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► **To cite this version:**

| Teja Šosterič. Consider the Worm. 2019. halshs-02324778

HAL Id: halshs-02324778

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02324778>

Preprint submitted on 22 Oct 2019

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Consider the Worm

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In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Adam Gabbatt writes about the Coalition of Radical Life Extension, “an organization which brings together scientists and enthusiasts interested in ‘physical immortality’”.¹ He writes about individuals and companies who have embarked on a quest to cheat death, by whatever means necessary. Some of the methods they undertake are gruesome, such as “injecting young blood into old people,”² while others seem perfectly acceptable, even laudable, such as following a healthy diet and exercise regime. But as Dr Muriel R. Gillick writes, there exists “overwhelming evidence that the potions are ineffective at best, harmful at worst – and a phenomenal waste of money overall”.³ Furthermore, these dubious treatments are only available to the fanatical few, who are most likely also white and almost certainly wealthy. Their first goal is to achieve longevity; their second is immortality. The theory is that if they manage to extend their lives long enough, someone will find a way for them to live forever. With this new, however distant possibility, a new social rift opens, further separating the rich from the poor. Luckily, for now, physical immortality remains a fantasy. However, the articles and books on the matter like to point out that to live forever is a human desire; something we all secretly want. Perhaps it is not surprising that most articles that promote the idea of physical immortality also refer to literature to prove not only that this quest is an old one, but also to give it legitimacy. While there are definitely literary texts that deal with a desire for immortality (the Epic of Gilgamesh is a popular one to mention, as is the Holy Grail), there are also those works that use death as not something to fear and shun, but as an organic part of life. These often deal with immortality projects rather than a quest for physical immortality, where characters view a symbolic extension of life as a way to “outlive” their physical deaths.

In this essay, I will discuss two of Shakespeare’s plays, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet* in order to discover how they deal with death and immortality, and compare them to

¹ Adam Gabbatt, “Is Silicon Valley’s quest for immortality a fate worse than death?”, *The Guardian*, 23 Feb 2019, 16 July 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/22/silicon-valley-immortality-blood-infusion-gene-therapy>>.

² Gabbatt, “Is Silicon Valley’s quest for immortality a fate worse than death?”, *The Guardian*, 23 Feb 2019, 16 July 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/22/silicon-valley-immortality-blood-infusion-gene-therapy>>.

³ Muriel R. Gillick, *The Denial of Aging: Perpetual Youth, Eternal Life, and Other Dangerous Fantasies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2007) 3.

the situation today. I will argue that the advance of medical technology is creating a modern crisis that was impossible in early-modern England. This much is obvious; but contrary to what some might say, immortality projects are still being promoted as a better way of dealing with death. According to some texts, acceptance of physical death and decay of the body is a healthy way of accepting one's mortality. This is in line with how death is tackled in both *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and is an indication that coming to terms with dying and a strong connection to the reality of death, decomposition of corpses (including getting eaten by worms) are still existent in today's society, forming an opposition to those who seek immortality with the aid of medicine and technology. To discuss this, I will review some recent texts that take different stances on the matter and show why it might be undesirable to strive for immortality. However, as I will argue, this does not mean that anxiety about death is not present; in fact, it is an essential part of life, and the drive behind most immortality projects.

In scene V of Act II of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a messenger arrives in Egypt and brings news of Antony, who had returned to Rome on urgent matters. Cleopatra is extremely anxious to receive the news, and worried about Antony. Before the messenger is even able to speak, she already assumes that the news is bad, and worries that some horrible fate has befallen her lover, exclaiming: "Antonius dead! – If thou say so, villain, / Thou kill'st thy mistress".⁴ Two things are of significance here: firstly, Cleopatra is terrified of the possibility that Antony has perished. Considering the danger of sea journeys in the time in which the play is set, her worry is understandable: it is indicative of Antony's vulnerability. Regardless of his high social standing, Antony is as likely to suffer some horrible fate as a regular sailor, since his status and wealth would not protect him from potential shipwreck. Secondly, Cleopatra states that Antony's death would be the death of her. This might be meant metaphorically and dramatically, or refer to not actual, physical death, but rather the anguish his death would bring her; however, given how the play ends, one can assume that Cleopatra is being literal. Antony dying would mean that she too would die. But she doesn't say that she would kill herself in that case – she puts the blame of her death on the messenger. Later, she threatens to kill the messenger, saying "Rogue, thou hast lived too long".⁵ Killing or shooting the messenger is a well-known metaphoric phrase dating from Plutarch; if nothing

