Osric: Waterfly, Lapwing, Chough, and Claudius's Final Instrument

Osric is a late-entering character, like the Gravediggers and Fortinbras, but like the latter, he is crucial to the play's finale. He does not show his face until most of the king's tools—the meddlesome Polonius as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—have found out that "to be too busy is some danger." Osric's entry takes audiences by surprise, and it is only after a good deal of distractingly amusing repartee with Hamlet that he mentions Laertes, the fencing match, or the king's "wager."[1] But audiences know that Osric's business is somehow connected with the mousetrap that the king and Laertes have elaborately fashioned for Hamlet, and they are acutely aware that it is Laertes himself, at his own request to be Claudius's "instrument," who will be physically wielding the instrument of premeditated murder. Osric, then, seems a shadow-Laertes, a figure with his own agenda of advancement who is also being used by Claudius to lure Hamlet into the final duel. Though a minor character, a mere court functionary satirized as the apotheosis of courtly decadence, Osric is the last and surely the most idiosyncratic and puzzling in a long line of those whom the king has used for his deadly purposes—and the only survivor.

There are different emphases and opinions about details of Osric's ostentatious "words, words, words" and of Shakespeare's grander design in sending such an emissary from the king, but there is little critical disagreement about the basic character of Osric—his buffoonish sycophancy and its comic/satirical ramifications—as he makes his first appearance in 5.2. Critical perceptions about Osric's role in the duel and at the finale of the play, however, diverge considerably.

The stage direction for Osrick's entry (TLN 3593) identifies him in Q2 as simply "a Courtier," but in the Folio, he is immediately identified as "young Osrick." Pope introduces him as a "Bragart Gentleman" (TNM3586). Wilson (1934) notes that Osric's Danish name aligns him with the comedy associated with the 5.1 names of Yaughan and "Yorick, the King's jester" (TLN3593). The courtier's name was likely familiar to playgoers because "Henslowe's company did a performance of a play called Oseryck in 1597, which might have been Heywood's own "lost play of Marshal Osrick" (Browne, apud Furness, ed. 1877, CN3586).

Osric's manner of outlandish foppery is instantly conveyed by the plumed "bonnet" or hat that he flourishes upon his entry. Spenser (1980) reminds us that "The first form of the name in Q2 is 'Ostricke', and this is used for his speech headings in the duel scene. In view of the many references to birds in this scene, it is tempting to suppose that 'Ostrick' was Shakespeare's original intention"

(CN3586). Andrews (1993) in that vein suggests that (in Q2) "the Courtier's name is Ostrick ((probably a play on Ostrich)), and it seems likely that his headdress in the original staging was designed to make him resemble a bird stupid enough to believe itself invisible if its head were buried" (CN3586).

Osric's feathers embody the hollow ostentation of the Danish court, but were doubtless also designed to be a metatheatrical send-up of the gallants on stage and in the Lords' seats—something equivalent to the Gravedigger's joke about the madmen in England. Stubbs (1736), while censuring the scene as "improper for Tragedy" opines that "The Scene of the Fop Osrick is certainly intended as a Satire upon the young Courtiers of those days" (CN3596). Such a view would seem to be confirmed by Marston's adaptation of gallants' misuse of their bonnets in *The Malcontent*.[2]

Andrew Gurr's Introduction to *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (2009) seizes upon Osric's hat as an emblem of how different from our stage was the early modern stage and how frequently contemporary productions get such staging details as the courtier's bonnet wrong:

> Hamlet, like any other Shakespearean nobleman, wore his hat indoors. When the foppish and murderous Osric came flourishing his headgear with the invitation to fight Laertes, Hamlet undoubtedly doffed his bonnet in reply to Osric's flourish, and then put it back on. Osric's failure to follow suit led to Hamlet's reproof ('Put your bonnet to his right use, 'tis for the head'). The unbonneted Hamlet familiar to modern audiences is a creation of the indoor theatre and fourth-wall staging. . . where everyone goes hatless . . . . Hamlet in 1601 walked under the sky in an open amphitheatre, on a platform that felt out-of-doors in comparison with modern theatres but indifferently represented indoors or out to the Elizabethans. (Gurr 1)

Lynda Boose (1979) sees the emphasis on fashion that Osric's entry reanimates as part of an ongoing theme of fashion which "fuses language and action":

> At the root of this emphasis on fashion is an important question of valuation—whether honour, vows, institutions and ceremonies have intrinsic value or whether like garments they can be discarded and changed to please the times….The visual culmination of this imagery comes in V.ii when the "water fly" Osric puts his hat off and on at

> Hamlet's whim, therein literalizing the courtier's ingratiating attempts to be properly suited to the temperature of the times. (67-8)[3]

In the commentary that accrues to the stage direction for Osric's entry, he is called, variously, "a fop" (Stubbs, 1736); "a whimsical mushroom of fancy" (Gentleman, 1770, 3586); a "fopling… supported by smartness of figure, pertness of delivery, and affectedness of gesticulation" (Gentleman [apud Bell, ed. 1773, CN3586]); part of "the swarm,—marsh-born, miasma-nourished, that are around . . . [Hamlet]" (Lloyd, 1858, CN 3586); a "mincing, periphrastic courtier" (Marshall, 1875, CN 3586); "a diminutive and fantastical courtier" (Wilson, 1934, CN3586).

