

# “I will never play the Dane”: Shakespeare and the performer's failure

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## Abstract

The cultural prestige accorded to Shakespeare's great roles has made them high watermarks for 'great acting' in general. They are therefore also uniquely capable of channelling a performer's sense of his own failure. The 1987 film *Withnail & I* famously ends with its title character, an out-of-work actor and self-destructive alcoholic, delivering Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man" to an audience of unresponsive wolves. And in 2014's *The Trip to Italy*, Steve Coogan plays a fictionalised version of himself: a comedian who fears he will never be remembered as a serious artist. On a visit to Pompeii, Coogan's delivery of Hamlet's speech to Yorick's skull similarly becomes a way of channelling the series's wider reflections on fame, mortality, and the value of the actor's art. Drawing on Marvin Carlson's argument that the role of Hamlet is unusually densely ghosted by its previous occupants, this article will explore how these two contemporary depictions of struggling performers evoke the received idea of the great Shakespearean role as the pinnacle of the actor's art to respond to the dilemma of how to cope with creative failure.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Stanley Wells, in *Great Shakespeare Actors* (2015), declares that Shakespeare's great roles "invite greatness of performance." Not all performers, however, have the opportunity for greatness—actors are disbarred, or in some cases eliminate themselves, from consideration for these "great roles" for reasons ranging from structural discrimination, to cultural preconceptions about a certain performer, to a simple lack of self-belief. As Antony Sher (2009) writes in his autobiography, *Beside Myself*, on the verge of his successful 1999 performance as Macbeth for the Royal Shakespeare Company:

*Macbeth is the dark actor's Hamlet. I'm buying into the cliché—Hamlet as a romantic blond figurine in the gift shops of Stratford—but it's what stopped me from ever having a go at the Danish prince. (Nonsense, of course, I see that now—now that it's too late.)* (348–9)

Nonsense or not, the association between a star Shakespearean turn and the pinnacle of career achievement has been internalised by many actors to such an extent that not playing such roles, for whatever reason, can be taken as an indicator of professional failure. Hamlet in particular, as presented by Sher, is the archetypal part for a young, white, Anglo-Saxon male, despite notable performances in the part's history from actors not fitting this description, from Sarah Bernhardt to Paapa Essiedu. Indeed, as Marvin Carlson (2001) puts it in *The Haunted Stage*, his seminal study of theatrical “ghosting,” the part of Hamlet has become “the dream and ultimate test of every aspiring young serious actor in the English-speaking theatre”; not coincidentally, “[t]he very thing that makes *Hamlet* so attractive to a young actor, the density of its ghosting, culturally, theatrically, and academically, also, of course, makes it a formidable, even daunting challenge” (79). As such, references to the play and to its overdetermined central character can be uniquely evocative of missed opportunity, never to be recovered. In a sense of the word distinct from Carlson's, young Hamlet can haunt the performer who finds himself past the point of conceivably succeeding in the role.

Two fictional representations of such performers establish the trope of Hamlet as the path not taken. This article examines the haunting presence of Hamlet firstly for the eponymous Withnail of the 1986 film *Withnail and I*, played by Richard E. Grant, and secondly the fictionalised Steve Coogan, whose comparisons of his own stalled career to that of his co-star Rob Brydon form a large part of the dialogue of the 2010 series *The Trip* and its sequels *The Trip to Italy* and *The Trip to Spain*, all directed by Michael Winterbottom. Both figures are semi-fictional creations with a core of truth; one is 29, one (when we first meet him) in his mid-to-late forties, and both, perhaps, are on the verge of losing the name of actor.

*Hamlet*, according to Aaron Kelly and David Salter (2004), “can be said to haunt *Withnail and I* ... the spectral presence of Shakespeare's play inflects the mood and atmosphere of the film, creating a tangible sense of disillusionment and melancholy” (100). These are linked particularly, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to the first title character, whose life is described by Kelly and Salter as “a comedy of frustration, stagnation, inertia, and ultimately of failure” (100). The aristocratic Withnail, despite his apparent talent, lives after drama school with a fellow performer in a domestic situation of appalling squalor, describing himself as “a trained actor reduced to the status of a bum” (15).

