

'I Know My Clay': Some Musical Afterlives of *Hamlet's* Gravedigger

INTRODUCTION

Robert Scarlett, a gravedigger at Peterborough Cathedral who died aged 98 in 1594, is commended in an epitaph on the building's west wall for having "interd two Queenes within this place": those royal bodies belonging respectively to Katherine of Aragon and Mary Queen of Scots. But along with figures of high significance, Scarlett – across a career of near-mythic length – was also said to have dug graves for so many ordinary Peterborians that their numbers constituted "his townes hovse holders in his lives space / Twice over." As "probably the only sexton in any age to be found in the Dictionary of National Biography," (Dixon 1997, 23), Scarlett has probably inspired a certain tendency towards exaggeration (he seems unlikely, for instance, to have physically buried Queen Mary at age 90), but he nonetheless emerges from his public epitaph and from George Dixon's historical pamphlet as a singularly vivid figure through whom to consider the cultural image of the gravedigger in sixteenth-century England.

That image is of particular interest to early modern literary scholars today, of course, because of the heightened attention 5.1 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has encouraged us to pay to those who "hold up Adam's profession" (5.1.26), and Scarlett offers one useful contemporary lens through which to view the grave-digging character we meet in that scene.ⁱ Dixon's suggestion that Shakespeare might have drawn directly on accounts of Scarlett, through a personal relationship with John Fletcher who studied at Peterborough's Cathedral Grammar School and thus "must have known Robert Scarlett," veers somewhat into the realms of speculative fantasy:

Could he have heard Scarlett mutter something like “Alas poor Yorick” when he handled the skull of a poor fool – someone, for instance, like “Edward the foole” buried on July 12th 1563? ... Could John Fletcher, later in life, have told William Shakespeare the story at *The Mermaid Tavern*? (Dixon 1997, 5)

Nonetheless, Scarlett stands out as an analogue for *Hamlet*'s gravedigger – and, I will argue here, for later iterations of the “singing gravedigger” topos – not only for the levelling quality of his workload, burying rich and poor alike, but for being a figure of human frailty, in daily contact with death and grief, deserving of particular attention and sympathy. Dixon quotes a contemporary account book which, in 1572, allocates

To Scarlett, being a poor old man, and rising oft in the night to toll the bell for sick persons, the weather being grievous, and in consideration of his good service, towards a gown to keep him warm: 8s 0d (Dixon 1997, 18).

A poor old man, doing good service in all weathers and at all times of day: this is one aspect of the gravedigger motif which, I will demonstrate below, occurs across a number of twentieth and twenty-first century cultural productions which respond directly to the legacy of the fictional, Scarlett-esque Elizabethan gravedigger immortalised (ironically, perhaps), in Shakespeare's Danish tragedy. In what follows, I consider songs by the French *chansonnier* Georges Brassens and two of his inheritors – the Yorkshire singer-songwriter Jake Thackray, for whom Brassens was a “hero, musical inspiration, friend and mentor” (Newell 2005), and the contemporary French artist Thomas Fersen – as citations of and developments upon a character bearing some comparison to the real-life labours of Robert Scarlett, but given fictional shape and durability in *Hamlet*'s gravedigger. I will first discuss the role, function, and emotional profile of that character in Shakespeare's play, before considering its likely chain of transmission to Brassens, writing in French in the 1950s, and assessing how the

figure is developed in Brassens's "Le Fossoyeur" and by the two more recent songwriters taking up the trope in dialogue with Brassens' work.

“HAS THIS FELLOW NO FEELING OF HIS BUSINESS? ‘A SINGS IN GRAVE-MAKING.’

I am a grave-digger, a digger of graves. I know my clay.

I know in my water, I know in my blood, I know in my bones

That you will never believe in the things I am going to say

Till you are listening in to a funeral all of your own.

— “The Gravedigger,” Jake Thackray

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T1gL2dU6oM>]

Thackray's words have a familiarity to them which many raised in an Anglophone literary culture will know in their water, blood, and bones. The character they sketch has a resonance which, like the lugubrious voice which delivers them, seems to emerge from somewhere just beneath the surface of the soil. Delivering a bracing, robust understanding of death which springs from the routine experience of personal labour, they call to mind the earthy, pragmatic perspective of the First Clown in *Hamlet*'s so-called gravedigger scene. (Most critics agree that nothing indicates the Second Clown in the dialogue is also a grave-digger – as G. R. Hibbard intriguingly puts it in a footnote to 5.1.1-2 in his edition, “he seems to be simply a crony of the First Clown who has stopped for a chat, unable to resist the fascination that the digging of a hole still exerts on Englishmen of all classes.”)

“You will never believe in the things I am going to say” – Thackray’s gravedigger matter-of-factly announces a total certainty that his own perspective will be marginalized by surrounding characters, despite or rather because of his significant craft knowledge: “I know my clay.” Those around him, he tells us, are happy enough to ignore him, and all the reminders of mortality his presence connotes, until forced to recognize the value of his insights on his trade and its social purpose by their own deaths. This relegation of the gravedigger’s viewpoint to the sidelines of mainstream consciousness is, in fact, entirely of a piece with the critical tradition surrounding the Clown in *Hamlet*. Just as the Clown and his fascinated companion are shifted from the central position which they occupy at the beginning of the scene, first by the entrance of Hamlet and Horatio, then by the “maimèd rites” (5.1.180) which attend the funeral of Ophelia and silence them completely, the gravedigger himself in many accounts of his role in *Hamlet* is subordinated to the role of Hamlet.

