



# Kent Academic Repository

**Lowe, Dunstan (2023) *Yorick's Skull and the Farting Irishwomen: Folkloric Migrations in Late Mediaeval Literature*. Shakespeare Quarterly . ISSN 0037-3222. (In press)**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/103116/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Yorick's Skull and the Farting Irishwomen:  
Folkloric Migrations in Late Mediaeval Literature

This article offers an approach to folkloric motifs in pre-modern literature, and with it, two new answers to old questions. The first is how Shakespeare got the idea for Yorick's skull: whereas most critics have suggested a general inspiration from the *memento mori* theme in the visual arts,<sup>1</sup> I offer the first ever investigation of a textual source.<sup>2</sup> The second question is why, in an Irish legend recorded in two twelfth-century texts, a certain man's tomb made women fart and laugh when they saw it. I offer both answers in the form of a genealogy for the jester's skull motif, which proves to be a pattern of cultural migrations between Francia, Ireland, Norway, and England between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. The results shed new light on several European literary texts, both Latin and vernacular, not least scene 5.1 of *Hamlet*. By reconstructing a historical development from a fart-prompting tomb to a jester's skull, I demonstrate that supernatural motifs can survive significant adaptation between different literary genres, as religious, obscene, and humorous elements are edited or recoded.

1. *Yorick in Hamlet*

---

<sup>1</sup> Several Shakespearean scholars have argued that Yorick's skull stages an iconographic convention of the time, in which a man contemplates mortality in the form of skulls or skeletons: Bridget Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology* 67 (1970): 57–66; Roland M. Frye, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: Hamlet and the Iconographic Traditions," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30 (1979): 15–28; Andrew Sofer, "The Skull on the Renaissance Stage: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Props," *English Literary Renaissance* 28 (1998): 47–74; Margie Pignataro, "Unearthing Hamlet's Fool: A Metatheatrical Excavation of Yorick," *Journal of the Wooden O* 6 (2006): 74–89.

<sup>2</sup> Two nineteenth-century publications anticipate my argument that Yorick has textual predecessors, though only in passing and without explanation: Anon., "Old Norse Mirror of Men and Manners," *London Quarterly Review* 285 (January 1877): 28–44, at 44; Frederick Metcalfe, *The Englishman and the Scandinavian: A Comparison of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Literature* (London: Trübner & Co., 1880), 354. They note that the jester's skull in the *Konungs Skuggsjá* anticipates that of Yorick, and the first also mentions the two Irish sources, though there is no attempt to explain how they are related. It seems almost certain that Anon. 1877 was Metcalfe himself, who then republished the idea in a monograph three years later, removing mention of the Irish sources.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1599–1601, and new information about it is scarce after four centuries of study;<sup>3</sup> however, its most famous scene is not as original as most critics have believed.<sup>4</sup> Imagine a Viking Christian graveyard, where fresh graves are being dug: an old skull is found by chance, recognized as that of a famous jester, and then handled and inspected. Although this narrative is familiar from scene 5.1 of *Hamlet*, there are striking parallels with another text written down three and a half centuries earlier: a mediaeval anecdote about an Irishman named Clefsan, in the Old Norse text *Konungs skuggsjá* (*The King's Mirror*).<sup>5</sup> I shall argue that this must have reached Shakespeare in some form to become the model for *Hamlet's* graveyard scene (5.1), and that this was the latest in a series of adaptations. I will step further into the past to argue that Clefsan's story is itself a hybrid of two separate stories: a serious one from Iceland and a comic one from Ireland. This reflects the cultural dialogue between the two cultures established during centuries of Viking

---

<sup>3</sup> The most recent contributions on Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet* are: W.S. Heckscher, "'Was This the Face...?'," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1938): 295–97, discussed below, and Julie Maxwell, "Counter-Reformation Versions of Saxo: A New Source for *Hamlet*?," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004): 518–560, who proposes that some details including the 'sledded Polacks' (1.1.63) derive from Olaus Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (Rome, 1555).

<sup>4</sup> Excepting Metcalfe, *The Englishman and the Scandinavian*, critics have always assumed that Yorick's skull was Shakespeare's invention. None has proposed a specific source, besides the visual motif of men contemplating mortality in the form of skulls and skeletons (Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy"; Frye, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls"; Sofer, "Skull on the Renaissance Stage"; Pignataro, "Unearthing Hamlet's Fool"). Regrettably, Yngve B. Olsson's "In Search of Yorick's Skull: Notes on the Background of *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Studies* 4 (1968): 183–220 (with riposte by A.P. Stabler, "More on the Search for Yorick's Skull; Or, The Goths Refuted," *Shakespeare Studies* 7 (1974): 203–208) is only metaphorical. Shakespeare's other additions to the story of Amleth (the ghost, play-within-a-play, and beloved's suicide) are all borrowed from Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587), and also have parallels in Shakespeare's earlier plays. By contrast, neither grave-scene nor prop skull has any forerunners: 'Act 5, scene 1 of *Hamlet* is apparently the first known scene in English Renaissance drama to be laid in a graveyard, and the first scene in which skulls are used as stage properties' (Sofer, 'Skull on the Renaissance Stage', 47). The *Hamlet*-like German play *der Bestrafte Brudermord*, whose date is uncertain, has no graveside scene. As usual, nothing can be said on this matter regarding the so-called 'Ur-*Hamlet*' indicated by Thomas Lodge in 1596.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent overview of the genesis, influence, and manuscript history of the *Konungs skuggsjá*, see Karl G. Johansson and Elise Kleivane, "Konungs skuggsjá and the Interplay between Universal and Particular," in *Speculum Septentrionale: 'Konungs skuggsjá' and the European Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. Karl G. Johansson and Elise Kleivane (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 2018), 9–33. The standard edition is *Konungs Skuggsjá, 2nd edn.*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo: Norsk historisk kjeldeskrift-institutt, 1983); the *editio princeps* is *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. and transl. Hálfðan Einarsson (Sórey, 1768); and the most recent edition with detailed introduction is Laurens M. Larson's English translation and commentary (*The King's Mirror: Speculum Regale—Konungs Skuggsjá* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1917).

settlement.<sup>6</sup> The result fits perfectly into the grotesque aesthetic of Shakespeare's study in melancholy, with its acute juxtapositions of absurd mirth and morbid grief, and may hint at previously unknown inspirations behind one of his most famous plays.

