HAMLET AND THE "DANCE OF DEATH"

SUBMITTED
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE MEDIEVAL PREOCCUPATION WITH DEATH</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. HAMLET AND MEDIEVAL DEATH MOTIFS</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In many instances, the themes in Renaissance drama reflect Medieval preoccupations, Medieval imagery, and Medieval content. Upon hearing this statement, the reader might ask how this could be possible since the Renaissance and Middle Ages are generally considered to be two distinct periods with distinctly different ways of looking at life. The answer to this question lies in our tendency to place cultural periods into specific blocks of time and to assign arbitrary time limits to preoccupations and ideas which apparently predominate in certain periods.

For example, J. Huizinga says that the Middle Ages ended toward the close of the fourteenth century and the Renaissance began at the beginning of the fifteenth century.¹ This time assignment is a good device for cataloging ideas and for noting general trends of thought, but it also contains a danger. After assigning certain life attitudes and intellectual forces to the same block of time over and over again, we begin to assume that these attitudes and

forces can exist only within that block of time. This is not true. In reality, dominant life modes and attitudes only tend to wane gradually as new forms come into existence, and they often do not disappear. This change is especially slow when certain preoccupations have deeply penetrated into a cultural period.

An example of one Medieval preoccupation which shows up in Renaissance literature is the Medieval preoccupation with death. In fact, this Medieval preoccupation not only occurs in the themes of Renaissance literature, but it dominates much of this literature. Actually, the obsession with death and its consequences, which is characteristic of the Middle Ages, doesn't reach its literary climax until the Renaissance. Many Renaissance works contain this preoccupation, which as a theme was so common to life in the Middle Ages. Certain of these works provide striking examples of it. Shakespeare's Hamlet is one of these.

One of the central preoccupations throughout Hamlet has to do with Hamlet's obsessive concern over images of death, decay, and corruption.
CHAPTER II

THE MEDIEVAL PREOCCUPATION WITH DEATH

J. Hulzinga includes in his book, The Widening of the Middle Ages, a chapter called "The Vision of Death."

In this chapter he explains the Medieval concern about death and discusses the images and themes which developed from this concern. Hulzinga points out that the expiring Middle Ages placed a great deal of stress on the thought of death:

An everlasting call of memento mori resounds through life. Denis the Carthusian, in his Directory of the Life of Nobles, exhorts them: 'And when going to bed at night, he should consider how, just as he now lies down himself, soon strange hands will lay his body in the grave.' In earlier times, too, religion had insisted on the constant thought of death, but the pious treatises of these ages only reached those who had already turned away from the world. Since the thirteenth century, the popular preaching of the mendicant orders had made the eternal admonition to remember death swell into a sombre chorus ringing throughout the world. Towards the fifteenth century, a new means of inculcating the awful thought into all minds was added to the words of the preacher, namely, the popular woodcut. Now these two means of expression, sermons and woodcuts, both addressing themselves to the multitude and limited to crude effects, could only represent death in a simple and striking form. All that the meditations on death of the monks of vora had produced, was now condensed into a very primitive image. This vivid image, continually impressed upon all minds, had hardly assimilated more than a single element of the great complex of ideas relating to death, namely, the sense of the perishable nature of all things.
It would seem, at times, as if the soul of the declining Middle Ages only succeeded in seeing death under this aspect.  

The above passage from Huizinga not only discusses the medieval preoccupation with death, but it also establishes the gradual growth of the medieval mind's concentration upon the macabre aspects of death--the concentration upon the decay of all forms of life. Huizinga tells us that the early monks had written treatises explaining that men should always remember that they must die, but that these treatises had had little real effect upon general medieval life because of the culture's illiteracy.

However, with the creation of an image--the woodcut--at least part of the monks' complex ideas about death could be understood by the people through graphic representations of the dead. It was this woodcut image, the image of decay and corruption, which, first appearing in medieval art, later runs through late medieval poetry and finally through much of Renaissance tragi.

Huizinga tells us that this one early image, created by the woodcut, allowed for the later development of three general death motifs which appear in medieval poetry. These three motifs dealt in an obsessive way on the hideous and threatening aspects of death as they appeared in literature.

The first motif is best expressed by the question: Where are now all those who once filled the world

\[2\textit{Ibid.}, 138-139.\]
with their splendor? The second motif dwells on the frightful spectacle of human beauty gone to decay. The third is the death-dance: death dragging along men of all conditions and ages.3

These three motifs appear in various types of images in medieval literature and art. However, it is not their appearance alone which makes them noticeable, for men of all ages have contemplated death. But it is the overwhelming number of images stemming from these three motifs which makes them important in medieval literature, art, and life, and which establishes a definite medieval preoccupation and sometimes pathological concern with the death motif.