Hibbard’s own footnote comment on the scene as a whole is instructive: “He tells Hamlet much that Hamlet needs to know, and, in doing so, he extends the whole scope and significance of the tragedy.” So the grave-digger becomes a stepping stone: “know[ing] his clay,” in the sense of understanding the practical and social implications of death and the ritual responses it incites, is valuable not on its own terms but to make him the more-or-less unwitting vehicle for the transmission of a knowledge or attitude which will allow the Prince of Denmark, in Act Five, to assume the part he has been avoiding for the majority of the play beforehand: that of the avenging hero, capable of both enacting and enduring death. Being a man who makes his living from death, the gravedigger confounds the Prince’s expansive metaphysical speculations on the afterlife with the blunt practicalities of one who literally looks death in the face every day, but is credited with about as much agency as the props with which he is most associated: the pickaxe, the spade and the skull.

This perfunctory view of the character can be read between the lines of Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor's footnote to 5.1.211 in their Arden 3 edition, as they attempt to solve the staging problem of his positioning during the funeral procession of a courtier's daughter: "Presumably the Gravedigger also stands aside; some editions and productions have him exit here, but [Michael D] Bristol argues that his choric function would be weakened by such an exit. More prosaically, he needs to stay onstage to continue with the burial at the end of the scene." It would be difficult to find a more literal example of marginalization than the arrival of four or five high-status individuals making it difficult to tell where one of the very few people in this play with a job has actually gone. In the rest of this essay, however, I consider three instances of authors who have "stay[ed] onstage" with the gravedigger, making him not merely a choric commentator on the lives of the great, nor a prosaic source of comic relief, but the focal character of his own poetic narrative, in sung form.

In this, the gravedigger lyrics set to music by Brassens, Thackray and Fersen follow in the tradition established in *Hamlet*, where the Clown's singing is at first openly critiqued as disrespectful and indecorous by the passing Prince:

HAMLET: Has this fellow no feeling of his business? 'A sings in grave-making.
(5.1.55)

Horatio's reply, however, leads his companion into a recognition somewhat akin to Lear's "I have ta'en / Too little care of this" (3.4.29-30): that Hamlet's hierarchical position has put a certain kind of lived knowledge and experience beyond his epistemological reach, and thus the questions of decorum which arise for him might not logically occur to a working man in the same terms:

HORATIO: Custom hath made it in him a property of easiness.

HAMLET: Tis e'en so; the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.

(5.1.56-8)

Here as elsewhere, proximity to death seems to induce a heightened awareness of the very class distinctions which are belied by the anonymous skulls on which Hamlet vamps. The Prince himself, the “little employment” of whose hand might well stand for his reluctance to act over the course of the play, recognizes that while he can afford to be squeamish about death, the gravedigger does not have this luxury. Like the drily banterous pathologist familiar from TV detective serials, Elsinore’s gravedigger has apparently become inured to death itself as a consequence of “custom” and long “employment.”

But despite these assessments – arrived at without any direct interaction with their subject by the higher-status characters – the Clown’s thirty years of service do not in themselves signify that he must be devoid of “feeling.” Though he does not, within the scene itself, make any explicit revelations of personal experience, he chooses to sing a series of excerpts from Thomas Lord Vaux’s “The Aged Lover Renounceth Love” which are either misremembered or deliberately altered. The song is a lament for lost love, and the alterations Shakespeare or his character make to Lord Vaux’s lyrics, as Maurice Hunt demonstrates, “consistently exclud[e] lines critical of the act of loving,” thus maintaining the primary sense of youthful love as a “very sweet” (5.1.51) state of affairs (Hunt 1984, 144); as Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor annotate 5.1.57-60 in their edition, the gravedigger thereby “seems to turn this stanza into a more straightforward celebration of careless youth.”

Predicting Hamlet’s extravagant expressions of his feelings for Ophelia later in the scene, the Clown’s choice of lyric also regrets the separation wrought by mortality on a

youthful love affair, but unlike the Prince, he doesn't confound the living and the dead. The gravedigger describes human remains in the past tense: "this same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull" (5.1.147). Hamlet, however, fails to place this object in a different category of perception from its former owner, which he addresses in the present: "Alas, poor Yorick [...] Where be your gibes now?" (5.1.151-55). And what the Clown is about to lower into the open grave is not a woman, but "one that was a woman" (5.1.108) – now a piece of inert physical matter, rather than what the far less "absolute" (5.1.109) Hamlet still sees as "the fair Ophelia" (5.1.204), a living and beloved individual. As Hunt writes with regard to the gravedigger's own beloved, a character whose existence he sees as implied by the lines from Vaux:

The gravedigger is able to distinguish, in the last verse of his song, his youthful love from his present time-worn state. Mutability, his decay in age, cannot shake his certainty that he once loved and was beloved. The gravedigger thus makes distinctions between various times of life and the conditions of each one. His vision may be phrased another way; he has the ability to keep sweet joys in the past and not allow a joyless present to infect the memory of old pleasures. (Hunt 1984, 144)

Unlike Hamlet, in whose world there can be no mingling of hornpipes and funerals (the phrase from Sidney to which Hunt refers to establish a sense of inflexible decorum), the gravedigger's "view of experience is truly decorous" (Hunt 1984, 143). But despite the gravedigger's attempt to take pride in the "ancient" (5.1.24) heritage of his trade and the durability of his work – building houses which "lasts till doomsday" (5.1.49) – Hamlet seems unlikely to accept his argument, based on a "nascent egalitarian ideology," that those involved in the "productive labour" symbolised by digging, from Adam onwards, maintaining a connection with the clay and the natural cycles of life and death, are the true

gentlefolk (Bristol 1998, 248). Instead, the unpalatable nature of his business, coupled with the apparent “easiness” with which he performs it, make him a victim of Hamlet’s social abjection. The heir to the throne scorns the apparent impropriety of such a “knave” and “peasant” whose manner of conversation with him induces an unwelcome sense of physical intrusion: “the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe” (5.1.109-12).