⁴ *Antony and Cleopatra* II, v, 1082-1083.

⁵ *Antony and Cleopatra* II, v, 1144.

else, it shows how little human life was worth to those in power, the recipients of the news who could kill at will. Cleopatra, oscillating between wanting to shower the messenger in gold and wanting to torture and kill him, is exemplary of this.

We can see how in just those few short lines death and anxiety about death, symbolic and real death as well as precariousness of human life inform this play. One might argue that because of how different life was in Egyptian, Roman, and Shakespearian times compared to today, the relationship with death was also different. Modern medical advances sterilise our experience of death, which takes place not violently and brutally in front of our eyes, like Antony died in front of Cleopatra, but behind closed white curtains. The fragility of life in the time in which the play is set resulted in a relationship with death that was more organic, and some might say more realistic, than what we experience today. Indeed, it reaches beyond death, but how life itself was viewed by Egyptians. Randall Martin writes that Egyptians “[saw] themselves as physiologically embedded in the earth’s organic cycles of material change, rebirth, and transmutation”.⁶ Cleopatra’s suicide is not sterile: it is a return to the earth. And here enter the worms. Martin turns to the edition of *Antony and Cleopatra* that contains notes by its editor, Michael Neill. Of course, the worm the Clown speaks of is the snake in the basket he carries, but as Martin points out, in Shakespeare, this word could mean other species of similar animals. The meanings become blurred when the Clown says “Give it nothing, I pray you, for it is not worth the feeding,” and Cleopatra asks “will it eat me?”⁷ On the surface, they are talking about the snake, but Martin agrees with Neill, who notes that Cleopatra’s question refers to the maggots in the grave. By asking that, she is expressing her anxiety of being eaten by maggots and her fear of bodily decomposition. On the other hand, she calls the bite of the worm/snake “sweet as balm, as soft as air”,⁸ which indicates her acknowledgment of her physical mortality and her fate. She lets the worms bite her, and accepts the worms will eat her dead flesh.

But she is Cleopatra, and therefore must be aware that her reputation will not die with her – her “immortal longings”⁹ indicate as much. Cleopatra’s immortality project is her own position as queen, the fact that she has what we would now call a ‘strong brand’. She knows

⁶ Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 137.

⁷ *Antony and Cleopatra*, V, ii, 3725-7.

⁸ *Antony and Cleopatra*, V, ii, 3776.

⁹ *Antony and Cleopatra*, V, ii, 3739.

she will not be forgotten. In fact, considering her propensity for the dramatic, I might conjecture that if she doubted her symbolic immortality, she would not have killed herself. Of course, her suicide is also an indication of her pride, because she does not want to be paraded in the streets of Rome as Caesar's conquest – to the Queen of Egypt, such a fate would be unacceptable, and suicide preferable. On the other hand, she presents her death as a return to Antony, her “husband”, and as a ticket to immortality. Partially, this refers to the afterlife in which she believes; partially, it's about the memory of her on Earth. To be sure, fame after death is a privilege of the higher classes, and there is no doubt that Cleopatra is not only in the highest position in her kingdom; her position was practically that of a goddess. But in Egypt, deities also die, at least as far as their physical form is concerned, that is something that both kings and beggars have in common. Death is the great social leveller, a position which is these days being challenged by the advance of medicine and technology. Consequently, the idea that we will die, and be eaten by worms, is now shunned by many.