Huizinga demonstrates the Medieval obsession with the macabre side of death as he presents a picture of the common activity around the Church of the Innocents at Paris. Huizinga points out that death was so much associated with every aspect of life that almost every imaginable life activity could be carried on in this church's graveyard. In fact, people enjoyed being in a graveyard. They liked to dwell upon things hideous:

Nowhere else were all the images tending to evoke the horror of death assembled so strikingly as in the graveyard of the Innocents at Paris. There the medieval soul, fond of a religious shudder, could take its fill of the horrible. Above all other saints, the remembrance of the saints of that spot, and of their bloody and pitiful martyrdom, was fitted to evoke the crude compassion which was dear to the epoch. The fifteenth century honoured the Holy Innocents

3Ibid., 139.
with special veneration. Louis XI presented to the church "a whole Innocent," encased in a crystal shrine. The cemetery was preferred to every other place of burial. A bishop of Paris had a little of the earth of the churchyard of the Innocents put into his grave, as he could not be laid there. The poor and the rich were interred without distinction. They did not rest long, for the cemetery was used so much, twenty parishes having a right of burial there, that it was necessary, in order to make room, to dig up the bones and pull the tombstones after a very short time. It was believed that in this earth a human body was decomposed to the bone in nine days. Skulls and bones were heaped up in charnel-houses along the cloisters enclosing the ground on three sides, and lay there open to the eye of thousands, preaching to all the lesson of equality. The noble Bouchicaut, among others, had contributed to the construction of these "fine charnel-masses." Under the cloisters the death-dance exhibited its images and its stanzas. No place was better suited to the simian figure of grinning death, drawing along pope and emperor, monk and fool. The duke of Berry, who wished to be buried there, had the history of the three dead and three living men carved at the portal of the church. A century later, this exhibition of funeral symbols was completed by a large statue of Death, now in the Louvre, and the only remnant of it all.

Such was the place which the Parisians of the fifteenth century frequented as a sort of luxurious counterpart of the Palais Royal of 1789. Day after day, crowds of people walked under the cloisters, looking at the figures and reading the simple verses, which reminded them of the approaching end. In spite of the incessant burials and exhumations going on there, it was a public lounge and rendezvous. Shops were established before the charnel-houses and prostitutes strolled under the cloisters. A female recluse was immured on one of the sides of the church. Fairs came to preach and processions were drawn up there. A procession of children only (12,500 strong, thinks the Barther of Paris) assembled there, with tapers in their hands, to carry an Innocent to Notre Dame and back to the churchyard. Even feasts were given there. To such an extent had the horrible become familiar.\(^4\)

\(^4\)Ibid., 148-149.
Thus, the activity around the Churchyard of the Innocents was probably the single most striking example of the extent to which Medieval man was fascinated with death. Here the three general death motifs, as expressed by the art, literature, and activity around the church, come together in one concentrated expression of Medieval man's preoccupation with things macabre. However, there are many illustrations of the motifs appearing singly in Medieval literature. Huizinga examines some of these.

Huizinga discusses the first of the three Medieval death motifs: "Where are all those whose splendor once filled the world?" Then he gives some examples of it as it appeared in Medieval literature. Huizinga tells us that compared to the other two motifs this one was really nothing more than "a graceful sigh". Derivative from Greek poetry, this motif was adopted by the Medieval Fathers and came to pervade all of Christendom in the Middle Ages.

The following verse illustrates this motif as it was expressed in twelfth century poetry. It is translated from the Latin:

5 Where is now your glory, Babylon, where is now the terrible Nebuchadnezzar, and strong Darius and the famous Cyrus? where is now Hecules, or where Romulus, or where Remus? The rose of yore is but a name, mere names are left to us.6

Another illustration of this wistful death motif is found in thirteenth century Franciscan poetry. Again it is

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5 Ibid., 139-149.
6 Ibid., 139.
translated from the Latin:

Saw where is Solomon, once so noble,
Or Samson where is he the invincible Chief,
And fair Absalom of the wonderful face,
Or sweet Jonathan, the most amiable?

This theme was very common in Medieval literature; it appears in the works of such writers as Deschamps, Gerson, Denis the Carthusian, Chastellain, Olivier de la Marche, and Villon. However, this wistful theme of remembrance, no matter how often it was used, did not satisfy the Medieval need of expressing with violence the real impact of death. It reminded man of his frailty and his impermanence, but it did not allow the really concrete expression of the horror of death which the Medieval mind demanded. The second common death motif did.

This second motif of decaying human beauty and the putrefying corpse provided for Medieval man a concrete and horrifying expression of his perishability. He dwelt on this theme. In one way or another, it runs through almost all of Medieval literature. Huizinga tells us that the Medieval mind became so obsessed with the idea of decaying human life that death often lost its larger religious significance. Men dwelt on graphic description of decay, forgetting that new life was supposed to spring from death:

> Ascetic meditation had, in all ages, dwelt on dust and worms. The treatises on the contempt of the world had, long since, evoked all the horrors of decomposition, but it is only towards the end

Ibid., 139.
of the fourteenth century that pictorial art, in its turn, seizes upon this motif. To render the horrible details of decomposition, a realistic force of expression was required, to which painting and sculpture only attained towards 1400. At the same time, the motif spread from ecclesiastical to popular literature. Until far into the sixteenth century, tombs are adorned with hideous images of a naked corpse with clenched hands and rigid feet, gaping mouth and bowels crawling with worms. The imagination of those times relished these horrors, without ever looking one stage farther, to see how corruption perishes in its turn, and flowers grow where it lay.

A thought which so strongly attaches to the earthly side of death can hardly be called truly pious. It would rather seem a kind of spasmodic reaction against an excessive sensuality. In exhibiting the horrors awaiting all human beauty, already lurking below the surface of corporeal charms, these preachers of contempt for the world express, indeed, a very materialistic sentiment, namely, that all beauty and all happiness are worthless because they are bound to end soon. Renunciation founded on disgust does not spring from Christian wisdom.

