do with as He will. Falstaff, however, is consistent in resisting thoughts about his morality (or lack thereof) and the afterlife. After Hal says "[T]hou owest God a death," Falstaff wittily quibbles on the word "owe" and its connections with debt and money. Ignoring the underlying meaning of Hal's warning, Falstaff says of his debt to God, "'Tis not due yet. I would be loath to pay him before his day" (5.1.127-28). Falstaff disregards the divine concerns Hal would have him contemplate (mortality and giving God His due) and focuses on the words used to convey the message rather than the message itself. Falstaff contemplates money, a subject he is more comfortable with, rather than contemplating God and Heaven and Hell, subjects which would force him to think seriously about his immoral life and the tainted state of his soul. In this scene, as in so many others, Falstaff ignores the chance to consider morality in favor of focusing on trivial, earthly matters.

In contrast, Hotspur is terribly aware that worldly concerns have no real importance. Before he dies, Hotspur's final words act as *memento mori* to Prince Hal. Of his own death, Hotspur says "No, Percy, thou art dust, / And food for –" (*Part 1* 5.4. 84-85). Hotspur cannot even finish his thought before he and death are joined, leaving Hal to complete the sentence: "For worms, brave Percy" (*Part 1* 5.4. 86). Clearly Hal has internalized the lesson that everyone

is destined for Hotspur's fate. Having Hal complete Hotspur's words illustrates that Hal understands that death is common to all men, himself included.

Ignorant of the poignant scene which takes place between Hal and Hotspur, Falstaff further demonstrates mockery of the seriousness of mortality when he feigns his own death and later stabs Hotspur's corpse. While Hotspur is dying, Falstaff is faking death nearby. The audience may very well think that the jolly fool has truly been killed. But when Hal leaves, Falstaff gets up and rationalizes playing dead, saying

> 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit [death], or that hot termagant Scot had paid me, scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie, I am no counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man. But to counterfeit dying when a man thereby liveth is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed. (*Part 1* 5.4.111-117)

Falstaff's use of the word "counterfeit" to describe death indicates he only understands the implications of death superficially. Death is not a "counterfeit" anything; it is terribly real. Falstaff's repetition of "counterfeit" puts distance between himself and death. He cannot imagine himself dead; he refuses to think of his own body becoming "the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man." When he plays dead he counterfeits a counterfeit. Still, Falstaff does not acknowledge that what separates him from death, this "counterfeit" of life, is his temporary existence. He may believe that he is the "true and perfect image of life indeed," but he is the "perfect image" of death as well, since he has become an ironic *memento mori*. Because of his corporeal inclinations, Falstaff's mortality, his identity as soon-to-be-a-corpse, follows him wherever he goes. When he stabs Hotspur, Falstaff engages in the irony of a corpse stabbing another corpse. Falstaff too will eventually become a real corpse rather than a counterfeit one, though not during the course of *Henry IV, Parts 1* or *2*. Still, when Falstaff stabs Hotspur in the

leg, he is oblivious to the lessons offered by the death of Hal's enemy. He still has yet to learn that he too is "Food for worms."

Henry IV, Part 2 appears to be a much darker play than *Part 1*. Critic Leslie Katz notes that the play seems uglier; the humor is less amusing and the sense of danger greater (Katz 87). Falstaff is forced to acknowledge death despite his continued attempts to avoid the subject, though his dialogue with the prostitute Doll Tearsheet in *Part 2* has been much discussed as typical of Falstaff's desire to avoid accepting his own mortality. After Falstaff has fought with his friend Pistol, he and Doll discuss mortality, albeit briefly:

> Doll Tearsheet: I' faith, and thou follow'dst him like a church. Thou whoreson little tidy Bartholomew boar-pig, when wilt thou leave fighting o' days and foining o' nights, and begin to patch up thine old body for heaven?
> Falstaff: Peace, good Doll, do not speak like a death's-head, not bid me remember mine end. (Part 2 2.4.204-209)

The strangeness of Doll's phrase "like a church" and her role as *memento mori* messenger merit attention. The action takes place in a tavern, and the figure chosen to remind Falstaff of his mortality is a prostitute. Her question does not appear premeditated or pointed; in fact, it is merely her use of the phrase "like a church" to describe Falstaff that seems to prompt her question regarding his morality. The meaning of "like a church" is not agreed upon. In the Arden edition of *Henry IV, Part 2* critic A. R. Humphreys claims Doll is either ironical ("You didn't budge an inch") or simply joking ("you looked like a great building lurching about") (Humphreys). But whatever her meaning the word "church" acts as a verbal reminder of the afterlife associated with churches and religious belief.

