

'Funeral Baked Meats': Cannibalism and Corpse Medicine in *Hamlet*

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Abstract

This article argues that the cannibalistic connotations in 'Hamlet' may be interpreted in the context of specific cultural anxieties relating to the popular and problematic use of corpse medicine, or mumia. I begin by exploring how Shakespeare represents corpses throughout Hamlet in ways which reference food and culinary practices. By doing so, Shakespeare not only emphasises the tragic objectification of the dead, but also links life and death inextricably to figurative and literal consumption. The essay proceeds to analyse the cannibalistic allusions in 'Hamlet' through the lens of the contemporary medical consumption of corpse medicine. While the use of corpse medicine was semantically distinguished from anthropophagy in early modern Europe, I argue that Shakespeare's depiction of man-eating in Hamlet forces his audience to confront their own unsavoury distinctions between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of cannibalism. Viewed through the lens of cannibal discourse, Hamlet's language over the course of the tragedy takes on new significance as the prince displays profane hunger that seems to simultaneously repel him and imbue him with a macabre vitality. Something is indeed 'rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.4.67), Shakespeare suggests, and the smell appears to be coming from the kitchen.

Keywords: Hamlet; cannibalism; transubstantiation; medicine; consumption; Eucharist

HORATIO: My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

*HAMLET: I prithee do not mock me, fellow-student;
I think it was to see my mother's wedding.*

HORATIO: Indeed, my lord, it followed hard upon.

*HAMLET: Thrift, thrift, Horatio. The funeral baked meats
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.*

(Hamlet, 1.2.175-80)ⁱⁱ

As his bitter jest implies, Hamlet is fixated on the relationship between life, death and consumption. Over the course of the play, the language that he uses to navigate his moral dilemma is situated firmly within the realms of cannibal discourse: his mother enjoys her husband 'as if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on' (1.2.144-5); kings and beggars are but 'two dishes ... to one table' (4.3.24); his thirst for vengeance presents as a yearning to 'drink hot blood' (3.2.360). While no character literally eats anyone else in the play, the reasons for and the effects of the undercurrent of cannibalism which runs throughout *Hamlet* have been the subject of a good deal of critical discussion in recent years. The cannibal is, to put it mildly, a complex and loaded symbol. To an early modern audience, allusions to anthropophagy (that is, man-eating) would have conjured up all kinds of ideas and associations ranging from vengeance and classical mythology, to transubstantiation and the Eucharist, to colonial discourse and the new world savages. The cannibalistic connotations of *Hamlet* also, however, seem to speak to very specific cultural anxieties relating to the popular and undeniably problematic use of what was commonly referred to as *mumia*: medicine derived from human corpses.

Throughout *Hamlet* Shakespeare represents corpses in ways that reference food and culinary practices. In doing so, he foregrounds the tragic objectification of the dead in ways that link life and death inextricably to figurative and literal bodily consumption – and also, therefore, to contemporary medical consumption of corpse medicine, a practice that was as widespread and as popular as it was problematic. As critics such as Wendy Wall and Jonathan Sugg have convincingly argued, the early modern household 'was spacious enough to embrace the work of recycling corpses; cookbooks placed the human body imaginatively in proximity to death, carnality, and orality' (Wall, 2002: 197). In the kitchen, cuisine and corpse medicine went hand in hand as housewives followed recipes for good old-fashioned home remedies that included ingredients such as human skulls, urine, placenta, and blood (Sugg, 2011: *passim*). While the use of corpse medicine was semantically distinguished from

anthropophagy in early modern society, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare purposefully depicts man-eating in such a way as to force his audience to confront their own unsavoury distinctions between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ forms of cannibalism.

Moreover, I argue that against this background of moral uncertainty Hamlet’s own dilemma takes on new significance as the prince struggles to reconcile his own conflicting impulses. Hamlet returns repeatedly to the image of the body-as-food, alternating as he does so between distasteful observer of figurative cannibalism to eventual butcher and would-be consumer. By tying Hamlet’s struggle so explicitly to cannibal discourse, Shakespeare draws our attention to the competing interests of a revenger who, like *mumia*, is ‘paradoxically associated with both restorative value and violence’ (Wall, 2002: 196). Ultimately, it seems that Hamlet’s only means to confront the profane consumption of his world is to partake in it.