This second Medieval death motif, the putrefaction of human beauty, is really a worldly one based on excessive sensuality. In fact, it closely reflects the pagan idea that man should make the most of his youth before death removes him from the world. We find this motif expressed in a painting with a verse found in the monastery of the Celestines at Avignon. Now destroyed, this French Medieval painting included the body of a dead woman enveloped in a shroud. Her head was dressed and worms were crawling her bowels. The inscription at the bottom of the painting reads:

Once I was beautiful above all women

8Ibid., 140-141.

9Ibid., 141.
But by death I became like this,
My flesh was very beautiful, fresh and soft,
Now it is altogether turned to ashes.
My body was very pleasing and very pretty,
I used frequently to dress in silk,
Now I must rightly be quite nude.
I was dressed in grey fur and miniver,
I lived in a great palace as I wished,
Now I am lodged in this little coffin.
My room was adorned with fine tapestry,
Now my grave is enveloped by cobwebs.10

In the above inscription the author is still chiefly
interested in the motif of the putrefying corpse and the
momento mori idea. However, other Medieval literature
adds another dimension to this death motif. Many times the
idea of decay also becomes mixed with sex, conception,
and birth. The use of females in images of decaying
corpses created this association of death and sensuality.
The following Medieval French verse from Olivier de la
Marche's Furement et Triomphe des Dames illustrates how
the worldly, sensual theme even dominates over the momento
mori idea:

These sweet looks, these eyes made for pleasance,
Remember, they will lose their lustre,
Nose and eyelashes, the eloquent mouth
Will putrefy....
If you live your natural lifetime,
Of which sixty years is a great deal,
Your beauty will change into ugliness,
Your health into obscure malady,
And you will only be in the way here below.
If you have a daughter, you will be a shadow to her,
She will be in request and asked for,
And the mother will be abandoned by all.11

In Villon's ballads the religious significance of
momento mori is completely gone. Only the sense of decay

10Ibid., 142.
11Ibid., 142.
and corruption remains, and added to that again we find the association of sex and decay. The following lines from one of his ballads contains only vivid images of decay and a sense of sorrow for the loss of sensual appeal. Thus, the *pompe a mori*, when attached to the image of the putrefying corpse, becomes a worldly idea:

What has become of this smooth forehead, 
Fair hair, curving eyelashes, 
Large space between the eyes, pretty look; 
Wherewith I caught the most subtle ones;

That fine straight nose, neither large nor small, 
These small ears close to the head, 
The dimpled chin, well-shaped bright face, 
And those beautiful vermilion lips?

... 

The forehead wrinkled, hair grey, 
The eyelashes come off, lack-lustre eyes....12

This medieval obsessive attachment to matter, to the body itself, and the horror of decomposition expresses itself in other non-literary ways. The Middle Ages attached extreme importance to the fact that the bodies of certain saints had never decayed; the Holy Virgin and Saint Rosa of Viterbo were two of these. On many occasions attempts were also made to retard decomposition of a body. The features of the corpse of Pierre de Luxembourg were touched up with paint to preserve them until burial, and one heretic preacher's body was preserved in line so that it might be burned with a living heretic. Such importance was placed upon burial in one's native soil that men who died abroad were

12Ibid., 143.
often cut up and boiled so to extract the bones from the body. The bones were then sent home for burial. Many emperors, kings, and bishops had this done to their bodies even after the church had ruled against it. Edward of York, the Earl of Suffolk and Henry V were three such men.\textsuperscript{13}

Towards fourteen hundred, Huizinga tells us, the third medieval death motif appeared—the death-dance. This one motif became the central point of a whole group of conceptions and themes. The death-dance motif, that of the three dead and three living men, is found in much Medieval literature, and it has a whole group of related themes. Three young noblemen meet three hideous dead men, who tell them of their past grandeur and warn them of their own near end. This motif is said to have originated in France, but it pervaded almost the whole Medieval world in one form or another. Huizinga has the following to say about the death-dance:

At the close of the Middle Ages the whole vision of death may be summed up in the word macabre, in its modern meaning. Of course, this meaning is the outcome of a long process. But the sentiment it embodies, of something gruesome and dismal, is precisely the conception of death which arose during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. This bizarre word appeared in French in the fourteenth century, under the form macabre, a line of the poet Jean Le Fèvre, "Je fis de Macabre la dance," which may be dated 1376, remains the birth-certificate of the word for us.

Towards 1400 the conception of death in art and literature took a spectral and fantastic shape. A new and vivid shudder was added to the great primitive horror of death. The macabre vision arose from deep psychological strata of fear; religious thought at once reduced it to a means of

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 144.
moral exhortation. As such it was a great cultural idea, till in its turn it went out of fashion, lingering on in epitaphs and symbols in village cemeteries.

