

YORICK

Thank the heavens! – or the diligence of ancient-time papersmiths – for the existence upon our earth of the material known as *strong velum*; which, like the earth upon which I have supposed it to exist (although in point of fact its contacts with *terra firma* are most rare, its natural habitations being shelves, wooden or not wooden, some dusty, others maintained in excellent order; or letter-boxes, desk drawers, old trunks, the most secret pockets of courting lovers, shops, files, attics, cellars, museums, deed-boxes, safes, lawyers' offices, doctors' walls, your favourite great-aunt's seaside home, theatrical property departments, fairy tales, summit conferences, tourist traps), . . . like the earth, I say again in case you have forgot my purpose, this noble stuff endures – if not for ever, then at least till men consciously destroy it, whether by crumpling or shredding, through the use of kitchen scissors or strong teeth, by actions incendiary or lavatorial, – for it's a true fact that men take an equal pleasure in annihilating both the ground upon which they stand while they live and the substance (I mean paper) upon which they may remain, immortalised, once this same ground is over their heads instead of under their feet; and that the complete inventory of such strategies of destruction would over-fill more pages than my ration, . . . so then to the devil with that list and on with my story; which,

as I had begun to say, is itself the tale of a piece of vellum, – both the tale of the vellum itself and the tale inscribed thereupon.

Yorick's saga, of course; that same ancient account which fell, near enough two hundred and thirty-five years ago, into the hands of a certain – no, a most uncertain – *Tristram*, who (although Yseult-less) was neither triste nor ram, the frothiest, most heady Shandy of a fellow; and which has now come into my possession by processes too arcane to detain the eager reader. Truly, a velluminous history! – which it's my present intent not merely to abbreviate, but, in addition, to explicate, annotate, hyphenate, palatinate & permanganate – for it's a narrative that richly rewards the scholar who is competent to apply such sensitive technologies. Here, dusty-faced and ink-fingered, lurk beautiful young wives, old fools, cuckoldry, jealousy, murder, juice of cursed hebona, executions, skulls; as well as a full exposition of why, in the *Hamlet* of William Shakespeare, the morbid prince seems unaware of his own father's real name.

Very well then: –

It appears that in the latter part of the reign of the illustrious King *Horwendillus* of Denmark, his chief

jestor, one Master YORICK, took to wife a toothsome goldhair waif, by name 'Ophelia'; and thereafter began all the trouble . . . What's this? Interruptions already? Did I not tell you, have I not just this moment set down, that the bardic Hamlet, that's to say Amlethus of the Danes, is quite mistaken in believing the Ghost's name to be Hamlet too? – An error not only unusual but unfilial, not only unfilial but downright *unsaxogrammatical*, one may say, for it is contradicted by no less an authority than Saxo-Grammaticus's *History of the Danes*! – But were you to be silent and hear me out you'd learn it was no mistake whatsoever, but rather the cryptic key by which our tale's true meaning may most swiftly be unlocked.

I repeat: –

Horwendillus. Horwendillus Rex . . . – Still more questions? – Sir, of course the jester had a wife; she may not feature in the great man's play, but you'll concede that a woman's a necessary apparatus if a man would make a dynasty, and how else? – answer me that? – could the antique Fool have produced that Line, that veritable Monologue of Yoricks of whom the ill-named Tristram person's *parson* was but one single syllable? Well! You don't need ancient vellum to see the truth of THAT, I think. – Good Lord; her *name*? Sir, you must take it upon my word. But where's the puzzle? Do you

EAST, WEST

imagine that this 'Ophelia' was so blasted uncommon a name in a land where men were called such things as Amlethus, Horwend&c., yes, and Yorick, too? So, so. Let's get on.

Yorick espoused Ophelia. There was a child. Let's have no more disputes.

In the matter of this Ophelia: she'd less than half his years and more than twice his looks, so it will instantly be perceived that what follows may be ascribed to divisions and multiplications. An arithmetical tragedy, in sum. A grave tale, fit for gravesides.

