Saturnalian Sacrifice: Comic-Tragic Blending in *Hamlet*

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The image of Ophelia's grave dominates the final movement of Denmark's tragedy. Enlivened by the jests of gravemakers, the smell of skulls, and the grappling of courtiers, the grave beckons the living to experience its terrors and prepare for death. As in the Dance of Death, the grave draws opposites to a dissonant encounter. Peasant and gentleman (the gravemakers and Hamlet), philosopher and fool (Hamlet and the gravemakers, Horatio and Hamlet), lover and sweetheart (Hamlet and Ophelia), priest and courtier (Doctor of Divinity and Laertes), and victim and culprit (Hamlet and Claudius, Claudius and Hamlet, Hamlet and Laertes, Laertes and Hamlet, Laertes and the King, Ophelia and Hamlet)—all clash and then submerge under the weight of the Leveler Death. The past and the present also collapse as Ophelia joins the ranks of the dead. She, like the ancient sinner Adam, must now suffer the indignity of the gravediggers' jests. Time fuses, and so too do the tragic and comic patterns that operate in time. While the gravedigger's abuse of decorum and his logical aberrations point to death's disruption of order, his gaiety and foolishness suggest an unquenchable life-force that surges even in the face of tragedy. The gravedigger may be a harbinger of death, but he also allays our anxiety by giving us an immediate representation of life.

As in the ancient saturnalia, satire and gaiety intermingle first to banish guilt and death and then to celebrate the resurgence of life. So direct is our contact with Hamlet's experience that we transfer our destructive impulses to him. As Hamlet suffers and dies, he symbolically expunges the guilt both of Denmark and of the audience. Herbert Weisinger explains that this transfer of guilt accounts for our strange sense of joy as we view the hero's agony and death. The hero chooses a wrong course of action and "the result of that