Modern audiences can appreciate Hamlet’s joke in the passage above: food prepared for his father’s funeral has been served up for his mother’s marriage in what Stephen Greenblatt calls a ‘confounding of categories that has stained both social rituals in the service of thrift’ (Greenblatt, 2000: 155). The joke functions both as a swipe at bourgeois values – what Greenblatt terms ‘an economy of calculation and equivalence’ (Greenblatt, 2000: 155) – and as a furious comment on the speed with which Hamlet’s mother remarried. As Robert Appelbaum writes, ‘only by marrying within a few days of the funeral would it have been possible to serve pies originally intended for the funeral’ (Appelbaum, 2006: 17). There is, however, a more subversive current of meaning at work in Hamlet’s joke than may be initially apparent. Linking ‘wedding’, ‘funeral’, ‘coldly’, and ‘baked meats’, Hamlet brings into uncomfortably close proximity contrasting ideas of hot and cold, life and death. His juxtaposition of corpse and cuisine places Hamlet’s dilemma firmly in the realms of cannibalistic discourse, and in this context his chosen culinary example – baked meat – takes on a grisly significance.

A ‘baked meat’ in early modern culinary parlance was largely similar to a pasty or meat pie, although the construction of these gastronomic treats was often a more complex process than one might imagine, as demonstrated in this recipe from London cookbook, *The Good Huswives Jewell* (1596):

Take a leg of Lamb, and cut out all the flesh, and save the skin whole, then mince it fine ... then put in grated bread, and some egg white and all, and some Dates and Currants, then season ... temper it all together, then put it into the leg of lamb again,

and let it bake a little before you put it into your pie (Dawson, 1596: 11-12).

While this recipe may seem innocent – and delicious! – enough to modern eyes, there are elements to the dish which may well have been construed by Shakespeare’s early modern audience as having darker significance. Firstly, the pastry shell in which the meat is cooked was commonly known as a coffin – the same kind of ‘coffin’ that Titus Andronicus forges with vengeful relish from the blood and bones of Chiron and Demetrius (5.3.187). Like *Titus*, albeit with a soupçon more subtlety, Hamlet’s reference to ‘funeral baked meats’ plays with the idea that a ‘coffin’ can be either both the focal point of a funeral, a locus of loss and grief, or it can be something containing food - a wholesome site of nourishment. Compounding the macabre efficacy of Hamlet’s imagery is the manner in which dishes such as that described by Dawson were traditionally served: once reconstituted, the meat is cooked as an entire joint that, as Appelbaum notes, would not have lent itself well to being portioned equally in slices like a pie. Instead, the pastry coffin ‘had to be opened up ... while the main ingredient was brought forward for display and then carved and parceled out’ (Appelbaum, 2006: 20).

Thus, a transgressive and ritualistic impression of ‘embalment, interment, and disinterment’ underlays the consumption of Hamlet’s baked meat (Appelbaum, 2006: 19). The prince’s image proves to be an apt one, and anticipates the Ghost’s eventual description of Old Hamlet’s murder – a death tied vividly to the body-as-food. One of the distinguishing features of the above recipe for baked lamb involves a complete reconstitution of flesh cooked inside the pastry. Deboned, minced, mixed with spices and restored into the skin, the animal transformed into something else in what Appelbaum terms a ‘re-presentation of the dead’ (Appelbaum, 2006: 19). The processes by which this leg of lamb is transformed bear some similarity to Old Hamlet’s description of his death by poison, the effects of which are described in unequivocally culinary terms:

... with a sudden vigour it doth posset

And curd, like eager droppings into milk,

The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine;

And a most instant tetter barked about,

Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,

All my smooth body.

(1.5.66-73)

Old Hamlet's death takes the form of a physical transformation very similar to that found in the baked meats to which his son compares him three scenes earlier. Like the reconstituted leg of lamb in Dawson's cookbook, Old Hamlet's body is gruesomely transformed from the inside out: his blood curdles like a posset and his skin develops pastry-like crust. To Appelbaum, Old Hamlet's living flesh becomes, in essence, decaying food, akin to a mouldy cheese or a corrupt pie. Such a vividly-described transition from 'wholesome' living flesh and blood to 'loathsome crust' could conceivably be interpreted as a comment on the 'horrific objectification of killing and feeding [...] and the brutality of eating meat' (**Appelbaum, 2006: 26**). In this context, Marcellus' remark that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark' (1.4.67) picks up extra unsavoury significance, becoming a joke on 'carnality and decay' (**Appelbaum, 2006: 15**).