The idea of the death-dance is the central point of a whole group of connected conceptions.14

The death-dance motif was found in the drama, art and literature of the Middle Ages, and it was made more potent because of its close connection with the putrefaction motif. The "Dance of the Dead" was acted, painted and engraved over and over again. Huizinga discusses some of its appearances in Medieval art forms:

We can see it still in the striking frescoes of the Campo Santo of Pisa. The sculpture of the portal of the Church of the Innocents at Paris, which the duke of Berry had carved in 1408, but which has not been preserved, represented the same subject. Miniature painting and woodcuts spread it broadcast... The Duke of Burgundy had it performed in his mansion at Bruges in 1449. If we could form an idea of the effect produced by such a dance, with vague lights and shadows sliding over the moving figures, we should no doubt be better able to understand the horror inspired by the subject, than we are by the aid of the pictures of Guyot Marchant or Holbein.

The woodcuts with which the Parisian printer, Guyot Marchant, ornamented the first edition of the Danses Macabres in 1485 were, very probably, imitated from the most celebrated of these painted death-dances, namely, that which since 1429, covered the walls of the cloister of the churchyard of the Innocents at Paris. The stanzas printed by Marchant were those written under these mural paintings; perhaps they even hail back to the lost poetry of Jean Le Fèvre, who in his turn seems to have followed a Latin model. The woodcuts of 1485 can give but a feeble impression of the paintings of the Innocents, of which they are not exact copies, as the costumes prove. To have a notion of the effect of these frescoes, one should rather at the mural paintings of the church of La Chaise-Dieu, where the unfinished condition of the

14 Ibid., 144.
Besides presenting a dramatic picture of the act of dying, of life meeting death, the death-dance had other purposes and effects. It reminded the spectators of the frailty and vanity of earthly things, and, at the same time, it preached social equality as the Middle Ages knew it, death levelling the various ranks and professions. It reminded medieval men, as it included women in the various aspects of its themes, that sensual joy can only last a short time, and that human beauty must fall into decay. The death-dance motif, toward the end of the Middle Ages, incorporated in its various themes the two other Medieval death motifs: the wistful longing for those who have passed away and the horrible obsession with the decaying corpse. Toward the end of the Middle Ages these three motifs were fused together in the "Dance of Death," thus creating the horrifying, spectral and often obscene concern about death which continued to exist in the themes of Renaissance literature. Chastellain, in his poem, "Le Roi de la mort," illustrates the fusion of the early death motifs into the death-dance. He gives successively the images of putrefaction, the lament over the loss of the world's great men, and an outline of the death-dance:

There is not a limb nor a form,  
Which does not smell of putrefaction.  
Before the soul is outside,  
The heart which wants to burst in the body

15 Ibid., 145-146.  
16 Ibid., 147.
Aisles and lifts the chest
which nearly touches the backbone.
---The face is discoloured and pale,
and the eyes veiled in the head.
Speech fails him,
for the tongue cleaves to the palate.
The pulse trembles and his parts.

...

The bones are disjointed on all sides;
There is not a tendon which does not stretch
as to burst.1

Villon also illustrates this fusion of death motifs in
his verse:

Death makes his shudder and turn pale,
The nose to curve, the veins to swell,
The neck to incline, the flesh to soften,
Joints and tendons to grow and swell.

...

O female body, which is so soft,
Smooth, save, precious,
Do these evils await you?
Yes, or you must go to heaven quite alive.13

Thus, through the writing of Hauzinga and the above
examples of medieval poetry we see that the Middle Ages
was truly obsessed with the idea of death. We see also that
this medieval fascination with the death of the human body and
the shortness of life and joy became crystallized into
certain death motifs which turned up in various medieval
art forms. Toward the end of the Middle Ages these death
motifs fused together into one obscure idea about death---
the "Dance of Death." This spectral death-dance motif
appeared in ever intensifying and horrible form in late

17 Ibid., 147.
18 Ibid., 148.
Medieval literature and continued to exist as one of the themes in Renaissance literature. While the "Dance of Death" motif continued to exist in Renaissance literature the images which expressed it became ever more vivid, hideous, and obscene.
CHAPTER III

HAMLET AND MEDIEVAL DEATH MOTIFS

One Renaissance work which provides a striking example of the extent to which the "Dance of Death" motif—the medieval way of looking at death—penetrated Renaissance literature is Shakespeare's Hamlet. From beginning to end, the play shows a gradual intensifying of the death motif. Prince Hamlet is obsessed with death in his every thought and action throughout the entire play. By examining the progression of the play and some of its elements, we can see just how important the death-dance theme is in Hamlet.

First, let us examine the progression of the play and see how much of a role death plays in the action. If we look at the very first scene of Hamlet, we see that Death enters the action immediately. When the scene opens, Horatio, BERNARDO, and MARCELLUS are waiting for the appearance of the Ghost. The Ghost enters and the three men are struck pale. Already in the play's first scene the Medieval death-dance motif becomes apparent, for spectral Death in the form of the Ghost of Hamlet's father is facing three live men. This is the death-dance motif as it was first conceived in the Middle Ages. The appearance of the Ghost is not only a clear example of the death-dance theme, but it also illustrates one of the Medieval Church's ideas about death—
the belief that the spirits of dead men could come back and walk the earth, that Death really could appear to men in the form of spirits or ghosts. The Church encouraged this belief and set down many elaborate descriptions of ghosts and what made them appear to men. The Church even wrote down "rules" for telling the various types of ghosts. Lewis Lavater, in his treatise, Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night, has the following to say about the Medieval belief that Death appeared to men in the form of spirits:

The papists have publicly both taught and written that those spirits which men sometime see and hear be either good or bad angels, or else the souls of those which either live in everlasting bliss, or in purgatory, or in the place of damned persons; and that divers of them are those souls that crave aid and deliverance of men.19