How did it come about that this old wintry fool got himself such a springtime of a bride? – A noisome gale blows across the ancient vellum hereabouts. It is Ophelia's breath. The rottenest-smelling exhalation in the State of Denmark; a tepid stench of rats' livers, toads' piss, high game-birds, rotting teeth, gangrene, skewered corpses, burning witchflesh, sewers, politicians' consciences, skunk-holes, sepulchres, and all the Beelzebubbling pickle-vats of Hell! Thus every time this youthful beauty, the frail perfection of whose features brought moisture to men's eyes, made so bold as to open her mouth, – why, then there was cleared all around her an open ground some fifty feet in radius at

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the least. So Yorick's path to wedlock was unobstructed, and a poor Fool must get what wife he can.

He courted her with a wooden peg on his nose. On their wedding day the king, who loved Yorick, gave the jester a thoughtful gift: a pair of silver nose-plugs. That's how it happened; first pegged, then plugged, our Fool in love assuredly looked his part.

So that's made clear.

[Enter young Prince Amlethus, bearing a riding whip.]

The scene's a poor bedchamber at Elsinore. Yorick and his lady lie fast asleep in their cot. In disarray upon a nearby chair: a cap, bells, motley, &c. Somewhere, a sleeping infant. Picture the boy Hamlet now, tipping to the bedside; where he tenses, crouched; until at last he leaps! And now,

Yor. (awakes) O, at What whoreson Pelion's this, that, tumbling down from Ossa, so interrupts my spine?

... I interrupt myself, for there occurs to me a discordant Note: would any man, awakened from deepest slumber by the arrival on his back of a seven-year-old princeling, truly retain such a command of metaphor and classical allusion as is indicated by the text? It may be that the vellum is not wholly to be relied upon in this regard; or it may be that Denmark's fools were most

uncommon learned. Some things may never be known . . .

(Back now to our Muttons.)

Ham. Yorick, the day's awake! Let's raise a chorus to the dawn.

Oph. (aside) My husband never loved this prince; a spoiled short brat, and cursed with sleeplessness, which plague he passes on to us. Here's how we wake each morning, with royal fists a-tearing at our hair, or heir-apparent buttocks jig-jogging on our necks. Were he my child . . . good morrow, sweet my prince!

Ham. Ophelia, it is. A dawn chorus, Yorick, come!

Yor. That's for the birds. I'm of too venerable feather, that's the truth. My years long since encrowded me, or made of me an owl. I sing no more, but only caw or hoot in most unseemly form.

Ham. Soft! None of this. Your prince would have a song.

Yor. Still hear me out. Age, Hamlet, is a setting sun, and in my occidental years it is not right I hymn the orient day.

Ham. No more. Up, sing. I'll ride upon your back and hear you croon.

Oph. (aside) At seven he's the Old Man of the Sea; who knows, at twenty-seven, what he'll be?

Yor. (sings) *In youth when I did love, did love,*

Metthought it was very sweet, To contract, O! the time, for-a my behove, O! metthought there was nothing meet. But age, with his stealing steps, Hath claw'd me in his clutch . . .

Ham. Cease, Yorick, this foul caterwaul, instant, hold your peace.

Yor. Did I not tell you true?

Ham. Enough. Give me some jest. Yes, make it about a cat, just such a waully mog as you just now surpassed.

Yor. (aside) Now must I do this penance for doing what he willed. (Aloud) There's life yet in this old dog you ride; so tell me, Hamlet, why cats have nine lives?

Ham. I know it not, but why they have nine tails, that I know well, and you shall find it out quick if the riddle be slow.

Oph. (aside) This prince is as sharp as his tongue; and poor Yorick blunter by the day.