Commentators have lots of fun with Osric. Explaining Hamlet's "waterfly" epithet (TLN3958), Symons (1786) calls Osric a "busy trifler, from its way of dancing aimlessly to and fro over the surface of the water" (CN3589), and Clarke and Clarke (1874) a "court flutterer" (1874); Osric as "chough" (TLN 3593) Hanmer (1744) glosses as "a bird, which frequents the rocks by the Sea-side, most like a Jackdaw, but bigger," noting, from, *Bacon's Natural History* that "'In birds, kites, and kestrels have a resemblance with hawks, crows with ravens, daws and choughs'"; Caldecott (1819) defines "chough" as "a vein and idle babbler," one with manners "like those of a jackdaw…attracted by glittering objects" (CN3593), and also as an "airy, affected insect" (CN3597).

Concerning Horatio's "lapwing" metaphor (TLN 3649), Steevens (ed. 1773) connects the youthful Osric with recently hatched lapwings who run about with "a shell upon their heads," and he further comments that "The same image occurs in Ben Jonson's Staple of News" (CN 3649-50). Jenkins (1982) makes the connection that "the lapwing is ornithologically remarkable for leaving the next within a few hours of birth and hence became the proverbial type of juvenile pretension" (3649-50). J. Anthony Burton, in an extended essay on Osric (discussed below), notes that the "deceitful lapwing" flys away from its nest as a decoy and that the lapwing's prominent feather instantly labels Osric's mission as a deceitful one and himself as a decoy of the king.[4] One look at a photo of a Northern Lapwing shows the visual aptness of the metaphor:

Another creature, however, serves as a first metaphorical foray into Osric's nature. Before Osric has uttered two lines or said much of anything, Hamlet reacts intuitively in an aside to Horatio, "Dost know this waterfly?" (TLN 3589). Clearly, as in 1.2 when despite the prince's protestations about "seeming," Hamlet's black clothing gives away his mourning essence, Osric's very costume gives him away.

Macquiod (1916) comments on the garb of the Elizabethan courtier: "The long doublet and hose frequently ornamented with ribbings, spots, and stripes were suggestive of insects, and the wearer, with his winged triangular cloak and bee-headed bonnet, must have been in character with the court drones who hummed and buzzed round their queen in 1585" (CN 3586). For Magreta de Grazia (2001), the outsized costume is a key to Osric's material ambitions, ones which for her align Osric with Fortinbras. Osric in his

> reach for "much land and fertile (5.2.86) has "grown 'spacious in the possession of dirt' (5.2.88-89.) Indeed, his inflated rhetoric, grandiose gestures, and extensive headgear all express a desire to expand himself still futher. At the same time, his outlandish manner indicates how recently landed he is." (DeGrazia 358)

Even more notable about Osric than his dress are his maddening linguistic excesses. Critics seize on this to prove that he is simply a clown-like figure and his scene with Hamlet merely a diverting breather providing additional comic relief before the long duel-cum-fencing match that leads to the deaths of the major

characters. Osric's speech and mannerisms, like those of Polonius, are full of distinctions without difference—the stuff of parody, indeed, of self-parody; Rossiter (1961) sees Osric's comic potential as part of his alignment with the other "spy" characters like Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are bound to be seen as clumsy or ridiculous.[5] He links the comic element in Osric's mission to Hamlet with the inherent ludicrousnessness of Polonius's task for Reynaldo of spying on his own son: "Everything here is under-hand, meanly self-interested, nothing is frank or generous. It is also undignified, not great evil; and often ridiculous" (CN 890-967).

For Marshall (1875), "The . . . scene is one of the most charming pieces of high comedy which Shakespeare has left us"; the "verbal fencing match, the flourishes of court dialect and fashionable etiquette are an ironical preparation for the realities of the encounter to come, and the pause tightens up the suspense" (CN3586). Janette Macintyre (1982) counts Osric as a member of a considerable substratum of stock characters that add to the play's "jesting":

> Hamlet and many of its characters come from the stock cast of Terentian comedy—Polonius the senex, Laertes the young adventurer, Ophelia the ingenue, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the parasites, Osric the fop (with a spice of braggart soldier), and even the grave-diggers as clownish servants. No other tragedy of Shakespeare includes such a roster of comic characters, and no other is so full of jesting. (6)

Indeed, Theobald (1730) first connected the initial conversation between Osric and Hamlet with the Third Satire of Juvenal (CN3599).[6]

Surely Osric's "golden words" are a matter of derision and merriment, but part of the entertainment is Hamlet's response. Theobold (in both 1730 and 1733 editions, insisted on the superiority of the "elder Quarto's" (CN3609) as including many of Osric's lines (not present in the Folio) "that I think are very necessary to be restored, as shoewing thoroughly the *foppery* and *affectation* of Osrick, and the *humour* and *address* of Hamlet in accosting the other at once in his own vein and style [3610+-+15]."[7] Just as he will carry forward the physical jousting with Laertes, Hamlet, having just been in "practice" with the gravedigger (that master of verbal jousting) now plays the chameleon and simply enters the skirmish with Osric by adapting the courtier's own expressions and going him one better at artficiality. Singer's summative comment on the early exchange between Osric and Hamlet is quite succinct: "This dialogue was intended to ridicule the affected

Euphuism prevalent among those shallow wits about the court, who mistook it for refinement" (1856, CN3610).

