

Susan Michalski

English 3

12 January 2009

Memento Mori



To be obsessed with mortality or not to be, is not in question at all in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Indeed, Hamlet, like a rejected lover who carries photographs and letters of the woman who scorns him, obsesses over a mistress who will leave him in the dust, the lady Death. From the start of the play, Hamlet aches from his father's death and his need to avenge it. His own death also looms large in his mind as he copes with his inability to act and later the consequences of his foolish actions. Without a doubt, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* revolves around the Latin concept of *memento*

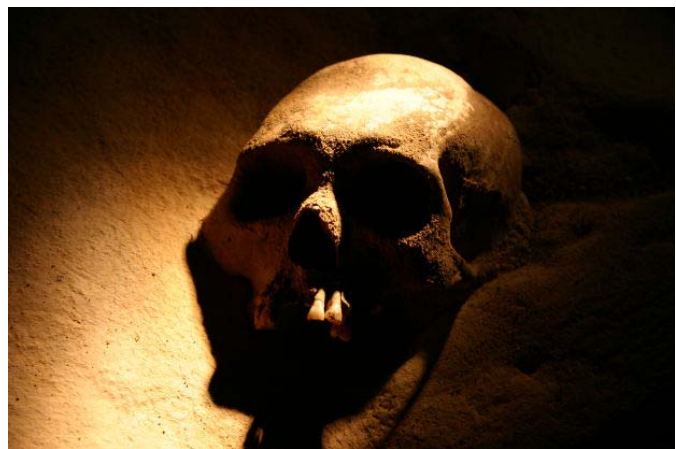
mori, or the remembrance of mortality, which is seen in the symbols and events of the play, as well as the motivations of the main character.

Memento Mori reminds Hamlet that though he lives, he and all others are merely mortal. To begin, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *memento mori* as a Latin term, which translated literally means "remember that you have to die." *Memento mori* therefore warns or a reminds people of death or mortality in the form of a skull or other symbolic or devotional object. In addition, *memento mori* was at one time a common tombstone inscription (Carroll 108). The words from the dead reached out to the living, reminding them that they too would find themselves in the ground one day.

Memento mori was a popular theme in art and literature from the 14th to the 17th centuries.

"In some Medieval and Renaissance visual art a *memento mori* was indeed often introduced, and this tendency (which underwent considerable regeneration in the late 16th and early 17th centuries) is certainly germane to *Hamlet* (Maslen 4)." The entirety of *Hamlet* can be read as *memento mori*, where Shakespeare reminds his audience of the morality of kings, princes, lovers and common men. He returns again and again to symbols and speeches on mortality and the transience of life. Claudius and Gertrude at the beginning of the play begin to introduce this theme. "[As] the King and Queen turn to Hamlet, they offer him *memento mori* consolation for the death of his father, persisting some forty lines, and he refuses this consolation" (Maslen 4). They try to rouse Hamlet from his melancholy state by pointing out that all men die eventually, a strategy which plunges Hamlet deeper into his obsession with death. Hamlet's dead father also drives him further down the path of *memento mori*. The ghost of Hamlet, Sr. serves as a more emphatic reminder of death by tempting Hamlet with "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (I.iv. 56).

Shakespeare continues to return to this theme in the play within the play, with Polonius's death, which certainly serves as *memento mori* for Claudius (Maslen 9). Additionally, Ophelia invokes *memento mori* when she tells her brother "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray,



love, remember" (4:5:57-58), before she commits suicide. The most intense revelation of *memento mori* happens in Hamlet's famous 'death the leveler' soliloquy, and most dramatically, in the grave digger's scene. This scene, V.i., is *memento mori* in every sense of the word because of the

appearance of the skulls, in particular Yorrick's. "Here the basic commonness of skulls, their appearance on stage, gives Hamlet *memento mori* emblems he can interpret without ambivalence for the first time in the play (Maslen 10)." Yorrick's skull is Hamlet's first tangible *memento mori*, he was a real person who Hamlet knew with some intimacy. Ironically instead of thinking about death at this point, Hamlet turns instead to thoughts of his childhood. It is at this point in the play that Hamlet perhaps accepts his own mortality and acknowledges that he may in fact die in avenging his father's murder.

The *memento mori* of *Hamlet* explores the problem of obsession with death; for when one is consumed with *memento mori*, as Hamlet is, it is difficult to live and act in the present. The remembrance of mortality resounds in Hamlet as young and old, men and women, king and commoner succumb to death by various means. Symbols of death like the skull of Yorrick and Ophelia's rosemary reinforce the obsession with death that holds the Prince in its grasp. Viewing *Hamlet* as a *Memento mori* offers the audience a reminder that life should not be spent in the shadow of the grave as Hamlet's life was spent. *Memento mori* paralyzed and inspired Hamlet's tragedy.

Works Cited

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