The basis for *Hamlet* is the story of Amleth the Dane, a Viking historical legend written down in the thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In the Latin *Gesta Danorum* (*History of the Danes*), published in or after 1208 by Saxo Grammaticus,<sup>8</sup> Amleth pretends to be a fool through a combination of absurd behavior and riddling speech, buying himself time to discover and kill the uncle who murdered his father. Two features show that the plot is more folklore than history: first, Amleth is a "speaking name" meaning Fool;<sup>9</sup> second, the prince sets himself the moral principle of never telling lies, which turns him into a trickster who utters insane-sounding technical truths. The theme of "Escape by shamming madness" is found in other folktale traditions, including the ancient Roman historical legend about Brutus (which is another speaking name meaning Fool).<sup>10</sup> The Danish story of Amleth is the indirect template for the plot of *Hamlet*; I will argue that the Norse legend of Clefsan is, likewise, the indirect template for the Yorick scene. It would be typical of Shakespeare's compositional method to integrate one narrative source into the other as a coherent whole.

---

<sup>6</sup> As I shall argue, the Irish story in turn adapted a Frankish Latin text of the tenth century: this reflects a separate and earlier commerce of ideas through the Latin-reading monastic culture of Western Europe.

<sup>7</sup> Saxo's story of Amleth had circulated in Latin ethnography before de Belleforest's 1572 translation into French. Versions appear in Albert Krantz's *Chronica regnorum aquilonarium Daniae, Sueciae, et Noruagiae* (Strasbourg, 1546) and Olaus Magnus's *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (*Description of the Northern Peoples*: Rome, 1555). Maxwell, 'Counter-Reformation Versions' gives a thorough study of these and other potential sources.

<sup>8</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*: the preface mentions Danish conquests north of the Elbe, which happened in 1208. de Belleforest published the material as *L'histoire tragique d'Hamlet* in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1572).

<sup>9</sup> In the Old Icelandic *Prose Edda*, the name is rendered *Amlóði* ('Fool, Simpleton'). Compare Irish and Scottish *amhlair* ('fool'), which originally meant 'jester', and the jester's name Admlithe in the Irish *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (see Lisa A. Collinson, "A New Etymology for *Hamlet*? The names *Amlethus*, *Amlodi* and *Admlithi*," *Review of English Studies* (New Series) 62:257 (2011): 675–694).

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, K523.1.

Shakespeare knew the Amleth story through the French adaptation of François de Belleforest, which did far more to shape it than rendering the prince's name as 'Hamlet'. The most important of de Belleforest's embellishments was giving Amleth/Hamlet's character a melancholic dimension. This profoundly ironizes the story's preoccupation with fools and foolery, which it arguably needed in order to work as Elizabethan stage tragedy: the theme of foolishness remains central, but Shakespeare makes further adaptations, building a more elaborate plot that is recentered on the psychology of the main character. Absurdity and joking are now just one side of a coin, and on the flipside are madness and even death (with its melancholic implication that life itself is folly). In narrative terms, the main function of scene 5.1 is to show Hamlet's changing state of mind after returning from England and on seeing Ophelia dead. But as a morbidly humorous scene in which the 'fool' Hamlet contemplates the skull of a court-fool, offered by another 'fool' (the First Clown), it is thematically crucial.

Although we know exactly how Saxo's Amleth was transmitted to Shakespeare, we can only guess at how the *Konungs skuggsjá's* Clefsan might have reached him. The Norse original was inaccessible beyond Scandinavia, but at least part was paraphrased into Latin by the fourteenth century and could have travelled further.<sup>11</sup> The nearest link that I have found between the *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Hamlet* is through Richard Hakluyt, the famous English geographer, who was known to Shakespeare, at least by reputation, in 1606.<sup>12</sup> In the expanded 1598 edition of his 1589 principal work, Hakluyt reprinted—and translated—a recent Latin passage by the Icelandic author Arngrímur Jónsson, in which Arngrímur scornfully recounted the marvels of the *Konungs skuggsjá*; unfortunately for our purposes, he

---

<sup>11</sup> The Latin paraphrase was published in G. Storm, "Brudstykke af en latinsk Oversaettelse af Kongespeilet fra 14de Aarhundrede," *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* 1 (1883): 110–112.

<sup>12</sup> *Macbeth* (1606) mentions a sailor who is 'to Aleppo gone, master o' the *Tiger*' (1.3.7), sharing Hakluyt's destination and vessel.

considered the Clefsan story too foolish to mention.<sup>13</sup> To sum up: a famous geographer (to whom Shakespeare alludes in a later play) published an English paraphrase of the miracle-lists from the *Konungs skuggsjá* about two years before the Yorick scene was staged.

Because Arngrímur omitted the Clefsan story, this is hardly a smoking gun, but it does show that the miracles of the *Konungs Skuggsjá* had reached English readers shortly before *Hamlet* was staged, in at least one well-known text.

Yorick's skull is famous as a stage property, and perhaps this is why the critical discussion about what could have inspired it has focused on images, not texts. A skull is obviously a token of death, and therefore dramatizes the *memento mori* or *vanitas* theme from the contemporary visual arts.<sup>14</sup> Despite considerable scrutiny of the scene, no textual source has been proposed. It is most telling that not until 1938 did a critic point out that Hamlet's musings upon the skull recall a 250-word dialogue by Lucian, known to Marlowe, in which Menippus expresses a similar mixture of pathos and wry disgust over Helen of Troy's skull.<sup>15</sup> None have questioned Yorick's presence in *Hamlet*, seeking instead to explain the unusual and Scandinavian-sounding choice of name.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, scholarly energy has been invested

---

<sup>13</sup> 'not to mention any of those things which it reporteth as lesse credible' = *nullum vero ex his quae minus credibilia affert recenseam*: Arngrímur Jónsson, *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* (Denmark, 1593), reprinted and translated in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, expanded edition, vol. 1 (London, 1598). Larson, *The King's Mirror* states incorrectly that the earliest print reference to the *Konungs Skuggsjá* was Peder Claussön in the early seventeenth century.