Indeed, the bulk of the commentary on Osric is taken up with glossing his obscure expressions and Hamlet's matching circumlocutions. Here are some interesting examples, and their glosses:

- **Osric**: "Sweete Lord, if your {Lordshippe} <friendship> were at leasure, | I should impart a thing to you from his Maiestie (TLN3596-7). Hamlet: "I will receaue it {sir} *with all dilligence of spirit*" [italics mine]

  Caldecott's gloss: "'With the whole bent of my mind.' A happy phraseology; in ridicule, at the same time that it was in conformity with the style of the airy, affected insect that was playing around with him" (CN3595, ed. 1819).

- Hamlet: I beseech you remember [i.e., to cover your head] (TLN3609-3610)

  Glosses turn up variants and analogues for Hamlet's request, "I beseech you remember." Farmer (1778, ms. notes) cites Marston's *Malcontent*, and Malone (1790) tells us the phrase is found in "Florio's SECOND FRUTES, 1591, as well as in Massinger (CN3610). Malone also conjectures (misunderstanding the original stage convention of indoors/ outdoors space) that Hamlet is urging "do *not* remember" i.e., don't stand on ceremony). Ingleby (1875) exposes this mistaken assumption by Capell and Malone and goes into detail about how the line had been further construed by Dyce and Staunton, with a long note solving the crux in terms of original practices of etiquette (CN3609). White in 1896 adds to the list of allusions/ analogues to Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

- **Osric** (replies): good my Lord} <in good faith,> for {my} <mine> ease in good faith.

  Farmer comments (1877, ms. Notes): "This seems to have been [th]e affected phrase of [th]e time."Wilson (1934) notes that "A teasing little puzzle is presented by the use of 'my" and 'mine' before a vowel,"and declares it "odd to find Osric at 5.2.109 asseverating "for my ease in good faith'" (CN3610).

> Osric's golden words about Laertes in the Q2 continue to unfold in fantastic phrases, such as "an absolute gentleman," "soft society," "great showing," "speak feelingly," "card or Kalender of Genry," "the continent of what part a Gentleman would see." Hamlet, in response, comes up with "his definement suffers no perdition in you," "to divide him inventorially," "dizzy th'arithmaticke of memory" "verity of extolment" "a soule of great article" "infusion of such dearth and rareness," and winds up all these flourishes with the unfathomable praise, "His semblable is his mirror,/ and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more" (TLN 3610+11-12). Hamlet, of course, wins the mathematical joke about weaponry: "Hamlet: What's his weapon? Osric: Rapier and Dagger. Hamlet: That's two of his weapons, but well" (TLN 3613-15).
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> The running contest in courtly language has no effect on the undaunted fop. Further along, Hamlet calls Osric out about the circumlocutions concerning the wager and odds, which Osric has couched in terms of "Poynards," "assignes, "girdle," hanger[s]," etc., and he further describes as of the "most delicate carriages, and of very liberall conceit" (TLN3620). In cross-examination, Hamlet ridicules Osric's use of "carriages" for "hangers" (TLN3622-3629).

But Osric's buffoonish additions to the play's extensive theme of language and its corruptions are not enough to explain his drawn-out dialogue with the prince; there's clearly something more here than comic brio before the play's tragic ending. Commentators alert to Osric's larger function in the play's dramatic arc pay attention to the fact that the courtier's entry itself is sudden and unexpected and that it interrupts a crucial moment of moral and spiritual reckoning taking place in Hamlet as he talks intimately with Horatio. Miles's (1870) commentary is one of the finest brief summations of the interaction between Osric and Hamlet:

> Horatio starts at the coming footstep, as if he had been listening to treason: 'Peace! who comes here?' As the vexed stream of Hamlet's life approaches the abyss, the foam and anguish of the rapids subside; and just over the level brink of calm and light that edges the fall, hovers the 'water-fly,' Osric. Hamlet is patient with him—almost as patient as with the sexton—although constitutionally merciless to a fool; whether a fool circuitous like Polonius, a fool rampant like Laertes, or a fool positive like Osric. It is the last of his intellectual engagements, this singular duel between a dunce on the threshold of existence, and the stately gentleman but three steps from the grave.