As such, his role in the scene as determined by the Prince’s line of questioning is to provide answers to trade-specific inquiries – “How long will a man lie i’th’ earth ere he rot?” (5.1.133) – and to essentially furnish the physical material for his ruminations on mortality. Having identified Yorick’s skull as a prop about to take on greater significance – “E’en that” (5.1.150) – the First Clown no longer has anything to say that the Prince will be particularly interested in hearing. This encounter with a decidedly non-dainty hand sparks reflections on the passing of monarchical power – the “noble dust of Alexander ... stopping a bunghole,” “Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay” and so on (5.1.166-7, 5.1.174) – but very little consideration of the material conditions of the gravedigger’s life. It therefore falls to later writers to take up the mantle of the singing gravedigger whose knowledge and personal experience of his despised trade merits greater attention than the Prince at this juncture seems able to give.

“IF DEATH STOPPED COMING ‘ROUND / I WOULD STARVE HERE ON THIS MOUND”’: FROM *HAMLET* TO “LE FOSSOYEUR”

One of the recognized primary sources for the *Hamlet* narrative entering the Elizabethan consciousness is the French *Histoires Tragiques* by Belleforest. Because it contains no

character directly analogous to Ophelia, and because its hero doesn't die at the end, Belleforest has no need for a graveyard scene (c.f. Hibbard 1987, 12). (Saxo Grammaticus features a figure sharing some of Ophelia's plot functions, but no gravediggers, and also ends with its hero victorious and alive.) Shakespeare's addition of two clowns jesting at the verge of death to his partly French source material was notoriously the source of one of the most critical comments about Shakespearean indecorum in the French neoclassical tradition, in Voltaire's "Discourse on Ancient and Modern Tragedy":

They dig her grave on the stage, and the grave-diggers, holding the dead men's skulls in their hands, talk nonsense worthy of them. Hamlet answers their abominable stuff by some whimsies not less disgusting ... (trans D. Nichol Smith, quoted in Bloom 2008, 105)

Voltaire railed elsewhere against Shakespeare's tendency to "show cobblers with mandarins and gravediggers with princes," a trait he sardonically identifies as – in the manner of the Clown's own lines – intending to "remind men of their original equality" (quoted in Wilson 242). For Erin Sullivan this mingling of persons attracted Voltaire's ire precisely because he found it antithetical to useful moral teaching: "It was important to him for drama to make its audiences *better*, and in his view Shakespeare's mix of high and low language, virtuous princesses and crude buffoonery, and tragic events with comic asides did not set the proper example for the greater public" (Sullivan 2007, 4).

In any case, the graveyard scene clearly made a primal impression, and what is perhaps most significant about it is the sense that the Prince is himself verbally debased (answering with "whimsies not less disgusting") by being drawn into conversation with these two figures who expose the instability of hierarchy. A stage world where "our princes speak

like porters” is not one Voltaire could wholeheartedly countenance, and much of the supposed “low” talk occurs in this play when Hamlet comes face to face with figures whose own speech is rather more porter-like than princely. These lines, Michèle Willems notes, have earned Voltaire a reputation abroad as an “enemy of Shakespeare” (Willems 2007, 226), despite the fact that as Sullivan reminds us, “in his early career Voltaire had been a great advocate of Shakespeare, introducing the playwright to the French public and translating portions of his work into French” (Sullivan 2007, 2).

In a later passage, perhaps less well known in English, Voltaire also critiques *Hamlet* in hierarchical terms which, later in the French literary tradition, inspired a powerful counter-reaction. Assuming a clear division of language by social rank which Shakespeare is castigated for ignoring, he argued that “Gilles [a name associated here with provincial ignorance, for which “Billy” might be the most apposite English equivalent], in a country fair, would speak more nobly and decently than Prince Hamlet” does in his first soliloquy (quoted in Willems 2007, 226).ⁱⁱ Willems describes how Voltaire’s “nationalist resistance” induced him to align Shakespeare more and more with “Billy ... the village clown, who represents for him the vulgarity and excess of fairground theatre” (Willems 2007, 226).

It took Victor Hugo, a century later, to recuperate and reintegrate this figure into critical favour by commenting: “Billy Shakespeare – perhaps. I admire Shakespeare, and I admire Billy; I admire that senseless cry, “A rat!” I admire Hamlet’s puns” (quoted in Willems 2007, 237). Willems presents this declaration as a sign that Hugo rejected the idea of “sorting out and excluding the excessive” elements (those Voltaire found indecorous) within Shakespeare, in favour of “integrating everything,” thus recognizing the necessary alliance of “Mount Olympus and fairground theatre,” and the mingling of persons and character types that this brings with it (Willems 2007, 237). The belated appreciation of Shakespeare’s open

and indecorous forms by French literature is now largely associated with Hugo and his contemporaries' Romantic aesthetics, and indeed a translation of the complete works by Hugo's own son, Francois-Victor Hugo, remained in current theatrical use well into the twentieth century.