<sup>14</sup> On the *vanitas* theme and Yorick's skull as an equivalent of images in art, see Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy"; Frye, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls"; Sofer, "The Skull on the Renaissance Stage"; Pignataro, "Unearthing Hamlet's Fool".

<sup>15</sup> Heckscher, "'Was This the Face...?'" , on Lucian, *Dialogues of the Dead* 18. Marlowe's best-known line was quoted from this very dialogue only eight years previously (circa 1592): 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships...?' (*Doctor Faustus*, line 1874). Coincidentally or not, Helen's ghost and Yorick's skull both appear in scene 5.1 of their respective plays.

<sup>16</sup> On Yorick's integral place in the play, see Elizabeth Maslen, "Yorick's Place in Hamlet," *Essays and Studies* 36 (1983): 1–13. One explanation advanced for the name "Yorick" is Rørik, Amleth's grandfather (Yorick is effectively Hamlet's surrogate father, according to Norman Austin, *Meaning and Being in Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 170–71). Shakespeare's willingness to mix names from Saxo is shown in his name for Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, which combines the names of Amleth's mother and wife, Gerutha and Hermithruda (Olsson, "In Search of Yorick's Skull," 212). A second explanation is some Dutch

in explaining Yorick as a cipher for some contemporary figure. This game will be familiar to many, as it has been played with numerous Shakespearean characters including several other parts in *Hamlet*.<sup>17</sup> Most follow Nicholson in identifying Yorick with the actor Richard Tarlton, who died only a decade before *Hamlet*'s premiere. Other suggestions include Clod, a famous court-fool of Queen Elizabeth; the living actor Will Kemp (as recently 'dead to Shakespeare'); and even the Catholic Edmund Campion, martyred in 1581.<sup>18</sup> Establishing a textual model for the graveside scene would not invalidate these meanings, but it would align it with the overall project of the play (not to mention Shakespeare's method in tragedies generally), which is not to invent new historical fables, but to invest existing ones with unprecedented emotional depth.

## 2. Clefsan's Skull in the King's Mirror

It is not surprising that critics have overlooked the much earlier analogue for Yorick's skull, because the Old Norse original only reached print in the eighteenth century, German

---

cognate of the name George, such as "Joris" (the Duke of Brunswick's fool according to Samuel Rowlands, *A Fooles Bolt is soone Shott*, 1614: 22), or "Jerick" (a Dutch peasant in *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany*, a play of disputed authorship and date). A third explanation is that Shakespeare echoed his own line "Alas, poor York!" (*3 Henry VI* 1.4.48), fudging it with 'Warwick' from the same source: thus Seymour M. Pitcher, "Two Notes on Shakespeare," *Philological Quarterly* 21 (1942): 239–240. A fourth explanation is "Erik," a name of several Danish kings in Saxo. Latham notes that "King Eric" is the Claudius-character in the anonymous quasi-*Hamlet* play *der Bestrafte Brudermord* (Robert G. Latham, *Two Dissertations on the Hamlet of Saxo Grammaticus and of Shakespear* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1872), 145–146). There was a *Chronicon Erici Regis*; Latham fancifully speculates that the Latin title of some lost *Gesta Erici Regis* was misread as 'Yorick the King's Jester'.<sup>17</sup> It will be enough to cite one egregious example. Lilian Winstanley, *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921) proposes that Polonius represents William Cecil (Lord Burghley), and Ophelia and Laertes Burghley's children Anne and Robert, while Hamlet himself combines aspects of: Anne's husband, Edward de Vere; the Earl of Essex; and King James I.

<sup>18</sup> Yorick as Tarlton: Brinsley Nicholson, "Kemp and the Play of *Hamlet* – Yorick and Tarlton – A Short Chapter in Dramatic History," *The New Shakespeare Society's Transactions (1880–1882) Part 1* (London: Trübner & Co., 1882): 57–66; Muriel Bradbrook, *Shakespeare the Craftsman* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969): 135. For Yorick meaning "Your Rick," see Katherine Duncan-Jones, "The Life, Death and Afterlife of Richard Tarlton," *The Review of English Studies* 65:268 (2014): 18–32. Yorick as Clod: Thomas Davies, *Dramatic Miscellanies: Consisting of Critical Observations on Several Plays of Shakespeare*, vol. 3 (London, 1784), 132. As Will Kemp: Pignataro, "Unearthing Hamlet's Fool". As Campion: G. Kilroy, "Requiem for a Prince: Rites of Memory in *Hamlet*," *The Downside Review* 120.419 (2002): 91–112, at 103. Kilroy alleges that 'Yorick' encodes 'Kyrios', indicating Campion, as part of a covert pattern of Catholic references in Shakespeare. The incompleteness of the anagram is one objection; a greater one is picturing the alleged Jesuit priest dancing, singing, and giving piggy-back rides.

translation in the nineteenth, and English translation in the twentieth.<sup>19</sup> The *Konungs skuggsjá* (*King's Mirror*) is a prose dialogue that survives in about forty manuscripts, some from the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>20</sup> This original contribution to the “mirror of princes” genre, in which a father delivers essential knowledge to his son and heir, has a first section on merchants and their business. Our concern is the end of this section, which becomes a Viking-centered cosmography including weather, navigation, peoples, and topography, eventually finishing with lists of marvels from Norway, Ireland, Iceland, and Greenland (chapters 8–20). The partially-settled Ireland stands out as ethnographically exotic.<sup>21</sup> The Irish material has been called an interpolation,<sup>22</sup> but probably comes directly from Ireland: the names reflect spoken Irish,<sup>23</sup> and King Hakon Hakonarson (the most likely sponsor of the text) is known to have received Irish ambassadors while in Scotland.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the Irish marvel-list, the author offers one more topic, just for amusement.<sup>25</sup> A dead Irishman named Clefsan made all men and women laugh while he was alive; grave-diggers uncovered his bones, including an intact skull, which was set on a high rock in the churchyard (and remains there still). ‘Clefsan’ is an

---

<sup>19</sup> The *editio princeps* of the *Konungs skuggsjá* is Hálfðan Einarsson, *Konungs skuggsjá*. German translation: *Speculum Regale: ein Altnorwegischer Dialog*, ed. Oscar Brenner (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1881). English translation: Larson, *The King's Mirror*.

