Unearthing *Hamlet's* Fool: A Metatheatrical Excavation of Yorick

Margie Pignataro
Texas Tech University

One would expect to see the Clown role in *Hamlet* go to a court jester; but in Elsinore, the king's jester, Yorick, is dead. Shakespeare's chosen Clown, the gravedigger, unearths his bones. *Hamlet* interprets humor and its relation to clowning, foolishness and madness. Lacking a formal Jester, the role passes figuratively through other characters, at different times and for different reasons. What those reasons are, who the new assumed fools are, and what it means to the play historically and creatively, I will explore later.

But back to our Gravedigger. The resident actor hired to play clown roles would have played the role. At the time of the production of *Hamlet* in 1604, that actor was Robert Armin. Armin had just joined the Chamberlain's men in their new home at the Globe Playhouse. In 1600, the company had lost their resident clown and partial future shareholder in the Globe, Will Kemp. The reasons for his leaving the company at such a profitable and auspicious time are particularly unknown. In a pamphlet Kemp published at the time, he offers juicy hints as to why he "danced his way out of the world" of the Globe, but does not offer specifics.[1] What is obvious and important is that Kemp's departure was not for positive reasons. Leaving the new Globe was a bad business decision. The reason for his going must have been great and serious to give up such a lucrative investment.

The change in actors which occurred led to a change in the types of Clowns Shaksepeare created. There is an obvious difference between Kemp's Clowns and Armin's Fools. The men were two different types of actors, with different comedic styles and strengths, and Shakespeare shaped their roles accordingly.

Shakespeare was a writer of sources and metatheatre in his plays. He made references to contemporary events and personages, as well as his theatre and actors. Overwhelming evidence throughout the plays demonstrates that Shakespeare was very aware

of metatheatrical devices and deliberately created dizzying labyrinths in his layered plays within layered plays.

This brings us back to the Gravedigger. His scene is highly unusual: a clown unearths the bones of a jester. The dead Yorick symbolizes the loss of humor, gaiety, and merriment in Elsinore. Could he represent something else? Robert Armin plays the living Gravedigger. Through an analysis of the history and lives of Armin and Kemp, as well as through deconstructing several of Shakespeare's plays, I will argue that Yorick is Kemp; if Yorick were alive in the play, it would be a role crafted for Kemp's talents. With Yorick, Shakespeare is making statements to his former clown. *Hamlet* as a whole is a battleground between Shakespeare and Kemp as the playwright explores humor in new ways, celebrates Robert Armin, attacks Kemp, and exercises power as a writer in obvious, metatheatrical ways.

Will Kemp

Before approaching the text of *Hamlet*, it is important to explore the history of Armin and Kemp. David Wiles's *Shakespeare's Clowns* is a definitive historical exploration of Kemp and Armin; it is from this work that I primarily take my historical information.

Kemp, more than anything, was a physical comedian. His specialty was the Morris dance, involving much leaping and athletic prowess.[2] Kemp's act also included music and playing instruments; the essence of his talent was in "nonverbal performance skill."[3] His reported physical unattractiveness relegated Kemp to the role of clown. Kemp had a "fund of humor, plenty of egotism, and an unfortunate temper…[;] his contemporary fame was great."[4] He and Burbage were widely considered the epitome of comedy and tragedy, respectively, of the day.[5]

Kemp was very much a part of the culture of the common man; he was not a gentleman, nor had he aspirations to be, having rejected all pretension and embraced what he referred to as "honesty."[6] Being in a culture where title and heritage were power, Kemp embraced the opposite, which became essential to his comedy and the characters Shakespeare later constructed for him.

When Kemp joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594, his performance history up to then had been only as a solo performer. He had traveled with the Leicester's Players, but wasn't integrated into their troupe. Working with Shakespeare and his fellow actors began Kemp's theatrical career and was the only time in his life when he had to share spotlight, work submerged in a group, and enjoy economic stability.[7] Kemp's presence in the company during

the years 1594-1599 landed him roles in *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, among others. Through examination of *Titus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, I will construct typical Kemp character.[8]

Titus Andronicus was Shakespeare's first attempt at tragedy. For that we applaud Shakespeare's intrepid attempt, though while watching the play we shake our heads in artistic horror. Most horrifying is the play's clown that, Wiles most rightly assumes, was a part inserted specifically to provide Kemp a role.[9] The clown scenes can be extracted without harming or interfering with the plot.