> All forms and degrees of intellect have been dwarfed beside this most sovereign reason: the final contrast is between godlike apprehension and sheer fatuity. (CN3585)

On the surface, where waterflies of Osric's type seem to lodge, Osric's verbiage does seem to bring "sheer fatuity" to the stage at this critical moment. We've been aware of the profound ontological debate that underlies the dialogue between the prince and the gravedigger—the common man whose language is creatively literal-minded. We've heard the gravedigger quibble wittily enough in plain English (though humorously dressed up at times with legalistic malapropisms and selectively expressions of obtuseness) as he fences with Hamlet in the prior scene and finally even wins the verbal duel with the prince (see Magnus, pp. 19-20). But the Gravedigger's language is an emanation from the bottom of the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, the place, according to Yeats, "where all the ladders start," where one finds creatures like Dickens' Boffin—a dustman/gentleman but also the salt of the earth—or Wallace Stevens' "Man on the Dump." This is the very opposite of the language of the foppish courtier whose elaborately mannered expressions are part of his attempt to climb the ladder of advancement, an ambition completely irrelevant to Hamlet now.[8]

Russ MacDonald, in his 1983 essay on Osric in *Hamlet Studies*, sees the timing of Osric's sudden entry as one that bisects the two parts of Hamlet's conversation with Horatio, "separating the specific narrative on the role of chance and unmediated action in human affairs from the general conclusions about the need for patience and readiness, the appropriate response to worldly insecurity" (64). In a complex argument that draws on Norman Rabkin's notion of the "complementary" of thought in Shakespeare's late works, McDonald argues that Osric's presence in the early part of the scene is for thematic reasons that have large implications about Hamlet's character:

> Shakespeare has sent this fool to intrude on one of the most crucial discussions in the tragedy so as to reveal the pitfalls along the road that Hamlet has finally taken. Osric's inability to commit himself to any position constitutes a critique of Hamlet' new-found practicality, his capacity for compromise. Everyone remembers Hamlet's parody of Osric, but I wish to suggest that Osric is himself a parody of the new Hamlet. . . .Shakespeare delicately questions the hero's wisdom by showing us an extreme form of it in practice. (65)

In this vein, McDonald pits the hero against the waterfly. Against Hamlet's "'new

attitude toward the world: Osric is nothing but a collection of 'attitudes.'" Hamlet's "self-absorption" gone, he has "come to understand himself in relation to others ('by the image of my cause I see /The portraiture of his')" (66). McDonald's interpretation is the most thematically consistent explanation of Osric's excesses in his first part of the dialogue with Hamlet.

However, as we pass from this preliminary scene of invitation to the duel itself and to Osric's role in the finale of the play, other difficulties appear. Differences in Quarto and Folio stage directions and the presence in the Folio of the second "Lord" who successfully delivers Claudius's invitation and accompanies Hamlet and Horatio to the duel, as well as Osric's late exit and re-entry to explain Fortinbras's "warlike volley" give rise to some critical differences of opinion about the extent to which Osric is in collusion with Claudius and Laertes in the distribution of the "treacherous instruments" and his refereeing of duel-cum-fencing-match.

For Lloyd (1858), "the waterfly Osric lies under the suspicion of complicity in the treachery of the King and Laertes with the foils, though Shakspeare has not thought it worth while to render the crime definite, or to condescend to punish it" (CN3586). For Miles (1870), "The King's 'Give them the foils, young Osric,' inclines us to think that Osric was even more knave than fool. The creature appointed to shuffle those unequal foils could hardly have failed to detect the one unbated point. But he is too slight for dissection" (CN3585). Yet Miles's conclusion begs the question. If Osric is "too slight," one wonders why Osric is given so many lines and an extended presence in the play's finale, one that seems far beyond that of an ordinary messenger.

Antony Burton's discussion of "Hamlet, Osric, and the Duel" (reprinted in the "Criticism" section of Hamletworks.org) has the most elaborate and comprehensive view of Osric's dramatic function, starting with the later scenes of Claudius's Act IV manipulations of Laertes and following through till the start of the fencing match. Burton's argument is that Osric is not merely a tool of general purposes (like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example): Osric's general habit of using absurdly inflated language is calculated to arouse Hamlet's ire (and thus the weak "lapwing" Osric will be used as a decoy). But when he finally gets to his point and delivers the terms of the wager and the odds, Osric will also use certain phrases carefully scripted by Claudius to insure that that ire be directed against Laertes. The ideas for his script occur to the arch-improvisor Claudius in the graveyard scene, where he clearly registers Hamlet's anger over Laertes' exaggerated terms of grief as well as the prince's particular verbal expression of

anger with Laertes in his allusion to the classical myth of the Giants' rebellion against Zeus.

Burton notes a two-part aspect to the wager, "the stakes," explained in Osric's exasperatingly Frenchified diction, into which the all-imporant word "imponed" (TLN3617) can easily be slipped; as well as "the odds," which Osric explains in a second speech of plain English that uses a term equivalent to "imponed," i.e. "laid on" (TLN3631). Both "imponed" and "laid on" recall Laertes' misprision of the myth of the Giant's rebellion in 5.1 when he asks for more dirt to be "piled on" him as he holds Ophelia's dead body in mourning, thinking that the Giants in their rebellion against Zeus to be heroic instead of misguided usurpers. In that earlier scene, Hamlet had replicated Laertes' misprision in trying angrily to "outface" his opponent's mourning, resulting in their grappling. Osric's report of Laertes' "laying on" of odds on top of Claudius's kingly odds[9] is what clinches Hamlet's decision to take up the wager.