<sup>20</sup> The most important is AM 243 a fol., circa 1275: see *Handskriftene av Konungs Skuggsjá: Bibliotheca Arnarnaganaeana 13*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo: E. Munksgaard, 1952).

<sup>21</sup> On Icelandic traditions about the Irish, see Jónas Kristjánsson, “Ireland and the Irish in Icelandic tradition,” in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Aidan Clark and Ragnall Ó Floinn (Copenhagen: Four Courts Press, 1998): 259–276. On the ‘Wonders of Ireland’ section of the *Konungs Skuggsjá*, see Jean Young, “Two of the Irish *Mirabilia* in the *King's Mirror*,” *Études Celtiques* 3 (1938): 21–26; B.T. Hallseth, “Írland-afsnittet i Konungs skuggsjá: til spersmalet om værkets composition,” *Maal og mine* (1967): 50–63; William Sayers, “Konungs Skuggsjá: Irish Marvels and the King's Justice,” *Scandinavian Studies* 57 (1985): 147–61; Eamonn Noonan, “Ireland in the *King's Mirror*: Sources and Significance of an Old Norse Text,” in *Proceedings of the eighth symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, ed. Ailbhe Ó Corráin and Jan Erik Rekdal (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007): 135–148; Colmán Etchingham, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Elisabeth Ashman Rowe, “The ‘Wonders of Ireland’ in *Konungs skuggsjá*: Text, Sources, Context,” in *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World*, ed. Etchingham et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019): 43–121.

<sup>22</sup> Hallseth, “Írland-afsnittet”.

<sup>23</sup> Kuno Meyer, “The Irish *Mirabilia* in the Norse ‘Speculum Regale’ (revised),” *Ériu* 4 (1910): 1–16.

<sup>24</sup> For the evidence, see Young, “Two of the Irish *Mirabilia*,” 24–25.

<sup>25</sup> Despite this defensiveness, the story was included not as a digression but by design: after a set of seven natural Irish marvels, Clefsan completes another set of seven human ones (Sayers, “Irish Marvels,” 148–149).



obvious confusion of the Irish word Clessan, ‘Trickster’, from *cless* meaning trick.<sup>26</sup> The Iron-Age Celts displayed skulls in stone niches, and there was also special treatment of heads and skulls in Iron-Age and Viking Scandinavia,<sup>27</sup> but I shall argue that the story of Clefsan has no historical basis in Norway. Instead, it is concocted from external legends, traceable to the post-Carolingian period.

### 3. *The Unbreakable Skull in Egil’s Saga*

It is now time for the first scholarly investigation of the background to the marvel of Clefsan’s skull. By connecting it with certain texts of the twelfth century, I will explain it as a product of the Norse-Irish cultural dialogue that began with the Viking settlements from the late eighth century (and perhaps gained a last impulse from the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the late twelfth). The story of Clefsan merges two tales that typify separate storytelling cultures. One, from mediaeval Irish literature, has been compared with the Clefsan story, though without any exploration of the relationship between them.<sup>28</sup> The other, from the Norse Icelandic sagas, has not. Together, they provide the recipe for the Clefsan story that goes on to shape the scene of Yorick’s skull.

---

<sup>26</sup> This is almost certainly a name derived from *clessan* (tricks): the three jugglers in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* are Cless, Clessine, and Clessamunn (Meyer, “Irish *Mirabilia* (revised),” 14). Another word for juggler is *clessamnach*. Clefsan/Clessan and similar errors indicate that the catalogue of Irish marvels was transmitted orally (Kuno Meyer, “The Irish *Mirabilia* in the Norse *Speculum Regale*,” *Folklore* 5 (1894): 299–316, at 315; “Irish *Mirabilia* (revised),” 14–16). As with many folkloric motifs, the textual documents in this case seem mere snapshots of a more fluid, plural process of oral transmission.

<sup>27</sup> On severed heads and skulls in Celtic religion, see Pierre Lambrechts, *L’exaltation de la tête dans la pensée et dans l’art des Celtes* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1954); Françoise Le Roux, “Têtes coupées et religion celtique,” *Ogam* 16 (1964): 451–453; Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Routledge, 1967), 61–126; Julia Kristeva, transl. Jody Gladding, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 9–27). On skulls in Iron Age and Viking Scandinavia, see Marianne H. Eriksen, “‘Body-Objects’ and Personhood in the Iron and Viking Ages: Processing, Curating, and Depositing Skulls in Domestic Space,” *World Archaeology* (2020): 103–119.

<sup>28</sup> See Kuno Meyer (ed., transl. & comm.), *The Vision of MacConglinne: A Middle-Irish Wonder Tale* (London: David Nutt, 1892): 131; Meyer, “Irish *Mirabilia* (revised),” 14; Larson, *The King’s Mirror*, 188, with note.

To take the Norse contribution first: this is an anecdote tacked on to the end of *Egil's Saga*,<sup>29</sup> whose oldest manuscript dates from 1140 but which is considered one of the earlier sagas and attributed by some to Snorri Sturluson.<sup>30</sup> Long after Egil's death, the priest Skapti Thorarinnsson exhumes the 150-year-old bones of his ancestor, identified by their large size, to rebury them at a new church.<sup>31</sup> Before transferring them, Skapti puts the huge skull on the churchyard fence in order to inspect its strange heaviness and wavy, shell-like surface. He even tries to crack it with the back of a hatchet but can only chip off the dirt: this proves how stout Egil's head was in life.<sup>32</sup> This anecdote contributes its narrative to the *Konungs skuggsjá*: in both texts a famous man's skull is exhumed, handled, and admired in a churchyard. Perhaps the two skulls can also be compared for their miraculous properties. Egil is a warrior and a serious poet (*skald*), not a jester like Clefsan, but his skull miraculously remains unbreakable, which preserves the ability he had in life. Clefsan's does the same in a different way, by remaining irresistibly funny.

#### 4. *The Tombs of Mac Rustaing and St Gangulf*

The second, Irish contribution to Clefsan's story is the marvel itself (compulsive laughter caused by the remains of a mischievous man), which has a more complex history to uncover. This is found in two older sources that are often cited together: the earlier of them names an

---

<sup>29</sup> *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* fF 2, p.299.