Yor. Then hear the answer. All cats will look at kings; but to gaze upon a monarch is to place one's life in their hands; and lives held in such hands do often slip through fingers and are spilled. Now, Hamlet, count the spaces on your hands, I mean 'twixt finger and finger, and finger and finger, and finger and finger, and finger and thumb. On two hands, count eight chasms through which a life may fall. Only nine lives

will ensure that one at least remain; and so our cat, king-watching, must have nine.

Oph. Husband, a fine conceit.

Ham. So now a dance! Discharge your jester's office and let's have a merry jig.

Yor. You'll hang upon my back the while?

Ham. I will; there to ponder what I want.

Yor. (aside, and dancing) Hamlet, you want for nothing: yet Yorick finds you wanting.

And all this spoken with filigree'd plugs up the nose, up princely nostrils as well as Foolish ones! – The child, crying in his cradle, complains as much of his bunged proboscis as of the noise of Hamlet's whip, whishing and whooshing through the air to encourage his dancing biped steed. – What are we to think of so enraged a prince? It's sure he hated Ophelia; but for what? Her pestilential gusts? Her sovereignty over the Fool, who doted upon her very eyelashes? Or could it have been the swelling buds beneath her shift, her body that was not his to command? At seven, Prince Amlethus is disturbed by something in this girl, but cannot give it name. – So childish ardour turns to hate.

Perhaps all three: her stink, her theft of Yorick's heart, for as any fool knows the heart of a Fool is his prince's possession, for who but a Fool would surrender

his heart to a prince?; and, yes, her beauty, too. There's no need to choose. Let's be gluttonous in our understanding and swallow this trinity whole.

We shall spare Hamlet too harsh a judgment. He was a lonely child, who saw in Yorick a father as well as a servant, viz. the best, the perfect father, for every son would make his father a slave. In Yorick, singing, jesting, dancing, the pallid prince sees Horwendillus tamed. He was a mother's boy.

The vellum hereabouts, – I should say the ink upon it – or, more precisely still, the fist that held the pen – but the fist's long dead, and it won't do to speak ill of the departed – O, *****, let me say *the text* begins to ramble, listing in gruesome detail all the crimes committed by the prince against the jester's person: each imprint of royal boot upon his buttocks, complete with itemisations of cause, effect, location, costume, contingent circumstances (rain, sun, thundery conditions, hail, and other functions of nature; or the absence of Hamlet's mother owing to the tyranny, even over queens, of natural functions), descriptions of the jester's pratfalls, of the clump of turf with which his nose collided, of subsequent searches for dislodged nose-plugs; in brief, a most lamentable lack of brevity, which we shall rectify here without delay. The point's well

made, I think. To labour it further would be to emulate the prince, who belaboured Yorick with sticks and whips and the Lord knows what – and we would be rash to treat our Reader (being ourselves no Prince) as if he were a Fool. (And being no Prince, what business have I with this newly infiltrative ‘we’, this purple plural my sentences have presumed to put on? Off with it! Back to the common – the *uncommon*, because *Cyclopean* – singular I.)

One story will suffice:-

While riding Yorick, Hamlet with his whip parted the fool's cheek's fleshy curtains, to reveal the bony stage behind. It seems he was a feeling prince: enshouldered as he was, his gorge rose at the bloody sight. – Reader, the Prince of Denmark, on catching his first glimpse of a skull, puked generously on Yorick's dingling cap.

I have till now endeavoured to tell a delicate tale of private character, with many fine touches of psychology and much material detail; still I can no longer keep the great World from my pages, for what ended in Tragedy began in Politics. (Which will be small surprise.)

Picture a banquet at fabulous Elsinore: boar's heads, sheep's eyes, parson's noses, goose-breasts, calves' livers, tripes, fish-roe, venison haunches, pig's trotters

(here's the anatomy of the table; were its several dishes assembled into a single edible beast, a stranger monster would lie here than any hippogriff or ichthyocentaur!). – Tonight Horwendillus and his *Gertude* are feasting FORTINBRAS, hoping to stay his territorial greed by satisfying his belly's equal liking for expansion, the latter requiring no more than the murder of the above mythical monster, a happier & certainly a tastier Strategy than WAR.