Old Hamlet's depiction of his own physical putrescence reflects more than simply common cooking practices, though. His language in the above passage brings far wider-reaching questions discourse related to bodily transformation directly into the realm of the culinary. As Peggy Reeves Sanday observes, 'Cannibalism is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for nongustatory messages' (**Sanday, 1986: 3**). In this case, as several critics have observed,ⁱⁱⁱ the symbolism of a body – specifically that of a king – transformed into food seems to resonate strongly with the traditional Catholic belief in transubstantiation and the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist. Mark Sweetnam, for example, proposes that based on Hamlet's preoccupation with remembering his 'poor father's body' (1.2.48), Old Hamlet becomes a symbolic Eucharist of sorts to his son (**Sweetnam, 2007: 16**). The young Prince is undoubtedly fixated on his father's body, and his recollection of the dead king is bound to palpable idiosyncrasies of, and tangible connection to, the dead king: during the course of the play he calls upon Old Hamlet's brow ('Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself'), his body and his 'grizzly' beard (3.4.55, 4.2.25-6, 1.2.249). Upon first meeting the Ghost, Hamlet instinctively draws on its corporeal aspects: 'thy canonized bones, hearsed in death, / [h]ave burst their cerements' (1.4.28-9), and although his reaction upon confronting the Ghost is one of suspicion and uncertainty as to whether he faces a 'spirit of health or a goblin damned' (1.4.21), his fear is supplanted by an immediate desire to 'call thee Hamlet, / King, father' (1.4.25-6). The prince's 'relentlessly fleshy commemoration' (**Sweetnam, 2007: 18**) of his father could thus be seen as presenting to post-Reformation London a nostalgic insurrection of Catholic imagery. Hamlet's reverence for his father's body is, Sweetnam suggests, akin to that of Catholicism for the 'incarnate Christ' (**Sweetnam, 2007: 14**) - and in this context the Ghost's final request that Hamlet '[r]emember me' (1.5.91) draws together

concepts of physical and spiritual remembrance by echoing Christ's command at the Last Supper: 'this do in remembrance of me' (**Luke 22.19**).

The corrupted flesh and blood of the dead king, though, is a far cry from the spiritual sustenance and restorative properties traditionally attached to the Catholic Eucharist. Instead, Shakespeare's depiction of a transubstantiated body (one endorsing the decidedly un-Christian act of bloody vengeance, no less) seems to present a vision of unholy consumption that, as Oldham argues, draws on the idea of 'eating and drinking the transubstantiated body and blood within the Eucharist' in order to situate the tragedy within 'a new subgenre of Christianized revenge tragedy' (**Oldham, 2015: 39**). Under these terms the circumstances of Old Hamlet's murder take on a new and subversive significance also. The fact that he died 'unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled' (**1.5.77**) - in a state of sin and without having received the last rites of the church - serves not only as an explanation of sorts for his ghostly return in keeping with the medieval Christian belief in Purgatory, but would have struck a nerve, Zysk writes, with a Christian audience 'for whom matters of death, final judgement, and salvation were bound up fundamentally with sacramental rituals' (**Zysk, 2017: 423**). By capitalising, therefore, on 'Reformation-era controversies over the sacraments', Shakespeare refigures them 'as part of a dark sacramental vision' (**Zysk, 2017: 424**) in which transubstantiation, bodily consumption, and sacramental ritual in a grotesque parody of papal doctrine.

And yet: even as *Hamlet's* anthropophagic allusions strike a chord with post-Reformation debate surrounding the sacraments by seeming to critique fleshly commemoration, Old Hamlet's concern with bodily transformation and objectification draws on a more palpable and everyday form of cannibalism: the problematic commodification and consumption of human flesh in contemporary medicine. The 'sacrilegious gastronomy' of corpse medicine in early modern Europe has been well documented (**Camporesi, 1989: 20**). Following the spread of Paracelsian medical theory which revered human bodily products as the superior cure for human ailments (**Schwyzler, 2007: 73**), there prevailed a commonly-held and officially-sanctioned belief in the curative powers of *mumia*. 'Mummy' was obtained from a variety of different sources ranging from 'embalmed Egyptian corpses' to 'relatively recent bodies of travellers, drowned by sandstorms' and – particularly as supplies of the aforementioned sources dried out – even from fresh corpses, 'usually those of executed felons, and ideally within about three days' (**Sugg, 2011: 15**). The most popular forms of *mumia* were sold in the form of ointments, scrapings or powder to be applied topically or sprinkled into food. As Michel de Montaigne relates matter-of-factly in his sixteenth-century essay *On Cannibals*, 'Physicians ... are not afraid to use a corpse in any way