The clown in *Titus* shows an important characteristic indicative of Kemp's characters in Shakespeare's plays: how easily his roles can be removed or how unintegrated they are into the main action of the play. In later plays, though, such as *Much Ado* and *Midsummer*, we see Kemp's characters (Dogberry and Bottom, respectively) as more important and valuable to the action of the play. Yet the characters are always on the periphery and enter the main action only when absolutely necessary. This is also characteristic of Kemp himself: a man who spent most of his life as a solo artist, a comedian who worked best, and by the pattern of his behavior, preferred to work alone.

The short clown scenes in *Titus* involve the clown carrying a basket containing two pigeons (4.3.77; 4.4.43); reading these scenes makes it difficult to understand their purpose, let alone their humor. Also a key characteristic of Kemp's characters, the humor in the play does not necessarily read to a modern audience, or does not exist. In his old but still relevant study, *Memoirs of the Principle Actors*, Collier recognizes the absence of humor in Kemp's characters: "Kemp. . . was in the habit of extemporizing, and introducing matter of his own, which he apprehended would improve his part and be acceptable to his hearers."[10] This extemporizing technique was taught to Kemp by his teacher and former comic master, Tarleton. Richard Brome, a playwright contemporary to Shakespeare, alludes to this practice of Kemp's in his comedy *Antipodes*: "in the days of Tarleton and Kemp/Before the stage was purged of this barbarism."[11] The technique was, in fact, the old school comedy of Elizabethan theatre. The method is very similar to today's improv, which Kemp had mastered. We can assume that Shakespeare's early works were written in an attempt to allow Kemp opportunity to make the most of his talent. The clown in *Titus* is open to interpretation; in fact, it requires interpretation if it is going to be at all funny. Later in Shakespeare's

works, we find movement away from this form of open writing; as Shakespeare developed as a writer and took more control of the clown characters in his plays, the fewer the roles he wrote for Kemp's type, leading to the conflict believed to have caused Kemp's eventual abandonment of the Globe.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, stage directions for act 4, scene 5 in the second quarto say, "Enter Will Kemp," Kemp enacting the role of Peter. It is interesting metatheatrically that the text of the script has Will Kemp by name rather than his character, which implies that Kemp as an actor superimposes himself onto the role, the role less important than Kemp himself. Kemp's entrance will be important to the audience because of expectations of a certain kind of comedy that will supercede the text.

Peter has a slightly more important role in regard to the plot in his first scene, though his importance lessens in his second and third scenes. His illiteracy functions as a plot device that serves to inform Romeo and Mercutio about the Capulet ball. Illiteracy, or an inability to use language effectively, such as the use of malapropisms, is a major feature of Kemp's characters. As a performer, Kemp himself did not rely on language as a component of his humor. Though he eventually became a published author of pamphlets about his jigs and travels, he was at heart a physical/musical comedian. Language was not his specialty.

Kemp was not a stupid man, but Skakespeare must have recognized that Kemp did not match his own specialty with language. The humor in the roles that follow *Romeo and Juliet* become increasingly based in ignorance or stupidity. Kemp's characters are funny without meaning to be funny, as their more educated audience recognizes their ignorance and finds them absurd. After several plays this mode reads increasingly more humiliating and insulting.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, we also see the faint beginnings of a style of character for Kemp that worked well for Shakespeare and his development: leader of a band of Rude Mechanicals. In Peter's interaction with the nurse, we see him winning laughs at her expense. Though she is a much more interesting character than Peter, we see the beginnings of this split class group; the group is related to, but not fully integrated into the main action of the play. We see how these servants can interact with one another or main plot characters and be a continual humorous respite from the more serious plot. But, essentially, Kemp as leader is still a figure of isolation from the main action: a rogue independent who leads, but does not belong to, a group. The group becomes a symbol of Kemp himself: the different clowns acting as independent petals

to the same central flower. The humor is more based in dialogue, the pacing more modern in its fast speed; laughs come through the language rather than leaving moments completely open to the skilled, physical clown. Though Kemp's characters routinely have more physical comedic moments, Shakespeare stages the moments himself. During this era, Shakespeare enlarges his skills and tightens his grip on his clown, restricting his artistic freedom.