Three of the Great Shakespeare Actors named by Wells—Donald Wolfitt, John Gielgud, and Michael Redgrave—are referenced in the film as comparison points to Withnail's own downward career trajectory. As Kelly and Salter point out, there is also “a poster of Laurence Olivier as Othello in the bathroom of Withnail and Marwood's London flat” (112 n.1). Trying to reinvent himself in the hope of drumming up more interest, Withnail proposes changing his name to “Desmond Wolfe” (61). “It's too like Donald Wolfitt,” his companion (“I,” named in the script as Marwood) responds (61). When Withnail has been rejected for a part in a cigar commercial, Marwood tries to console him by suggesting that September is always a bad patch. Withnail's reply contrasts a bankable star, John Gielgud, with their own desperate financial situation: “I haven't seen Gielgud down the Labour Exchange” (15). “Why doesn't he retire?” (15) asks Withnail of Gielgud, suggesting a particularly Shakespearean understanding of the natural transfer of power between age and youth. Being overshadowed, however, is not the whole story; Withnail himself reveals a proud, potentially self-sabotaging character in rejecting the offer of a job as an understudy for Constantine in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. He berates his agent from a rural phonebox: “why can't I play the part?” (60).

By contrast, Marwood happily puts himself forward for small, unprestigious roles in provincial theatre despite his flatmate's objections:

WITHNAIL: You don't wanna go to Manchester, anyway. Play a bloody soldier?

MARWOOD: Don't I? I damned well do. It's a damned good little theatre.

WITHNAIL: Not much of a part though, is it?

MARWOOD: Better than nothing. (88)

Marwood's participation in the norms of the industry, to the point of cutting his 60s hair short, is rewarded when he is offered a leading part. But Withnail, it seems, would rather have nothing than a role he perceives as inferior to his talents. In practice, however, this frequently means he has no work at all. Waving a fencing foil theatrically during an ill-fated trip to his Uncle Monty's cottage in the Lake District, Withnail claims not to want to discuss his family because "they don't like me being on stage" (53). As Marwood points out, however, this would suggest they would be "delighted with [his] career" (53). His lack of achievement is only heightened by the pose he is striking with a cork-tipped sword, reminiscent of the kind of high-status classical role he has so far been unable to secure for himself. As the script has it, "MARWOOD'S cynicism inspires Shakespearian activity with the *épée*," and in the context of Withnail's overall trajectory, no Shakespearian activity seems more clearly evoked than the fatal fencing match at the end of *Hamlet* (53).

Bruce Robinson's (1995) protagonist also notably finds his development stymied by the shadow of a difficult uncle. Failure in *Withnail and I* is intergenerational. Richard E. Grant's character might want to be Gielgud, but on his current course, he seems more likely to turn into Uncle Monty: an eccentric, camp, but ultimately tragic figure who in youth nurtured his own dreams of theatrical stardom which hover, unfulfilled, in the background of his nephew's struggles. Monty directly invokes missing out on the chance to play Hamlet as the epitome of theatrical, and personal, unfulfilment:

- MONTY: It is the most shattering experience of a young man's life when he awakes and quite reasonably says to himself, I will *never* play The Dane. When that moment comes, one's ambition ceases [...] Don't you agree?
- WITHNAIL: It's a part I intend to play, Uncle.
- MONTY: And you'll be marvelous. We do it wrong, being so majestic, to offer it the show of violence .... (34)

Monty recounts his own past experiences with an unforthcoming agent and laments how he is left with nothing but "vintage wine and memories" (34). Withnail's imaginary performance as Hamlet, however, is all in the future: "I intend"; "you'll be marvellous." It's just as well that this belief remains intact, however, because as Chris Lawson (1997) writes:

