

The Dramatic Function of the Gravediggers' Scene in Hamlet

By Q. L. West

It is unfortunate that one of the scenes most often cut from contemporary productions of "Hamlet" is the first scene of Act V, the gravediggers' scene. The scene is, after all, static; it is merely a lyrical passage which seems, at first, to delay the movement of the drama, and, at all events, to add nothing to it. The producer wants swift, forward-moving action, and, certainly, he finds little enough of what he wants in the almost perverse, but always fundamental, deliberateness of this play. Consequently, one of the first scenes to be eliminated is almost invariably this one, despite its trenchant, laconic prose, its macabre humor, and its mordant, cynical philosophy of ultimate disillusion.

The scene, in itself, as a separate entity, is probably one of the most famous in Shakespeare. Certainly it contains the most often misquoted line in English literature ("Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio."), as well as one of the funniest ("Twill not be seen in him there (England); there the men are as mad as he."). Perhaps the contemporary producer is short-sighted in cutting out the gravediggers' scene; perhaps it does contribute, very definitely, to the tragedy, apart from its intrinsic excellence.

The scene opens on a bit of broad, rather low, comedy, the mumblings of morons and yokels. Shakespeare regularly employs the device of comic "relief," only such scenes of comedy are never thrust, helter-skelter, into his tragedies, and they rarely afford relief. Their purpose is definite, and, in the violence of their contrast with what has gone before and what is to come after, they rather increase the tension and exaggerate the gloom. Probably the most effective of these interludes is the porter's scene in Macbeth; the gravediggers' scene is similarly famous and effective. But the two scenes, if they have similar purposes, do not use similar means. The porter's scene offers a violent, a horrible contrast between the mutterings of the porter at the knocking at the gate and the ghastly deed of treachery and blood that is going on in another part of Macbeth's castle. The pity and terror which the poet must arouse in us are multiplied by the deliberate incongruity in the juxtaposition of low comedy and high tragedy.

The gravediggers' scene, on the other hand, seeks also to heighten our tension. But the method is not one of stark contrast, but rather

it is the technique of the operatic intermezzo. There is a lull in the action, a pause, as for breath, after the crowded movement of the preceding act and the gory violence of the final scene. The ghoulish play of two clowns offers an eerie silence, a profound, ominous, palpable stillness, while the barometer is falling.

One cannot, in reading the scene, visualize it, without sensing the sombre massing of clouds, the weird, grey-green light, the flicker of soundless lightning, which precede a storm. The scene certainly does delay the action of the play, but the delay is deliberate and calculated. The adolescent grappling of Laertes and Hamlet in Ophelia's grave, mad as it is, and the bloody joke of the melee which ends the play, ironic as it is, come almost as relief: they, at least, are action, aimless, pitiable, futile, sardonic, perhaps, but action, any way.

The gravediggers' scene is not comedy alone, however. Hamlet and Horatio enter, and the rest of the scene reflects and emphasizes the character of Hamlet. Horatio is, as always, the taciturn, solid, sane foil, with his "Aye, my lord," and "E'en so, my lord." He is not torn with doubt and confusion; never is his will "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

Little, it is true, in this scene adds to what we already know about the character of Hamlet; nevertheless, it would seem that the intent of this episode is not so much dramatic as it is psychological and philosophical. The prince is here revealed in all the fascinating and baffling facets of his nature, and he reaches here the nadir of cynicism and disillusionment. It is not the cynicism and disillusionment of old age; it is the cynicism and disillusionment of intellect, of a man, still fairly young, whose mind is baffled by thought and is too painfully aware of ends to be able to discover means. He is witty; he delights, in his dialogue with the clown, in pun and play on words. The sharp brilliance of his intellect leads him from glib punning to scathing logic, as he relentlessly pursues his thought toward the final negation. He reaches the bottom; nothing is left but "Pah!" and a cynical ditty on the transience of man and the silliness of his glory. All is hollow, all is sham, all comes to nothing but a stink and some dust.

The scene is a purgation, rather in a medical than in an Aristotelian sense, for, only a few hours later, Hamlet is able to shrug his shoulders and resign himself to the special providence which will save him or kill him. There is some purpose; all is not meaningless. If man cannot understand that meaning and fathom that purpose, he, at least, must accept them, and he cannot live, or die, if he does not believe that they are there.

Thus we see a dramatic function in the psychological illumination and philosophical probing of this scene. Hamlet must reach the

ne plus ultra before he will be capable of the action which the entangled threads, the hesitancy and indecision of the first three acts, and the gathering momentum of the fourth, have so inextricably woven together. These threads are severed with Alexandrian despatch in the sanguinary and ironic hugger-mugger of the final scene.

We do not know how he bridges this gap from a complete cynicism to a negative faith. We only know that he does, and that he has to. We suspect, at times, that there is a certain element of the facile, perhaps even the glib, in his moralizing. Certainly there is little originality in it, and not much consistency, for that matter; perhaps, often, he merely gives voice to "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well exprest." He expresses, nevertheless, a universal experience of the young, at least the young who think of something beyond what the psychologists have so delicately called "fundamental drives." It may be, then, that the leap from unbelief to belief must inevitably follow the final degradation—at least for a young man of the Renaissance; and it is certain that there is no other direction that Hamlet can go, save up.

The action of the scene is not necessarily dramatic action; neither is it psychological. There is no flash of swords, no conflict of personality, no gust of wrath, no surge of passion. We are revealed nothing new about Hamlet's character.

There is action in the mind, however, and this action is essential to the necessary end of the drama. But action in the mind, even in Elizabethan romantic drama, can only show itself in talk. Talk, no matter how witty, vivid, or profound, is not movement, and therefore in a dramatic sense it does not advance the movement of the play. Anything that does not advance the movement of the play is not necessary. But such reasoning ought not to be applied to such a drama as Hamlet, for here the dramatic action is far less important than the psychological and moral action—one might almost say that it is ancillary to them—and it is these which the gravediggers' scene primarily assists.

But, not solely. It does not, of course, in the strictest sense, advance dramatic action. It is an interlude, a pause, before the final catastrophe. There is an atmosphere of pregnant, ominous silence, against which the maunderings of the clowns and the moralizings of Hamlet fall with a dead, hollow clatter; tension is spun to the very breaking-point, and the sudden outburst of febrile action comes as release. Its dramatic functions are invaluable, and something irretrievable is lost by cutting out this scene and rushing, pell-mell, into the bloody climax.