Falstaff is uninterested in considering these places of religion or in considering Christian doctrine, which states that a man must prepare his soul in this life in anticipation of eternal life in heaven or hell. Falstaff rebukes Doll for her question, and she quickly drops the subject, asking instead about Prince Hal. Spinrad, however, posits that her response to Falstaff's admonishment is double edged: as a prostitute, Doll could be expected to follow the fashion of wearing a death's-head ring on her middle finger. Spinrad suggests that a performance during Shakespeare's time might well have involved her demonstration of both the finger and the ring, insulting Falstaff while also showing him the death's-head (Spinrad 223). Of course, her possible display of the ring would force the audience to acknowledge the fitting irony of a whore (a symbol of earthly pleasure) wearing a death's-head (a *memento mori*). Doll is simultaneously selling death (by selling sex and the damnation that may accompany it) and warning her customers about mortality (with her death's-head ring). But again, it is physical *and* spiritual death that the *memento mori* warns of. Doll is in a line of work which places her soul, and the souls of customers like Falstaff, in jeopardy. She either does not appreciate the spiritual aspect of the death's-head's meaning, or she chooses to ignore it. In turn, the audience must question their own understanding of the *memento mori*, whether they themselves are living lives of deliberate blindness, in the same way that Doll and Falstaff are, and whether they themselves truly take the *memento mori*'s warning seriously.

In their book *Engendering a Nation* scholars Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin raise an interesting possibility concerning Doll's fitness as a *memento mori* incarnate. When Doll and Mistress Quickly are arrested at the end of *Part 2*, the first beadle says "There hath been a man or two killed about her" (5.4. 5-6). Howard and Rackin acknowledge that there is some ambiguity concerning "whether 'her' means Doll or the hostess [their chapter on the *Henry IV*

plays has an excellent analysis of how Doll and Quickly are often conflated] and whether 'about' means 'concerning' or 'near,'" but they also point out that death occurs around Doll because of the venereal diseases she spreads (Howard 165). Hence, Doll may be fit to speak to Falstaff concerning death because she is an agent of mortality. She is not just a reminder of death, but a cause of death as well. Doll's presence is another reminder that Falstaff has not accepted his own mortality or the possibility of hell (if he did, he would take better care of his soul and avoid prostitutes).

Katz claims that Falstaff's juxtaposition with death and characters associated with death is a new phenomenon in *Part 2*, the result of his military service in *Henry IV, Part 1*. Katz's essay "The Merry Wives of Windsor: Sharing the Queen's Holiday" claims that with *Part 2*, we see a "more mature version of Sir John, whose 'day's service at Shrewsbury' has caused him to be decorated with a figurative death's head, an obliquely visible *memento mori* reflected in Doll Tearsheet's words at 2.4" (Katz 87). But Falstaff, battle-tested or not, is no more mature, if maturity means accepting death's reality. He shrinks from Doll's warnings, and his only admission of the truth of her words is to complain, like a frightened man, "I am old, I am old" (*Part 2* 2.4. 243). Yet Falstaff never (to our knowledge) changes his behavior because of some supposed new realization that his age is bringing him closer to death. He is, in fact, no more emotionally mature. He is aware and *afraid* of his impending death in this scene, but has not internalized the message that, in addition to fearing death, he should also look to his soul. He should be aware of the very real possibility of damnation. But Falstaff's fear that *he* will die is not based on concern for his soul. Rather he fears that his merriment, his enjoyment of earthly pleasures, will eventually cease. It is a secular, rather than a spiritual, understanding of his situation.