Alongside or as part of this large-scale reclamation, however, it should be noted that Hugo specifically challenged Voltaire's assessment in writing his own account of a not-entirely-grave gravedigger, slinging his own quips and "quolibets" (Voltaire). In his poem "Pleurs dans la Nuit," written in the 1850s, we encounter a vignette of a figure who "throws shovelfuls of earth on the coffin" of one who had been dreaming sentimentally of "white dove"s and "infinite mourning"; the physical movement of the gravedigger "coming and going over your tomb" making this vision of solemn separation particularly hard to sustain (Hugo 1990, 411). The gravedigger's presentation is heavily corporeal, a grotesque celebration of bodily enjoyment in the midst of decay which thus emphasises the inseparability of the two: despite having just seen human teeth exposed by the earth, "he laughs, he eats, he bites," and he drinks at his work, holding a cup in his hands which are "at each moment confronted / By the trappings of death" (Hugo 1990, 411). Most significantly of all, he also sings, "murmuring scraps of songs" (*chansons hébétées*) over his cup as he carries out his tasks (Hugo 1990, 411).

The musicologist Stephen Rumph points out another near-contemporary French appearance of a similar trope being set to music: in the 1870s, Gabriel Fauré, who had previously set material by Hugo, composed *mélodies* for two "poems that recall the stage songs of French theatre" from the 1838 collection *La comédie de la mort* by Théophile Gautier (Rumph 2015, 500). Though gravediggers do not sing in these compositions, labouring men do and the grave is never far from view. The chosen poems were "La chanson

du pêcheur,” inhabiting a psychological landscape of dead loves, coffins, shrouds, doves, tombs (often in the same words, if not the same rhyme positions, as Hugo’s and as contemporary translations of the Clown’s song in *Hamlet*), and “Tristesse,” where a lamenting figure asks to be dug “a grave without a name” (Rumph 2015, 521). Rumph references the latter in direct connection to *Hamlet*’s gravedigger, a comparison established in René Jasinski’s notes to a 1970 edition of Gautier’s poems: the family resemblance is reinforced when we note that the sad speaker “no longer love[s] anything, / Neither man nor woman,” in terms familiar from *Hamlet* 2.2.260 and famously lingered on in the performance of this speech in the 1986 British film *Withnail and I* (Rumph 2015, 521-2).ⁱⁱⁱ

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKXnII7uKx4>]

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRzJoib_nGM]

In 1952, the great French singer-songwriter Georges Brassens drew on two authors he is known to have admired – Hugo and Shakespeare – to revive and inhabit the trope of the singing gravedigger. Brassens was known for drawing “on ancient and contemporary poetic sources for inspiration” (Goodall 2016, 184). As well as twice referencing Gautier’s poetry in “Le mécréant” and “Le Père Noël et la petite fille,” he had set to music Hugo’s poem “Gastibelza,” and directly referenced *Hamlet* in two other songs, “Germaine, tourangelle” (a setting of a poem by Paul Fort which adapts the weeping willow into the “saule d’Orphelie” – Ophelia’s willow, with a potential pun on “orphan/orphélin”), and the original composition “Le Moyen-âgeux,” which riffs on the phrase “something rotten in the state of Denmark.”^{iv} “Le Fossoyeur” is a song sung by a gravedigger who reflects on the stigmatisation and social misprision he is faced with in the course of his necessary work: a job which allows him to support himself literally “on the backs of the dead.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYu0_kJgnOs]

Joe Flood's 2011 English translation "The Gravedigger" impressively captures the moving simplicity of the original:

[<https://joeflood.bandcamp.com/track/the-gravedigger/> / <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rxp2u9z5S3w>]

Lord knows I'm not one who'd ever pray
That another's soul be borne away
But if death stopped coming 'round
I would starve here on this mound
A poor gravedigger am I

There are those who think that I take pride
In a living made off those who've died
But look closely and you'll see
I don't do it willingly
A poor gravedigger am I

Any time I set my feelings free
That's the time my friends make fun of me
They all poke me in the side
Say, "You look like someone died!"
A poor gravedigger am I

"Death's just part of life," I hear them say,
But I don't know why it is that way
There are those, but I'm not one,
Who can take death as it comes
A poor gravedigger am I

Dear departed one who I'll never know
Should you meet the Lord six feet below
Let him know how much it hurt
This last shovelful of dirt
A poor gravedigger am I
Your poor gravedigger am I

A number of familiar traits are here in evidence: here is a gravedigger who is expected to be inured to death, for whom "custom hath made it a property of easiness." Instead of unfeelingly going about his task, however, the character follows Shakespeare's use of Lord Vaux in displaying a sense of personal vulnerability and regret, despite the social responses which in this narrative have encouraged him to suppress it. In the French, Brassens's character is riddled with worries ("ça m' tracasse") and "releases the reins of his emotion,"

but is confronted by the expectation that he has “no feeling of his business”: figures around him fail to see the emotional toll of the work, or actively mock his emotive engagement. The jokes and laughter directed at him call to mind the jester Yorick, who pours a flagon of Rhenish on the First Clown’s head.

