**Ophelia's Burial**

From *The Riddles of Hamlet* by Simon Augustine Blackmore. Boston, Stratford & Co.   
  
From the death of Ophelia, we naturally pass to the scene of her burial. Without interrupting the action of the drama, her funeral serves as a brief respite for the audience before the breathless on-rush of the fast approaching and final catastrophe. The action is carried on by grave-diggers who by their grim humor and heartless indifference to the nature of their work, form a strong background to a scene wherein, by contact with most opposite extremes, the character of the hero is further luminously revealed. The weird humor of his philosophizing on life, the grave diggers and their gruesome moralizing, the funeral procession and the grapple in the grave, are all contrivances which make the scene a miracle of construction. It exhibits a remarkable change in Hamlet since his return to Denmark.   
  
No longer indulging in soliloquies, nor in expressions of weariness of life, nor in self-reproachful analysis of thoughts and feelings, he abandons with one exception the role of dementia, and, with the mists of melancholy slowly dissolving, discloses a new consciousness of power. It may be partly due to success in undermining the plot of Claudius and to the incriminating document in his possession, but more to a feeling which recent events have forced upon him — a feeling that he is in the hands of Providence.   
  
The scene opens with a dialogue between two grave-diggers, who with spades enter a church-yard to make a grave for Ophelia. The conversation of these clowns, the one a sexton, and the other, a common laborer, is replete with a strange wit that never fails to awaken delight and merriment. Incidentally it reveals the Poet's diversified genius, which enables him to impersonate so naturally even rude and ignorant characters in their peculiar habits and modes of reasoning. The first clown, laughing in untaught wisdom at the learning of philosophers, flashes his ready wit at almost every stroke of the spade; but, beneath it all is discernible a deep and solemn wealth of meaning. Though old, he is yet vigorous and bold of thought, and, in universal sweep of judgment, formulates principles which may or may not justify self-murder. In boastful words he prides himself upon his own avocation and the exalted dignity of his office.   
  
The works of other men, whether of stone or iron are all sure to crumble under the ravaging hand of time ; but the lowly edifices which he constructs shall, in defiance of the storms of ages, remain intact till the day of general doom. His sane philosophy enables him to perceive the difference between substance and accident, between real and artificial distinctions of social life; for daily he sees exposed before his eyes the fact that all have from Adam the same common patent of nobility.   
  
The dialogue begins with a discussion concerning the justice of according Ophelia Christian burial. Supposing that she had wilfully sought her own fate, or doom, the sexton appeals to the canon of the Church which forbids the burial of deliberate and wilful suicides in consecrated ground. In those days, all Europe was either Jewish, infidel, or Christian; and the term Christian was synonymous with Catholic, for none of the many modern Christian sects had as yet been born. The sexton's opponent appeals in turn to the verdict of the "crowner."   
  
The coroner was originally a royal official whose duty was to secure the property of suicides in forfeiture to the crown. His verdict was, as is evident from the text, that Ophelia, like any other Catholic in good standing with the Church, was entitled to Christian burial, either because her death was accidental, or, if wilful and deliberate, was due to her insanity: and one bereft of reason is according to the teaching of the Church, incapable of moral guilt in the violation of the Almighty's "canon against self-slaughter."   
  
The sexton still holding out, resorts to his own peculiar method of reasoning, whereby, as commentators commonly suppose, the Poet intended to parody an inquest held in his day on a certain Sir James Hales. His suicide in a fit of insanity was an admitted fact; but at the inquest arose much quibbling as to the activity or passivity of Sir James in his own death. The Second Clown, impressed by the reasoning of the Sexton, states his positive opinion that, if Ophelia had not been of the aristocracy, she would have been excluded from consecrated ground. This opinion of the clown is not uncommon to Catholics of the ignorant, and unreligious type. Around them, they daily see the influence which wealth and power exercise in the world, and naturally conclude that the same forces invade the sanctuary and sway its ministers.   
  
It is a rash judgment born of ignorance or forgetfulness of the fact that the Church has always gloried in being the Church of the poor; that history shows her in unremitting warfare against worldliness in its triple form: "the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life;" that, consistent with her teaching, she reduces to practice her precept of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. She receives at her sacred altar the serf and the monarch on equal footing, just as they are in the sight of God. In reply to the clown, the sexton ironically deprecates the fact that the world looks with more leniency upon the drowning or hanging of aristocrats, than of their poorer and "even Christians." The term "even" or fellow Christian contains an allusion to what has been noted above: namely, the professed and actual equality of all Christians in the eyes of the Church.   
  
Another error as palpable as the clown's is found in a recent edition of *Hamlet*, which we quote merely as a sample of the misleading notes which often "illuminate" our modern school editions of the tragedy. Commenting on the words "out of Christian burial," the author in wondrous simplicity affirms: "The Christianity of Shakespeare's day prescribed that one who ended his own life should be buried without service, at cross roads, and with a stake driven through his heart." How cruel and barbarous! How the young student's mind and heart must be stirred to rebellion against a religion which sanctioned a practice so inhuman and repulsive. But is it fact or fiction?   
  
The Christianity of Shakespeare's day comprehended Catholicity, Anglicanism, and Puritanism. Anglicanism was a new state religion established by law of Parliament; Puritanism was another new creed, but non-conformist and in opposition to the state religion. The charge, if made against the Catholic Church, is altogether false. The old religion, in which Shakespeare was born and raised, never ordained that "a suicide be buried at cross roads, nor that a stake be driven through his heart."   
  
The Church has always justly distinguished between culpable and inculpable suicides. To the latter class belong the insane, and to them, as to Ophelia, she accords all her sacred rites, as well as burial in consecrated ground; to the former class belong all who in sane mind wittingly and voluntarily violate God's mandate against self-slaughter. Such, because dying in rebellion against the Creator, she refuses to recognize as of her fold, and, therefore, takes no part in their burial. If from a popular standpoint there be crimes of darker hue than suicide, there is none other by which from a Catholic standpoint a man so utterly renounces his religion and his God.   
  
A common law, which was prevalent throughout Christendom in Shakespeare's time, held that one who encouraged and assisted another to commit suicide was guilty of murder as a principal. Though the willful suicide was denied Christian burial, his friends were free to bury him where and how they pleased, but not with the sacred rites of the Church, nor within her consecrated grounds. These were reserved solely for her true and faithful children.   
  
As Ophelia's corpse is, according to the coroner's inquest, to receive Christian burial, her grave is to be made "straight." The words, "make her grave straight" have been a source of trouble to many commentators, merely from their ignorance of Catholic customs and practices. The words are clear to every Catholic, and they were no less so to Dr. Johnson who, though a Protestant, was known to have been remarkably well acquainted with Catholic doctrines and practices. Ophelia's grave in the church-yard was "to be made straight" that is from east to west, or parallel with the church itself.   
  
According to a universal custom dating back to the earliest days of Christianity, Catholics are wont whenever it is possible, to erect their churches facing the Orient, or the Holy Land in honor of the Savior, the Blessed Founder of their religion. In modern Catholic cemeteries, where there is no sacred temple, the Church erects in its stead a great cross which also faces the Orient, and round about it she consigns to their long sleep her faithful children, all turned towards the East, whence in their Christian hope of a glorious resurrection, they await the second coming of the Savior, their God and King.

**How to cite this article:**   
Blackmore, Simon Augustine. *The Riddles of Hamlet*. Boston: Stratford & company, 1917. *Shakespeare Online*. 2 Aug. 2011. < http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/opheliaburial.html >.