<sup>30</sup> Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957), 140. Most accept Snurri's authorship: see recently Baldur Hafstað, "Egils saga og Snorres Edda: nogle spørgsmål vedrørende Snorres arbejdsmetoder og indflydelse," in *Snorres Edda i europeisk og islandsk kultur*, ed. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2009): 131–43.

<sup>31</sup> There are three other cases of exhumation and reburial in the sagas, and Egil's is not the only marvellously hard or large skull (Bjarni Einarsson, "Hörð höfuðbein" ["The Hard Skull"] in *Mælt mál og forn fræði*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavik: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1987): 107–15), though it is the best known and probably earliest.

<sup>32</sup> It has been suggested that Egil suffered from Paget's disease of bone (Jesse L. Byock, "Egil's Bones," *Scientific American* 272 (1995): 82–87), or alternatively the extremely rare Van Buchem disease (P. Stride, "Egill Skallagrímsson: the First Case of Van Buchem Disease?," *J. R. Coll. Physicians Edinb.* 41 (2011): 169–73). Commentators have taken the coda about the skull as fact. I suggest the possibility that his father's name inspired it: Skalla-Grímr can mean either "Bald Helm" or "Skull Mask".

obscure figure, Mac Rustaing (supposedly a seventh-century abbot buried at Ross Ech),<sup>33</sup> and says that no woman could look on it without spontaneously farting (*cen maidm a delma esti*) or laughing immoderately (*cen ardgair boeth*). The commentator then quotes these verses:

Lighe maic Rustaing ráidhe  
i Ros ech cen innáire  
Mar atchí cach ben báighid,  
Braighid ocus bangháiridh.

Mac Rustaing's grave you say,  
In Ross Ech, without great shame  
If she sees it, every woman talks,  
Breaks wind and laughs like a woman.<sup>34</sup>

Evidently extracted from a longer story, these verses almost certainly represent a lost narrative explaining Mac Rustaing's miracle, which is now so enigmatic to us. Our second source is the late twelfth-century *On the Wonders of Ireland*,<sup>35</sup> an Irish Latin poem in which another version of the anecdote appears. This one mentions no specific name or location: when a marvel is transferred into the catalogue format of paradoxography, such details are

---

<sup>33</sup> Modern Russagh in County Westmeath. Mac Rustaing was probably a cleric, as he is called the brother of St Coeman Brecc and (identified as "Critán") numbered among eight great scholars of Armagh (*Mac Conglinne's Vision, Speckled Book* p. 219). "Rustaing" is the Germanic name Rostang, commonest in Occitania, though further identification is impossible. The anonymous twelfth-century notes to the *Féilire Óengusso (Martyrology of Óengus)* locate Mac Rustaing's tomb at Ross Ech's church.

<sup>34</sup> Text and translation are those of Whitley Stokes, "On the Calendar of Oengus," *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881–1883): 339–380, at 208–209. Although the final word 'laugh like a woman' ('woman-laugh', *ban-gháiridh*) may seem redundant, the poet has contrived a similarity between the three verbs *báighid*, *braighid* [...] *bangháiridh*.

<sup>35</sup> *De Rebus Hiberniae Admirandis*. The earliest copy is in MS. Cotton Titus, D. xxiv. Fol. 74, verso, archived at the British Library. See Elizabeth Boyle, "On the Wonders of Ireland: Translation and Adaptation," in *Authorities and Adaptations: The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland*, ed. Elizabeth Boyle and Deborah Hayden (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2014): 233–61.

often stripped away.<sup>36</sup> Despite this, the Latin version is fuller and seems to preserve more of a lost original narrative:

This land contains the tomb of a certain man,  
Which tricks crowds of women in a cunning way,  
For he violated a huge number of them:  
But in the end he had been at peace, weeping for his crimes:  
And so in a wondrous way a woman, if she sees it,  
Always farts or laughs when she looks upon the tomb,  
And rumbles with trapped wind if she doesn't laugh.

Two new details expand the enigma. The ‘certain man’ (*hominis cuiusdam*) debauched a great many women (*numerum ingentem violavit earum*) before eventually repenting,<sup>37</sup> and the involuntary laughing or farting of women who see the tomb—we learn that their bellies rumble if they try to hold it in—is a ‘cunning trick’ (*fallentis more doloso*). This dead man is playing a practical joke. Embarrassing people is a stock-in-trade of fools, and farting itself is a mediaeval fool’s trick, while women’s loud laughter was a lapse of modesty that suggested ‘loose conduct’ in a sexual sense.<sup>38</sup> In mediaeval Irish thought, an unchaste woman allows

---

<sup>36</sup> Another example from the same text is the werewolves of Ossory, which have been culled from the Middle Irish *De Ingantaib Érenn* or a comparable source and de-localized (*Konungs Skuggsjá* 11). In a Welsh example of the same period, a levitating tomb was culled from chapter 22 of the *Life of Illtud*, de-localized, and listed in Nennius’ ninth-century *De Mirabilibus Britanniae* (*Historia Brittonum* 67–76). This serves to abstract the marvels onto the international level, to rival models such as Nennius, and more recently the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (circa 1140s). Boyle (“Wonders of Ireland,” 258–261) suggests four motives, including the political agenda of forging a national identity.

<sup>37</sup> *fine tamen fuerat felici crimina deflens: / ergo modo miro mulier, si viderit illud...* (“But in the end he had been at peace, weeping for his crimes: / And so, in wondrous fashion, if a woman sees it”...).

<sup>38</sup> On professional farters (*braigetoír*) in mediaeval Ireland, and farting as comic performance in general, see Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). 163–170). Women’s loud laughter could be considered ugly, but also as a sign of sexual availability: see Olga V. Trokhimenko, “Women’s Laughter and Gender Politics in Medieval Conduct Discourse,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin 2010): 243–64, at 256–258. Compare Lisa Perfetti, *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

herself to be impulsive and shameless in private, exactly as the idiot and the professional jester do in public. The conceptual link between male foolery and female immodesty is supported by a semantic link in Old Irish: *drúth* and *báeth* ('wanton, unchaste') both developed the two separate definitions "fool/jester/idiot" and "loose woman".<sup>39</sup> When we compare the two texts above, they tell a ribald tale in which the humiliation of spontaneous farting punishes women for illicit sex. The earlier text does not say why the women who see Mac Rustaing's grave are shamed, but in the later one it is because they'd had sex with the buried man (who is unnamed, but probably Mac Rustaing again). If so, then it can be traced directly to the widespread motif of the supernatural adultery-test, which gained renewed popularity in mediaeval Europe through the Arthurian romances with their drinking-horns and mantles.<sup>40</sup> Many such tests reveal women's guilt in involuntary and embarrassing ways: some even expose their genitals.<sup>41</sup> Farting is an understandable alternative for genital exposure, though to confirm that women's farting really does imply adultery, external evidence is needed.