Brassens’s figure seems, at least, to have friends, but friends who seem not to recognise his conflicted approach to the task which has clearly alienated him from a sense of social belonging: even as they treat death more callously than he does. He is driven to defend himself, appealing to God for support, against the implicit accusation that he has “le fond méchant” for engaging in this work: the opening couplet might more literally be rendered “Heaven knows that I’m decent deep down / Never wished a body underground.” Flood’s translation replaces the idea of lacking “remorse” with a disavowal of “pride” in the task which Shakespeare’s Clown associates with professional heritage, adding to the sense that here is merely a “poor” man – like the “poor old” Robert Scarlett (Dixon 1997, 18), cold and in need of a parish-funded nightgown – who relies on death as a source of recession-proof subsistence living: “If death stopped coming round / I would starve here on this mound.”

He attempts to accept the social levelling implied by death – here there is no explicit class animus directed towards him, and nothing akin to the sense that Ophelia is treated differently from her “even Christen” (5.1.24) – but the recognition that death makes us all as if we “had never been such” (5.1.62) brings him neither joy, solace, nor a sense of order: “Though I tell myself “All things must die”/ I’m still not quite sure exactly why.” (Flood’s translation departs slightly from the original in assigning the proverb to another set of speakers, the judgemental “them”).

In the song’s closing movement, the gravedigger addresses a person whom he is burying – speaking to the “brave mort” directly in a way that suggests, unlike Hunt’s reading

of *Hamlet*, that this body is not as categorically separate from the living as “one that was a woman.” Instead, the corpse becomes the messenger for a complaint against God (who seems to exist not above us, benevolently, but in a profoundly earthly space — to be expected, perhaps, from a songwriter known for “savage attacks on organized religion” (Goodall 2016, 190)), about the social cost of doing this necessary and ubiquitous work. That work has led to a complete misreading of his affective life and seen him treated as fundamentally “other” for engaging daily with the business of death, and so as Flood puts it, God ought reasonably to be informed “how much it hurt / This last shovelful of dirt” (Hugo’s gravedigger also covers the coffin in “shovelfuls of earth”). In the phrasing of *Hamlet*, he might equally ask the nameless dead to “Tell him how dearly I’ve paid / For a pickaxe and a spade.”

“IT GETS YOU DOWN”: JAKE THACKRAY’S “THE GRAVEDIGGER”

In the previous section, I established a plausible chain of connections by which the gravedigger of Elsinore, added by Shakespeare to the French source of his play (or at least of the lost *Ur-Hamlet*), the *Histoires Tragiques* by Belleforest, may have made his way into Brassens’s 1952 recording. The next hop is rather shorter: though Jake Thackray’s ‘The Gravedigger’ is not in any literal sense a translation of Brassens’s lyric, it forms part of a wider and well-documented pattern of appropriation within which Thackray “Englished” the style and content of the French *chansonnier*.

Colin Evans, a lecturer in French at the University of Cardiff, had brought the two singers together for a “one-off concert” at the Sherman Theatre on campus, “most unusual” given that “Brassens rarely travelled outside France” (Goodall 2016, 184, 191). Writing shortly after Thackray’s death for a Brassens fanzine, Evans remarked that Thackray “was

the English Brassens – the same humanity, the same humour, the same way of telling a story, the same mastery of language and the same liberties taken with words” (Evans 2003).

Thackray aimed consciously for this artistic profile: Mark Goodall asserts that he, “almost uniquely, tried to emulate Brassens, to create an Anglo-Saxon version of the *chanson* to tell English stories and critique the English sensibility” (Goodall 2016, 186). A 2002 obituary by the singer-songwriter Momus (Nick Currie) placed him in a “pantheon of dark comic masters” alongside such figures as Chaucer, Villon, Ivor Cutler and Juvenal, but especially singled out “his great mentor Brassens.”

The Leeds-born songwriter discovered Brassens’ music on the radio while teaching in Lille, France in the 1950s. Having, in this formative period, “missed out on rock,” “all [his] influences were French,” and over the course of his career he particularly “helped to introduce Brassens' songs to British audiences” (Leigh 2002). As well as performing “Dans L’Eau De La Claire Fontaine” in his live concerts, he produced three recorded translations of Brassens which Evans calls “easily the best in English”; an accolade which could be partly ascribed to Thackray’s own assessment that he was “not so much translating the songs, as making them happen again, in England” (quoted in Goodall 2016, 187). For instance, “Brother Gorilla,” an adaptation of Brassens’s satire on capital punishment “Le Gorille,” replaced the original’s reference to the guillotine with its equivalent, hanging, in the English legal system, and made its proponent a distinctly English “petty sessions judge.” Evans noted a suspicion that yet more translations went unrecorded, a thought partly supported by Thackray’s own comments on “Brother Gorilla”:

I added a couple of my own jokes and changed the chorus, but Georges said that was okay. I would like to do some more, but he's no longer here to pass judgement and I wouldn't like him to think I was mucking about with his songs. (Leigh 2002)

Outside of direct translation, Goodall outlines a number of points of contact between the two men's oeuvres: "both sang in their own way of society's 'little people' or 'marginiaux,'" in "celebration of the 'downtrodden'," in relation to such shared themes as "money ... religion, mortality" (Goodall 2016, 189-90, quoting Christopher Pinet and Julian Barnes). From this summary alone it is clear enough what would have appealed to Thackray about Brassens's singing "fossoyeur," and Goodall reminds us that the singer had form in undertaking such indirect homages: drawing like its forebear on Villon's "device of a pretend will," 'The Last Will and Testament of Jake Thackray', written at the start of his career, is essentially an English version of Brassens's 'Testament' (Goodall 2016, 190).

