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*Robert Thew's Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and the Ghost [1796],
after Fuseli; engraving on ivory wove paper.*

The Divinity That Shapes Our Ends: Theological Conundrums and Religious Scepticism in *Hamlet*

Hamlet is the most theologically problematic cosmos in the canon. The ghost of King Hamlet evinces an afterlife, at least one realm of which involves the fiery purgation of sins, but the ghost's deportment is peculiarly unchristian, and the Prince's understandable scepticism about its identity and intentions determines the play's narrative, so it would be critically irresponsible to pass over the theological implications of the ghost's presence. There would be no play if the ghost had not told Hamlet of his father's murder, which makes the spectre culpable in the play's eight deaths. Whether the ghost be a demonic impostor or an earnest purgatorial

apparition, its presence stimulates religious scepticism by complicating Elsinore's ostensibly Christian cosmos and cheapening Hamlet's mortal ruminations.

Ghosts of the dead are uncommon in Shakespeare: there are Richard III's murder victims, Posthumus's dead relatives in *Cymbeline*, the ghost of the murdered Julius Caesar, the ghost of the murdered Banquo in *Macbeth*, and the ghost of the murdered King Hamlet. However, Shakespeare was almost certainly aware of the long tradition of theatrical ghosts. As John Mullan indicates:

Elizabethan playwrights drew on the example of the Roman tragedian Seneca, whose plays were translated into English and widely read. Seneca's influence is very clear in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, first staged around 1590. This features the Ghost of Andrea, a Spanish nobleman, who opens the play with a long soliloquy, at the end of which he is promised by the personified spirit of Revenge that he will witness the killing of Don Balthazar, 'the author of thy death'. [*sic*] ("Ghosts in Shakespeare")

But what distinguishes the ghost of King Hamlet from lesser apparitions, apart from its Shakespearean articulateness, is its position in an eerily Catholic cosmos. It claims that it is "[d]oomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in [its] days of nature / Are burnt and purged away[,]" evoking something similar to the Catholic notion of Purgatory. It also claims that King Hamlet was murdered "unhouseled," meaning not having received the Eucharist, and "unaneled," meaning not having received the Final Anointing of the Sick (Holm). Nevertheless, we are not obliged to trust the

ghost for its use of Catholic terminology: if it were a devil, it would not be required to tell the truth. If anything, it would be more inclined to lie, and the manipulative use of Catholic terminology would be a sophisticated deception indeed, one surely not beyond the powers of a malevolent spirit intent on causing mischief in Elsinore.

Shakespeare was probably acquainted with the translated works of demonologists like Lewes Lavatar (1527–1586), whose speculations accord with contemporaneous suspicions about ghostly visitations:

Devils, if that is what a particular ghost turned out to be, might give incorrect information the living. They might perhaps mention ‘purgatory’, a location in which the souls of the recently dead were thought in Catholic doctrine to do penance for their sins, scouring them away painfully before entering heaven. But what if it did not exist, as Protestants argued, and the devil was trying to delude the bereaved into misbelief? (Gibson and Esra 101)

Horatio asks the Prince, “What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord? / Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff / That beetles o’er his base into the sea, / And there assume some other horrible form / Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason / And draw you into madness? Think of it” (1.5). The very possibility of the ghost being a devil is Hamlet’s purported justification for his elaborate scheme of verification; says he:

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power

T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play's the thing
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

(2.2)

Consider also the ghost's suspicious knowledge of Claudius's murder method. In what Harold Bloom calls a "brilliant fantasia on *Hamlet* in the Library scene of *Ulysses*" (398), James Joyce's alter ego Stephen Dedalus reminds us that "those who are done to death in sleep cannot know the manner of their quell unless their Creator endow their souls with that knowledge in the life to come. The poisoning and the beast with two backs that urged it King Hamlet's ghost could not know of were he not endowed with knowledge by his creator" (Joyce 196–197). Dedalus does not explicate the troublesome theology behind his provocative claim, which we may qualify by allowing for the possibility that some entity other than God could have revealed the manner of the King's death to his ghost, but that would of course only absolve God of the revelation if He were not omniscient or not omnipotent.