Burton therefore concludes that

> Hamlet's consent to the fatal duel has, in the end, little or nothing to do with reasoned judgment, submission to the workings of divine providence, or even with revenge, but only his feeling toward Laertes. For the moment, even the great vow of eternal rembrance that he made to his father has slipped from his mind. His answer to Osric, "It is the breathing time of day with me," is a message of defiance to the upstart challenger: "If he thinks he can take me, he knows where to find me." It is not said in a spirit of casual indifference or stoic acceptance, but in a spirit of defiance and barely controlled hostility. (Burton, p. 11)

This arresting argument initially shares points with McDonald's views, though their conclusions differ completely. Both critics assume that Osric has only a marginal comic function and much more important thematic and characterological implications. McDonald claims that Osric functions mainly as a dramatic foil to Hamlet, a character designed to illuminate Hamlet's final spiritual transformation preparatory for his fatal duel. He evinces for this transformation Hamlet's admission to Horatio of his having "forgotten himself" to Laertes. Burton, instead, argues both from dramatic structure and linguistic evidence (including an energetic solving of several cruxes) that Osric is a puppet whose over-the-top language has been quite deliberately factored into the strings Claudius pulls. Whereas McDonald emphasizes Hamlet's new mindfulness of his affinity with Laertes, Burton stresses

the enmity between Hamlet and Laertes that Claudius re-agitates through Osric.

Burton's reading does suggest a rationale for the fact that in all the quartos, a Lord comes in to replace Osric, who at this point is quite relieved that he seems to have gotten Hamlet to come to an "immediate trialle" (TLN 3633). Marvin Rosenberg (1992) interprets the new lord's appearance as possibly connected with "Osric's frustration and resentment at being toyed with" (870), but he and Burton agree that "Osric is dangerous" (875).

However, neither McDonald nor Burton follows Osric substantially into the final scene of the play, where a new "twist" on Osric's character seems visible when Osric serves as a referee whose "judgment" presides over the entire duel. Unlike the gravedigger, that other verbal skirmisher with Hamlet, who vanishes entirely once the funeral procession arrives, Osric not only returns to (or remains on) stage to render these "judgments," but is a vocal survivor of the "havoc" at the play's end. He is a listener to the prince's last words, part of the "mutes or audience" included in Hamlet's mediated speech to the "yet unknowing world /how these things came about" (TLN3874-5), but he is also given the unique privilege of providing the intelligence to the dying prince of Fortinbras's approach—information crucial to Hamlet's final actions in the play. How Osric comes off in these functions is ambiguous, and once again, a subject of critical disagreement. (This is especially so in performance. Branagh's *Hamlet*, for example, has a Norwegian soldier injure Osric as part of a stealth attack to take over the Danish throne, one that begins even before Fortinbras enters the castle and takes in Hamlet's death!) A recent line of thought (which I share) sees Osric as transformed in the solemnity of the play's ending.

When we at last arrive at the venue of the fencing match, the opening SD in both Folio and Quarto versions mention only "Lords" in the processional. In the Folio, Osric is identified by name on stage only when the king commands, "Giue them the foiles young Ostricke" (TLN 3715-6). With contradictions in clues leading up to the moment when the fencing swords are given out to be chosen, opinion here is seriously divided on the question of Osric's collusion. A number of commentators believe that he is indeed in collusion. Wilson (1934) argues that "the unbated sword could not have been introduced without the knowledge of one of them" [the judges, of whom Osric was chief]" (CN3715). Wilson later adds the reminder (citing A.H.J. Knight) that the analogue character "Phantasmo" was "certainly an accomplice in the *Brudermord*" (CN 3715, 1936b). Burton R. Pollin (1989) comments on the oddity of Hamlet's seemingly casual acceptance of the foils from Osric, that "untrustworthy creature of the king" (254).

But there are many who cannot credit Osric’s ability to pull everything off smoothly, given Claudius’s stress in plotting with Laertes that no “wind of blame” may attach to the “practice” (TLN3075-77). Watson (1878) urges that “Laertes was minute in details, and his evident familiarity with them, coupled with his self-accusation” are sufficient to show his culpability (TLN3715). Kittredge (1939) affirms that “nothing can be less warranted than the idea (which Wilson ‘assumes” from [2783-84]) that Osric is an accomplice in the plot. If that were the case, dramatic method would have made his guilt clear” (CN3715). Rylands (ed. 1947, Notes) agrees: “At this moment, while Osric turns to answer Hamlet’s question, we may suppose Laertes selects in exchange the unbated weapon. While Claudius gives commands to the attentive court about the wine and the healths, Laertes can anoint the sword-tip unnoticed. There is no need to make the butterfly, Osric, a party to the plot” (CN3723). Jenkins (1982) finds that “Dover Wilson’s assumption that Osric is an accomplice in the plot is unsupported by text or plausibility” (CN3715). Edwards (1985) also weighs in as follows: “It is quite incredible that Claudius and Laertes should have admitted anyone else into their plot—least of all the young waterfly! Whatever ‘shuffling’ is done to get the poisoned and unbated foil into Laertes’ hand is done by himself” (TLN 3723).

While there is no conclusive textual evidence about Osric’s culpability in the physical arrangement of the foils or their anointing with the deadly poison, my own vote lies with Kittredge’s argument that “If that were the case, dramatic method would have made his [Osric’s] guilt clear.” Moreover, even if the actor playing Osric were one of the few “mouths” to whom Shakespeare might have given lines to account for what has happened on the stage of carnage, Osric seems to have changed. Osric’s attention to the dying on stage and his final lines in the play have a kind of ceremonial function, while his words contribute to the intelligence the tragic hero needs to make the right decisions in his last moments.