He continues to tell us how to tell good ghosts from bad ghosts:

Foolish writers teach us to discern good spirits from evil by four means. First, they say that if he be a good spirit, he will at the beginning somewhat terrify men, but again soon revive and comfort them. Second, good spirits do appear under the shape of a dove, a man, a lamb, or in the brightness and clear light of the sun. Thirdly, we must note whether the spirit teacheth that doth vary from the doctrine of the apostles, and other doctors approved by the church's censure. Fourthly, we must take diligent heed whether in his words, deeds, and gestures, he do show forth any humility, acknowledging or confessing of his sins and punishments or whether we hear of him any groaning, weeping, complaint, boasting, threatening, slander, or blasphemy. For as the beggar doth rehearse his own misery, so likewise do good spirits that desire any help or deliverance.20

20 Ibid., 109.
Lavater tells us how the Church men recognized good spirits. Then he goes on to say that "evil angels are hurtful and enemies unto men; they follow them everywhere, to the end they may, by appearing in divers shapes, withdraw them from true worshipping of God." 21

The fact that the Church did have clearly defined concepts regarding the appearance of ghosts explains why Hamlet was not so concerned about the reality of the Ghost when he met it as he was about whether or not the Ghost was good or evil. When he meets the Ghost, Hamlet wants to believe that he is a good spirit, but he remembers that the Ghost might be an evil spirit out to claim his soul:

Hamlet: Angels and Ministers of grace defend us! Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, Be thy intents wicked or charitable, Thou com'st in such a questionable shape That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane. O, answer me! 22

Hamlet needs some type of proof before he can accept the Ghost as the spirit of his dead father. The play he eventually arranges provides this. Hamlet's reaction toward the Ghost shows his familiarity with Medieval Church doctrine concerning spirits appearing to men and helps establish the presence of Medieval death attitudes in Hamlet, a Renaissance drama.

21 Ibid., 109.

After the action of *Hamlet* is opened by the appearance of Death in the form of the Ghost, we shift directly to the palace where the Queen and Claudius spend some time trying to convince Hamlet that he should remove death from his mind—that he stop excessive mourning for his dead father. Gertrude and Claudius both try to console Hamlet by reminding him that everyone dies—that all life is frail. Their urging Hamlet to accept his father's death introduces a second Medieval death motif—the frailty and impermanence of human existence:

**Queen:** Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.
Do not for ever with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.
Thou know'st tis common—all that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.\(^23\)

\[...

**Claudius:** 'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father,
but you must know your father lost a father,
That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
In filial obligation for some term
To do obsequious sorrow. but to persever
In ostinate condolence is a course
Of impious stubbornness. 'Tis unmanly grief.
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschooled.
For what we know must be, and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense,
Why should we in our peevish opposition
Take it to heart? Fie, 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whose common these
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died to-day
'This must be so'. We pray you throw to earth

\(^{23}\text{Ibid., I,11,67-73.}\)
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father, ...24

The presence of Death in the action of Hamlet builds
up as the play progresses so that by the end of Act V it
has enveloped almost every major character. After the play
opens with living men meeting Death face to face and with
the King and Queen trying to remove the thought of it from
both Hamlet's and their subjects' minds, the presence of
Death becomes ever stronger. Hamlet meets his dead
father's ghost and swears to keep the spirit's demand
for revenge in the form of Claudius' death:

And thy commandment all alone shall live
within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmired with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!25

action picks up in the third act of the play, and the
real presence of death intensifies when Hamlet inadvertently
kills Polonius.

Their father's murder brings the reality of death
close to Ophelia and Laertes. Laertes, enraged by Polonius'
death and suspicious of his father's quick funeral, returns
to Denmark bent first upon killing Claudius and later
Hamlet. Ophelia, driven mad by Polonius' death, roams the
palace singing ballads full of death references and sorrow:

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone;
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.26

24Ibid., I,ii,86-108.
25Ibid., I,v,102-104.
26Ibid., IV,v,28-31.
Finally, the presence of Death overcomes her, and she commits suicide. Gertrude describes Ophelia's death in a speech which contrasts the beauty and fragility of life with the power and presence of death:

There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettle, daisies, and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the penitentouches her crownet weeds
Clamp'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weary trodies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element, but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. 27

Claudius, fearful of the loss of his own life and the danger to his subjects, sends Hamlet to England to be executed:

King: And, England, if my love thou hold' st at aught—As my great power thereof may give thee sense, since yet thy cicatrice looks raw and red after the Danish sword, and thy free awe Pays homage to us—thou mayst not coldly set Our sovereign process, which imports at full my letters concurring to that effect The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England, For like the hectic in my blood he rakes, And thou must cure me. Till I know 'tis done, How'er my mops, my joys were ne'er begun. 28

Hamlet escapes death, orders the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and returns to Denmark where Laertes and Claudius plot to kill him in a duel. In the last scene of

27 Ibid., IV, vii, 164-181.
28 Ibid., IV, iv, 55-65.
the play Hamlet and Laertes meet for the fencing match. Here, in one fell swoop Death envelops not only these two men, but also Gertrude and Claudius. The three men are killed by the poisoned sword and Gertrude by the poisoned drink. At the end of Hamlet four dead bodies are on the stage! What better example of the shortness of life and the ever presence of death could there be than this final scene of the play? Fortinbras, overcome by what he sees, reacts directly to Death:

   This quarry cries on havoc. O proud death,
   What feast is toward in thine eternal cell
   That thou so many princes at a shot
   So bloodily hast struck?29

Thus, just by examining the action of Hamlet, we notice a preoccupation with death similar to that which was characteristic of the Middle Ages.