that serves our health, and will apply it either internally or externally' (**de Montaigne, 1993: 114**). The faith placed in what Louise Noble terms 'medicinal cannibalism' appears to be constructed around the notion that by ingesting corpse materials, one gains the strength of the person consumed (**Noble, 2011: 3 and *passim***). Simply put, subscribers to corpse medicine sought to receive life from dead human flesh – a desire which echoes the transubstantiated holy sacraments of Catholic communion, and therefore seems ill-suited to a Protestant culture which, as Philip Schwyzer observes, 'recoiled phobically from the very aspects of medieval Christianity that might conceivably have allowed mummy-eating a comfortable niche' (**Schwzyzer, 2007: 71-2**). Despite this curious double-standard, the *taste* in Europe for 'human flesh, fat, blood or bone – usually drunk or topically applied' persisted well into the eighteenth century (**Sugg, 2006: 225**). The popularity of the practice of eating human remains, writes Walker, indicates that, whether Catholic or Protestant, 'early modern individuals believed in the body's enduring, resolutely distinctive and affective qualities' (**Walker, 2019: 219**).

This is not to suggest that mummy consumption went uncontested (although, as Sugg notes, overt attacks on the practice were few and far between before the eighteenth century). In 1585 the French royal surgeon Ambroise Paré lamented that Europeans were 'compelled both foolishly and cruelly to devour the mangled and putrid particles of the carcasses of the basest people of Egypt, or such as are hanged' (**Paré, 1585: 145**). Yet his abhorrence is only part of an evidently more complex attitude on Paré's part, as he reserves his most definite condemnation for opportunist substitutes rather than 'true mummy' (**Paré, 1585: 145**). Moreover, he declares, if *mumia's* efficacy as a pharmaceutical could be proved then its advocates 'might perhaps have some pretence, for this their more than barbarous inhumanity' (**Paré, 1585: 145**). Just as Montaigne's issue with *mumia* is related less to cannibalism and more to European hypocrisy, Paré's problem with corpse medicine is not that it involves consuming human matter, but that the consumption is the result of false advertising. He admits to having tried mummy 'an hundred times' without success, demonstrating if nothing else that his optimism frequently overcame his distaste (**Paré, 1585: 145**). In 1566, herbalist Leonhard Fuchs launched a less equivocal attack on the 'gory matter of cadavers...sold for medicine': 'who, unless he approves of cannibalism, would not loathe this remedy?' (**Cited in Sugg, 2008: 2079**). Fuchs, however, as proved by the vast demand for *mumia*, was very much in the minority – and even his vehement denunciation refers to mummy as a 'remedy,' suggesting some acceptance of its medical potency.

The use of pharmaceutical mummy increased over the early modern period despite the fact that the distinction between corpse medicine and cannibalism became ‘almost impossible to sustain’ (Noble, 2002). Within decades, the demand for long-buried corpses from the distant East far outstripped supply, and even ‘the corpses of executed criminals, beggars, lepers and plague-victims’ were not enough to satisfy the growing market (Sugg, 2006: 227). By the sixteenth century mummy was no longer dug up – it was manufactured. Below, Samuel Purchas (1617) describes the Ethiopian method of preparing *mumia*, and the processes involved read like a gruesome inversion of Dawson’s recipe for baked meats:

[T]hey take a captive Moore ... cut off his head in his sleep, and gashing his bodie full of wounds, put therein all the best spices ... after which they burie him in a moist place, covering the bodie with earth. Five days being passed, they take him up againe, and ... hang him up in the sunne, whereby the body resolveth and droppeth a substance like pure balme, which liquor is of great price (Purchas, 1613: 571).

The end product of the Ethiopian method is a ‘pure balme’ bearing little resemblance to its original human form. To the general population living a safe distance from its production, the reconstitution of man into medicine helped to make *mumia* acceptable.