Some disagreement surrounds Robert Armin's point of entrance into the Chamberlain's Men, replacing Kemp. By 1600 the company was in the new Globe, and it is believed their first play to open the theatre was *Julius Caesar*. No clown is listed among the characters, nor, as the text continues, does a clown personality similar to Kemp or Armin reveal himself. Yet this does not mean that either of the men performed in the play; it simply means a role was not written for either of their particular talents. If Kemp never acted upon the Globe stage, it is probable that Shakespeare did not include a clown in *Caesar*, knowing he wouldn't have a clown or be able to find a replacement.

In 1599, Kemp withdrew from the Chamberlain's Men and most likely never performed on the new Globe stage. After leaving the company, Kemp went on an epic Morris Dance from London to Norwich, and then continued his dancing in Europe over the Alps. After this, Kemp returned to London and worked with Worcester's Men, whose brand of comedy was more in tune with Kemp's style.[12] He published a pamphlet about his dancing adventures to Norwich, called "Kemp's Nine Days Wonder." In it, he complains of slanders written against him; his prime slanderer is "a jig-maker," the leading suspect an actor working at a playhouse on the Bankside, and Kemp refers to his enemies as "Shakerags."[13] There is little debate that the culprits attacking Kemp were Shakespeare and the Lord Chamberlain's Men, housed in the Globe on the Bankside.

Hamlet is Shakespeare's written response to "Kemp's Nine Days Wonder." At times, *Hamlet* becomes a noisy war between Clown and Poet, Shakespeare using the play as a sometimes-pulpit both to attack Kemp and to defend himself. But before launching into *Hamlet* and excavating the gravedigger scene, it is necessary to look at Kemp's successor in the Lord Chamberlain's Men: Robert Armin.

Robert Armin

Armin was "small in stature, ugly, highly intelligent, combining the physique of a 'natural' fool or clown with the mental agility of a professional wit."[14] He was a contradiction: the mind of Burbage

(or close to Shakespeare himself) in the body of Kemp. His physical appearance could not allow him to play a tragedian or a serious lead, such as Burbage enjoyed; yet he had a mind able to comprehend the complexities of a character such as Hamlet.

Armin could be considered more of an intellectual peer to Shakespeare than Kemp. Educated in Latin and Italian, Armin began life apprenticing a goldsmith, during which time he wrote ballads.[15] Armin went on to become a more published writer than Kemp, as well as a playwright. Wiles says Armin's skills as a performer lay in singing (not dancing), "mime and mimicry," skills which could easily be adapted to a theatre based in satire and the mimesis of manners. Because he set himself up as a writer, Armin did not perceive any necessary tension between the purposes of the dramatist and the purposes of the actor/clown. As a mimic and an intellectual, Armin never projected the clown persona "of the common Englishman."[16]

Armin was completely opposite Kemp in personality and type. In most of his roles, as we shall see, he embodied a "singing or court fool" in contrast to the "knockabout clown in Kemp's tradition."[17] His characters were men whose foolishness was ambiguous: "the congenital moron" versus "the artful jester."[18] Is an Armin character really an idiot, or someone so much more intelligent that he can pretend lunacy, thereby making us, the audience, the true fool for believing him? This type of Fool we see not only in Shakespeare's works, but Armin's own; in his own play *Two Maids of More-Clacke*, written presumably as a vehicle for his talents, Armin played an idiot clown named Tutch, featuring Tutch disguised as Blue John and Tutch disguised as a Welshman.[19] This is direct evidence of the actor understanding and capitalizing, even defining, his own type. Armin understood his skills and created this wondrous metamorphical tribute. These transformative, metatheatrical skills we don't see in Kemp; Kemp never played anything so complex. But we do see Shakespeare writing very similar roles for Armin himself.