Before assessing Thackray's "Englishing" of this particular Brassens character, however, it will be worth briefly noting the still-closer connection the songwriter is likely to have enjoyed with Shakespeare's comparable figure. After France and before his musical career took off, Thackray returned to his native Leeds to teach English in the local Intake School, beginning in 1963, where some of his former students recalled to music historian Peter Mills that he taught Shakespeare primarily by "reading it out loud to the class and doing different voices for each character," thus making the texts "come alive" (Mills 2014).

The school's theatrically-minded headteacher, Charles Gardiner, encouraged the performing career of his employee, who was already playing songs in classroom contexts as "audio aids" (Clayson 2002)), by introducing him to the producers of the BBC's regional television programme *Look North*. Gardiner also staged a Summer Festival every year based around the performance of a play — usually Shakespeare — which reportedly brought the teaching timetable to a standstill (Watterson 2014). In telephone interviews conducted in 2014, two of Jake's former colleagues, Graham Stanley and Trevor Thewlis, recalled *Romeo*

and Juliet, King Lear and *The Tempest* as being among the chosen productions performed during Thackray's employment at Intake.

Combining the guiding influence of Brassens with his experience of extracurricular Shakespeare at Intake and his classroom experience giving vivid voice to small roles in the plays, it is therefore unsurprising that when Thackray came to write an English spin on "Le Fossoyeur" — an imitation following in the footsteps of the *chansonnier's* own tributes to Hugo and Villon — the most obvious comparison to this song in the singer's native language should continue to exert its pull. Shakespeare's gravedigger is, after all, like many characters in the "cast" of both Brassens's and Thackray's songs as described by Goodall, an "actual representativ[e] of the unprivileged" who demonstrates a strong awareness of social class, wealth, and privilege (Bristol 1998, 247). Thackray's "staunchy left-wing" politics, along with his Catholic faith, might well have attuned him particularly to how, in the play, these three things affect the four last things as death both dissolves and foregrounds social distinctions (Leigh 2002).

The gravedigger's role necessarily brings him into daily contact with "the blunt and fearless acknowledgement of death as a process of social levelling"; this acknowledgement, in its fullest extent, teaches that "doomsday is a horizon that corresponds to the overthrow of social inequality," in which "all claims to hierarchical superiority [will be] nullified" (Bristol 1998, 247, 251). Nonetheless, the Clown's discussion of Ophelia's treatment after her implied suicide suggests that the living attempt to enforce a continuing hierarchy in death and burial, because "wealth and privilege influence [the] determination" of "the spiritual condition of the deceased" (Bristol 1998, 247). Thackray's response to "Le Fossoyeur," "The Gravedigger," thus takes up precisely this aspect of the Shakespearean character identified by

Bristol as exemplifying “plebeian consciousness,” by exploring how the rituals of social politeness intersect with the business of burial (Bristol 1998, 251).

Thackray’s lyric exists in two versions, the earlier of which, “The Gravedigger,” was later reworked into a song titled “Family Grave” which replaces the first-person gravedigger singer-narrator with a family member and adopts a somewhat more comic tone, while maintaining the central concerns and many of the same lyrics. Sidelining the gravedigger himself may represent a conscious step away from the French source material, or a desire to take a less detached approach to the material, foregrounding complex and grotesque family relationships through the lens of a direct participant as Thackray had done in songs such as “Family Tree” and perhaps his best-known work, “Lah-Di-Dah.” The first version, “The Gravedigger,” which sticks more closely to Brassens’s use of the character trope, will be my primary focus here.

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T1gL2dU6oM>]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW4oS8J4RSc>]

After the introduction of the gravedigger, once again centre-stage, whose first-person identification of himself with the hard-won knowledge gleaned from his job (“I know my clay”) and who expects his contributions to be misread or ignored (“you will never believe in the things I am going to say”) puts him directly in Brassens’s lineage, Thackray’s song turns to a family reunion: “uncles and aunties and nieces and nephews and sisters-in-law.” The reason behind this unusual event is a death in the family: “The only time when all of them meet is when one of them dies,” at which point implicitly unexpected relations come out of the woodwork: “A family swarms with them; they teem; they are thicker than flies.”

In *Hamlet*, it also takes a death to bring an uncle and a nephew together, interrupting the Prince’s studies in Wittenberg and creating a new and uncomfortable family dynamic; the

teeming flies of Thackray's family group are reminiscent of the natural overabundance Hamlet fears in the "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" which has become his world, possessed by the "rank and gross" things of nature (1.2.135-6). Beneath their outward "respects" these fractured families, it transpires, are keeping an eye on potential changes to their social and financial position brought on by death: "They are studying form and weighing up who it is going to be next / To go under the slab, whose turn it is next to pay for the 'do'." More broadly, they are always out to get each other, or to get something from each other:

Then there are those, of course, who turn up and can then hardly wait
For the vicar to stop and the coffin to drop and the sobbing subside,
And then they are barely a blur as they sprint for the cemetery gates
To go get their hands on the money, the food, or the widow's backside.