One might argue that even cremation is a way to sterilise death, since ashes are, after all, sterile. Embalming is another way we ward off decay; something we in fact have in common with the Egyptians, who mummified the most important members of their society. However, this is not something that is on Cleopatra's mind: she considers the worm. The exact reason behind this would be impossible to guess, but it might be related to Shakespeare's own ideas about death. Worms that eat flesh are after all not something unique to *Antony and Cleopatra*. In *Hamlet*, worms are referred to several times. In the scene where Claudius questions Hamlet about Polonius, Hamlet shrewdly declares that Polonius is at supper, “[n]ot where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation / of politic worms are e'en at him”.¹⁰ This, and the subsequent lines where he says “[y]our fat king and your lean beggar / is but variable service; two dishes, but to one table”¹¹ he shows no disgust at the idea of decomposition; in fact, he almost revels in it. To Hamlet, worms eating flesh are a part of the natural process of life. To be sure, he might be using the image of maggot-ridden flesh to make Claudius uncomfortable, but Claudius does not seem to be bothered by Hamlet's phrasing; he is more concerned with the fact that Hamlet has committed a murder. Considering that cremation, embalming or such practices as Egyptian mummification were not available in those times, organic decomposition was much more accepted in society than

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, IV, iii, 2731-2732.

¹¹ *Hamlet*, IV, iii, 2734-2735.

it is today. That doesn't mean that it was not considered unpleasant; as Martin puts it, worms, or maggots (since worm in this case serves as an umbrella term) were "creatures exercising a trivial yet fearful agency in the world".¹² Being eaten by maggots was certainly not appetising, but was quite unavoidable.

Secondly, the answers Hamlet gives to Claudius are also political; this is clear from the use of the word 'politic'. Martin¹³ and James Calderwood¹⁴ both mention how this passage contains a reference to the Diet of Worms, the assembly at which Martin Luther responded to charges of heresy. This already invokes politics, but the political nexus does not end there: according to Martin, Hamlet's invocations of the power of the worm "dethrone humans as privileged consumers at the top of the food pyramid".¹⁵ In a talk given at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Steven Connor makes a similar point, saying that through this statement, "Hamlet's worms enact a radically egalitarian politics of the body that dissolve the imperious authority of the body politic".¹⁶ Martin's point shows the error of perceived superiority of humans over other beings. The clever word play in the final sentence of Connor's speech links closer to politics, reminding us that decay is unavoidable for all things, even nations, states, and empires. But, as Connor is keen to point out in a different part of his talk, worms are not only agents of decomposition; they are invaluable in the circulation of organic matter, which fertilises the soil and promotes new life. In concrete terms, in the very unlikely event that immortality became possible for all humans, the planet might at some point reach full capacity, and the population would stagnate not only in keeping a stable number of individuals, but in literally keeping the very same individuals. It is unclear how that would affect our further progress as a species, but as a worst case scenario, it might result in a population that struggles with originality. From a personal perspective, I can imagine extreme dullness. It is only through accepting mortality and realising that death is a part of life that we can viably expect the formation of new life.

At least on the material level, there is constant recycling, death and life forming two indispensable parts of a whole. But why then do the grave-diggers, the clowns in Hamlet,

¹² Martin, 141.

¹³ Martin, 142.

¹⁴ James L. Calderwood, *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death* (Amherst University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 17.

¹⁵ Martin, 142.