The first logical, yet still debated, role written specifically for Armin is Touchstone in *As You Like It*. Touchstone "puzzles commentators because his occasional shrewdness and his professional skills, which contrast largely in putting up a dazzling façade of pseudo-intellectual scholarship, seem to contradict his simplicity.[20] Unlike Dogberry's unintentional humor, Touchstone "intends to be [comical]."[21] The roughness of the role and the sometimes blending of traits between a Kemp character and Armin's characters read as indications of a playwright struggling

to understand and fit a role to a new actor's type.[22] Prior to Armin's joining the company, Shakespeare must have seen him perform. Possibly Shakespeare had read his published writings. Most likely he discovered within Armin the provocative contradictions of his intelligence and physicality. Touchstone blends old school clowning of ignorance as comedy with the new intellectual humor of Armin, perhaps also as a test to see how an audience would react.

The role of Touchstone is enormous; no other clown role previously, save Dogberry or Bottom, is so large, plot enveloped, and memorable. The humor is funny because it is language based; Touchstone is clever, wise, and charming. A contemporary audience would find him humorous. Touchstone is not cuttable. Touchstone is an embodiment of contradiction; characters constantly regard him in awe of his wisdom that is seemingly opposite his nature and appearance. This contradiction becomes the embodiment of Shakespeare's increasingly complex characters, a theme or idea that Armin himself embodies.

Touchstone continually one-ups other characters with his wit; he can match puns with Rosalind and Celia. For the first time we have clowns that not only interact more with main characters, but challenge main characters. This is an Armin characteristic that continues to emerge; his clowns butt heads with the leads and match or surpass their wit. The lack of intellectual understanding of language and society in Dogberry or Bottom distances him from others, as well as adding a degree of arrogance and obsession with power. Touchstone's ability to match wits joins him with characters. His intelligence does not isolate him; it creates successful communication and comradery.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shaksepeare has discovered Armin. And the discovery is unabashedly and quite self-consciously an orgiastic celebration of his new Fool. We see a number of themes begin in *Twelfth Night* that recur throughout Armin's roles. With the previous breadth of Touchstone, now in Feste, the Fool is fully integrated into the plot, frequently interacting with main characters. He is an intimate of Olivia, and a major player in the practical joke practiced on Malvolio. Feste is everywhere. He is licensed in his ability and willingness to go everywhere, talk to everyone—Olivia, Viola, the Duke; he has interaction with everyone. At times, the interaction becomes a bit self-indulgent, as if the scenes exist primarily to give Feste stage time. This omnipresence of foolishness we will see thematically throughout *Hamlet*.

Olivia points out to Feste, "Now you see, Sir, how your fooling grows old and people dislike it?"[23] This theme of irritation and

endearment recurs in Armin's characters; Feste is both obnoxious and touching, funny and cruel. His nature is a contradiction. We'll see these same qualities in Lear's Fool. The things Feste says are biting, unpleasant, truthful, and serious; and he is a necessary member of the intimate circle of main characters. He may not always be likeable, but he is gentle. He may be cruel, but he can be sympathetic. As he works to crush one character (Malvolio), he nurtures another (Olivia). With his dry wit and intelligence, he shows up the absurdity in others. The joke on Malvolio is like a joke on a Kemp-like character: Malvolio, who does not realize he is funny, is tormented by others more intelligent and socially sophisticated than he, who recognize his absurdity and make him seem more absurd. The practical joke on Malvolio is a metatheatrical precursor to the Kemp reference in *Hamlet*'s gravedigger scene.

Feste's first scene in act 1, scene 5 deftly surpasses any comedy in *As You Like It.* It is a definite evolution of the witty, language-based Fool. The dialogue crackles with new, inventive humor, and Shakespeare the playwright seems more comfortable with this wit. It is a profitable avenue for the writer, as his specialty is language and intelligence. A startling and exciting difference separates Touchstone and Feste from all the clown roles preceding them. Feste truly begins a Golden Age of Fools, with roles that offer much more complex characters and more modern psychological constructions, as well as melding seamlessly into the upcoming Golden Age of Tragedy for Burbage.

Feste's proof of Olivia as a fool in this first scene is not only a work of comic genius; it is the genesis scene for *Hamlet.* In this scene we see major elements of *Hamlet*: a major character in mourning, another character attempting to encourage this character out of mourning. Feste becomes the proto-gravedigger: a clown who outwits the lead wit. Yet Feste does it gently, softly, in a way that does not hurt the already pained Olivia, but lightens her black mood.