And is it not conceivable that *F*, seeing upon the laden board the dismembered limbs of this fearsomely diverse and most occult of creatures, and constructing in his mind's eye the whole composite Beast, with antlers on its giant turkey's head, and hooves set weirdly down beneath its scaly belly and its hairy shanks, might lose all appetite for the fray – fearing to confront on Danish battlefields the mighty race of hunters who could slay so wild a Thing – and might therefore cease to hunger for Denmark herself?

It does not matter. I've lingered at the banquet only to explain why this Queen Gertrude, over-occupied by diplomacy, beset by several types of meat, was unable to go upstairs and wish her son goodnight.

I must show you Hamlet sleepless in his bed, – but where's the fellow who can portray an absence? – of

sleep, I mean, and of a mother's kiss upon his cheek, - for a cheek un-kissed resembles in all particulars a cheek for which no osculation had been hoped, and a boy shewn horizontal in his cot, and subject to the tergiversations & other Frenzies characteristic of *insomnia*, may nevertheless be taken for a child plagued by a flea; or fevered; or surly, at being forbidden the grown-ups' table; or practising his swimming in this textile sea; or G— knows what, for I don't. But absence, as is well known, makes hearts grow fonder; so up Amlethus gets, and tip-toes down corridors thus (if each dot represent the conjunction of one toe-tip with the floor):

...../...../...../...../...../.....&c. &c.

- until (to be as brisk as he) he reaches Gertrude's chamber, rushes in, and resolves to await her there, so that what's missing from his cheek may be presented; a Lethe-kiss from Mother, and then he'll sleep.

(As it turned out, this proved a lethal scheme.)

And now, in pantomime, let me display what followed (for I'm afraid my pages' mean allotment may expire before my tale, and so in compensation for my earlier garrulity these my characters may be obliged to rush through Dumb-Shows, *tableaux*, and other acceleratory devices quite unsuited to the story's tragic content. But

there is nothing for it; my present long-winded Folly must make these ancients Fools. Thus haste, enforced by our inevitable end, makes Yoricks of us all):-

Hamlet Agbast: There are voices at the door! Not only his mother's, but some fierce drunken sot's! - Quick, hide! - But where? - The arras, not a moment to be lost! - He hides. (And so it may be said of him that in later life he slew himself, his child-self's memory lurking in this place, grown hoary and Polonial in form.)

O, what he hears! The grunting, roaring man! His mother's squeals and shrieks - ah, frail maternal cries! - Who threatens the Queen? - Bravely, the prince peers round the arras' edge, and sees...

... *HIS FATHER* falling wild upon the lady. It is a porky-snuffling Horwendillo beneath whom Queen Gertrude sobs and flails, - and then falls quiet, while her breath sounds harsh in Hamlet's ears, as if her throat were stopped.

The prince hears Death upon her voice, and understands, with a seven-year-old's acuteness, that his father's bent on murder.

Now out he leaps!

'Stop! Stop, I say!'

His father's springing back! His mother's hand flies to her throat, confirming Hamlet's fears of throttling!

The scene is plain enough. 'I saved her life,' Amlethus proudly thinks. – But drunken Horwendillus takes his son, & thrashes him, & lashes, & then thrashes once again. – A curious sort of thrashing, for it beats something into the prince's hide, – whereas the nature of most punishment is to beat an evil out.

What's beaten in? Why, hatred; and dark dreams of revenge.

Hamlet Alone: But I'll leave soliloquies to richer pens. My vellum's silent on what Hamlet felt while locked & wealy in his room. You must infer his thoughts from what he did.

If you desire, you may see him haunted. A Horwendillian phantom shimmers before his eyes and seems to squeeze the life-breath from the Queen. Amlethus's eyes, made visionary by fear, observe the dreadful Spectre as it assassinates Queen Gertrude a thousand times and more, now falling upon her to choke her in the bath (soap-bubbles die upon her lip), now strangling her at her mirror, so forcing her to watch her own Demise.