We see as much in these entries in Thomas Blount's 1661 dictionary, the *Glossographia*:

Canibals. A barbarous kinde of people that eat mans flesh. (Blount, 1661: sig.H)

Mumie or Mummie (Lat. Mumia. Ital. Mummia) a thing like pitch ... good against all brusings, spitting of blood, and divers other diseases. [It is] digged out of the Graves, in Arabia and Syria, of those bodies that were embalmed. (Blount, 1661: sig.Dd)

While cannibals simply and explicitly ‘eat mans flesh’, *mumia* is tentatively described as a ‘thing like pitch’. Blount’s entry may reveal that this substance is dug out of graves, but *mumia* is never explicitly identified as the corpse itself, and the ambiguity is compounded by references to exotic - and therefore comfortingly abstract - areas of geographical origin. Nor does the language of consumption enter Blount's entry for ‘Mumie’: he chooses not to elaborate upon the methods of application or consumption, we know only that it is good for the health. To eat ‘mans flesh’, on the other hand, is ‘barbarous’. The degree of cognitive dissonance on display here is noteworthy: in practical terms, it seems obvious that consumption of corpse medicine and the act of cannibalism

are but two sides of the same grisly coin. The cautious wording of the *Glossographia*, though, pointedly divides the cure-all from the cannibal, and in doing so mirrors the manner in which the physical manufacture of corpse medicine would result in a product aesthetically unlike a recognisable human body. Via a careful process of transformation and defamiliarisation, *mumia* is ‘the human body reduced to an undifferentiated and formless mass’, stripped not only of life ‘but also of particularity and context’, unrecognisable as human flesh (**Schwyzler, 2007: 83**). The consumption thereof is thus aesthetically and palpably different to savage man-eating, and for early modern consumers, this appears to have been the vital distinguishing factor between the two.

This distinction was absolutely *vital* in the early modern home, a site ‘spacious enough to embrace the work of recycling corpses’ in a range of different forms (**Wall, 2002: 197**). Hamlet’s and the Ghost’s invocation of ‘funeral baked meats’ may not have struck many in Shakespeare’s audience as reminiscent of the Ethiopian medical preparation described above, but the connection both draw between food and corpse certainly echoes the ‘licensed bloodshed’ of contemporary housewifery (**Ibid.**). Although the growing corpse economy in Europe burgeoned so due to the demand of anatomists and apothecaries (**Sawday, 1995: 54-66**), the result of this macabre industry was that by the seventeenth-century in London it was ‘truly possible for a shopper to obtain a skull’ – and various other body parts, to boot – for use in medical recipes that ‘placed the human body imaginatively in proximity to death, carnality, and orality’ (**Wall, 2002: 197**). In the same domestic space in which one might have prepared a baked meat, one may have used the same implements to prepare and serve up home remedies which demanded dung, breast milk and human urine, among other such delights. Wall recounts a number of different recipes which count pounded human skull and fresh man’s blood in the same breath as other more familiar culinary staples (**Wall, 2002: 195-7**). To return to Old Hamlet’s self-identification as rotting meat and posset, then, his words invoke what Wall fittingly terms the ‘specter of death in the kitchen’ (**Wall, 2016: 177**), and irrevocably (and uncomfortably) demystify the mummy and associated substances taking up space in one’s own cupboards.

The Ghost’s invocation of food items when describing the effect of poison upon his body highlights the potency of the cannibalistic paradoxes observed by Noble, Wall, and Sugg. Here, the same kind of semantic distancing demonstrated in the clinical descriptions of *mumia* above seems to emphasise that Hamlet’s father is not the victim of *literal* consumption – he is instead food for thought, as it were. His language conveys the horrific manner of his death and the tragic objectification of his body as the king becomes ‘a thing ... Of nothing’ (**4.2.22-24**). Raymond

Rice states that in Shakespeare's works the consumption of human flesh represents 'the symbolic order's limit point' (Rice, 2004: 298). The language of *Hamlet* adheres to this 'limit point' by shifting the focus away from the violence of humans eating humans and onto consumption of more *conventional* food.