In this vein, Robert F. Willson (1989) sees Osric’s adjudicating role in the fencing match as contributing to a kind of ritualistic closure of the revenge motif:

> The three-part division of the duel sequence, with Osric's judgments marking each segment, likewise echoes the triadic pattern of the Ghost's appearances. As Claudius watches the unravelling of his scheme, the "Player King" must feel that he is being forced to attend a supernatural interlude. The shadow of his murdered brother returns in the son's shape to administer both poison and sword wound to the killer. (85)

Osric tries to attend to the fallen. Once Hamlet and Laertes start scuffling and while all attention is on the two contenders, Osric insists: "Looke to the Queene there howe" TLN3780). And it is to Osric, who asks "How is it with you?" (TLN3783) that Laertes confesses, "Why as a woodcock | to mine {owne} sprindge Ostrick/ I am iustly kild with mine owne treachery" (TLN 3784-85).

Hamlet orders "Treachery! Seeke it out" (TLN 3791), but there is no stage direction for Osric's exit, which he would need to execute in order to be able to return to the stage later, as implied in TLN 3838, "Enter Osrick." But the stage direction for his re-entry highlights the fact that he is present to answer one of Hamlet's urgent dying questions: "Why does the drum come hither?" (3838). Indeed, "young" Osric's answer concerning another young man is his final lines in the play: "Young Fortinbrasse with conquest come from Poland,/ To th'embassadors of England gives this warlike volley" (TLN 3839-40).

Miles (1870) comments: "The wide repose of a perfect catastrophe extends to the remotest fibres of the plot. In the masterly lines assigned to Osric, the simultaneous arrival of Fortinbras and England is announced in one breath" (3817-47).

In a similar vein, but with broader implications about a transformation in Osric's character, Andrews (1989) catches the "young" epithet for both Osric and Fortinbras and notes that

> Here, for the first time in the Second Quarto, this courtier bears the name he is given consistently in the First Folio. It is conceivable that at this point Shakespeare simply decided to change the character's name to something more noble ((Osric is a name with dignified Anglo-Saxon roots.)) But it is also possible that the name change is meant to signal a stage metamorphosis in which a character who exits as a foppish young man . . .[and] re-enters to announce the arrival of another young man who appears to have matured into a more august role" (CN3838).

Andrews' comment focuses just on Osric's last lines and promotes what would be an extremely subtle change; he also suggests that the change could be embodied in a quick change of costume. But so very quick a change would be difficult to stage or even to notice in an interval of crowded eventfulness for protagonist, villain,

queen, Horatio, and all the others survivors, but it does point to a different kind of presence for Osric. Taking this line of thought backward into a slightly earlier part of the scene, Osric's important change seems to occur with the his ministrations to those in need of help. And in the face of the sudden or impending death of the entire royal family and its posterity, even a fool of many an idle word might now reach for the right ceremonial words, wresting some measure of dignity from the engulfing catastrophe. Certainly Laertes, who has been wavering, has changed—as has his language under the aegis of death. In a very minor way, then, Osric's ceremonious and dignified lines at the play's end might be said to signal a new order of things, audible, too, in Fortinbrasse's tribute[10] to a royal prince who was as well, for all-too-short a-time, the king of Denmark.

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1. It is interesting to compare Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's first approach to Hamlet in 2.2. to Osric's entry; in both scenes, the "lead in" to the point of the encounter is prolonged, with the courtiers similarly beating around the bush. In the earlier scene, Hamlet allows his putative "friends" considerable time to come clean, hoping, it would seem, that they will do so of the own volition. When they don't, he has to trap them into an admission that they have been "sent for" (TLN 1325-6), but he executes this as a final effort, as one might with old friends, and shares (or seems to share) his afflictions frankly with them. With his "waterfly" epithet and question to Horatio, Hamlet stresses the fact that this unknown and unexpected visitor is no friend, although, similarly, he remains superficially polite and winningly takes up the language game with "this waterfly."

2. In the Prologue to *The Malcontent*, the gallants are not, of course, the only targets of Shakespeare's barbs; Shakespeare had fun casting his fellow actors as characters. Dowden (1899 reminds us of other *Hamlet* echoes in Marston: "Sly also asks Sinko to 'sit between my legs' (a remiscence of Hamlet and Ophelia), to which Sinklo replies, 'the audience will then take me for a viol-de-gambo, and think that you play upon me' (a remiscence of Hamlet and the two courtiers" (CN 3610).

3. See Lynda E Boose, "The Fashionable Poloniuses" *Hamlet Studies.* 5.1(1979): 59-65. Vol 1 #2. P. 67-8, reprinted in Hamletworks.org.

4. Burton notes Horatio's perspicaciousness in tagging Osric with the epithet of "the deceitful lapwing" whose "reputation is to decoy nest-robbers by feigning injury and vulnerablility, fluttering weakly farther from its nest and then flying safely away when the hunter is hopelessly off the the track" (p. 8), Osric's deceitfulness being to arouse anger against himelf and remind Hamlet of Laertes' linguistic and behavioral presumptuousness while deflecting attention away from the actual raptor, Claudius.

