



Alas, poor Yorick

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First Clown:

A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! 'a pour'd a flagon
of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was, sir,
Yorick's skull, the King's jester.

Hamlet:

This? [*Takes the skull*]

First Clown:

E'en that.

Hamlet:

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite
jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a
thousand times, and now how abhorr'd in my imagination it is!
My gorge rises at it.

[*Hamlet Act 5, scene 1, 179–188*](#)

As two clowns dig Opelia's grave [*see CUDGEL THY BRAINS*], they unearth the skull of Yorick, court jester to the former king. This king's son, Prince Hamlet, just happens to be strolling through the graveyard with his friend Horatio, and he joins the first clown in a round of morbid jokes. Hamlet's spirits, however, are dampened by the smelly skull, whose grim visage belies the prince's vivid memories of the frolicsome rogue. In his characteristically associative fashion, Hamlet takes the sickening contrast between the Yorick he imagines and his disgusting remains as a leaping-point into sweeping philosophical conclusions about the common fate—decay—of both kings and court jesters.

"Alas, poor Yorick" has always been one of the most fondly remembered lines from [Hamlet](#) (or misremembered lines—Hamlet does *not* say "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well"). As early as 1760, in his novel *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne introduced the parson Yorick, one of whose ancestors emigrated from Denmark to England to become the English king's court jester. In fact, the narrator claims, "Hamlet's Yorick, in our *Shakespeare*, many of whose plays, you know, are founded upon authenticated facts,—was certainly the very man."

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Shakespeare Quotes: Alas, poor Yorick

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