In the final scene of *Henry IV, Part 2* Hal, now Henry V, condemns Falstaff's sinful indulgence in earthly pleasures outright. Though he uses the same terms he has been employing all along, he tone is now stern rather than jocular.

> I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
> How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
> I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,
> So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane;
> But, being awaked, I do despise my dream.
> Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.
> Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
> For thee thrice wider than for other men (*Part* 2 5.5.45-52).

Hal recommends that Falstaff turn to religion (referencing Matthew 7:22-23) and connects his very flesh with death. Because Falstaff is three times fatter than most other men, Hal describes his grave as "gap[ing]" for him. This eternal gaping of the jaws of the grave is quite similar to the eternal grinning of Death, as a skull, that is mentioned in *Richard II*. In this image, the grave itself is not merely Falstaff's inevitable fate; it actively threatens to swallow Falstaff up in an ironic reversal of eating, one of the carnal pleasures bringing Falstaff ever closer to death. Hal banishes Falstaff on "pain of death," which seems a harsh punishment, but which is actually deeply meaningful (5.5.61). The choice given to Falstaff is to repent in this life or face death on earth. He also faces death in the next life if he does not reform.

In spite of all of these reminders, Falstaff still does not seem to understand what these skulls and other *memento mori* would have him comprehend. With the play's end, Falstaff has not reformed. He still believes that Hal does not mean what he has said, that he is only rejecting Falstaff in public for the sake of appearances, and that Falstaff will be "sent for soon at night," so that they might resume a private relationship (5.5.84-85). Falstaff's heart-breaking refusal to accept that Hal has rejected him reminds the audience that even the most sympathetic of us can

choose to disregard the inevitability of death and the afterlife. Falstaff ignores every opportunity to reform and to save himself from spiritual death.

Conclusion

The moral lessons of the *memento mori* in *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Parts 1* and *2*, reappear in *Hamlet*, but this time the imagery of death is more obvious. The introduction of physical skulls, not seen before on the Elizabethan stage, heightens the sense of unease which the contemplation of death and the afterlife is meant to evoke in the viewer. The message of Yorick's skull is unmistakable. Yorick's skull is the most powerful *memento mori* in a play brimming with allusions to death and the afterlife. Sometimes, language reminds the viewer of the physical realities of death, as in *Richard II*; sometimes characters themselves take on the role of *memento mori*, just as Falstaff does in *Henry IV*. And in *Hamlet* as in *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Parts 1* and *2*, it is the fate of kingdoms, rather than just the fates of individual men, at stake. Richard, Bolingbroke, Hal, and Hamlet's struggles are tied in with the fate of their respective nations. Each sees it as his duty to rid his nation of what is "rotten" (1.4.67) and "set it right"(1.5.189).

In *Hamlet*, Gertrude fills a very similar role to that of Falstaff. Many characters in *Hamlet* are fond of carnal pleasures in the same way that Falstaff is, but only Gertrude (until the "closet scene") shares both Falstaff's sensual nature and his insistence on ignoring of the other worldly consequences of indulging worldly desires. And she refuses to take death seriously as well. In Act One, scene two, in front of Claudius's court, Gertrude encourages Hamlet to stop grieving for the loss of his father. She questions why he still wears black (1.2.68) and appears so deeply unhappy (1.2.69-71). Gertrude's queries reflect the jaded attitude of Shakespeare's audience towards images of death and reminders of the afterlife. She says, "Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72-73). Gertrude thus seems, on the surface, rather pious. She acknowledges that all things are transitory and that souls will

continue to exist in the afterlife. But when Hamlet responds, "Ay madam, it is common," Gertrude then insults Hamlet's reverence for and deep reflection upon death and the afterlife, saying, "If it be, / Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.74-75) Claudius too demonstrates a numbness to the horrors of death and the very serious consequences of immoral behavior in the afterlife. He expands on Gertrude's callousness towards the dead, telling Hamlet "[Y]ou must know your father lost a father; / That father lost, lost his" (1.2.89-90). Claudius, like Gertrude, is desensitized to death. Hamlet insists that he is familiar with the kind of reverence due to death and the afterlife. He responds "Seems, madam? Nay, it *is*. I know not 'seems'" (1.3.74).