The largest joy of *Twelfth Night* is Feste's role in the joke on Malvolio, when Feste pretends to be the Curate in act 4, scene 2—this is the climax of Armin's abilities. Frankly, the appearance of this scene in the canon of Shakespeare's works thus far is stunning. Armin must carry this scene alone, speaking to Malvolio locked in his closet, playing both Feste and Sir Topas; it is not only a fabulous comic moment and hilarious to read, but Armin has the opportunity to sing, revolving between characters and using his voice to create them. This scene could not have been written for anyone except

Armin and his specific talents. Though we don't know the exact reason for Armin's eventual retirement from the company, we do know he left the same year Shakespeare did: we can conjecture the actor saw remaining pointless, having lost a writer who truly celebrated and exploited his talents.

Hamlet

Hamlet as a text comes in context with Kemp's published attack of Shakespeare and the Chamberlain's Men. It is also in the personal context of the company that has lost a major member and former shareholder, resulting in the integration of someone new—which can be as startling and shocking to a theatre company as suffering the loss of a known member. Regardless of whether or not the parting of ways was to everyone's benefit, it was still difficult. Dust of such an upset will have begun to settle by the time *Hamlet* is produced. Armin's success in the company will have restored lost faith, alleviated fears, and soothed feelings. I think it is safe to say that with the creation of Feste, Shakespeare has found his new clown to be a true celebration. But, despite all this, resentment will still exist—on Kemp's side, we are sure—as well as personal confusion.

Hamlet is set in Elsinore. During the early part of his career, Kemp toured Elsinore as a solo performer.[24] If there is influence here, it is more unconscious; *Hamlet* was a common story at the time and multiple Hamlet's were being done throughout the Elizabethan era. But on some level, there must have been some association between Elsinore and Kemp. And where there is Kemp, there are feelings of betrayal, distrust, loss, and pain—all vivid themes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

Hamlet's speech to the players in act 3, scene 2 is one of the most autobiographically inspired speeches in all of Shakespeare's works. Harold Jenkins, editor of the Arden edition of *Hamlet*, credits it as reflecting "Shakespeare's own concern" with playacting.[25] With two interruptions by the First Player, the lecture runs forty-five prose lines at the beginning of 3.2. Yet a serious question demands answering: Why do we have this speech? Why is it present at all in the scene? The scene can play quite well without it; in fact the pacing moves more swiftly without it. Yes, it gains an opportunity to develop Hamlet's "uncompromising" standards, as Jenkins puts it, but is it really necessary?[26] If we can assume that the speech is a revelation of Shakespeare's own true feelings of acting, staging, and actors, it opens the door to metatheatrical speculation as to the motives of its presence: why does Shakespeare the playwright need to discuss these things?

The speech seems to come from anger, frustration; Hamlet instructs according to his negative observations of players' acting habits. Most interestingly, Hamlet—who we know has constructed the text of "The Mousetrap"—ends his diatribe with instructions for clowns, yet there are no clown scenes in "The Mousetrap":

> And let those that play your clowns speak no more than it set down for them—for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the meantime some necessary question of the play be then to considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (3.2.38-45)

Yet these lines seem the peak of Hamlet's anger. Critics abound with the opinion that these are directed at Kemp himself and reflect Shakespeare's artistic causes of disagreement with the actor. If so, Shakespeare is deliberately and blatantly attacking Kemp. To do so requires incredible anger in the dramatist. The seeds of this anger bloom into flowers that grow all over *Hamlet* like weeds; the comedy grows twisted and black, forming a new comedy unseen in his prior work. Most important, the writer is asserting his power over all his actors and company.

Much clowning or Foolishness occurs in *Hamlet*, but it is a Foolishness linked closely with the ambiguity Armin himself embodied: the intellect behind the clownish appearance; the brilliant actor who possibly could have been a tragedian like Burbage, if not for his physical nature. It is easy to resolve Kemp as a clown because of his lack of intellect and education. Armin wasn't so easy to resolve. Armin's birth displaces him: he is a person thrust into an idiot role by circumstances he has no control over. Allowing Armin to influence himself thematically is more of the same kind of celebration of Armin we witnessed in *Twelfth Night*. As Shakespeare is intellectually titillated by Armin, he simultaneously affronts and devalues Kemp.