¹⁶ Steven Connor, "A Certain Convocation of Politic Worms," talk given at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 23 April 2010.

claim the opposite? The second clown asks: “Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a / carpenter?”¹⁷ The first clown does not know, but the second one replies: “when you are ask’d this / question next, say ‘a grave-maker.’ The houses he makes lasts / till doomsday”.¹⁸ This would seem in contrast with the previous idea, in which all things come to an end. However, the clown is not being literal; he does not believe that the grave itself will last forever. What he means is that regardless of the fact that bodies decay and all has an eventual end, death itself is eternal. Once they pass from life, the dead are dead – until the end of the world. The Christian undertones refer to a religious immortality project, by which the dead can enter new and better lands. We are also reminded of Hamlet’s line in his famous soliloquy, where death is that “undiscover’d country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns”.¹⁹ At first glance, the finality of death invoked in this passage might seem at odds with the idea of an immortality project. However, the opposite is true: because death is the final and unavoidable end of our physical being, and because this is something that we fear, we become motivated to preserve some other part of ourselves for posterity, a memory or legacy that serves as symbolic continuation of life.

Immortality projects are one of the primary topics of Ernest Becker’s book *The Denial of Death*, where he refers to them as *causa sui*. The book is premised on the idea that human civilisation is essentially built on the terror of death, and that one of the most important pursuits of humanity is the immortality project, which attempts to defy it. As Sam Keen lucidly puts it in his introduction,

We achieve ersatz immortality by sacrificing ourselves to conquer an empire, to build a temple, to write a book, to establish a family, to accumulate a fortune, to further progress and prosperity, to create an information-society and global free market.²⁰

Becker also claims that each immortality project “is a lie that must take its toll as one tries to avoid reality”,²¹ because it is based on a fantasy, on an imagined heroism of the self that can cheat death. These premises are echoed in James Calderwood’s book *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*, the title of which was inspired by Becker’s work and which not only builds

¹⁷ *Hamlet*, V, i, 3389-3390.

¹⁸ *Hamlet*, V, i, 3397-3399.

¹⁹ *Hamlet*, III, i, 1772-1773.

²⁰ Sam Keen, introduction to *The Denial of Death*, by Becker (New York: The Free Press, 1973) xiii.

²¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973) 107.

on his ideas, but connects them to Shakespeare. About Hamlet, Calderwood writes that his immortality project was interrupted, as they often are, by the death of his father: this throws Hamlet into a spiral and “sets him off on a neurotically obsessive exploration of death in its various and most repellent forms”.²² The realisation of the lie of *causa sui* leads Hamlet to embrace and explore the more organic, tangible, gruesome truth of death: he considers the worm.

Immortality projects can change throughout a person’s life, be destroyed or replaced, but presumably we all pursue some way of dealing with the terror of mortality. However, as Calderwood puts it, “the fate of all immortality projects [is] a demystifying return to the body and death”.²³ This obvious, yet keen observation applies to the creator of the immortality project. Once dead, Cleopatra can no longer envision herself as the immortal queen of Egypt; any preservation of her person is left to those around her, who remember her ... in her specific case, to this very day. That is how we learn that immortality projects *can* be successful. They provide comfort at the thought of death, because we know that some people managed to live on symbolically. For most of us, our goals are humbler than those of Cleopatra – often, we wish to be remembered by our families, or find comfort in having children. But Cleopatra found immortality in history books and in the works of Shakespeare, who matches her in fame, and whose symbolic existence also far exceeds his mortal life. It is easier to accept the idea of decay and decomposition of our human form when we have such examples of symbolic immortality.

In her book on the subject, Dr Muriel R. Gillick also invokes Becker’s idea of immortality projects, and mentions how the “knowledge of our own mortality has shaped human culture”.²⁴ She advocates for the acceptance of mortality, and directly attacks the modern medical pursuit of physical immortality I mentioned in the introduction. According to Gillick, chasing immortality and trying to drastically extend life is not only ineffective, but can also have dire social consequences. She writes that it would “create grave injustice if it is not equally available to all citizens”.²⁵ She instead presents the immortality project as a healthy way of dealing with the knowledge of our inevitable death. I have previously implied

²² Calderwood, 117.

²³ Calderwood, 91.

²⁴ Gillick, 223.

²⁵ Gillick, 219.

that physical immortality might result in decreased social productivity of the species as a whole: Gillick disagrees, instead saying that her “contention is not that it is good to be mortal because it promotes productivity, but rather that mortality is simply a reality”.²⁶ In this, she echoes the telluric relationship demonstrated in *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, of death as a part of life which we might fear, but should embrace.