The combination of a wake buffet and the hasty, carnal pursuit of a bereaved woman recall the sped-up intermingling of food, sex and death contained in Hamlet's summary of Gertrude's second marriage: "the funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.179-80). Different burials elicit different responses, all of them exaggeratedly unappealing in their own way: at the loss of a child, for instance, "the mother embarrasses you with a sudden hysterical scream / Where the coffin you came to see off is pathetically small." Elsewhere, there is unwillingness to "speak ill" of the dead which is reminiscent of the white-washed reputation of Hamlet's father: a man who suffers horrible physical punishment in a purgatorial space for unspecified, unabsolved crimes. Most of the characters in the play seem to share the impulse of Thackray's mourners, who insist on saying "'What a good family man, and a wonderful friend,' even if / He was a palpable pain in the arse and he died of a dose."

The gravedigger here is a particularly isolated figure, not presented as having any friends or family of his own. Instead he observes, seeing — and seeing through — all of this, from the position Bristol suggests his counterpart might occupy in *Hamlet*: a “Plebeian chorus” remaining onstage in the background, accumulating awareness of the differences and similarities between “great folk” and “their even Christen” (5.1.22-24) at the boundary between life and death (Bristol 1998, 251). “I see many different fashions of mourning, both fancy and plain,” begins the second verse, before turning its focus onto those figures who “bellow and howl at the drop of a corpse.” We might recognise this kind of uncontrollable explosion of what Claudius calls “unmanly grief” (1.2.94) from the behaviour of both Hamlet and Laertes, leaping and weeping in Ophelia’s grave.

Despite his sometimes scathing social diagnoses, the character is still capable of emotive response: he can be “embarrassed” by the scenes around him, but also, and more positively, be moved by the “pathetic” plight of individual dead bodies to whom, like Brassens’s figure and perhaps unlike Shakespeare’s, he speaks in a tone of engaged benediction: “In a whisper often I / say “Good luck, my friend. Goodbye.” He also follows Brassens’s narrator in not accepting, but instead railing against, the unfairness of death itself: “There are days, days when I / Shake my shovel at the sky.” If we want to imagine how *Hamlet*’s gravedigger, if he remains onstage, might perceive a funeral such as that which prompts the outraged question “What ceremony else?” (5.1.185), we could therefore do worse than listen to Thackray’s response to the practical task of “the putting of the people in the ground.” When there is “no one there – at least, just a policeman and a priest,” quite understandably, it “gets you down, down, down,” in a musical phrase which similarly deepens, like three repeated shovel strokes digging deeper and deeper into the earth.

In rewriting this narrative without the gravedigger, Thackray eventually produces in the later “Family Grave” a more independent lyric that leans particularly on the English aspects of his social comedy: a familiar world “where the booze is rough and the grub is duff and no flowers at all.” He also reorientates the song more towards life with the teasing new refrain: “For every dead one there are dozens of us alive.” This substitution offers the listener a greater sense of complicity in the sham mourning, and results in a more tightly-framed composition where we become, in a sense, part of the family. It does so, however, at the cost of the weary omniscience about what death does to the living that the original introduction — “I know my clay” — indicates is the learnt result of a long professional lineage running back through Brassens and Hugo to *Hamlet*.

“THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT / GIVES ME AN APPETITE” : THOMAS FERSEN’S “CROQUE”

One of the most successful and critically-lauded performers working in the *chanson* tradition in France today, Thomas Fersen (particularly in his most simply arranged work, foregrounding vocals and guitar or ukulele) cannot fail to be influenced by the cultural prominence Brassens enjoys within the genre. To my knowledge, he has not publicly mentioned an awareness of Thackray’s writing: his 2003 song “Croque,” however, shows distinct connections to the work of his French forebear and offers a recent reprise of the figure of the singing gravedigger.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgs_8sIEtpk]

The song has previously been translated by Martin Dwyer, an Irish chef who lives and works in France, in an effective and comic rendering which, as might be expected, is highly attentive to the song's culinary detail, but has not yet been recorded by an English-language artist (Dwyer 2012). What follows is my own attempt to “mak[e the song] happen again, in England,” in the tradition of Thackray's takes on Brassens (as quoted in Goodall 2016, 187); where necessary I refer directly below to more literal translations of the French lyric.

When I've barely stepped inside
Doesn't take her long
To say “you look like someone died”
And she's not far wrong
Well I think you get the drift of
What I do all right —
But I find the graveyard shift
Gives me an appetite
I don't let it get me down
I could eat all day
Isn't nothing in this town I couldn't
Put away
Then it's back to digging graves and
If I do my best
It'll help my pie and gravy
And my pint digest

When the priest is eulogising
I've a hank'ring for
A little something appetizing:
Leg of lamb, mint sauce
When they start to bring the wreaths in
Something starts to stir
It's my stomach which is grieving
As they're laid in earth

By the cemetery gates
There's an empty stretch
Where I've dug a little space for
A potato patch
And I tend my little plot at
Any time I can
In my sober mourning coat
I hide my wat'ring can

When I delve and when I dig
Between the services
When I find a worm, a big'un,

What a treat it is
And I store it up for fishing
In my tackle-box
You could never wish yourself
A better picnic spot

When the priest takes up his ewer —
Water blessed by God —
I'll be thinking of my stew
And my boiled spuds
When the drops from his aspergil
Strike my top hat's brim
Then my stomach starts to gurgle
Then it starts to scream