Twisted and complex comedy vividly flowers in *Hamlet* and appears in many scenes and characters. It begins with Hamlet's opening line: "A little more than kin and less than kind"—both a funny line and a tragic line, the line of a clown and the line of a hero. It is the line of a brilliant mind and the line of a smart-ass, a pun that deserves at least a smile and a lament that deserves at least a frown. It leaves the audience in a position of ambiguity and confusion, thinking and feeling contradictory thoughts and emotions. In this way, it thematically mirrors the opening line of the play, Barnardo's "Who's there?" The audience doesn't know what is going on.

Hamlet's response to Claudius's question, "How is it the clouds still hang on you?" is comic: "Not so, my lord, I am too much i'th' sun" (1.2.66-67). The punning continues, and even in Franco Zefferelli's film, the line elicits a laugh from Gertrude.

The conversation loses its comic tone, but these two lines are excessively important. The comedy is at heart ambiguity; it is both humorous and serious. The bitterness and anger behind the puns, the source of the jokes, is the heart of the tragedy. The punning is the soul of Hamlet's character: a prince displaced by events emotionally, socially, and psychically. The prince who should be king, who, in this opening scene, should be on the throne instead of Claudius, has been reduced and is introduced to us as the Court of Denmark's Fool.

Hamlet's madness is nothing if not funny. His scene with Polonius in act 2, scene 2 is hilarious as he continually renders the official adviser to the king and queen absurd. During "The Mousetrap," however, Hamlet's Fool role is at its strongest. Wiles recognizes the great significance in theatre history and the history of playwriting, when "Burbage united within Hamlet the figures of Clown and tragic hero."[27] As much as I personally credit Burbage with aiding Shakespeare with the psychological construction of Hamlet by providing himself as the actor Type for whom the role is written, Armin must be given credit as an influence as well, due to the humor's extremely contradictory, dark nature.

In Hamlet, we see an intelligent, language-based, brilliant Foolishness that is extremely akin to Armin's type. Hamlet's punning and jokes are too advanced for Kemp humor. Burbage, we must grant, was an actor of a caliber who could master these moments and complexities of character; Shakespeare created the role for Burbage knowing full well Burbage could handle it. During "The Mousetrap," Hamlet becomes an insulting, groundling-like, bawdy clown with his crude sexual jokes to Ophelia, interrupting the players with comments and singing like a court jester. Throughout, the ambiguity of the character compels us: Is Hamlet mad or is he pretending? Has he lost his wits while pretending to have lost his wits, or has he more wits than all of us combined?

Most startlingly and poignantly, we see Foolishness bleed into Ophelia. Hamlet is the first character in the play to sing; Ophelia is the second. Ophelia's mad scene is one of Shakespeare's most brilliant and inventive integrations of song into dramatic action, as well as a tragedy. Though this scene evokes great pity and horror,

it involves an undeniable and necessary element of comedy. Ophelia sings two bawdy songs. The first is the "St. Valentine's Day Song," which tells the story of a girl who is abandoned by her lover after surrendering to him sexually. Moments of this scene can be, and are intended to be, funny.[28] When Ophelia sings bawdy lyrics, it is meant to provoke laughter from the audience. In fact, it is best to give such comic moments to the audience to relieve tension and provide contrast to the horror. She becomes, therefore, another example of an oddly created Fool—humor resides in a character where it should not; Ophelia, a girl who should not be made into a Fool, who should not lose her wits, who should be the Queen of Denmark, suddenly is singing before the Court of Denmark: Gertrude and Claudius.

Her other song, I argue, is a direct reference to Robert Armin. Only one line from the song is heard in the scene: "For Bonny Sweet Robin is all my joy" (4.5.184). The line comes from a very popular song of Shakespeare's time, a song the audience would have known; it appears in some referential form in more than thirty manuscripts of the time.[29] We do not know what reference this line would have created for the original Elizabethan audience, as the song as a whole does not exist. But we can speculate. In the sixteenth century, the name "Robin" was a common term for a penis.[30] It is provocative that of all the lines Shakespeare could have selected for this moment, of all the bawdy songs, he chose one mentioning the name Robin.