I suggest that the key to this pair of anecdotes, in the Irish verse fragment and *On the Wonders of Ireland*, is an early tenth-century text from France. The *Vita Gangulfi Prima*<sup>42</sup> explicitly punishes an adulterous woman with spontaneous farting. This text has many

---

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy, "Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts," *Ériu* 44 (1993): 105–24, at 106–107.

<sup>40</sup> Thérèse Saint Paul, *The Magical Mantle, the Drinking Horn and the Chastity Test: A Study of a 'Tale' in Arthurian Celtic Literature* (doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh: 1987).

<sup>41</sup> On chastity tests, see Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* H400–H459, especially H411 "Magic object points out unchaste woman". Thompson does not specify genital exposure: examples of that include the *Patria of Constantinople* 2.65 (statue), the Welsh Triads and Arthurian romances (robe), and Tafur's *Andanças e viagens* 17 (pool of water). On the robe, see Marianne E. Kalinke, "Chastity Tests" in Norris J. Lacy et al. (eds.), *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia: New Edition* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1991): 81–83.

<sup>42</sup> Wilhelm Levison's edition of *Vita Gangulfi martyris Varenensis* is on pages 142–70 of *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum* 7, ed. Levison and Bruno Krusch (Hanover: Aulicus Hahnianus, 1907). For discussion, see Steffen Patzold, "Laughing at a Saint? Miracle and Irony in the *Vita Gangulfi prima*," *Early Medieval Europe* 21 (2013): 197–220. While spellings vary, Gangulf is closest to the Germanic etymology *ganganā + wulfaz*, 'Wolf-Tracker': in the *Vita Prima*, Gangulf goes hunting (un-Christian behaviour, for which the author apologises).

trappings of a standard hagiography, but its focus on cuckoldry and scatological humor anticipates the verse *fabliaux*, which would become popular in northeast France in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Despite its claim that all written records about Gangulf were destroyed and only oral sources were available, it has playfully reworked a very recent miracle-story in Flodoard's annals from Reims.<sup>43</sup> The *Vita Prima* probably determined the character of my hypothetical Irish source for the legend of Mac Rustaing, on which (I have suggested) both the surviving sources draw. Gangulf exposes his wife's infidelity with a chastity-test, which painfully and explicitly shames her: this is important for my argument, because I claim that the spontaneous farting later in the text serves the same function. She confidently accepts his challenge to retrieve a pebble from his spring,<sup>44</sup> but it boils her skin off, which reveals her adultery with a priest. This priest murders Gangulf and then, 'exactly like Judas the betrayer and Arius the heresiarch', fatally excretes his entrails into the latrine.<sup>45</sup> The wife, meanwhile, hears on a Friday that miracles have happened at Gangulf's tomb. She exclaims, 'Gangulf is as miraculous as my ass!', and thrusts it out to make her point.<sup>46</sup> Saying these fateful words, she spontaneously farts: on every Friday thereafter,<sup>47</sup> she continuously farts whenever she speaks. In early Latin hagiography, farting accompanied excretion in the

---

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Pierre Poly made this connection ("Gengoul, l'époux martyr: Adultère féminin et norme populaire au Xe siècle" in *La femme au Moyen Âge: Collection de la Faculté de droit Jean Monnet* (Paris: Université de Paris-Sud, 1992): 47–63, at 50). The *Vita Prima* reads as a comic expansion of Flodoard's sober story (*Historia Remensis Ecclesiae* 4.49, p.452 Lejeune), adding additional miracles. In Flodoard, as in the *Vita Prima*, a nobleman's bride cuckolded him while he was at war and he tests her fidelity by oath. Flodoard's suspicious nobleman makes her swear fidelity on every local altar. At St Remigius' altar her belly bursts, and out spills 'what was inside' (*utero disrupto...labuntur humo intranea*), a death which proves his suspicions true. (On my interpretation, she was pregnant: perhaps an actual miscarriage was this story's gruesome origin.) The husband donates her dowry to the church, refuses to remarry, and prospers.

<sup>44</sup> The spring patently reasserts Gangulf's virility, superficially recoded as sanctity. After Gangulf buys the land at great cost, his wife sneers that he was cheated, and when he goes back the water is gone. Gangulf tells his servant to retrieve the staff he thrust into the soil, and a new spring gushes forth. The wife's scalding, like the later fart-curse, punishes her emasculating disrespect.

<sup>45</sup> *Ad instar Iudae proditoris et Arrii heresiarchis* (12). This also resembles the messy death of the adulteress in the Flodoard passage on which this text is based (see footnote 43 above).

<sup>46</sup> *Sic operatur virtutes Gangolfus quomodo anus meus* (32).

<sup>47</sup> It is unclear why Fridays are specified, unless this was a fasting day and therefore relevant to digestion. Bread-and-water fasting on Fridays featured in church penances, for example Halitgar's ninth-century *Liber Poenitentialis*.

pseudo-medical purgation of demons.<sup>48</sup> It was a temporary version of death-by-excretion (also present in this text), inflicting a similar combination of disgust, offensiveness, and humiliation.<sup>49</sup> However, the author moves flatulence into decidedly humorous territory by pairing it with odious babble;<sup>50</sup> his pious commentary serves more to excuse this rude joke than to defuse it. The *Vita Gangulfi Prima* is an example of the mediaeval phenomenon Mikhail Bakhtin dubbed the ‘carnavalesque’, found in whimsical manuscript illustrations, in which the ‘material bodily lower stratum’ (buttocks, belly, genitals, and bodily functions) joyfully escapes its normal suppression and usurps the upper stratum of the head, face, and voice.<sup>51</sup> The carnivalesque spirit may not be needed to explain the theme of adultery, but it certainly accounts for the manner of Arius’ death; for the indecent gesture and words of Gangulf’s wife, when she retorts to his miracles; and above all, for the curse that combines talking with farting. Gangulf himself retains full physical control: it is the bodies of the adulterous woman (and man) that literalize the unboundedness of their wanton sexual activity. Perhaps for that reason the text is only partly a carnivalesque celebration, and partly a cautionary tale: we get the sense that the humor is in conflict with the moral lesson. Perhaps

---

<sup>48</sup> Rectal exorcism usually took the form of diarrhea (*fluxus ventris*): see e.g. Sulpicius Severus’s fifth-century *Vita Sancti Martini* 17.7. When the false prophet Anatolius loses his demonic powers in a sixth-century life of St Martin he vomits, soils himself, and runs away stinking (*sua per vestigia sordens / et foetore sibi comitante satellite fugit*, 350–351).

