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Abstract: The article presents the side of the play "Hamlet," by William Shakespeare, that shows parody of Pythagoras' metempsychosis. According to the author, Hamlet's graveyard reflection offers a parody of metempsychosis in its image of the transmigration of matter from the glorified bodies of great men to the baser forms of barrel bung and insulation caulk.

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signals yet another way the laws of the purlicue gloss this text and its heroine. A play that is associated with borders and boundaries in so many other respects locates its discourse on the margins as well: as many students of *As You Like It* have noted, both Rosalind and other personages repeatedly deploy the conditional 'if'.⁶ The purlicue, Manwood declares, are 'but conditionally in some sort *Forrest*' (153).

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⁶ These conditionals are discussed in Maura Slattery Kuhn, 'Much Virtue in If', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, xxviii (1977), 40-50; David Young, *The Heart's Forest: A Study of Shakespeare's Pastoral Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 46-50.

HAMLET'S PROGRESS OF DUST: A PARODY OF PYTHAGORAS' METEMPSYCHOSIS?

HAMLET's sardonic comments upon the emblematic skull of Yorick (V.i.178-209),¹ beyond the conventional *memento mori* and *ubi sunt* associations they initially evoke, may also constitute a somewhat academic jest on the scholarly prince's part, in their parodic correspondence to Pythagoras' theory of metempsychosis. The classical belief in the transmigration of souls, associated with its early Greek proponent Pythagoras (c. 582-c. 507 BC) and familiar to Elizabethans through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (and Arthur Golding's 1567 English translation of that early first-century work), is twice directly cited by Shakespeare in two other plays:

Clown: What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wildfowl?

Malvolio: That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird.

(*Twelfth Night*, IV.ii.51-4)²

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Arden edn, ed. Harold Jenkins (New York: Methuen, 1982). All quotations from the play are from this edition.

² William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Arden edn, ed. J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik (New York: Methuen, 1975).

Gratiano: ... Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men: ...

(*The Merchant of Venice*, IV.i.130-3)³

While Hamlet's graveyard reflection would seem to focus upon death's merely physical degrading and depersonalizing aftermath:

Hamlet: To what base use we may return, Horatio! Why, may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?

Horatio: 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

Hamlet: No, faith, not a jot, but to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it. Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,

Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

O that that earth which kept the world in awe

Should patch a wall t'expel th'winter's flaw.

(V.i.196-209)

it also offers a parody of metempsychosis in its image of the transmigration of *matter* from the glorified bodies of great men to the baser forms of barrel bung and insulation caulk.⁴ Moreover, the reference to Julius Caesar's fate may add to this latent irony in the image. For Elizabethans might well have recalled that it is the murdered Caesar's soul that is famously plucked from its defiled corpse by Venus at the end of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to

³ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Arden edn, ed. John Russell Brown (New York: Methuen, 1955).

⁴ This version of physical transference refashions the prince's earlier aphoristic barb at Claudius, itself a coporeal analogy to metempsychosis:

Hamlet: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

King: What dost thou mean by this?

Hamlet: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.

(IV.iii.27-31)

Indeed, yet another oblique allusion in *Hamlet* to metempsychosis might possibly underlie the mad Ophelia's mention of the owl in act IV: 'They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be' (IV.v.42-4). While commentators have diversely laboured to make sense of this passage as an expression of Ophelia's self-pity by way of the owl's emblematic and folkloric meanings (see Jenkins, 532-3), its simultaneous application as a passing reference to metempsychosis in association with her father's death is at the very least feasible, and as such, aligns with the prince's repeated imagery of transformation.

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be *not* mortally refitted on earth, but rather exalted among the stars.

And from her Caesars bodye [Venus] tooke his new
expulsed spryght
The which shee...
Did place it in the skye among the starres that glisten
bryght.

(xv.950–2)⁵

In this, Shakespeare's play most attentive to speculation upon supernatural post-mortem events, it would seem neither thematically askew nor out of character for the mordantly humorous prince, chided by his mother in the first act for too morosely seeking his dead father 'in the dust' (I.ii.71), to manage by the last act to find in that dust, finally, a joke ironically reflecting just such speculation.

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⁵ Publius Ovidius Naso, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. Arthur Golding (1567), ed. John Frederick Nims (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000). Jenkins, in noting the common use from ancient times of Alexander in 'meditations on Death the leveller', and also the tradition of linking citations of Caesar to those of Alexander, proposes that such linking here, in rhyme, 'must be taken to be one of Hamlet's impromptus' (387). It would also seem to play a supplemental role in Hamlet's parody of the transmigration of souls.

CLAUDIUS'S 'EFFECTS' IN *HAMLET*

NO play has had as many editions or has been the subject of as much critical examination as *Hamlet*, yet there remain passages that have never been satisfactorily glossed. One such passage occurs in Claudius's prayer speech, overheard by Hamlet on his way to Gertrude's closet after the play scene. It reads:

My fault is past, but, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? "Forgive me my foul murmur?"
That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
May one be pardoned and retain th' offense?

(III.iii.51–6)

The word 'effects' is so common that one easily passes over it; in his Arden edition,

Harold Jenkins does not comment at all, while Philip Edwards's New Cambridge offers 'things acquired or achieved', and G. R. Hibbard, in the Oxford edition, has 'fruits, things acquired', citing *OED* (*sb* 4), and adding 'this sense appears to be peculiar to Shakespeare'.¹

'Peculiar to Shaklespeare' is somewhat inaccurate; 'peculiar to one line in *Hamlet*' would be more apt, since it is *OED*'s only citation for this usage, while all of the many other instances of 'effect' as a noun in Shakespeare carry the common definition of 'result' or 'outward sign'. Furthermore, in the context of the play, such a meaning is simply 'peculiar': Claudius cannot have 'acquired or achieved' *ambition* by poisoning King Hamlet – ambition was one of his *motives*, or an element of his character leading him to commit the crime. This ambition, and its outward manifestation of desire for a crown and a queen, are not effects, but *affects*, defined by *OED* in the singular as 'the way in which one is affected or disposed; mental state, mood, feeling, desire, intention' (*sb* 1a), although the plural is far more common, as in 'for every man with his affects is born' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, I.i.151).

There would be no editorial problem had *OED*, in its early citations for 'affect' (*sb*), provided one or two in which the word begins with an 'e'. Considering all the vagaries of early modern spelling and the exhaustive research of Murray and his colleagues, one would expect this – indeed, without (unfortunately) offering any examples, the *Middle English Dictionary* notes that 'effect' (*n* 7) is an 'occasional spelling for affect and infect'.² Yet no such quotation appears in *OED*, and Thomas Cooper's magisterial *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (1578) also maintains a rigid distinction between *affectus*, 'motion or passion', and *effectus*, 'bringing to pass' (*sig.* E4^v, Ss1^r). Hence we have definition by circularity: *OED* creates a special

¹ Harold Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet* (London, 1982); Philip Edwards (ed.), *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Cambridge, 1985); G. R. Hibbard (ed.), *The Tragedy of Hamlet* (Oxford, 1987). Shakespeare quotations from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1997).

² Hans Kurath (ed.), *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–c.2001).