*To Monty, playing Hamlet is not only the pinnacle of a man's acting ambition; it also becomes the culmination of youth, the realization of a dream that is, in itself, life-affirming. To miss this opportunity is to be haunted by a certain "lack," to remain unfulfilled and perpetually at the boundaries of "otherness."* (34)

In this context, the fear that Withnail might well turn into Monty—an ageing bachelor in a room "filled with vegetables" (Robinson, 31) and portraits of his younger self, "whispering at the Ghost he never saw" (34) – is what underlies his desire to lie to his uncle about the opportunities that lie before him, including the outright fabrication: "My agent's trying to edge me towards the Royal Shakespeare Company again" (33). It is also significant that the speech from *Hamlet* Monty chooses to deliver features a minor character (perhaps the only kind of role he ever played) speaking about a ghost. Monty's role throughout the film is that of a haunting reminder of the past, who refuses to leave things in the present alone: He wants Withnail and Marwood to remember him, to complete his work by living the life he was never able to, erotically and professionally. As such, he represents a continuous unsettling encounter with what Carlson, in a phrase Monty himself might have spoken, describes as the "crowded field of ghosts" that make up the performance tradition of *Hamlet*, forcing Withnail into antagonistic contact with "the interpretations of the past" (81).

Just as as Hamlet's narrative is never truly free from the Ghost's instructions, so Withnail is trying and failing to escape Monty's example right up until the final scene. In this, the best-known Shakespearean moment in Robinson's film, Withnail delivers Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man!" to an audience of unresponsive wolves:

*I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth.*

And the fifty-three again journeys to his lips. The wolf keeps staring. WITHNAIL keeps speaking like a natural instinct.

*And indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory.*

Now the wine is adding some volume. This is WITHNAIL back in gear. And all his pride and rage is adding emotion.

*This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.*

WITHNAIL is suddenly on a stage somewhere. Obviously at Stratford. And his expression asks: And by God, I'd be good enough, wouldn't I? Absolutely brilliant, wouldn't I? No more sadness now. All the fire is back. And all the power!

*What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god.*

He looks at the wolves in wonder that the bastards aren't clapping .... (127-8)

This bravura performance, which the script frames through Withnail's self-perception as more than worthy of an RSC production, presents a young actor at the peak of his powers, but also one who is, even in a seemingly wide-open space, as trapped as his captive audience. As the screenplay puts it,

*[Withnail] looks at the wolves in wonder that the bastards aren't clapping .... Albert Finney never felt so good. He takes a last final slug of the bottle and casts it aside. By Christ, that was the best rendition of Hamlet the world will ever see. The only pity was it was only wolves that saw it. (128)*

Just as Hamlet seems briefly to recognise the physical ceiling of the Globe playing space even as he praises man's infinite faculties—"this majestic roof fretted with golden fire"—Withnail's stirring speech is powered partly by his knowledge of his own limitations. Kelly and Salter describe how, just as "Hamlet is using the principal goal and instrument of humanist education—eloquence—not to sing the praises of humanity, as conventional usage would dictate, but rather to sow the seeds of doubt and dissatisfaction," Withnail too reaches for the apex of the classical acting tradition to convey his disillusionment and failure (102). "In a sense," they write, "both Hamlet and Withnail are rejected—or being rejected by—that which they have mastered" (102).

The ironic mismatch between performance and audience only heightens the scene's tragedy, not least because as Lawson phrases it, the main obstacle to his success is his own resistance to change:

*The wolves suggest critics or journalists judging his "performance" (perhaps making reference to "News hounds" or a "pack of reporters"). Just like the wolves, Withnail must become tamed or domesticated if he too is to fulfil his ambition of performing before a critical audience. (34)*

We can tell, without knowing that *Withnail's* alternate ending was a lonely suicide, that this personal transformation will never happen. Marwood, however, is visibly altered by his dreadful experience in Penrith. Monty's cottage thus serves as a kind of purgatorial "green world," the term coined with regard to Shakespeare in Northrop Frye's (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism* (182), which at least one of Robinson's metropolitan characters enters and comes back, in Frye's terms, "converted," ready to embody "the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land" of their squalid flat (182). He cuts his hair and refuses the offer of marijuana and alcohol in a rejection scene as poignant as that between Hal and Falstaff:

MARWOOD: Well, I'm off now, then.