Reader, see Hamlet's dreams: look through his eyes at Horwendillus's chimaera, its fingers at his mother's throat, in gardens, kitchens, ballrooms and potting-sheds; on chairs, beds, tables & floors; in public and in

private, by day and by night, before and after luncheon, while she sings and when she is silent, clothed and nude, in boats and on horseback, enthroned or upon her piss-pot . . . and you may understand why he, the prince, now sees his recent 'rescue' as no End, but only a Beginning, to his loving anguish; why he racks his brains to find some permanent conclusion to his fear. – And so a *Plot* is born, conceived by Urgency out of Hate, its generative organ the royal whip that stung his royal buttocks, delivering upon those nether cheeks just such a yoricking as he'd often given the Fool.

And the plot begins to converge on Yorick; bitter Hamlet will use the jester as his revenge's tool.

Now you may see two hatreds coalesce: in Hamlet's angry brain his fury merges (one might as well say *marries*) Ophelia and the King. He sees how his hard wrath can stone down both these birds (for it is a Medusan wrath, that can turn yoric flesh to deadly granite).

And, at last, you hear the child-prince in his room, walking round & round about, a sullen riddle dripping from his lips: –

*'Nor liquid, nor solid, nor gassy air,
Nor taste, nor smell, nor substance there.
It may be turned to good or ill.
Pour it in an ear, and it may kill.'*

- So, Reader, my congratulations. Your fancy, from which all these dark suppositions have issued (for I began this passage by swearing myself to silence), is proved by them more fertile & convincing than my own.

So well, so accurately have you supposed that my task's made very brief. It remains only to bring Hamlet and Yorick, the one upon the other's back as is their custom, to a Platform below the Castle at Elsinore; - where the young prince pours such a magical poison into Yorick's ear that the Fool falls into foolish Delusions.

You have understood it all. - The ghost of Hamlet's living father appears, to haunt poor Yorick; and the venom conjures up a second undead phantasm - it is Ophelia, Yorick's wife, her clothes in disarray, her body twined in translucent, ectoplasmic splendour round the King's!

- *What was the princely poison?* -

Only solve your own riddle, Reader, and you'll know... there, never mind, I'll solve it for you. It was SPEECH.

O deadliest venene! Being insubstantial, though very serpentine, it knows no antidote. - To be plain, Hamlet persuades his father's Fool that Horwendillus and Ophelia, that Dame Yorick and the King... no, I

cannot say that terrible word of doing, when in truth was nothing done! - And possibly (the vellum is smudged, at this point, by ancient tears or other salty fluid) the cruel boy brought 'proofs': - a pair of golden nose-plugs, wrapped in a forged billet-doux? Or was it a handkerchief? No matter. The damage is done, and Yorick is multiply a fool: always a Fool by trade, he has become a doubled Dolt for being the Prince's *gull*, and (in his own eyes, for, as he sees it, seeming a Fool in the lovers' eyes) an Ass as well, an Ass most Foolish in appearance, because of the cuckold's horns between his ears.

Strangest of all - and here's the dark heart of the matter - by becoming a Fool-Actual, he sacrifices the privileges of the Fool-Professional. A jester was a curious brand of Fool, permitted by his motley to speak wisdom and have men laugh at it; to tell the truth, yet keep his head, jingling as it was with silly bells. - Yes, Fools were wise, as wise as clocks, for they knew their time for what it was. - But now this clock-wise Yorick changes round; fooled by the prince, he starts to play the Fool - to play it truly, that's to say to rant, to roar, to act the jealous spouse in deadly seriousness.

Which was Hamlet's intention: to force the Fool into a fatal folly. I've said he saw the jester as a second,

clownish father: this surrogate parent is now by poisoned words unleashed against the royal sire.