When I chew a garlic clove
You can hear it crunch
Or a mushroom or an onion
Both'll do for lunch
It's a small serving
But it's what God sends
'Cause sometimes it seems the sermon's
Gonna never end
Then the clouds have started thinning
Just as Fate compels
And the sun has started spinning
Like a Babybel
Then I find that I'm so starving
That I eat my hat
And my buttons and my scarf
And then a passing rat

Then it starts to eat me up — I'm
Giving up the ghost
When I think about my supper
And my Sunday roast
Can't believe how long it's lasted
I'm not at my best
Stretching out upon the grass, I
Lay me down to rest

Here, at last, is a gravedigger who is, if not happy, at least apparently unperturbed by his task in the manner Horatio and Hamlet ascribe to the First Clown: my translation of “Faut pas se laisser abattre,” “I don't let it get me down,” underscores how different Fersen's take is from the anguished figures who deliver what are effectively gravediggers' soliloquys in Brassens

and Thackray. Fersen instead follows and expands upon Hugo's snacking gravedigger, his singer-narrator characterized by a comic insolence and a gluttonous enjoyment of life in the midst of death.

The gravedigger (the title draws on the slang term for this profession, "croque-mort", but also the well-known "croque monsieur" sandwich) is introduced with a metaphorical visual reference almost exactly the same as that applied to Brassens's: "une tête d'enterrement" where the earlier song has "figure d'enterrement," translated here and by Flood as "look[ing] like someone's died." The speed at which the lyrics move on, though, tell us all we need to know about the emotive impact of this encounter. The gravedigger's wife (and here he is more visibly socially integrated, introduced to us in terms of a close family relationship) may be "not far wrong" about his appearance, but this is immediately subsumed into a description of rapid, capacious eating: as Fersen literally puts it, "I leave my head [as in "tête d'enterrement"] on the coat-rack, and I sit at the table."

This singer is consumed not by grief, but by hunger and the deferred prospect of its being gratified: we are told explicitly "It's my stomach which cries at each burial" and, more allusively, "Then it starts to eat me up — I'm / Giving up the ghost / When I think about my supper / And my Sunday roast" (in the original, an absent croque-madame and paupiettes are lamented). The gravedigger almost blends with the site of his work, drinking "like a hole," and different varieties of food pile up in his thoughts in a long, additive list across the course of the song, many of which he himself nourishes "between the services" in his private "potato patch." Where the ground is "inhabité" — not yet required for the dead — it thus serves to furnish food for the living.

As such, in this final song, there is a kind of reimagining of the relationship between death and profusion which occurs in *Hamlet*: the rank growth of a garden is here a source of pleasurable abundance, baked meats (or at least, boiled or fried, in Fersen's "pot-au-feu" and

“côtelette”) are greeted with relish rather than horror, worms are used not for ruminations on the dissolution of social categories but for fishing bait, and the dead themselves – whoever they may be – are forgotten entirely. By the end of the song, the gravedigger seems exhausted, certainly, but he is not broken by the work he does: and the buoyancy of his response suggests, perhaps, that this “easiness” might not in fact be such a negative quality.

CONCLUSION

Despite their constant closeness to the things of death, none of these singing gravediggers cherish or desire it – even Fersen’s robust figure seems at best to see it as an encumbrance, getting in the way of a life lived in full satiety. Fersen’s detachment is closer to Hugo’s, and to the imagined “easiness” of the First Clown who seems able to blithely describe the unknown dead in abstract terms as “your whoreson dead body” (5.1.140): the singer of “Croque” seems more the type to “knoc[k]” his charges “about the mazard with a sexton’s spade” (5.1.73) than even Shakespeare’s own figure, whose emotional life and history, as we have seen, has been the subject of speculation.

Neither of the earlier singer-narrators, however, are so deaf to death’s depredations as to fail to feel regret for the body of a child, in the “pathetically small” coffin to which Thackray alludes, or the unknown “brave mort” to which Brassens bids farewell: in this they hark back to the long-lost youthful love which Shakespeare’s figure laments. The confession of feeling which Brassens and Thackray make explicit in their use of the gravedigger trope therefore seems like a riposte to the “hand of little employment” (as perhaps, in a different mode, does Fersen’s joyous flippancy). In this, they come closer to the “poor old” Robert Scarlett, whose unique contribution to his 16th century community is memorialised on the walls of Peterborough Cathedral: these *Hamlet*-inspired gravedigger songs are a necessary corrective to the limited understanding of the “feeling” or feelings of a rare working man in a

tragedy which depicts, among other things, the abolition of the hierarchical codes of honour, inheritance and revenge in an aristocratic society by the indiscriminating, “stealing steps” of death.

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ⁱ All further references are to the text of the New Oxford Shakespeare, edited by Taylor, Bourus et al, unless otherwise stated.

ⁱⁱ All translations of Willems, and Voltaire and Hugo as quoted in Willems, are my own, as are translations of “Pleurs dans la Nuit.”

ⁱⁱⁱ I would like here to express my gratitude towards one of my peer-reviewers, a historical musicologist, for this fascinating additional reference.

^{iv} A third song, “Le Modeste,” cites *Richard III* and indicates the breadth of Brassens’s likely reading of Shakespeare in translation. Many of the references I describe have been previously identified by Rochard, Yendley and contributors to the crowd-sourced annotation website analysebrassens.com; see Bibliography.