In spite of her ostensible piety, Gertrude fails to see why Hamlet is so personally moved by death and its spiritual implications. Like Falstaff, Gertrude vaguely understands that all must die, but does not take the lesson to heart. Why anyone would choose to dwell on physical and spiritual death is beyond her. But without contemplation of mortality and the afterlife, Gertrude seems to have let the concerns of this life overwhelm her. Though she appears to understand *memento mori*, she lives her life as if there were no tomorrow, no soul to be concerned about. She and Falstaff, though vaguely aware that death and the afterlife exist, refuse to alter their lives of carnal pleasures in favor of living lives which reflect respect for death or concern for the soul after death. Both allow worldly pleasures to blind them to more important concerns regarding right and wrong.

Hamlet's meeting with the Ghost constitutes yet another example of a character serving as a *memento mori*. The Ghost has returned from beyond the grave to speak to Hamlet of his moral obligations. He commands Hamlet to rid Denmark of its corruption, presumably by eliminating Claudius, the usurper. But the Ghost also warns that, even as Hamlet acts to help Denmark, he must "Taint not thy mind" (1.5.85). That is, even as Hamlet rids his country of

corruption, he should not forget the state of his own soul and become tainted in the process of removing vice. The Ghost also warns Hamlet to not harm his mother in the undertaking, preferring instead that he "Leave her to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.86-88). The Ghost wants Hamlet to show mercy to Gertrude (allowing divine justice to deal with a lesser degree of criminal). He also believes that her own conscience will drive her towards remorse for her sins.

When he tells Hamlet "Remember me," the Ghost's words instill in Hamlet the spirit of the *memento mori*: "Remember me" by removing a usurper, thus ridding Denmark and its throne (so closely tied to God by the divine right of kings) of corruption (1.5.91). To do so, Hamlet must put aside all lesser cares, all trivial worries, in order to achieve justice. The second meaning of "Remember me" lies in the fact that Old King Hamlet is now an embodiment of death. He, like the death's-head, is a reminder of the fate that awaits all men: mortality. Like the skull, the Ghost is meant to remind Hamlet and the audience of the moral consequences of death. By dying unshriven and damned to walk the earth, Old King Hamlet evokes self-reflection in the same way that the death's head does. He instructs Hamlet and viewers to eschew the materialistic and the sensual in favor of more lasting, Christian rewards (namely, heaven).

Hamlet obeys the Ghost's request to the letter. He is no hypocrite, to accuse others of sensuality and yet not admit his own carnal desires. Before he puts in motion any part of his plan to punish Claudius or rebuke Gertrude, Hamlet severs ties with Ophelia. He frightens her by acting strangely,[12] putting distance between himself and his worldly attachments in order to better pursue what is good for Denmark. In Act Two, scene two, Hamlet will reveal the extent to

[12] 2.1.75-101. Ophelia describes Hamlet's bizarre behavior to Polonius. Polonius immediately assumes that Hamlet is being driven mad by love for Ophelia.

which he has rejected the world of the flesh. In what may well be the most graphic and disgusting passage in *Hamlet*, the prince says to Polonius (who is attempting to find a reason for Hamlet's madness) "For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—have you a daughter?" (2.2.182-183). Hamlet's words reveal his realization that Ophelia is merely flesh and that flesh is deeply connected with death (as we have seen with the discussion of Falstaff's flesh in both parts of *Henry IV*). Hamlet here (2.2.185) and earlier (1.2.67) links himself, as "son," to the homophone "sun." In this passage he likens the effect he may have on Ophelia (pregnancy) to the effects the sun was thought to have upon flesh (the breeding of maggots). In his comparison, all flesh is likened to all other flesh. Both the flesh of humans and of dead dogs are subject to decay. Thus, the less pleasant aspects of carnality are made obvious, making them easier to reject. Hamlet takes a step away from sexuality and a step towards more divinely-focused thoughts.