WITHNAIL: Already? [...] I've got us a bottle open. [...] Confiscated it from Monty's supplies. Fifty-three Margaux, best of the century. I'm sure he wouldn't resent us a parting drink.

He's about to fill a pair of waiting glasses. But MARWOOD doesn't want to wait. Wants the goodbye over with and wants out of here.

MARWOOD: I can't, Withnail. I've gotta walk to the station. I'll be late.

WITHNAIL: There's always time for a glass.

MARWOOD: No. I don't have the time. (125–6)

Marwood also orders his friend to come back to reality from his flights of drug-fuelled fancy on discovering that they have been served an eviction notice—"Stop laughing. This is serious" (121)—and eventually leaves him to deal with their housing situation alone, with no clear indication as to its outcome. Whether Withnail, in the course of their shared experience, discovers anything beyond the simple fact that he will never play the Dane, is an open question.

The same Hamlet speech Withnail delivers appears twice in *The Trip*—once, in the show's very first episode, spoken by Rob Brydon as part of an impression of Richard Burton, and once in its third and final series, after Coogan, asked by Brydon if he would ever perform Shakespeare onstage, admits "I would have liked to have *played* Hamlet" (Parmenter, 2017, episode 4). Coogan's emphasis insists on the transcendence of the character, with all its inherent actorly kudos, over its source text or Shakespeare *per se*, and the part's association with transient youth is once again evoked in Brydon's response—"That train has left the station." Noting in his defence that "Olivier played him when he was 42," Coogan reveals a depth of knowledge that suggests this is no mere passing fancy, but a frustrated final grasp at the youthful potential the role implies. Hamlet's lines themselves, delivered in rivalrous tandem by both men in another impersonated persona—this time that of Rolling Stones singer Mick Jagger—might seem like a mere comic deflation, a puncturing of a foolish ideal. But Coogan's ambition, stated openly here for the first time, is expressed with an honest simplicity and is of a piece with his characterisation throughout.

When we first see Coogan speaking to his agent in the first series, on a dodgy connection in Lancashire's Trough of Bowland, he is refusing, like Withnail, to demean himself with roles in British TV, declaring instead "I want to do films. Good films" (Parmenter, 2010, episode 1). As he tells his agent, he is "rather appropriately in a trough ... literally and metaphorically." Coogan in particular, at this stage, fears being pigeonholed solely as a comic performer, not least by Brydon who insists that neither of them is "in the same group as Michael Sheen, Anthony Hopkins and Richard Burton" (Parmenter, 2010, episode 5).<sup>1</sup> He reacts with some degree of surprise and scorn to any success by Brydon, who he clearly views as an inferior talent: jealously re-iterating his own strings of BAFTA awards, he attempts to dismiss Brydon as a mere "entertainer" and his work as "froth," repeatedly stating the belief that "we are not the same" (Parmenter, 2010, episode 5).

Though he initially bats away the very suggestion of appearing in a film by Michael Mann, director of *Heat*—"I don't work with mainstream Hollywood directors, I work with auteurs" (Parmenter, 2010, episode 1)—much of the second series sees him struggling towards a gracious acceptance of the fact that Mann wants to offer Brydon a part, symbolic of the increasing star power of his colleague as Coogan's own star wanes. That the Coogan character of *The Trip to Spain*, while he might still be compulsively namedropping his Oscar-nominated screenplay *Philomena* and the chance it afforded him to work with another of Wells's Great Shakespeare Actors, Judi Dench, is able to engage in this frank discussion of Hamlet as a missed opportunity at all is a sign of the incidental but not insignificant role Shakespeare has played in his own emerging self-recognition over the three series.