For the rest: -

Horwendillus sleeps alone in his Gethsemane. Enter Yorick, with juices of cursed hebona in a phial. - The poison Hamlet poured into his ear has precipitated, or so it fancifully seems, into this bottle; - and from the bottle into the king's ear it goes. - And that's Horwendillus dead; while Ophelia, accused and spurned by Yorick, loses her senses and wanders round the palace in a flowery madness until she dies of grief; - which madness gives the clue to Claudius, who then uncovers the crime, and it's to the block with Yorick, and that's that.

- But here's a mystery, an unknown hand at work! For *someone*, whom I cannot name, retrieves the Sever'd Head; and with all necessary bribes and whis-pers secretly contrives to have it buried there, where after many years the prince will be confronted by his grinning bony guilt. - So a faceless joker, some lover of the jester's heady wit, makes of his discarded noodle a most 'capital' (if unforeseen) amusement.

Tumpy turn, tumpy turn, and a tumpy tumpy turn . . . Reader, time's passing, and each of us passes the time in his own sweet way, whether by drumming

of fingers, or in sleep, or courtship, or the consumption of strings of sausages, or however we please; my own habit is to hum, and so tum tum tumpy turn. (If the tune distress you, be off and pass the time in some other place; freedom's a spaniel that grows weak and flabby if it be not exercised, so exercise your dog, Sir, that's the trick.)

- But, returning after many years to our Scene, what is this we see? Not Yorick; he's dead. Then, **YORICK'S GHOST**. For he seems to haunt the living, so that we may call him Will-o'-the-Wits . . . Reader, how much has gone wrong at Elsinore!

Gerrude, murderously 'rescued' by her son from her first, un-murderous spouse, remained in mourning many years, while Claudius ruled. (In this it's true my history differs from Master CHACKPAW's, and ruins at least one great soliloquy. I offer no defence, but this: that these matters are shrouded in antiquity, and there's no certainty in them; so let the versions of the story co-exist, for there's no need to choose. - Or this: that when Queen Gerrude at last did marry Claudius, the intervening years were, in Hamlet's troubled mind, by this action concertina'd, blurred together, compressed; so that to him the passage of his childhood, adolescence and young manhood appeared no longer than two months [nay, not so much, not two] . . . and this is

wholly comprehensible, for have they not flown by in the brief space of time it took to sing my tumpy turn? Have they not passed in the few moments it took to walk *Freedom*, your spaniel bitch? – Well, then, you have two unanswerable cases instead of one; and that's enough, I hope.)

As I was saying: Gertrude marries! And now dead Yorick's jealousy, unhoused from the jester's corpse and seeking a new home, finds one in Hamlet. 'Tis clear – so Hamlet plots – that King Claudius must be accused of his brother's murder, and Yorick's execution must be shown to be the camouflage, the *arras* behind which the Truth was hid. – So Murder's spectre is invoked a second time, and Hamlet, in his mother-loving passion, sees it walk the battlements of Elsinore.

But this Ghost bears his own name: by which the prince, the accuser, is accused. Haunted by the Phantom of his crime, he starts to lose his reason. His own *Ophelia* he treats badly, as you know; his cracking brain confuses her with the unbearable memory of the Fool's falsely maligned and foully odorous wife; until at last the prince, who once turned Speech to Poison, drinks from a poisoned cup . . . and then dead marches, and also marches of the living:– old Fortinbras, too long uninvited to a meal, gobbles Denmark up instead.

Yorick's child survives, and leaves the scene of his family's tragedy; wanders the world, sowing his seed in far-off lands, from west to east and back again; and multicoloured generations follow, ending (I'll now reveal) in this present, humble *UTTER*; whose ancestry may be proved by this, which he holds in common with the whole sorry line of the family, that his chief weakness is for the telling of a particular species of Tale, which learned men have termed *chamticleric*, and also *tauream*.

– And just such a COCK-AND-BULL story is by this last confession brought quite to its conclusion.