Circumventing this disturbing quandary is nigh impossible on stage, though it has been done on the screen. Olivier's Hamlet closes his eyes while the camera zooms into the crown of his head, whereafter the murder is depicted under the ghost's synchronous dialogue, heavily implying that Hamlet imagines what the murder looked like, albeit with poetic license, given that he pictures the King briefly waking after the poisoning in order to stare and point at Claudius

before falling off his couch and dying, none of which is included in the ghost's testimony. Branagh outdoes Olivier by depicting in slow-motion Claudius's purported seduction of Gertrude and murder of King Hamlet, complete with interposed shots of blood dropping from an ear, a bodice-ripping, and the napping King's response to the poison: waking, falling to the ground with his chair, shaking, agonizingly pressing his hands to the sides of his head, staring and gesturing at the affrighted murderer, then dying. Zeffirelli, however, does not depict the murder; he trusts Paul Scofield's harrowed delivery of the lines to stimulate the viewer's imagination and leave unresolved the possibility that God revealed the murder method to King Hamlet's ghost.

As Claudius's private confession in 3.2 proves, the ghost is not lying when it claims that Claudius murdered King Hamlet, nor do its request that Hamlet "[l]eave [Gertrude] to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" and its expressions of outraged disgust prompted by her "o'erhasty marriage" to the dead King's apparently less talented and less attractive brother Claudius seem like the utterances of a crafty devil, who one would expect to omit mention of Gertrude or even encourage Hamlet to punish her as well as Claudius. Furthermore, the ghost only reappears to Hamlet in Gertrude's closet, when the Prince is dangerously angry and close to committing violence against her, sexual or otherwise. If the ghost were a devil, it likely would not reappear in this moment in order to whet Hamlet's almost blunted purpose and implore him to be gentler with Gertrude.

While we may accept that the ghost of King Hamlet is an authentic representative for the deceased, this still does not explain its unchristian call for revenge by regicide, nor does it explain who in the afterlife allowed it to haunt Elsinore and communicate with the living. The ghost refers to Purgatory as a "prison house," but what sort of prison house allows its prisoners

to walk the night on the condition that they return by morning? And while it is conceivable (however unlikely) that purgatorial authorities might be unaware of the ghost's nocturnal activities, it would be heretical to suggest that God is unaware of them or else unable to prevent them. Why should God allow the ghost of King Hamlet to reveal to the Prince the details of the murder knowing full well that it could trigger such shufflings, mishaps, and collateral damages as would occur in Acts 3–5? Even if one were to speculatively limit God's knowledge to things past and present, it would be outrageous to suggest that He could be so poor a judge of character as to presume that nothing at all disastrous could happen if Hamlet were to be informed of his father's murder. It seems that both God and the ghost are culpable in the play's deaths and that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare either inadvertently promotes religious scepticism or else deliberately implements questionable supernaturalism in order to force the reader-playgoer to reflect on the unfeasibility of Christian theology in the shambles of Elsinore.

We now consider how the ghost's presence problematizes Hamlet's behaviour and depreciates his deathly contemplations. Inspect these lines of the Prince's world-famous soliloquy in 3.1: "To die—to sleep— / No more; and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished." These are not the words that we would expect from a man who has spoken with the ghost of his murdered father. Hamlet has no business entertaining the notion that death may be the annihilation of consciousness, and though we may forgive him for his apprehension about the unknown torments of the afterlife, given what little the ghost has revealed about the horrors of purgatory, he backslides when he describes death as "[t]he undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns[.]" He then harasses Ophelia in weirdly religious terms, at one point venting one of the great underappreciated questions in world literature: "Why wouldst thou be a

breeder of sinners?” This is an astonishing flirtation with a pragmatic nihilism that calls into question the motive for human reproduction and therefore the motive for divine Creation. The word *breed* or a variant thereof appear at least once in all of Shakespeare’s plays (with the odd exception of *The Taming of the Shrew*), but the word *breeder* appears only eight times, mostly in unsavoury contexts. After Hamlet’s initial persecution of Ophelia, which Dr. Johnson suggests is “useless and wanton cruelty” (Taylor 1993), the Prince plays up his salaciousness in 3.2. He seems genuinely sickened by sexuality throughout the play, even at his bawdiest, and this is in perfect keeping with his religious scepticism. It is no accident that both *Hamlet* and *Lear*, Shakespeare’s most highly regarded tragedies, present apocalyptic visions of filiality that provoke such horrifying theological speculation. The sexual grotesqueries of *Timon* are inferior to those of *Hamlet* and *Lear* insofar as they fixate on disease and not on procreation itself. Thus, Hamlet’s “Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” is really “Why would a prescient, morally impeccable God create humanity?”

