

“Shakespeare’s Spirits”

Of the leading Renaissance English playwrights, it is only Shakespeare who fully participates in the popular vogue for presenting ghosts onstage. Indeed, “participates” is an inadequate term: Shakespeare’s celebrated ghost scenes – easily the greatest in all of English drama – are signs of a deep interest that continues through virtually his entire career. He saw that he could draw upon a range of traditions, including not only the classical Hades and the popular Hell but also the banished realm of Catholic Purgatory. He saw, too, that uncertainty – including perhaps his own uncertainty- about the very possibility of ghosts was itself valuable theatrical capital. More than anyone of his age, Shakespeare grasped that there were powerful links between his art and the haunting of spirits.

The richest and most complex exploitation of the theatrical capital Shakespeare found in ghosts is in *Hamlet*, which is the subject of the next chapter and the subtext of this entire book, but it is important to grasp how frequently and insistently the figure of the ghost recurs throughout his plays. The questions the figure raises, at once theological, psychological, and theatrical, are ones to which Shakespeare never provides definitive answers; rather, he prefers to keep the issues alive by staging ghosts in a variety of guises and from shifting perspectives. Each of these stagings has its own distinct and subtle meanings, but there are three fundamental perspectives to which Shakespeare repeatedly returns: the ghost as a figure of false surmise, the ghost as a figure of history’s nightmare, and the ghost as a figure of deep psychic disturbance. Half-hidden in all of these is a fourth perspective: the ghost as a figure of theatre.

Shakespeare was clearly fascinated by what we might call evacuated ghosts beliefs, beliefs attributable to panic, superstitious dread, or psychological projection. This fascination may have seemed sufficiently characteristic of him to induce the printer, hoping to increase sales of a decidedly creaky comedy, *The Puritan: or, the Widow of Wailing Street*, to publish it in 1607 with the ascription “Written by W.S.” (The ascription seems to have led the editors of the Third Folio of Shakespeare’s *Works* [1664] to include it in their text.) The plot of the comedy, whose style does not remotely resemble Shakespeare’s, hinges on an attempt by the clever scholar, young George Pyeboard, to persuade a wealthy London widow that her deceased husband, a grasping Puritan, lies in Purgatory and will suffer there unless she and her daughters change their marriage plans. The resolution of this sly device does not concern us, but is of interest that the play could have been passed off as Shakespeare’s, since it suggests that his name may have been associated with stories of Protestants confronted by purgatorial spirits, stories obviously relevant to *Hamlet*.

“Dark Hints”

“When the ghost has vanished,” says Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, in what is probably the most influential of all readings of *Hamlet*, “what do we see standing before us? A young hero thirsting for revenge? A prince by birth, happy to be charged with unseating the usurper of his

throne? Not at all!" The tragedy is more inward: "A fine, pure, noble and highly moral person, but devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero, goes to pieces beneath a burden that it can neither support nor cast off." Generations of critics have agreed, responding in effect to the startling Shakespearean shift from vengeance to remembrance. But what motivated this unprecedented shift? Where did it come from? How did it connect successfully with a popular London audience in 1601? And why more specifically, is the injunction to remember spoken by a ghost? The overwhelming emphasis on the psychological dimension, crowned by psychoanalytical readings of the play in the twentieth century, has the odd effect of eliminating the Ghost as ghost, turning it into the prince's traumatic memory or, alternatively, into a conventional piece of dispensable stage machinery. But if we do not let the Ghost vanish altogether, we can perhaps begin to answer these questions, by recognizing that the psychological in Shakespeare's tragedy is constructed almost entirely out of the theological, and specifically out of the issue of remembrance that, as we have seen, lay at the heart of the crucial early-sixteenth-century debate about Purgatory.

The Ghost makes clear to Hamlet that he is in what Thomas White's early-seventeenth-century text called "the middle state of souls," not damned for eternity but forced to suffer torments in a "prison house" designed to purge him of the crimes he had committed in his life:

I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.9-13)

In church teachings, the excruciating pains of Purgatory and of Hell were, as we have seen, identical; the only difference was that the former were only for a certain term.

That one difference, of course was crucial, but the Catholic Church laid a heavy emphasis upon the horrors of purgatorial torments, so that the faithful would be as anxious as possible to reduce the term they would have to endure. When he first encounters the apparition, Hamlet envisions only two possibilities for the Ghost's origin:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee. (1.4.21-25)

Nothing Hamlet says in the wake of his fateful exchange with his father's spirit explicitly acknowledges a third possibility, a middle state between Heaven and Hell, a place within the earth where souls are purged. But "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio," he tells his Wittenberg friend, as the Ghost moves restlessly beneath the stage, "Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (1.5.169). And a moment later, hearing the Ghost's voice once again, he

addresses it directly in words that would have been utterly familiar to a Catholic and deeply suspect to a Protestant: “Rest, rest, perturbèd spirit” (1.5.183).

There is a famous problem with all of these heavy hints that the Ghost is in or has come from Purgatory: by 1563, almost forty years before Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was written, the Church of England had explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic conception of Purgatory and the practices that had been developed around it.

from Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001)