However, if we examine the play more closely, we see that there are other elements in Hamlet which are even more closely akin to the Medieval preoccupation with death—elements which reveal sharply the Medieval "Dance of Death" motif in its various forms. Let us consider the imagery in Hamlet. There is an overwhelming amount of imagery of decay and corruption, much more than is needed to reveal the action of the play. Just as there seems to be an extraordinary amount of death in the play's action, so there is also a great amount of death and decay imagery in the Medieval sense. And this imagery, like the presence of death in

Hamlet's action, builds up as the play progresses and is then heavily concentrated in one scene devoted almost totally to the discussion of death—the graveyard scene.

Hamlet abounds in passages which reflect with vivid imagery the death-dance motif and some of the themes which come from it: the lament for the absence of past men and their greatness, the putrefaction theme with its vivid imagery mixing sensuality and decay, the theme of human frailty, and the equality of all men in death. Hardly a scene of the play passes without some reference to one of these themes.

The first example of death and decay imagery occurs in Act II. The mad Hamlet is speaking to Polonius. His disillusionment with life causes him to speak of everything around him in terms of death, decay, and disappointment.

In this passage Hamlet links sex, conception, and the creation of new life with graphic images of rot. This expression of human frailty, and this linking of sensuality with putrefaction could easily have come from Medieval writing, but here it occurs in a very intense and complex form in the Renaissance:

Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?

Polonius: I have, my lord.

Hamlet: Let her not walk in the sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't.30

Again at the beginning of Act III Hamlet links sensuality and fertility with decay and evil. Here the stoic nature of the Medieval view of death is reflected. In the nunnerly scene Hamlet warns Ophelia never to marry and have children, for this world is an evil place with evil men in it. Joy can never last. As often happened in the Middle Ages, Hamlet urges Ophelia to renounce life. "Renunciation founded on disgust does not spring from Christian wisdom." Hamlet says:

Get thee to a nunnerly. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my back than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I

31 Compare the following passage from Marcus Aurelius' Meditations to Hamlet's putrefaction speeches and note the similarities: "How useful, when roasted meats and other foods are before you, to see them in your mind as here the dead body of a fish, there the dead body of a bird or a pig. Or again, to think of Falernian wine as the juice of a cluster of grapes, of a purple robe as sheep's wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish, and of sexual intercourse as internal rubbing accompanied by a spasmodic ejection of mucus. What useful perceptual images these are! They go to the heart of things and pierce right through them, so that you see things for what they are. You must do this throughout life; when things appear too enticing, strip them naked, destroy the myth which makes them proud. For vanity is a dangerous perverter of reason, and it is when you think your preoccupations most worthwhile that you are most enthralled. Marcus Aurelius, The Meditations, trans. G. A. A. Grube (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963) p. 50.

32 Huizinga, p. 141.
do crawling between earth and heaven? we are
arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy
ways to a nunnery.33

A few lines later he adds:

If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague
for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as
pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.
Get thee to a nunnery, farewell...34

In the chamber scene, where Hamlet talks to his mother,
the amount of imagery of decay and corruption greatly increases.
Hamlet is here so obsessed with the evil he has seen in the
world and with the idea that death is all around him
infecting all life, that his conversation is filled with
references to it. In this scene the Medieval death-dance
motif is ever present—especially the putrefaction theme.
As we examine the scene we see that Hamlet refers to his
uncle several times. He never uses his proper name. He
always refers to him in derogatory terms and these terms
usually connote some type of corruption, infection, or
decay. Hamlet calls Claudius a "sister,"35 "a bloat king,"36
"a mildewed ear,"37 "a nasty sty,"38 and "a thing."39 The
above derogatory names are highly inaptastic. They present
a vivid picture of utter corruption.

33Shakespeare, III, i, 119-127.
34Ibid., III, i, 132-134.
35Ibid., III, iv, 45.
36Ibid., III, iv, 186.
37Ibid., III, iv, 65.
38Ibid., III, iv, 95.
39Ibid., IV, i, 24.
Another aspect in the scene scene is an excellent reflection of the Medieval putrefaction theme. Throughout the scene Hamlet tries to get his mother to admit the evil she has committed— to confess her sins. In this particular speech he tells his mother not to use his madness as an excuse to dismiss his accusations of her evil nature, and he refers to her sin in terms of decay:

Let not that flattering shadow to your soul, That not your trespass but my madness speaks. It will yet shine and fill the ulcers place While sin corrupts the human body, and the Medieval putrefaction theme, appears in the literature of the Middle Ages.

After Hamlet murders Polonius and hides his body, a frantic search of the palace ensues. As various members of the court attempt to get Hamlet to tell where he has hidden the body, he answers them in acrobatic riddles. These riddles are full of imagery portraying the Medieval view of death. The death-dance motif is clearly present in Hamlet's riddles. When Rosencrantz asks for Polonius' body, he receives an answer from Hamlet which contains both the death-dance's putrefaction theme and the equality in death theme:

Rosencrantz: What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

40 Ibid., III, iv, 149-153.
Hamlet: Compounded it with dust, whereto 'tis kin. 41

A few lines later the king asks Hamlet the same question.