Hamlet does not take kindly to himself, and many critics have not taken kindly to Hamlet. *En route* to his mother’s closet, the Prince chances upon Claudius praying, nearly murders him, then justifies his delay by deciding that it would be much better to slay the usurper when he is engaged in a particularly sinful act, a premeditation that bespeaks a moral sensibility more pagan than Christian. As William Hamilton argues:

We cannot avoid the impression that Shakespeare intentionally sets forth Hamlet as a genuinely evil man: he is certainly an exceptionally callous murderer: Polonius (3.4.212, 4.3.32) and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (5.2.46, 58), and it seems he can only effectively murder on his own behalf, and not for someone else. And Shakespeare has

Hamlet twice rejoice at the idea of killing men who have not made their peace with God (3.3.88 and 5.2.38). Even when he is moralizing, there is a corrupt cruelty to his style. His aggressiveness against his mother in the closet scene reminds us stylistically of a fundamental evangelist pressing for a conversion. [*sic*] (Hamilton 195)

After he rashly kills the concealed Polonius, Hamlet twice suggests that he thought that the eavesdropper might have been the King, the praying man that he had just left in another room. Unless those excuses are not merely compositional mistakes, Hamlet is either behaving disingenuously or else assuming that Claudius took a shorter alternative route or sprinted to the closet in order to get there first. The Prince further claims, “For this same lord [Polonius] / I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister.” If Hamlet is not merely trying to appease his bystander mother or indulge a rhetorical flight of fancy, he seems to believe that heaven is pleased when busybodies are killed and the rash are punished by becoming manslaughterers and exiles, which is to say that his God has an exquisitely perverse sense of humour. Later, in the famous graveyard scene, which may be the Western summit of literary gallows humour, we cannot help but remind ourselves that the scene would be much more existentially painful if there were any uncertainty about the existence of an afterlife beyond Elsinore, but Acts 1–2 permit no such uncertainty, and so the metaphysical resonance of Hamlet’s brilliant quibbles are limited by their context.

By 5.2, the sea-changed Prince is more enigmatic than ever, particularly when he says to Horatio, “Rashly— / And praised be rashness for it: let us know, / Our indiscretion sometime serves us well / When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us / There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will[,]” to which Horatio responds, perhaps

somewhat uncomprehendingly, “That is most certain.” We cannot doubt that among the “dozen or sixteen lines” (2.2) that Hamlet interpolated into *The Mousetrap* are the Player King’s “Our wills and fates do so contrary run / That our devices still are overthrown: / Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own” (3.2). The mature Hamlet of Act 5 has all but forgone hesitating and scheming (excepting perhaps his use of a disingenuous insanity plea in apologizing to Laertes for being complicit in the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia), and although it is without the purview of the literary critic to decide whether Hamlet is a compatibilist, hard determinist, stoic, or something else that transcends such convenient labels, none can argue that Hamlet is a metaphysical libertarian, for his meditations on theistic determinism appear as early as the Player King’s speech and reach their zenith in his foreboding exchange with Horatio, just before he enters the *dénouement* that will destroy him.

Every death in the play is a morbid parody of poetic justice: Polonius is killed while eavesdropping; Ophelia goes mad and drowns after she cannot reconcile her personal idealization of Hamlet with the Hamlet who rejected her, sexually harassed her, and rashly stabbed her father to death; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unwittingly sent to their deaths by Hamlet after having acted as sycophantic spies for the throne; the immoderate Gertrude dies from drinking wine poisoned by her lover; Laertes is killed by the poison that was crucial to his scheme to avenge his father by killing Hamlet; the King is bladed and forced to drink the wine that he poisoned, after having been revealed to be complicit in virtually every death in the play; and Hamlet dies after dithering, faffing about with the Players as a microcosmic director-deity, rejecting and harassing Ophelia, killing Polonius, forging a letter to get Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed, and effecting an *ad hoc* regicide.

In the shuffling carnage of Elsinore, vice is purged in anguish and death, and we are caught between two horrifying conceptions of deity: a God who leaves His children to their own bloody devices, and a God who shapes His creatures' ends with a ghoulish patience.

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