<sup>49</sup> There are intermediate cases of death-by-farting. In Gregory of Tours, a heretic priest who swallowed burning-hot custard died with a sigh and a huge fart (*emissoque cum suspirio immenso ventris strepitu: Miraculorum Libri* 8.81). In Flodoard, Spervus the extorter died in bed, and when people tried to remove him he farted (*crepuit medius*), driving everyone outside (*Historia Remensis Ecclesiae* 2.3, p.238–239 Lejeune, probably a genuine event caused by decomposition). These deaths may allude to Emperor Claudius’ death-fart in Seneca’s satirical *Apocolocyntosis*. Either way, they form an obscene counterpart to the ‘wind’ of the soul or life’s breath (*pneuma, spiritus*).

<sup>50</sup> This form of joke may be transcultural. An Assyrian proverb says “While the backside was breaking wind, the mouth brought forth babble”: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005): 428. Seneca’s foolish Claudius “made a loud noise out of the part he talked from more easily” (*maiolem sonitum emisisset illa parte qua facilius loquebatur, Apocolocyntosis* 4). Three poems in the *Greek Anthology* compare a fool’s speech to farting (11.241, 242; 11.415). Compare the current English expression “talking out of your ass”.

<sup>51</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), with Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

the theme of revenge from the grave is already somewhat dark, anticipating much later versions of the deceased jester who mocks the living. But the Irishwomen laugh as they fart, suggesting that the motif can be carnivalesque and moralistic at the same time.<sup>52</sup>

French culture influenced Ireland even before the 1169 colonization, and Gangulf's *Vita* circulated widely, so it is entirely possible that it inspired a local Irish legend.<sup>53</sup> In this later Irish version, two changes have been made that we can easily understand as continuing down the path from Flodoard via the *Vita Gangulfi* in the adultery-themed farce of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century *fabliaux*. In other words, the Irish sources make the miracle funnier and more like a folktale. First, the punishment of Gangulf's wife was extended onto other adulterous women. Second, the trickster-saint was changed from a cuckold into a rogue who had illicit sex with numerous women and then repented. This explains why at the tomb of the "certain man" in Ireland, "every woman talks, / Breaks wind and laughs like a woman." We can now clarify these words better: like Gangulf's wife, these women fart *whenever they speak*. This also explains why, in the slightly fuller account of the *Wonders of Ireland*, a woman "rumbles with trapped wind if she doesn't laugh": only by staying mute can she avoid farting. In the two Irish texts (whose kinship is now definite), the punishments of Gangulf's wife have been combined. She reached into Gangulf's spring (his sacred site?) as a chastity-test and was scalded, then she shamelessly mocked his miraculous tomb and suffered the fart-curse. These punishments were apparently merged into a chastity-test for all unchaste

---

<sup>52</sup> This is probably because sex is both funny and serious. Compare the Arthurian chastity-tests, which expose and punish wrongdoing, but take place at a time of feasting.

<sup>53</sup> On Franco-Hibernian contacts in the mediaeval period, see Keith Busby, *French in Medieval Ireland, Ireland in Medieval French: The Paradox of Two Worlds* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017). On the *Vita Prima*'s popularity, see Monique Goulet, "Les vies de saint Gengoul, époux et martyr," in *Guerriers et moines: Conversion et sainteté aristocratiques dans l'occident médiéval (IX–XIIIe siècle)*, ed. Michel Lauwers (Antibes: Michel Lauwers, 2002): 235–63.



women, or are separate reflections of that much older theme in connection with a comic story about adultery.

Another new element in the two Irish sources is the irresistible entertainment of the jester, which can endure even after death. The *Konungs skuggsjá* says that when Clefsan was alive, no man could hold back laughter at hearing him talk, “even though he was heavy-hearted.” Metaphors in the same line may underlie the marvel itself: Irish verse may be the source for the idea of a jester so funny that even his remains cause hilarity.<sup>54</sup> A twelfth-century Irish text provides a clear specimen of such hyperbole: King Conari’s three jesters, Mael, Mlithé, and Admlithe, are said to be capable of making every man in Ireland laugh—even if they were all standing over their father or mother’s body.<sup>55</sup> The Irish accounts of Mac Rustaing and the ‘certain man’ both introduce the element of involuntary laughter alongside the farting. This laughter is eventually what survives in the marvel of Clefsan’s skull, and laughter (not farting) is what echoes in scene 5.1 of *Hamlet*.

It is quite plausible that the miracles of Gangulf the cuckold saint would appeal to Irish audiences as a bawdy and scatological joke (even though there was enough of the conventional saint’s life in it to make it defensible monastic reading). It is equally plausible that they would reimagine the hero of the narrative as a wanton jester, instead of a cuckold who is by nature a humiliated victim. I suggest that both of these changes did in fact take place, in a thriving oral performance culture that drew on (but was independent of) written sources from monastic contexts. I also suggest that in a final step, typical of folkloric

---

<sup>54</sup> A good comparison for how metaphors become marvels is the legend that Irish poetry kills rats, found in Johnson, Sidney and Shakespeare. This is traceable to a single seventh-century poem by Senchán Torpéist, which playfully wishes death on the mice that ate his treat: J.H. Todd and Eugene Curry, “On Rhyming Rats to Death,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 5 (1853): 355–366.

<sup>55</sup> *The Destruction of the Hostel of Derga (Togail Bruidne Dá Derga)*, *Book of the Dun Cow* MS 23 E 25, p.311–312.

migration,<sup>56</sup> the legend was re-localized onto the Irishman Mac Rustaing. His previous role (perhaps a holy man, a fool, or indeed a holy fool) lost relevance; he provided a local anchor for the drifting folkloric motif, becoming the Irish answer to Gangulf.