He receives an answer reflecting the same two Medieval
death themes, here the themes are even more intense:

King: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

Hamlet: At supper.

King: At supper? Where?

Hamlet: Not where he sits, but where 'a is eaten. A
certain convocation of politic worms are 'en at him.
Your works in your only emperor for diet. 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.

King: Alas, alas!

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

King: What dost thou mean by this?

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

King: Where is Polonius?

Hamlet: In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger
find him not there, seek him 'th' other place your-
self. But, it, indeed, you find him not within
this month, you shall pose him to you so up the
stairs into the lobby. 42

We have seen how the imagery in Hamlet which reflects the
Medieval preoccupation with death increases and intensifies
as the play progresses. At last we come to the grave-
yard scene which is entirely preoccupied with the imagery of

41 Icid., IV, 11, 3-4.

42 Icid., IV, 111, 16-35.
death. These discussions clearly reveal that the medieval
view of death appears throughout this late Renaissance work.
All of the themes surrounding the Medieval death-dance
motif are present in this scene. They are all tied together
with the image of the skull. As Hamlet discusses the skull
with the two gravediggers and Horatio, a view of death
similar to that held in the Middle Ages becomes apparent.

In the opening of the graveyard scene the two clowns
illustrate the commonplace position which death occupied
in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The awareness
of death had so saturated society that descriptions had
to become increasingly macabre. At the first of the
graveyard scene the two clowns are able to joke about death:

Clown: what is he that builds stronger than either
the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?

Other: The gallows-maker, for that frame outlives
a thousand tenants....

Other: Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright,
or a carpenter?

Clown: Ay, tell me that, and unjoke.

Other: Hurry, now I can tell.

Clown: To't.

Other: Mass, I cannot tell.

Clown: Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull
ass will not mend his pace with beating. And when
you are asked this question next, say 'a grave-maker'.
The houses he makes lasts till doomsday. Go, get
thee in, and fetch me a stoup of liquor.43

Besides being able to joke about it, the gravedigger
is also able to sing about death. He is singing about it as

43Ibid., v,1,35-54.
Hamlet and Horatio approach him. It is here that the skull image is introduced, unifying the whole discussion about death. The gravedigger throws a skull up out of the grave, starting a discussion which involves several of the death-dance themes. As Hamlet and Horatio discuss the skull, they reflect upon the frailty of mankind and the equality of men in death. They ask where are all those men who once lived on earth, and through the use of imagery they reflect upon the refraction theme:

Hamlet: That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once. How the knave joust it to the ground, as if 'twere Chin's jawbone, that did the first murder! This might be the got of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?

Horatio: It might, my lord.

Hamlet: Or of a courtier, which could say 'Good morrow, sweet lord! How dost thou, sweet lord?' This might be my Lord Such-a-one, that praised my Lord Such-a-one's horse, when 'a went to beg it, might it not?

Horatio: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: Why, 'a'en so, and now my Lady Worm's, charless, and knock'd about the mazzari with a sexton's spade. Here's fine revolution, as we had the trick to see't. Did these bones cost no more the brailing out to play at loggets with then? mine aye to think on't. 

Just a few lines later the gravedigger throws up another skull, and Hamlet speaks about the equality which death creates and the human vanity which it destroys:

There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his squiddities now, his cuillts, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? why does he

44Ibid., 58-53.
suffer this mad knave now to knock him about the scene with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum! This fellow might be in’s time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveniences of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th’ inheritor himself have no more, ha?45

Later in the scene Hamlet talks to the clown, and the discussions of death become less philosophical and more macabre. The refraction theme becomes more vivid and more like its Medieval counterpart. In the following speech Hamlet and the Clown discuss the rotting human body:

Hamlet: How long will a man lie i’ the earth ere he rot?

Clown: Faith, if ’a be not rotten before ’a die—as we have many pocky corse now-a-days that will scarce hold the lying in—’a will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine year.

Hamlet: Why no more than another?

Clown: Why, sir, his hide is so tanned with his trade that ’a will keep out water a great while; and you water is a sore devourer of your wares: can dead body. Here’s a skull now, withlien you i’ th’ earth three and twenty years.46

The theme continues a few lines later when the Clown throws up another skull. As a discussion of this particular skull ensues another Medieval death-dance theme is reflected—the lament of the loss of past human glory:

Clown: This same skull, sir, was, sir, Horick’s skull, the king’s jester.

45 Ibid., V.1, 87-100.

46 Ibid., V.1, 144-153.
Hamlet: This?

Clown: E'en that.

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My heart rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your sires now, your amours, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chaf-fall'n? Now set you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. Frithea, Horatio, tell me one thing.47

The whole discussion of the skull and of death ends with a conversation between Hamlet and Horatio. This one last discussion of death is very intense, and it contains in one way or another all of the themes surrounding the death-dance motif: the putrefaction theme, the lament for past glory, the frailty of man, the uselessness of human vanity, and the equality of all men in death:

Horatio: What's that, my lord?

Hamlet: Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

Horatio: E'en so.

