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SHAKESPEARE'S ANCIENT GHOSTS

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Did Shakespeare believe in ghosts? Well, of course, we have no evidence as to what Shakespeare personally believed. What we can say is that he knew that a ghost was a very effective dramatic device. So too with devils and spirits. In the early 1590s, as he was carving out his career as a player and playwright, two of the most celebrated plays in the London theatre repertoire were Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which is presided over by the Ghost of Don Andrea and a personification of Revenge, and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, conjurer of the devilish spirit Mephistopheles. In each case, the supernatural is the driver of the action: the demand for revenge in one case, the quest for illicit knowledge in the other.

Although *The Spanish Tragedy* is set in modern times, as Portugal attempts to secede from Spain, the Chorus consisting of Ghost and Revenge have come from the classical world. Don Andrea's long opening speech tells of his journey along "the flowing stream of Acheron", transported by "churlish Charon, only boatman there", and his arrival upon "Avernus' ugly waves" (Avernus was the lake at the entrance to the underworld). He then recalls his encounter with "Minos, Aeacus, and Rhadamanth", the three judges of the dead, and of his descent "to Pluto's court, / Through dreadful shades of ever-glooming night", where he sees two divergent paths, one of which descends to Tartarus, "the deepest hell, / Where bloody Furies shakes their whips of steel, / And poor Ixion turns an endless wheel", the other of which leads more invitingly to the meadows "Where lovers live and bloody martialists" – the destination that Virgil in *The Aeneid* called the "mourning fields" (*lugentes campi*) and "furthest plains" (*arva ultima*) that are the destination of, respectively, those such as Dido who have died for love and the heroes such as the Trojan warriors who have died in battle.¹ But Don Andrea is stopped by Pluto because he doesn't have the correct "passport", at which point he is introduced to Revenge and sent back to earth to witness the man who killed him being killed by the vengeful Bel-Imperia.

Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* was the keystone of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, but the foundations were laid by Seneca. Remember Polonius: "Seneca cannot be too heavy" for the players of tragedy at Elsinore. The very idea of commencing a play with a Chorus is learned from the classical tradition and, linguistically, the long opening speech by the Ghost of Don Andrea is modelled on Seneca's *Agamemnon*, which begins with the Ghost of Thyestes:

Departinge from the darkned dens which Dicis low doth keepe,
Loe heere I am sent out agayne, from Tartar Dungeon deepe,
Thyestes I, that wheather coast to shun doe stande in doubt,
Th'internall fiendes I fly, the foalke of earth I chase about.
My conscience lo abhors, that I should heather passage make,
Appauled sore with feare and dread my trembling sinewes shake.
(trans. John Studley in *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, 1581, p. 141)

Seneca's trademark is indeed the supernatural intervention that winds the plot of revenge tragedy. Thus his *Thyestes* begins, as the "Argument" of the Elizabethan translation puts it, with "Megaera one of the Hellish furies

¹ *Aeneid*, 6. 440, 477.



raising up Tantalus from Hell” and inciting him “to set mortall hatred betwene his two nephewes Thiestes, and Atreus being brothers” (ibid, p. 21). The Fury and the Ghost as joint Chorus served as another model for Kyd.

The original edition of the *Thyestes* translation had a verse preface describing a dream in which the ghost of the dramatist appears to the translator, who was an Oxford don called Jasper Heywood. Seneca is wearing a “scarlet gowne” to indicate that his genre is tragedy of blood and a laurel garland in honour of his poetic greatness. He carries a book and says that he has come back from the dead

to seeke some one that might renewe my name,
And make me speake in straunger speche and sette my woorks to sight,
And skanne my verse in other tongue then I was woont to wright.²

This idea of an author from imperial Rome returning to pass the baton to an English successor was an essential part of the Elizabethan cultural project of dignifying the nation with a literary canon of its own.

These Senecan and neo-Senecan contexts raise a number of interesting questions that we can apply to Shakespeare. Clearly neither Kyd nor Shakespeare believed that Revenge was a real person. They trust their audience to understand that the idea – the spirit – of Revenge is being embodied in a fictional persona for dramatic purposes. Early in his career, Shakespeare doubles down on Kyd by making the figure of Revenge in *Titus Andronicus* not a discrete character but a role impersonated by Tamora:

I am Revenge, sent from the infernal kingdom,
To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind
By working wreakful vengeance on thy foes.

Titus deliciously sees through the disguise and turns the vengeance back on Tamora in the most wreakful way, by dishing up her sons in a pie, self-consciously replicating Procne’s revenge on Tereus in the Philomel story in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that is explicitly displayed on the stage.

Shakespeare deploys the word “revenge” and its cognates more than two hundred times in the corpus of his works, but instead of bringing the figure on stage as a Chorus, he allows his characters to internalize the idea as a moral problem and an imperative for action. Revenge is an impulse that, as Aaron puts it in *Titus Andronicus*, hammers in the head. Notice how Tamora in the guise of Revenge speaks of the “gnawing vulture” of Titus’ “mind”: the classical myth of Prometheus’ punishment (tied to a mountainside with a vulture gnawing at his liver) is turned into a mental state. This is a typically Shakespearean move: whereas Kyd’s Don Andrea comes from classical Tartarus where “Ixion turns an endless wheel”, Shakespeare’s Lear internalizes the fate of Ixion (“I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead”). The transposition of Furies and ghosts from external forces to internal mental states is a significant clue to Shakespeare’s representation of the paranormal.