Hamlet, perhaps inadvertently, acts as *memento mori* for Claudius when he stages the play-within-a- play, recreating Old King Hamlet's murder. Act three, scene three, where Claudius prays, allows Claudius to demonstrate his acceptance of the connections between earthly sin and spiritual repercussions, connection which Hamlet's staging has brought to the forefront of Claudius' mind. Hamlet only wished to confirm the king's guilt with the play, but it also reminds Claudius of the danger his soul is in. Still, as the audience will learn in the scene's final lines, Claudius' repentance is not genuine. He, like Falstaff, may recognize the sinful nature of his misdeeds, but he is unable or unwilling to change for the sake of his soul.

Hamlet also acts as *memento mori* for Gertrude, and the impact Hamlet's conversation has upon her is much more lasting than the impact upon Claudius. Like Falstaff, Gertrude seems harmless on the surface. Gertrude certainly does not appear ruthlessly sinful, at least not from her

dialogue or stage directions alone (though Hamlet's and the Ghost's reports of her activities paint a more hedonistic picture) (*Hamlet* 1.2. 145-157, 3.4. 36-37, 3.4. 39-49, 3.4.70.4-70.11 in q2 only, 3.4. 82- 84, 3.4. 165-170). Janet Adelman says "[T]he Gertrude we see is not quite the Gertrude they [Hamlet and the Ghost] see. And when we see her in herself, apart from their characterizations of her, we tend to see a woman more muddled than actively wicked" (Adelman 259). Perhaps the same might be said of Falstaff (although his treatment of his men is sinfully callous). Neither Gertrude nor Falstaff believes him or herself to be "evil." Rather, neither is actively involved in being "good." Unlike Falstaff, however, Gertrude is admonished for her misbehavior by a man who never tempers his criticisms with humor, the way Hal does his criticism of Falstaff. During the "closet scene," Gertrude never has the luxury of believing that Hamlet is merely jesting about her sins. She cannot laugh off Hamlet's accusations in the same way that Falstaff dismisses Hal's accusations as playful banter. The problem for Hamlet and for Hal is that, in a world filled with corruption or danger or both, there can be no middle ground concerning moral behavior. Because human beings are "fallen," no one can be expected to be morally upright at all times. Regardless, allowing oneself to be morally "muddled" is essentially the same as allowing sin to prosper both in and around oneself. It is possible that even Gertrude's death by drinking wine is her punishment for her devotion to earthly delights.[13] Perhaps under less dire circumstances Hamlet and Hal could allow such debauchery to continue unchecked. But in both cases, the fate of their respective nations is at stake. Gertrude and Falstaff are obsessed with carnal pleasures to the extent that they endanger their souls and ignore serious dangers to their countries. Hamlet and Hal see them as figures who will not accept the spiritual implications

[13] Hamlet condemns excessive drinking early on: "it is a custom/ More honoured in the breach than the observance" (1.4.17-18)

of their actions or aid them in ridding their reigns of destructive elements and must, therefore, be condemned.

Hamlet interests himself in the moral wellbeing of others because he, unlike Richard II, knows from the beginning that death affects all people, the powerful included. He, like John of Gaunt, does his very best to remind a king that death and the afterlife are the fate of all men. After Hamlet kills Polonius in the closet scene and hides his body, Claudius questions the prince to find out where the corpse is concealed. Hamlet responds to Claudius' question "[W]here's Polonius?" (4.3.17) with a riddle, "At supper" (4.3.18). The explanation of Hamlet's answer is a reminder of death's power to strip men of their identities: "We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That's the end" (4.3.22-25). In spite of Polonius' achievements, he, like every other human being, is destined to be reduced to rotting flesh and bone. His physical existence after he has died has no meaning, except to nourish insects. Claudius has no interest in Hamlet's comments about death and again asks after Polonius' whereabouts. This time Hamlet does not talk about the physical decay which accompanies death, but rather, the continued existence of the soul after death. He tells Claudius that Polonius is "in heaven… If your messenger find him not there, seek him i'th' other place yourself" (4.3. 33-34). Of course, Hamlet's words are meant to tell Claudius to "go to hell" elaborately, but Hamlet is not merely insulting the king. Claudius runs the serious risk of damnation for his sins. Like Hal, Hamlet uses humor to attempt to instill fear for death and concern for the afterlife in a man who knows about the possible consequences of his sins, but chooses not to alter his behavior to reflect his knowledge. Hamlet's status as *memento mori* for Claudius becomes even more explicit when he returns to Denmark after Claudius attempts to have him murdered in England. Like the Ghost of

King Hamlet, Hamlet returns from "death". Like the Ghost, Hamlet carries a serious religious message for those who listen to him, although Claudius continually ignores it.