Hamlet: And so'lt so? Foh!

Horatio: E'en so, my lord.

Hamlet: To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 's find it stopping a dung-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.

47Ibid., V,1,159-173.
Alexandria died, Alexander was buried, Alexander
ret urne d to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we
make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was
converted did they not stop a beer-barrel?

Imperious Caesar, die and turn to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away
0, that that earth which reset the world in we
should pitch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw.48

Just as the action of Hamlet is preoccupied with death
and just as this preoccupation reaches a climax in one scene,
so is the imagery in Hamlet preoccupied with the "Dance of
Death" motif as it reaches its point of highest intensity.
The imagery of the play reveals everywhere the same death
themes which were so common in the Middle Ages.

However, there is one more element which helps establish
Hamlet's preoccupation with death in a manner similar to
the Middle Ages. This is Hamlet's own mental state—
his constant tendency to contemplate death. Part of this
contemplation of death is necessitated by the plot. Hamlet
is obliged to avenge his father's death. Therefore he has
to think about killing his uncle; but there is more to it
than that. Besides mourning over his own father's death
and trying to find an opportunity to kill his uncle, Hamlet
contemplates death for its own sake. This is where his
contemplation becomes clearly Medieval. Hamlet has
discovered the reality of evil in the world. This discovery
has caused him to think about the nature of existence and to
wonder if living is worthwhile. It has made him see the
world as an "unweeded garden" causing him to wish for oblivion.

48Ibid., V,1,174-192.
In his first soliloquy Hamlet reveals that he has seen through his personal situation the evil which exists in the world and that he wishes that he did not have to remain alive to be a part of it:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah, fie, 'tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Posses it merely. That it should come to this,
But two months dead, Nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,
That he might not esteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember? why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on, and yet, within a month--
Let me not think on't. Fruity, thy name is woman--
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she followed my poor father's body
Like Niobe, all tears, why she, even she--
O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason
Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,
My father's brother, but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules. Within a month,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue.49

This first soliloquy is our first indication that Hamlet has contemplated the general concept of death and finally his own suicide, but there are many more passages which refer to his thoughts of suicide. Later in the play Hamlet talks to Polonius and tells him clearly that he wants to die:

49Ibid., I,11,129-158.
Polonius: Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Hamlet: Into my grave?...you cannot take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal--except my life, except my life, except my life.50

In the same scene Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He tells them of his extreme depression and of his present view of the world as evil and meaningless.

I have of late--but wherefore I know not--lost all my mirth, forsworn all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this suddy fraze the earth seems to me a sterile praenotary, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'er-hanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me, nor woman neither; though ye your smiling you seem to say so.51

It should be noted that in one way or another all three of Hamlet's soliloquies deal with his contemplation of death, his desire to rest in "ease on Lethe wharf."

we have already discussed the first soliloquy and pointed out that it revealed Hamlet's disgust with life and his desire for death. That soliloquy reflects the kind of renunciation of life based upon disgust which Huizinga tells us was so common in the Middle Ages. The second soliloquy contains an even stronger death wish. In fact, in this soliloquy Hamlet tells us that the only thing which

50 Ibid., II,1,204-213.
51 Ibid., II,1,285-298.
keeps him from suicide is the fear of something worse
after death. He wants peace (oblivion) and he is afraid
that death might hold some form of consciousness:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consumption
Devoutly to be wished--to die, to sleep--
To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause--there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself with his quietus make
with a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grant sadl sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. 52

In his last soliloquy Hamlet reprimands himself for
not being able to act against his uncle. Here he shows
knowledge of his death wish as he blames the wish and his
constant brooding for his inaction:

How all occasions do inform against me,
And spur my dull revenge! what is a man,

52Ibid., III, i, 56-88.
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fast in us unused. Now, whether it be
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
A thought which, quartered, hath but one part wisdom
And ever three parts coward— I do not know
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do',
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means,
to do't.53

Hamlet spends a great deal of time contemplating
death and desiring oblivion. According to Huizinga, this
renunciation of life based on disgust is another aspect
of the medieval preoccupation with death.

53 Ibid., IV, iv, 31-46.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

From the preceding observations we may draw three conclusions. First, from the writings of Huijunz and other scholars we may conclude that the Middle Ages was preoccupied with death and that this preoccupation reached extreme forms of the morbid. Second, we may conclude that the Medieval preoccupation with death is reflected in Renaissance literature in a form just as morbid as in the Middle Ages. Hamlet, one of the most famous Renaissance dramas, is an illustration of this preoccupation. Hamlet illustrates a view of death similar to that held in the Middle Ages in three ways: The action of the play is greatly concerned with death. The imagery in Hamlet reflects the Medieval "Dance of Death" motif in its various themes. And Hamlet himself renounces life in disgust and demonstrates a desire for oblivion. The third conclusion which we may draw comes out of Hamlet's renunciation of life—his constant contemplation of death—and his use of language which reflects the gruesome side of the Medieval preoccupation with death—his references to and reflections of the Medieval "Dance of Death" motif.

To the extent that Hamlet adopts this Medieval view of death in its various aspects, he is a Medieval figure—
or a late Renaissance figure who has inherited a Medieval attitude. Man often inherits many past medieval preoccupations, outlook, and ways of looking at life. Hamlet's preoccupation with the "Dance of Death" is one instance.
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