The first appearance of Hamlet, via Brydon-as-Burton, fits into the arms-race of celebrity impressions conducted across all three series of *The Trip*, in which Coogan especially takes pains to prove that he is the most talented impressionist of the two. Here as elsewhere, the series recalls Carlson's description of a dizzyingly effective understudy performance in Neil Simon's *Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor*, in which he observed "[Alan] Blumenfeld ghosted by Nathan Lane ghosted by Sid Caesar ghosted by Marlon Brando playing Brutus ghosted by his interpretation of Stanley Kowalski" (77).

Brydon plays Burton playing Hamlet at a rapid pace—free of Withnail's anguish, the monologue is spoken trippingly on the tongue, reeled off as an example of dramatic fluency. In context, Brydon is offering Burton's Hamlet as a symbol of Welsh cultural prestige, but in so doing, he also conveys his own sense of a high watermark for

theatrical performance. A scene in *The Trip to Spain* where Brydon takes the stage of the Corral de Comedias—an early modern theatre associated with Lope de Vega—to deliver Jaques's "All the world's a stage," only to have his travelling companion correct his defective memory of the monologue, suggests Coogan's similar investment in this material (Parmenter, 2017, episode 5). Furthermore, the notes the two men obsessively give each other on the accuracy and tonal quality of their impressions are a kind of extended advice to the players: Each clearly has a firm mental image of what good acting is and should be, against which their own work and the work of others should be measured.

As such, the pair's duels of impersonation have higher stakes than they initially imply. Though few of Wells's great Shakespeareans appear in the two men's repertoire, the impressions they do choose include a number of actors who have flourished in Shakespearean roles. Burton, Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Anthony Hopkins, and Ian McKellen (mentioned by Wells) all form part of an older generation, more successful and more critically respected than our two protagonists, to whose achievements they implicitly aspire, whose voices they try on like masks of the people they would like to be. The second and third series see references to younger actors—including those, like Tom Hiddleston and Benedict Cumberbatch, known for their high-profile Shakespearean productions—who have achieved far greater box office success and name recognition than Coogan and Brydon themselves.

The inclusion of Burton as Hamlet in this panoply of potential identifications might itself seem of limited importance, were it not for the resonances of this play which reverberate particularly across the second series, culminating in one of its final images. In general, the series most often echoes the autumnal bickering of the orchard scene in *Henry 4.2*: like Uncle Monty, the two men fear being superseded, put out to pasture, and both ruminate at length on the physical decay of the body. At one point, Brydon points out that they're now 10 years older than Byron when he died, "complaining about how old he felt." Elsewhere he counsels Coogan to make peace with his mortality: "it's better to accept it, you're going to be on a slab" (Parmenter, 2014, episode 3). Meanwhile, in one dream sequence, Coogan literally yells "Wait! Come back!" to an agent promising high-profile contracts as the scene dissolves into the air (Parmenter, 2010, episode 2).

It is in its concern with memory, however, that *The Trip* reaches specifically for *Hamlet*. As the two men spar, it becomes clear that Coogan believes his achievements have more durable value than Brydon's, and that he wishes to frame Brydon as his chronicler. Johnson and Boswell, Coleridge and Southey and, in *The Trip to Spain*, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are all suggested as potential comparisons for this relationship, but Hamlet and Horatio offer perhaps the most instructive frame for the dynamic Coogan is working to establish in which he is the remembered, not the rememberer.

BRYDON: What will people remember of us, in 200 years' time?

COOGAN: Er ... I don't think we'll be remembered, to be honest with you.

BRYDON: No.

COOGAN: I mean, if ... There's a big if.

BRYDON: If we are...

COOGAN: ... either of us are remembered, I would say that it would probably be me.