In Act Five, scene one, *Hamlet*'s display of Yorick's skull has the same effect (but much intensified) as John of Gaunt's allusion to the death's-head in *Richard II*, Acts One, scene three and Act Two, scene one. The skull acts as a shocking, but effective *memento mori*, one whose grotesque nature would have captured the audience's attention. It represents a new method of shocking the viewer, offering different kind of shock than that created by the severed heads of *Titus Andronicus* and other plays. Yorick's skull is unusual enough to catch the viewer's eye (it was, after all, the first usage of a skull as a prop on the early modern stage). The skull is not, however, so gruesome as to cloud its underlying purpose. This particular prop is meant to send shivers down the spine of the audience, but it is also meant to force them to see themselves in the prop (to see the possibility of themselves becoming nothing more than bones), rather than merely being repulsed by it.

When the gravedigger unearths Yorick's skull, he also unearths questions about the anonymity of the dead which *Richard II* (in part by its allusions to Lucian's work) seeks to answer. After he is deposed, Richard gazes into a mirror and wonders about his identity:

> …Was this face the face
> That every day under his household roof
> Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
> That like the sun did make beholders wink? (4.1.271-274)

If Richard's questions are meant to be more than rhetorical, then he sees himself stripped of his identity. When he yields his crown and scepter to Bolingbroke, he also yields certain attributes which superficially identify him. This dismantling of Richard's appearance prefigures death's further removal of Richard's identity. Death strips the flesh which distinguishes one human

being from another, leaving behind skeletons which all appear the same, regardless of one's achievements in life.

If Richard, looking into his mirror, is meant to remind the audience of Menippus holding Helen's skull in *Dialogue of the Dead*, Richard's questions about his own identity reflect Menippus' question regarding the identity of Helen. If even Helen of Troy's famed beauty cannot save her from the anonymity of death, then worldly vanity is indeed a very temporary (and thus unimportant) concern. Menippus asks Hermes a question whose answer scholars have been attempting to explain in relation to *Hamlet* for ages: how can we know whose skull we are viewing? In *Dialogue of the Dead*, all that remains of the most beautiful woman on Earth is her skull and a few other bones lost in a pile of anonymous remains. The skull which Hermes points out retains no trace of Helen's identity; only a god can differentiate between remnants of Helen and those of another. Death's ability to strip one of one's identity and its power to unite in anonymity those who have "been the theme of admiring poets," are closely echoed in Act Five, scene one of *Hamlet*. Susanne L. Wofford asks "[H]ow can the grave-digger tell one skull from another?" (Wofford 197) The question is a disturbing one, especially given the grave-digger's confidence about the skull's identity. Not only does the grave-digger state confidently, "This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's Jester," but he also claims to know exactly how long Yorick has been dead ("three-and- twenty years") (5.1. 166-167, 5.1. 160). And yet, it seems exceedingly unlikely that in a plot of ground that contains at *least* three skulls, according to the stage directions (s.d. after 5.1.69, 5.1.89, and 5.1.170), any human could positively identify anyone. It seems quite possible that the gravedigger is simply making Yorick's identity up entirely, assigning more permanence to human identity than actually exists by stating that bones can identify us even after death.