However, Shakespeare's purpose in invoking the discourse of medical cannibalism goes beyond, I argue, merely confronting his audience with the proverbial (and indeed literal) skeletons in their pantries. Given the position of corpse medicine as a culturally uncertain practice seen as 'both taboo and beneficial depending on the circumstances' (Noble, 2003: 687), corpse medicine is an apt motif in a revenge tragedy – a genre in which audiences are encouraged to sympathise with (if not outright condone) the protagonist's quest for personal justice even while the act of vengeful murder itself violates the most sacred of Christian tenets. Shakespeare, as Noble observes, drew 'frequently on such uneasy paradoxes' (Noble, *ibid.*). In this case, allusions to man-eating throughout the play correspond to Hamlet's evolving relationship to the moral corruption that permeates Elsinore. As he transitions from victim to willing participant in a violence and culture of bodily objectification that he initially abhors, so too is his distaste for the figurative consumption of his father supplanted by urges – hungers – rooted in cannibalistic discourse.

Hamlet's most explicit reference to corpse medicine occurs in his soliloquy following the performance of the Mousetrap, and in doing so represents a major turning-point in his character: 'Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the bitter day / Would quake to look on' (3.2.360-2). The 'could I' in this case would appear to situate this particular cannibalistic yearning within the realms of the figurative, and thus is often treated as signalling Hamlet's newfound desire for violent retribution. G.R. Hibbard, for example, cites Ben Jonson's *Cataline* (1.491-4) when he explains the *desire* to drink blood as 'an incitement to homicide' (Hibbard, 1987: 269 n.373). The ideas at play here, however, also signal, as Joan Fitzpatrick suggests, 'an escalation in Hamlet's attention to profane consumption' (Fitzpatrick, 2007: 110). Not only does the adjective 'hot' seem to relate to 'a lustful attitude and a grotesquely fresh victim', but the implied cause-and-effect of these lines rather gives the impression, Oldham writes, that Hamlet 'associates the drinking of hot blood with the ability to do the terrible deeds he is about to do' (Oldham, 2015: 46). Contemporary humoral theory was clear on the relationship between blood and violent impulses – a surplus of the former could lead directly to a tendency towards the latter. Indeed, bloodletting was regarded as the most direct therapy for excessive anger (Gail Kern Paster, 1993: 97). The inverse, however, was also considered to be true, and excessive aggression was well-known as a side-effect of consuming blood as a medical agent.

Blood, writes German Paracelsian chemist Johann Schroeder, drunk 'fresh and drunk hot is said to avail against the epilepsy' but 'requires great caution, because it brings ... a truculency' (**Schroeder, 1659: 48, cited in Sugg, 2011: 56**). The effects of blood-drinking, writes Sugg, 'were sufficiently well-known for onlookers to realise that patients (and perhaps especially men) could become extremely aggressive after swallowing a concentrated shot of human energy' (**ibid. 79**). Through the lens of medicinal cannibalism, then, Hamlet's reference to 'hot blood' takes on a new significance: on the one hand, the action of drinking hot blood could be read as a metaphor for his renewed call to vengeance, and the lengths to which he is willing to go. On the other hand, it reads as a theoretical plan of action: Hamlet imagines that the *effect* of drinking 'hot blood' will be to instil him with the vitality necessary to enact the 'bitter business' necessary for vengeance.

After this point, many of Hamlet's engagements with other characters *en route* to avenging his father's figurative consumption are coloured by recurring allusions to profane and cannibalistic bodily objectification. The unfortunate Polonius, for example, becomes meat from the moment that the prince murders him: Hamlet refers to his still-warm body as merely 'the guts' (**3.4.186**). His corpse is then hidden away and left to be revealed 'At supper', as Hamlet puts it, 'Not where he eats, but where he is eaten' by 'politic worms' (**4.3.18; 20**). Even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become apples in the corner of an ape's jaw, 'first mouthed to be last swallowed' (**4.2.16-17**). In the words of Hamlet, his two erstwhile friends are not consumed as humans, but as fruit by an animal, thus softening the idea of man-eating by filtering it through an image both non-human and vegetarian. Through this semantic shift, Shakespeare capitalises on fears of man-eating without foregrounding them. He thus creates an effect at once markedly cannibalistic and comfortably non-human in order to symbolise the inherent corruption of *Hamlet's* Denmark, and emphasise the severity of the 'limit points' which have been broken: the sins which have divided families and crumbled friendships. Nowhere are these corrupted relationships – and Hamlet's newfound willingness to objectify and consume – made more visually apparent than during Ophelia's funeral in Act 5. Here, Ophelia suffers an unwholesome posthumous return similar to that of Old Hamlet as the fate of her corpse mimics to some extent the culinary steps of a baked meat. In death, her body is physically altered through drowning (and 'water is a sore / decayer of your whoreson dead body,' the gravedigger reminds us (**5.1.158-9**)), and then buried. No sooner is she placed in her 'coffin', however, than she is disinterred by her grief-struck brother. Once she is placed on display, Hamlet and Laertes fight for their portion of the 'funeral baked meat' that is Ophelia's body.^{iv}