On the opposite end of this spectrum is John Harris, who calls immortality “the Holy Grail”.²⁷ In his chapter on the issue, he even mentions Shakespeare, saying that “Shakespeare’s plays have all made such ideas familiar”.²⁸ He is referring to fairies and magical creatures that feature in some of Shakespeare’s plays, rather than immortality offered to humans, and he goes on to mention that many people would choose immortality if it were possible, even at cost of lower quality of life. But I would argue that the problem is not in whether we all want or do not want to live forever; it’s whether or not it is ethical. Harris argues for human mental and physical enhancement through the use of gene manipulation and technology, but even though he mentions Karl Marx,²⁹ a person who most definitely concerned himself with class inequality, Harris neglects the class divide in these matters. He sees no problem with the fact that these enhancements and improvements would probably only be available to the selected and wealthy few. He even claims that justice should not enter into the picture.³⁰ For him, social inequality is the way of the world, something that always existed and always will; so why not perpetuate it. This is an idea that many, myself included, find unappetising. In her article on the matter, Ann Leckie heavily implies that increased longevity for some but not for all is immoral. However, her argument is naïve; she believes that those who want to be immortal and have the resources to do the research are “often thinking of their own, personal lives, and the lives of those they’re surrounded by”.³¹ The truth is that they might be aware of the detrimental consequences of their actions on the underprivileged, and simply not care.

²⁶ Gillick, 224.

²⁷ John Harris, *Enhancing Evolution: The Ethical Case for Making Better People* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007) 59.

²⁸ Harris, 59.

²⁹ Harris, 186.

³⁰ Harris, 62.

³¹ Ann Leckie, “Living to be 500 years old would be wonderful – but only for the rich,” *The Guardian*, 16 Mar 2015, 16 July 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/16/living-500-year-would-be-wonderful-bill-maris>>

Harris certainly does not care about social equality, and does not think that creating “parallel populations of mortals and immortals”³² is immoral; in fact, he relies on literature to make his point, claiming that such populations were “envisaged in literature and mythology”.³³ However, the imaginary and magical immortals, such as fairies and elves, that do feature in literature, even Shakespeare’s plays, are not the same as immortal humans. They are otherworldly: that’s the point! Shakespeare’s humans, regardless of their social position, are not immune to death. Both Hamlet and Cleopatra are arguably among the most powerful people in their respective polities, but in the end, they both perish. Their fates are indicative of the relationship with death of people in early modern England, where the relationship with the dead and the dying was much more direct. Of course, it would be impossible to predict how people in Shakespeare’s time would feel about death if they had modern medicine at their disposal, but that is not the most important question to ask. It is whether physical immortality is even something we should be pursuing. Fear of death is natural, even evolutionary necessary, as it drives our survival instinct, but in order to achieve happiness in life we would perhaps be better off if we learned from Hamlet and Cleopatra, who did not ignore the inevitability of physical decay. Through their respective immortality projects, they learned to extend their symbolic existence. We too can learn to accept that our bodies will perish, and instead strive to improve the society in which we live for future generation, and so that they may remember us.

The fear of death is ever-present. It is most certainly true that most humans wish for some sort of immortality, some way of cheating death and prolonging life. However, chasing physical immortality is not only expensive and ineffective; it also increases social inequality that is already a problem in the modern world. The crisis of death which already significantly affects our perception of the gravely ill and disconnects us with the natural process of dying took on a new shape in the pursuit of physical immortality. While immortality would obviously mean the perpetual existence of the currently living humans, it would make no room for new life, new ideas, and perhaps even hinder further progress. If we consider the worm as not only the agent of decay, but also as the fertiliser of new life, and an agent of progress, we can more easily understand and accept that death is the physical end of an individual, but not of the species, and not of life in general.

³² Harris, 71.

³³ Harris, 71.

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