Armin's first name was Robert, but he is repeatedly referred to by others in texts of the time as Robin Armin. Wiles cites *Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, a 1606 play in the King's Men's repertoire, that Armin's character being named Robin is a direct reference to Armin himself.[31] John Davies, in his "Scourge of Folly," wrote a long epigram to "Robin Armin" praising his wit.[32] Armin also refers to another nickname of his, "Pink," in a 1604 tract he authored; the name "Pink" could be a referential name to Robin—in the same way that a contemporary of his, author Robert Toffe, had the nickname "Robin Redbreast."[33] Robert Armin could have been nicknamed "Robin Pink" or "Pink Robin."

Ophelia singing "Bonny Sweet Robin" is a comic moment due to its bawdiness, but also carries with it the added metatheatrical reference, which, coupled with Ophelia being in a Foolish moment of singing before the Court, would have been additionally funny. The line becomes one of praise to Armin, for Armin, at that point, was Shakespeare's joy.

The Gravedigger Scene

Now for the grave scene. The scene (5.1) opens with dialogue between two diggers: the gravedigger and another man. The stage directions refer to both as clowns. Armin would have been the Gravedigger—the Other most likely a protégé or budding actor, a boy who formerly played women, now graduating into male roles with the potential for being a clown. The Other is the straightman; the Gravedigger has all the jokes. Their conversation is the macabre subject of whether or not Ophelia deserves a Christian burial. The Gravedigger has a Kemp attribute: a few malapropisms. But in comparison to, say, Dogberry, the Gravedigger is an intelligent, though uneducated, man. He is deliberately funny and reasons wittily; his mistaken words are funnier when compared to his clever thinking. This scene also establishes a contrast for Hamlet; the Gravedigger does not have Hamlet's Wittenburg education, but he is very intelligent.

This initial scene between the two diggers is cuttable; once Hamlet enters, it is not. The second clown exits and the Gravedigger continues digging Ophelia's grave and singing. On the Globe stage, the physical grave would have been the trap downstage. For Armin to be digging the grave and able to toss out bones, he must be in the trap. The depth of the trap is not known, but it doesn't matter too much: Armin was short, and being short and in the trap, no matter what its depth, there wasn't much of Armin for the audience to see. Those audience members in the balconies could have seen Armin well, but the groundlings and anyone sitting on the ground would have seen, most likely, only his head. Armin holds the stage alone for a few moments, singing as he digs, before Hamlet and Horatio enter. Without much of his body visible, Armin must maintain the audience's attention with just his voice on a primarily empty stage. To allow Armin this moment is a testament to his singing abilities.

The beginning of the song is worthy of fully reprinting here in order to see exactly what Shakespeare is doing:

> In youth when I did love, did love,
> Me thought it was very sweet
> To contract—O—the time for—a—my behove,
> O, methought there—a—was nothing—a—meet. (5.1.61-64)

The song in its last two lines is purposely broken, with O's and A's added to account for the physical actions of the Gravedigger digging, taking breaths, and attempting to remember his song. Shakespeare does not allow for extemporaneous comedy; in fact,

this entire scene is written in such a way that Kemp-like extemporaneous comedy is not only inappropriate, it is not allowed. Shakespeare has this moment under complete control. This cannot be stressed too much: rather than allowing his clown to make his own decisions with the song, Shakespeare did it for him. This is the work of a playwright keeping tight control over his singing clown. These are embedded stage directions for the actor. Taken in the context of Hamlet's speech to the players, these lines read as the work of a paranoid artist, or a playwright who has learned how to exercise power in a way he hadn't before—and is now enjoying.

The Gravedigger is Hamlet's intellectual match. The exchange between the Gravedigger and Hamlet is uncuttable banter and one of the most provocative pieces of dark comedy ever written. Representative of death, the Gravedigger will always play the higher wit to Hamlet, as death triumphs over all, intellectually, comedically, physically. But it is metatheatrically something more: it is a moment when Armin shines over Burbage, when the laughs go to the clown over the Tragedian, when Armin takes the focus. Burbage may be the lead, but Armin can take the attention through his wits. Armin is as powerful as Burbage is. This headbutting of Armin and Burbage, the exchange of Fool and Tragedian, appears again in *King Lear*, where Armin's Fool is more powerful, intelligent, and present than the Gravedigger ever could be. Shakespeare is letting Armin have the upper hand, just as he let Feste rule *Twelfth Night*. This is a moment Shakespeare would never have given Kemp, but which Kemp would have attempted to seize.