(Parmenter, 2014, episode 2)

This contest over remembrance feeds into the two men's engagement with the literature of the past, particularly the Romantic poets. Standing before Coleridge's house near Langdale, which was actually inhabited for far longer by Southey, the men ask the reasonable question: "Robert Southey. Who was he?" Coogan points out that what matters is not length of stay, but the significance of the individual: "If I lived with you for six months, when I died, there'd obviously ... there'd be a plaque on the house saying, 'Steve Coogan lived here from 2010 until 2011,' or something" (Parmenter, 2010, episode 3). And at one point, Brydon makes a scathing transition from quoting Hazlitt on the ageing Coleridge—"All that he had done of moment he had done 20 years ago voice [...] It was not to be supposed that Mr Coleridge could keep on at the rate he set off"—into the "A-ha!" catchphrase made famous by Alan Partridge,

the comedy character Coogan remains best known Just 'for' having created 20 years earlier (Parmenter, 2010, episode 3).

Brydon directly challenges the idea that his fellow traveller might have control over his legacy, even within his own lifetime, suggesting that, for all Coogan's assertions that he will be remembered for his "very good art house films," there will be hecklers shouting "A-ha!" if the roles for which Coogan militates were reversed, and Coogan appeared to give the eulogy at Brydon's funeral (Parmenter, 2010, episode 6). He therefore starkly implies the process Carlson describes, whereby "even when an actor strives to vary his roles, he is, especially as his reputation grows, entrapped by the memories of his public, so that each new appearance requires a negotiation with those memories" (9). It is precisely because it is so difficult for established actors "to avoid a certain aura of expectations based on past roles" that Coogan's career in "good films," and the prospect of his success in Shakespearean theatre, had largely stalled before the breakthrough represented by *Philomena* (Carlson, 67). In one poignant moment in the first season, Coogan yells Partridge's catchphrase from the top of a hill and it reverberates around the Romantic landscape all around him, as if trying and failing to cast the character which has limited the prospects of his entire subsequent career into the abyss (Parmenter, 2010, episode 4).

The continuous interweaving of death, memory and forgetting, and the disputed value of comic art is what leads up to *The Trip's* explicit engagement with *Hamlet* in the final episode of its second series. Two episodes earlier, there is an intimation of this Shakespearean focus as the characters gather around Shelley's grave to read its epitaph, taken from *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea change/Into something rich and strange." Coogan is interested in this sense of transmutation after death, commenting "Defying the physical, isn't it? Transcendent. And his poetry lives on in a way that ..." (Parmenter, 2010, episode 4). A characteristic Brydon interruption prevents him from completing this thought about art surviving transient life.

But when the two men visit the Fontanelle Cemetery in Naples in the final episode, strolling through a dim passageway surrounded by skulls, a specific comparison to *Hamlet* 5.1, the graveyard scene, seems inevitably to suggest itself:

COOGAN: Must be like being at one of your gigs.

BRYDON: Uh-huh, a lot of people.

COOGAN: Well, they turned up, I'll give you that.

*Pause.*

Weird, isn't it, that Byron used to drink out of a skull.

BRYDON: Ohhhhh.

COOGAN: You all right?

BRYDON: [as Richard Burton]: Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well.

COOGAN: That's a total misquote, it's "Alas poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio."

BRYDON: I knew him well.

COOGAN: It's not "I knew him well," it's "I knew him, Horatio." It's the most famous mis-quote in the English language and you just did it.

BRYDON: What's the actual quote?

COOGAN: I'm a bit shocked.

BRYDON: What's the actual quote, then?

COOGAN: I ... ala, alas poor Yor ... ala ...

BRYDON: See, you don't know it yourself.

COOGAN: I do know it. Alas, poor Yorick ... alas, alas, poor Yorick ....

BRYDON: Well, who are you talking to? Me or the invisible man?