This scene in *Hamlet* even incorporates Lucian's insistence that we learn to see reflections of ourselves and of great men in bones. Hermes also points out to Menippus that "Those bones, of which you seem to think so lightly, have been the theme of admiring poets." Hamlet and the grave-digger treat the bones "lightly" indeed. The grave-digger physically disrespects the dead by "jowl[ing]" or "slam[ming]" skulls around (5.1.71, Greenblatt's gloss, *Hamlet,* 1770). Hamlet hypothesizes that owners of the first and second skulls engaged in disreputable activities. The first was a "politician," a "schemer for political advantage" or an overly solicitous courtier (5.1.72, Greenblatt's gloss, *Hamlet*, 1770, 5.1. 76-79). The second skull is that of a riddling lawyer (5.1.91) When, however, Hamlet learns that another skull is Yorick's, he appears to sober. Yorick's humble remains remind the prince (and the audience) that great men too are the victims of death. Alexander and Caesar, both of whom have been the "theme[s] of admiring poets" are now the themes for the introspective Hamlet (5.1.188, 196).

Hamlet's calm acceptance of death after the grave-yard scene is indicative of a man who has made his peace. When Horatio encourages Hamlet to avoid taking part in the duel if he has misgivings, Hamlet responds as one who knows that the end must come and yet is not disturbed by the knowledge. Hamlet does not wish to delude himself into believing that he can change his destiny. Instead, he is willing to accept whatever God's plan for him may be. He tells Horatio "There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.157-58). Hamlet alludes to Matthew 10:29, a passage which reaffirms God's knowledge and presence in even the smallest matters, matters which include the deaths of human beings. Hamlet insists "The readiness is all," explaining that he will not attempt to subvert God's will. He is ready to accept death whenever it comes; all that matters is that one is spiritually prepared for the event. Thus, Hamlet demonstrates an internalization of the Ghost's message. Rather than simply hearing a message of

revenge in the words of his father, Hamlet takes to heart the importance of dying well by "taint[ing] not" his mind. His concern is to avoid being "Cut off even in the blossoms of …sin, / Unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled."

Hamlet humbly accepts that his death means little in the larger scheme of things and that all his death means is that he will leave behind the trappings of this world. He does not taint his final hours on earth with underhanded plotting, planning to get revenge by any means necessary. Instead, he says "Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?" (5.2.160-61) When he dies, "Flights of angels" sing Hamlet to his rest because he has dedicated himself to goodness as much as is possible for any human being (5.2.303). Even Laertes confesses and repents (5.2.256-263 and 5.2.269-273). In contrast, Claudius clings to life to the bitter end. Envenomed with a poison he knows has no cure (4.7.114-18), he cries "O yet defend me, friends! I am but hurt" (5.2.266). His obsession with life distracts him from what is truly important. He dies unrepentant because he vainly hopes to extend his life just a little while longer. He, unlike Hamlet, does not take the knowledge that he is dying as an opportunity to prepare himself for heaven.

Understanding *Hamlet*'s deeply religious concerns can greatly alter how we view the text. Certainly, *Hamlet* considers earthly questions (political intrigue, interpersonal relationships, and so on), but the work's main interest is the need to prepare oneself for death and the afterlife by living morally in this life. Viewed in the light of *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Parts 1* and *2*, *Hamlet* fits well into a Shakespearean pattern which questions the ability of a human being (especially one who exercises political power) to live morally in a world which often appears hopelessly corrupt. All four plays place emphasis on the importance of the world of the divine above that of the temporal world. And yet, knowledge that one will die and that one's soul will

exist eternally in heaven or hell does not necessarily mean that one will act morally. These plays are deeply concerned with men who must hold to their spiritual beliefs in the midst of pressing issues in this life. The skulls and other reminders of death in *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Parts 1* and *2*, and *Hamlet* represent the connections between physical death and the spiritual ramifications which must follow. These concepts are reinvigorated by Shakespeare's innovative incorporation of allusions to death and his eventual use of a physical skull on stage. By including these images throughout, Shakespeare reminds us that the danger of physical and spiritual death is omnipresent, even in situations in which we allow ourselves to forget this truth.

By keeping in mind how Shakespeare and his audience may have perceived *memento mori*, we are better able to grasp the religious concerns of these works which may appear less obvious to the modern reader. When considered as part of a society very well versed in concepts of religion and yet simultaneously becoming increasingly secular and desensitized to death, Shakespeare's plays take on a didactic quality. They are meant to entertain, certainly, but they also appear to encourage moral behavior by frightening the audience with the gruesomeness of death (causing them to pay close attention) as well as focusing on the importance of the afterlife.

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