It is through the gravedigger that we first meet Yorick. The Gravedigger makes the dead Fool a guessing game for Hamlet: Guess whose skull this is? A face and identity anyone would know, but who is now unrecognizable and therefore erased? The clues Hamlet receives are that it was "a whoreson mad fellow," whom the Gravedigger then curses: "A pestilence on him for a mad rogue." The relationship he shared with Yorick was not positive, but contained animosity. The Gravedigger was the butt of Yorick's physical jokes: "A poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once" (.1.174-175), physical comedy indicative of Kemp.

We see more of Kemp in Yorick through Hamlet's description of him: "A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (5.1.178-179). This is flattering and gives due credit. "He hath borne me on his back a thousand times" (5.1.179-180) describes not only a gesture of childish play, but also Yorick as an object of support, a

figure present through Hamlet's youth. Like a dream symbol, Yorick carries Shakespeare through his early childhood works.

The next lines are provocative considering Kemp's absence and career path: "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, 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 chop fallen?" (183-186). The gibes and gambols are Kempian humor; "merriment" is a quality frequently associated with Kemp. Kemp is now dead to Shakespeare. The humor is what is emphasized as the loss. Hamlet mocks the skull with puns of its own decay. The horror is great and so overwhelming that it becomes funny. It is a moment flowered with everyone: Shakespeare, Burbage, Kemp, Armin, the Globe, all of London.

Wiles grants this moment a metatheatrical bow to Tarleton—the great comic teacher of both Kemp and Armin—and sees it as a symbolic breaking away from the older style of comedy.[34] But he forgets a very important point: this would be true if Armin had written *Hamlet*. Shakespeare did, and Shakespeare has no motive to bid farewell to Tarleton; but he does have much to say to the recently decamped Kemp. The identity of the skull isn't Tarleton, but Kemp.

What follows this scene is Hamlet's acceptance of his fate and eventual death. Little comedy follows. There is no more anger, only resolution. It is time for the play to end.

Conclusion

Actors, in professional skills and personality, are inspirational; they are source material as important and creditworthy as Holinshed and Ovid and can still be as rich a source today for any playwright. It is my hope that in this small way, I've not acted as a sixteenth century gossip, but demonstrated the power of Kemp and Armin. For better or worse, the Bard found them interesting enough to hold the attention of hundreds of paying customers.

Notes

1. Agnes Latham, ed., introduction to *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare (London: Thomas Learning, 2005), lii.

2. David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 24.

3. Wiles, 33.

4. Helen Ormsbee, *Backstage with Actors: From the Time of Shakespeare to the Present Day* (New York: Benjamin Blom: 1969), 40.

5. Wiles, 34.

6. Wiles, 24.

7. Wiles, 33-34.

8. Though I establish character "types" in Shakespeare's plays for both Kemp and Armin, these are by no means rigid rules. Occasionally, there is a "regression" of sorts and Shakespeare falls back on old Clown patterns. For example, the Clown in *Othello* is structurally more Kempian than Arminian.

9. Wiles, 34.

10. J. Payne Collier, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Shakespeare Society, 1846), 97.

11. Collier, 99.

12. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 182-83.

13. Wiles, 25.

14. R. A. Foakes, ed., *King Lear* by William Shakespeare (London: Thomas Learning, 2000), xxi.

15. Wiles, 19.

16. Wiles, 136.

17. Gurr, 185.

18. Wiles, 140.

19. Latham, liv.

20. Latham, li.

21. Latham, lii.

22. Latham, liv.

23. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), (1.5.107-108). In-text citations to this play are from this text.

24. Kate Emery Pogue, *Shakespeare's Friends* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), 117.

25. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins (London: Thomas Learning, 1982) 498. In-text citations to this play are from this text.

26. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 498.

27. Wiles, 59.

28. Peter J. Seng, *The Vocal Songs in the Plays of Shakespeare: A Critical History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1967), 144.

29. Seng, 154.

30. Seng, 151.

31. Wiles, 151.

32. Collier, 199.

33. Collier, *Memoirs*, 195.

34. Wiles, 151.