COOGAN: I'll tell you. I'm talking to him about you.  
 BRYDON: Who am I?  
 COOGAN: You're Yorick. Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio. A man of infinite jest.  
 BRYDON: Thank you.  
 COOGAN: Of excellent fancy.  
 BRYDON: Thank you.  
 COOGAN: He hath borne me on his back a thousand times.  
 BRYDON: That is true.  
 COOGAN: Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flights of merriment...wont to set a table on a roar?  
 COOGAN: *smiles, then mimes—'poof!'—blowing away dust.*

(Parmenter, 2017, episode 6)

Byron's penchant for drinking out of skulls has already been mentioned in a previous scene that episode, leading Brydon to suggest that he—in a form of the Horatio role—might take custody of Coogan's skull after death. His plan, though affectionate, reduces the dead Coogan to the early role which has ghosted him throughout his life:

*[I'd] use it as a cup holder and put on the best of Partridge on the MP3 player. I'd laugh my head off while looking at your head, literally off, pop the latte into your head, and if I was entertaining someone I'd say .... They'd sit there, I mean your work is great, they'd say, "Isn't he funny?" I'd say, "Not just funny, he's holding my coffee."*

(Parmenter, 2017, episode 6)

Taken together, both of these scenes respond to Yorick as the ultimate figure for the transience of the comedian, and suggest the characters making peace with this status. After death, Coogan's skull is repurposed, his memory as a comic figure kept alive by others, even if some kind of functional utility is the quid pro quo due for the honour of being remembered. In the Fontanelle Cemetery, however, Coogan seems paradoxically to realise through Hamlet that his comic talents being forgotten might not be so bad either. In this moment, the endless verbiage of the series subsides to a quieter moment, as Coogan, with a rueful smile, directly confronts the vexed question of legacy he has spent many previous scenes tetchily stepping around: "Where be your gibes now?"

Though Brydon looks genuinely disturbed at the thought of the transient enjoyment of comic art dissolving into nothing, Coogan's expression implies that, if only for this scene, he has achieved a calm acceptance similar to Hamlet's acknowledgement that "Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes? Let be" (5.2.180–1). Having previously "shamelessly compete[d] like two rutting comic stags," as Graeme Thomson (2010) noted in *Uncut*, Coogan now includes Brydon in Hamlet's meditation, allowing him the status of a valued comic rather than a Horatio-esque observer: "you're Yorick." Having continually undermined his art, he is now happy to acknowledge him as a fellow "fellow of infinite jest," and the two acknowledge their mutual dependence: "he hath borne me on his back a thousand times"; "That is true." Unlike the impressions in which they briefly lose themselves, here, Coogan gives the performance of a serious actor genuinely inhabiting a role and applies it directly to his real-life situation; he acknowledges that he and Brydon really are the same, and in passing, gives a version of the tribute at Brydon's funeral he had previously shown himself unable to offer.

The loss implied by the invocation of *Hamlet*, and specifically its graveyard scene, here operates not as an image of missed opportunity, as in *Withnail*, to be lamented but never conquered, but instead as a chance for new connection: not only with Brydon but also with his estranged son Joe, who at the end of the scene emerges from the light outside to join his father. Formerly distant, Coogan spends the end of the episode with



his child in a stated attempt to “get my priorities right” which continues throughout the third season as their relationship develops.

Like Withnail (it is implied), Coogan will never have the chance to play the Dane for real, and indeed, his admission that he would have liked to in *The Trip to Spain* might seem like backsliding from the tentative revelations of the Fontanelle Cemetery episode. But while joshing his companion (though Olivier played Hamlet at 42, “Olivier was a better actor than you”), Brydon makes it clear that the comparably great part of Lear—what Wells calls “the final summit of ambition” for a Shakespeare actor (2)—is still available to an older performer. And Coogan more than rises to the occasion, delivering from memory a subtle, serious, melancholic account of the following lines:

I know when one is dead and when one lives.  
 She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass.  
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
 Why then she lives.

(5.3.256–9)

For Coogan and Withnail, the use of Shakespeare's greatest part for a young male actor helps to highlight themes of transience, regret, ghosting, and wasted ambition in both characters' careers; but at least for Coogan, Hamlet also points a way out of the darkness, underwriting his maturing understanding of the blend of comedy and tragedy that haunts every human being—not only great actors—until they find a way to say “Let be.”

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Sheen himself played Hamlet a year after the first series aired.

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