Now that I have identified two separate ingredients for Mac Rustaing's miraculous grave—the chastity-test that humiliates all adulteresses, and the farting-curse of St Gangulf's adulterous wife—we can see how the marvel of the Irish jester's tomb was invented, paving the way for a future reinvention as Clefsan's skull. Mac Rustaing is Gangulf himself refashioned on Irish terms. I have observed that in Ireland, a hilarious trick that is also a punishment for an adulterous woman lies squarely across the whole semantic range of “wanton” (*drúth/báeth*): in Ireland, the cuckolded Frankish saint became an adulterous jester because this seemed a better fit for his unorthodox ‘miracle’ of shaming women. This kind of miracle could only ever be textual, existing in ribald semi-parodic texts independent from actual religious cult.<sup>57</sup> We now have proof that at some point between the tenth and twelfth centuries, a narrative about Gangulf migrated from continental to insular and from Latin to vernacular culture. The arrival and transformation of the jester's tomb in Ireland was the first of at least three migrations. By the thirteenth century, it would arrive in the Norse *Konungs skuggsjá* in the form of Clefsan, and by the end of the sixteenth, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's Yorick. Ironically, the defining obscenity that turned the dead man Gangulf into the jester Mac Rustaing in the first place would be completely removed from Clefsan and therefore Yorick.

---

<sup>56</sup> “Legends are, however, generally subjected to the greatest modifications when they leave their native soil, especially when they owe their origin to some incident of local history or tradition. When such a legend passes from one country to another, it is very liable [...] to be changed in consequence”: Domenico Comparetti, trans. E.F.M. Benecke, *Vergil in the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1895), 290.

<sup>57</sup> All four hagiographies postdating the *Vita Prima* record conventional cure-miracles, reflecting the historical cult of St Gangulf and his relics. See Goulet, “Les vies de saint Gengoul”.

The later Norse story in the *Konungs skuggsjá* is obviously the one attached to Mac Rustaing and the ‘certain man’, now transformed again by the removal of the once-essential adultery and farting elements, and the replacement of an intact tomb with a skull. The ribald Irish tale is adapted for a more sober Scandinavian aesthetic, and as we have seen, the skull itself is drawn from the stately poetry of *Egil’s Saga*. As a coda or epilogue, it was detachable from the main narrative. Despite the fact that Clefsan’s name means ‘Trickster’, as noted above, the humor is redirected away from crude bodily functions—Bakhtin’s material bodily lower stratum<sup>58</sup>—onto the upper stratum of verbal humor and the mouth. We are explicitly told that Clefsan was funny for the things he said, and both men and women look inside the skull’s mouth to inspect the seat of wit. The final remark, that the skull remains there still, suggests that the source is a raconteur who considers their own story to be fantasy.

We can now reassess potential influences of the skull of Clefsan (or a lost analogue) on Shakespeare’s graveside scene. Yorick is said to have performed the full repertoire of the Elizabethan court-jester, including buffoonery, but Hamlet still pays close attention to the skull’s mouth: “here hung those lips that I have kissed...Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fallen?” As for making people laugh, Yorick has no such power over the melancholy Hamlet, but the famous epithet ‘of infinite jest’ might allude to that miraculous ability. The most decisive parallel is of course that the skulls of both jesters, Clefsan and Yorick, are unearthed by chance during grave-digging.<sup>59</sup> As a final consideration, we should ask how Shakespeare’s First Clown so readily identifies Yorick’s

---

<sup>58</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18–23 & *passim*.

<sup>59</sup> By contrast, the spate of Elizabethan “prop skulls” after *Hamlet* are all private possessions kept indoors (see Frye, “Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls,” 15, with references).

skull among the four unearthed in the scene.<sup>60</sup> Ordinary jesters do not have distinctive skulls, but heroic Egil and miraculous Clefsan did, so Yorick is their descendant in this respect.

### 5. Conclusion

I have argued that Yorick's skull is a version of a late mediaeval motif: its folkloric ingredients traced migratory patterns from Francia into Ireland, then to Norway and eventually to Renaissance England, though their familiar form was already reached in a Norse text that survives from the thirteenth century. In the first phase, Irish storytellers produced the marvel of Mac Rustaing's tomb, by combining the wife's curse from the French tale of St Gangulf with the widespread motif of the supernatural chastity-test. They were influenced by the Irish notions that jesters are sexually wanton and supernaturally hilarious, and the tomb of the farting women joined a list of Ireland's national marvels. Second, a Norse narrator turned Mac Rustaing's tomb into the marvel of Clefsan's skull, by combining it with the skull of Egil from the well-known Icelandic saga and removing the adultery and farting. Finally, through some unidentified but probably Latin medium, the jester's skull motif reached Shakespeare and was adapted again, becoming a bittersweet relic of childhood fun in scene 5.1 of *Hamlet*. By inserting the jester's skull scene into de Belleforest's retelling of Amleth, Shakespeare merged two folkloric traditions, which exist for us in two entirely separate sources: one Danish (from Saxo's Latin history), the other Norse. But perhaps Shakespeare encountered the second in association with the first, since both are thirteenth-century prose texts from Scandinavia? Despite this lingering uncertainty, I hope to have

---

<sup>60</sup> Two alternative answers might be made. First, perhaps the First Clown pretends that some anonymous skull is Yorick—but since he has no idea who Hamlet is, and did not overhear the speculations about various walks of life, such an invention would be quite arbitrary. Second, perhaps the First Clown can identify every skull by its gravestone—but since he is digging just one grave, finding four skulls in quick succession implies a jumbled deposit. It remains highly suggestive that Yorick's skull is so easily recognized. Hampton asks why, but offers no answer, observing only that Kenneth Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* movie (which makes everything visual) gives Yorick distinctive teeth: Bryan A. Hampton, "'I Knew Him, Horatio': Shakespeare's Beliefs, Early Textual Editing, and Nineteenth-Century Phrenology," *Religions* 10 (2019): 1–14, at 6.

convinced readers that Yorick's skull was not invented by Shakespeare, but reinvented—  
again.