With Hamlet now a willing participant in the profane consumption riddled throughout Elsinore, Shakespeare seems determined to open his audience's eyes to their own engagement in forms of 'acceptable' cannibalism. In the very next scene after Hamlet's ape and apple simile, we observe the following exchange:

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 CLAUDIUS: 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.

(4.3.27-31)

In Hamlet's allegory, the beggar is twice removed from the scene of his cannibalistic crime. Firstly, by the fact that the worm which initially ate the king's body is the prime consumer, and a second time by the fish which ate the worm. In the same way that one would not necessarily be considered a cannibal for eating a king transformed into a baked meat, the beggar would seem to be the least culpable member of his chain of consumption. Unavoidably, though, the same steps which put distance between the beggar and the crime of eating man's flesh also connect him to it. Hamlet is fully aware of the link he creates between corpse and beggar via fish and worm (the same kind of 'politic worms', perhaps, which feast on poor Polonius **(4.3.21)**). The fact that the body of the king ends up in the form of a fish is suggestive of the manner in which *mumia*, is unidentifiable as human – an 'undifferentiated and formless mass' (**Schwyzler, 2007: 83**). And while the chain that Hamlet describes seems to hint at the 'shifting blame' that was, as Schwyzler notes, so pervasive in contemporary discussions about *mumia*, (**Schwyzler, 2007: 83**) and which put early modern medicine-takers at ease, Hamlet's conclusion is cuttingly free of ambiguity. When Claudius asks Hamlet to explain himself, the prince's answer is to remove the links which separate corpse from cuisine so as to evoke nothing less than pure cannibalism, in a manner which may have been most uncomfortable for his *mumia*-consuming audience: 'a king may go a progress / through the guts of a beggar'.

I will conclude by recalling Robert Stam's observation that the cannibal, in literature, so often symbolises something other than itself, serving as the 'name of the other', the ultimate marker of difference in a coded opposition of light / dark, rational / irrational, Protestant / Catholic, civilised / savage (**Stam, 1989: 125**). *Hamlet* is no exception to this pattern,

undoubtedly bringing to mind the kinds of unsanctioned anthropophagy that so intrigued, horrified, and excited Shakespeare's audience. However, Shakespeare's allusions to the act of cannibalism throughout this tragedy serve also to bring the 'other' into uncomfortably close proximity to the self, in a way which indicts damningly the hypocrisy of a society that distances itself from the cannibal bogeyman even as it defends the use of pharmaceutical products derived from dead bodies. There will never be what might be considered a 'definitive' reading of the complex symbolism of *Hamlet*, but if we wish to uncover what exactly is 'rotten in the state of Denmark', we may wish to start with the food.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Website: <https://writusandronicus.blog/>

ⁱⁱ Citations from the play are all from the Norton edition, conflating Q2 and FF: Shakespeare, W., 2008. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. In: Greeblatt, S., ed., *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies*. 2nd edn. New York: Norton, pp. 336-424; 1.2.175-80.

ⁱⁱⁱ See especially Sweetnam, M. S., 2007.

^{iv} Discussion of the thin line between gastronomic and sexual hunger throughout *Hamlet* lies outside of the scope of this essay, but for different takes on Hamlet's relationship with female flesh, see: Adelman, J., 1992. *Man and His Wife is One Flesh: Hamlet and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body*. In: Adelman, J., *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"*. New York: Routledge, pp. 11-37., arguing that Shakespeare sees female sexuality as giving birth to tragedy itself; Freud, S., Strachey, J., ed. and trans., 1953-74. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols*. London: Hogarth Press. 14:239-58, for the original analysis of Hamlet's Oedipal desires.