5. It is odd contrast that Ophelia, given her clear spying role in Q1 and the fact that she too is instrumentalized, is not at all comic but rather pitiable in her sufferings.

6. See also Prem Nath's "*Hamlet* in the Eighteenth Century, 1701-1750: From John Dennis to Arthur Murphy." *Hamlet Studies* 6.1-6.2 (1984): 30-67.

7. Knight (1839) among others, demurs, and argues that the Quarto version adds nothing important: "Though it furnishes a most happy satire upon the affected phraseology of the court of Elizabeth, and displays the wit and readinesss of Hamlet to great advantage, the poet perhaps thought it prolonged the main business somewhat too much. Several other passages in this scene, which we find in the quarto, are omitted in the folio; and these we have placed in brackets" (CN3610+1).

8. How absurd the idea of the ambition of Hamlet (as heir to Denmark's throne) has been clear from his sarcastic comment in Act II to Rosencrantz about the source of his discontent in Denmark, "Sir, I lack advancement" (TLN 2210).

9. Dollerup (1982) comments concerning the comparative offerings of Laertes and Claudius, "What the Frenchified Laertes has brought back with him is set against the home product. Danish horses were esteemed and exported ((Dollerup, pp. 118-19)) (CN3628).

10. Could it be that in the conversions of both Osric the trivial and Laertes the tragic fool, one feels that 'a terrible beauty is born?' There is a strangely apt dignity about Osric's final line in the play, which could be contrasted with Fortinbras' own concluding words that are a wholly inadequate tribute to one who would have 'proved most royal,' though through his words he, too, attempts to come to grips with all that has happened on stage and give it a concluding stamp of 'custom and ceremony.'

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SELECTED COMMENTARY

1736 STUBBS: “The Scene of the Fop Osrick is certainly intended as a Satire upon the young Courtiers of those days, and is humorously express’d, but is, I think, improper for Tragedy” (CN 3586).

1765 JOHNSON (glossing “card or calendar of gentry”): “The general preceptor of elegance; the card by which a gentleman is to direct his course; the calendar by which he is to chuse his time, that what he does may be both excellent and seasonable” (CN 3610+3).

1770 GENTLEMAN: "Ostrick is a whimsical mushroom of fancy, and tho' Shakespeare presents his audience with a danish beau, he took the constituent parts from English court-butterflies of his days, and even furnishes him with the equivocal punning stile, which took its rise and fashion from that second Solomon, James the first, whose pedantry and hatred of witches were equally conspicuous" (CN 3586).

1819 CALDECOTT: "A vain and idle babbler, but possessed of large landed property. Buffon describes the Cornish chough, or red-legged crow, as 'elegant in figure, lively, restless. His manners are like those of a jackdaw: it is attracted by glittering objects.'" Bewick's Hist. of Birds, 8 vo. 1797, I. 77(CN3593).

1877 COLERIDGE (*apud* **FURNESS**): "Sh. seems to mean all Hamlet's character to be brought together before his final disappearance from the scene: his meditative excess in the grave-digging, his yielding to passion with Laer., his love for Oph. blazing out, his tendency to generalize on all occasions in the dialogue with Hors., his fine gentlemanly manners with osr., and his and Shakespeare's own fondness for presentiment" (CN**3661-2**). 1818-19.

1858 LLOYD: "I presume, again, that Coleridge was serious when he spoke of Hamlet's fine gentlemanly manners with Osric; but he would have been nearer, though not close to the truth, had his terms been ironical, or compounded into the more equivocal word 'fine-gentlemanly.' The waterfly Osric lies under the suspicion of complicity in the treachery of the King and Laertes with the foils, though Shakespeare has not thought it worth while to render the crime definite, or to condescend to punish it; he embodies, however, at least whatever is most frivolous and contemptible in the courtier and chamberlain, and continues into the last act the motives of the departed Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which brought out before so admirably the contrast between the tastes, the nature of Hamlet, and the swarm,—marsh-born, miasma-nourished, that are around him. . . .'"

1870 MILES: "Horatio starts at the coming footstep, as if he had been listening to treason: 'Peace! who comes here?' As the vexed stream of Hamlet's life approaches the abyss, the foam and anguish of the rapids subside; and just over the level brink of calm and light that edges the fall, hovers the 'water-fly,' Osric. Hamlet is patient with him—almost as patient as with the sexton—although constitutionally merciless to a fool; whether a fool circuitous like Polonius, a fool rampant like Laertes, or a fool positive like Osric. It is the last of his intellectual engagements, this singular duel between a dunce on the threshold of existence, and

the stately gentleman but three steps from the grave. All forms and degrees of intellect have been dwarfed beside this most sovereign reason: the final contrast is between godlike apprehension and sheer fatuity"(CN3585).

1870 MILES: "The wide repose of a perfect catastrophe extends to the remotest fibres of the plot. In the masterly lines assigned to Osric, the simultaneous arrival of Fortinbras and England is announced in one breath" (CN 3817-47).

1875 MARSHALL: "The next scene is one of the most charming pieces of high comedy which Shakespeare has left us; and those are very superficial critics who talk of the slovenliness of the last act, for the elaborate finish of this scene, at least, cannot be denied. It barely exists in the first version of 1603 [Q1]. Shakespeare was too great an artist not to know that any interruption to the action at this point would not be tolerated, unless it were of so interesting a nature as to reconcile the audience to the delay. Some pause is necessary before the scheme of the King and Laertes can be carried out. Nowhere is the irony, which pervades this great work, more remarkable than in the contrivance of introducing what the spectators know is a treacherous design to assassinate Hamlet with a genuinely comic prelude. Affection was never more happily ridiculed than it is in this mincing periphrastic courtier; nor was satire ever more effective and good-humoured than is that of Hamlet, whose wit shines now with greater brilliancy than ever, though he is heavy and is standing unconsciously on the brink of his own grave" (CN3586).

1916 MACQUIOD: "The long doublet and hose frequently ornamented with ribbings, spots, and stripes were suggestive of insects, and the wearer, with his winged triangular cloak and bee-headed bonnet, must have been in character with the court drones who hummed and buzzed round their queen in 1585" (CN 3586).

1934 WILSON: "As for the other cut, it possesses the theatrical merit of saving a part, seeing that it altogether suppresses the lord, who follows Osric and does nothing but repeat the message and the question with which the latter had been charged. Shakespeare probably introduced this lord in order to show us that when Osric 're-delivered' Hamlet's reply to the King, the latter found him even more difficult to follow than hamlet had, and was therefore forced to send a second emissary to discover his meaning. But the Osric business is over-long in any event, and it is difficult not to regard the F1 cut as a definite improvement. The only serious loss is the message from the Queen bidding Hamlet 'use some gentleman entertainment to Laertes' before they 'fall to play' (CN3657+8).

1982 MACINTYRE: "*Hamlet* and many of its characters come from the stock cast of Terentian comedy—Polonius the senex, Laertes the young adventurer, Ophelia the ingenue, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the parasites, Osric the fop (with a spice of braggart soldier), and even the grave-diggers as clownish servants. No other tragedy of Shakespeare includes such a roster of comic characters, and no other is so full of jesting." (6)

1983 MCDONALD: Osric's sudden entry bisects the two parts of Hamlet's conversation with Horatio, "separating the specific narrative on the role of chance and unmediated action in human affairs from the general conclusions about the need for patience and readiness, the appropriate response to worldly insecurity" (64).

Moreover, "Shakespeare has sent this fool to intrude on one of the most crucial discussions in the tragedy so as to reveal the pitfalls along the road that Hamlet has finally taken. Osric's inability to commit himself to any position constitutes a critique of Hamlet' new-found practicality, his capacity for compromise. Everyone remembers Hamlet's parody of Osric, but I wish to suggest that Osric is himself a parody of the new Hamlet. . . .Shakespeare delicately questions the hero's wisdom by showing us an extreme form of it in practice" (65).

1984 BURTON: "Osric has a mission of the utmost delicacy, to provoke Hamlet to behave imprudently without ever noticing that he is being played upon. . . . "Imponed' was an unusual word in English, rare enough to catch Hamlet's attention" but in Osric's mouth the same uncommon word will be no more than a single drop in a chaotic flood of extravagant Latinisms . . . .The Anglo-Saxon half of the "great wager" reveals that Laertes did more than simply increase the stakes posted for the duel. He committed the further impertinence of raising the odds against himself, 'piling on" a second affront on top of the first. Claudius proposed a match of twelve passes, with Laertes to win the prize only if his margins over Hamlet exceeded three: if the final score was 8-4, Laertes would win; at 7-5, he would lose. Laertes responded by promising to defeat Hamlet even more severely, at least 9-3, before he would claim victory.

1989 WILLSON: The three-part division of the duel sequence, with Osric's judgments marking each segment, likewise echoes the triadic pattern of the Ghost's appearances.

1989 ANDREWS: Here, for the first time in the Second Quarto, this courtier bears the name he is given consistently in the First Folio. It is conceivable that at this point

Shakespeare simply decided to change the character's name to something more noble ((Osric is a name with dignified Anglo-Saxon roots.)) But it is also possible that the name change is meant to signal a stage metamorphosis in which a character who exits as a foppish young man . . .[and] re-enters to announce the arrival of another young man who appears to have matured into a more august role" (CN3838).

2001 DEGRAZIA: Osric, in his "reach for "much land and fertile (5.2.86)" has "grown 'spacious in the possession of dirt' (5.2.88-89.) Indeed, his inflated rhetoric, grandiose gestures, and extensive headgear all express a desire to expand himself still futher. At the same time, his outlandish manner indicates how recently landed he is" (358).

2015/16 MAGNUS: "Could it be that in the conversions of both Osric the trivial and Laertes the tragic fool, one feels that 'a terrible beauty is born?' There is a strangely apt dignity about Osric's final line in the play, which could be contrasted with Fortinbras' own concluding words that are a wholly inadequate tribute to one who would have 'proved most royal,' though through his words he, too, attempts to come to grips with all that has happened on stage and give it a concluding stamp of 'custom and ceremony'" (N.10).

Laury Magnus