When Revenge is externalized, it is in the form of a human comparison, such as Pyrrhus in *Hamlet*, as opposed to an embodied spirit. Whereas self-consciously Senecan tragedians such as Kyd and Peele were content to bring on Atë, the spirit of havoc, as a prologue or in a masque between the acts, Shakespeare confines her to the rhetorical and metaphoric fabric of his plays, for example when Queen Eleanor in *King John* is described as “An Ate stirring [John] to blood and strife” (2.1.63) or when Mark Antony speaks of “Caesar’s spirit, ranging for revenge, / With Ate by his side come hot from hell”.

Atë does not appear on the Shakespearean stage, but Caesar’s spirit does. The ghost in *Julius Caesar* is not a Senecan prologue, but a nocturnal apparition as the action builds towards its climax. Brutus is reading by the light of a flickering taper when the Ghost of Caesar enters. Brutus initially thinks that it is the “the weakness of mine eyes / That shapes this monstrous apparition”. Then he asks, very much in the manner in which Hamlet interrogates the Ghost of his father,

² Heywood, *The seconde tragedie of Seneca entituled Thyestes faithfully Englished by Iasper Heywood fellowe of Alsolne Colledge in Oxforde* (1560) sig. *¶ 2r.



Art thou any thing?
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.

The ghost replies that he is Brutus' "evil spirit" and that he has come to tell him that they will meet at Philippi. We do not witness that second meeting, but Brutus reports it after the event and acknowledges that the two visitations are a sign that his "hour is come", in other words that he is about to die. The phrase is strikingly reminiscent of the language of Jesus talking about his coming crucifixion and in this regard it is interesting to note how the words of Roman Brutus are inflected by the Christian idea of a seeming ghost really being an angel or a devil. In an influential treatise called *Of ghostes and spirites walking by nyght, and of strange noyses, crackes, and sundry forewarnynges, which commonly happen before the death of menne, great slaughters & alterations of kyngdomes* (English translation, 1572), the theologian Lewis Lavater asked "What those things are which men see and hear" and which they call ghosts. He concluded "first, that good angels do sometimes appear" but that "sometimes, yea and for the most part, evil angels do appear".

There are two things to notice about the ghost scene in *Julius Caesar*. First, that two fellow-soldiers, Varrus and Claudius, sleep through the entire incident and that Brutus' subsequent dialogue with his servant Lucius makes it absolutely clear that the boy has not seen or heard anything either. This strongly suggests that the ghost is a figment of Brutus' imagination. Secondly, although Brutus says that it is the Ghost of Caesar (as does the stage direction), and although at the moment Brutus kills himself he says that he is releasing the ghost that has remained restless until revenged ("Caesar, now be still"), the Ghost identifies himself not as Caesar but as Brutus' "evil spirit". He is like the Bad Angel of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* or, indeed, like Prospero acknowledging that Caliban is a thing of darkness that is his own. He is a figuration of Brutus' conscience for the killing of his best friend. The idea is derived directly from Shakespeare's source, Plutarch's life of Julius Caesar:

Brutus being ... in his tent, and being yet awake, thinking of his affaires: he thought he heard a noise at his tent dore, and looking towards the light of the lampe that waxed very dimme, he saw a horrible vision of a man, of a wonderfull greatnes, and dreadful looke, which at the first made him marvellously afraid. But when he saw that it did him no hurt, but stode by his bedside, and sayd nothing: at length he asked him what he was. The image answered him: I am thy ill angett, Brutus, and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippes.

According to Plutarch, when the "spirit" appeared a second time, it did not speak a word – reason enough for Shakespeare to report rather than dramatize the second visitation.

Plutarch's account in the "Life of Marcus Brutus", which Shakespeare also read when scripting the play, is much fuller. Plutarch tells of how as the army marched out of Asia into Europe, a rumour spread that "a wonderful sign" had appeared to Brutus at night. There is a vivid account of his sleeplessness, the result of him being a man full of cares with "his head every busily occupied". He is evoked slumbering lightly, reading "some book till the third watch of the night", until

one night very late (when all the camp took quiet rest) as he was in his tent with a little light, thinking of weighty matters, he thought he heard one come in to him, and casting his eye towards the door of his tent, that he saw a wonderful strange and monstrous shape of a body coming towards him, and said never a word. So Brutus boldly asked what he was, a god or a man, and what cause brought him thither? The spirit answered him, "I am thy evil spirit, Brutus: and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippes." Brutus being no otherwise afraid, replied again unto it: "Well, then I shall see thee again." The spirit presently vanished away: and Brutus called his men unto him, who told him that they heard no noise, nor saw anything at all.

There is no suggestion in either "Life" that the spirit is the ghost of Caesar.

According to Plutarch, in the morning, Brutus tells Cassius about the vision. Cassius, "being in opinion an Epicurean" (a detail that Shakespeare picks up, having his Cassius say that he "held Epicurus strong / And his opinion"), responds as follows:



In our sect, Brutus, we have an opinion, that we do not always feel or see that which we suppose we do both see and feel, but that our senses being credulous and therefore easily abused (when they are idle and unoccupied in their own objects) are induced to imagine they see and conjecture that which in truth they do not. For our mind is quick and cunning to work (without either cause or matter) anything in the imagination whatsoever. And therefore the imagination is resembled to clay, and the mind to the potter: who, without any other cause than his fancy and pleasure, changeth it into what fashion and form he will.

I think that the cognitive skepticism articulated here struck a deep chord with Shakespeare. There are all sorts of key moments in his plays where characters do not feel or see that which they suppose they see and feel: Claudio in *Much Ado about Nothing* supposes he sees his beloved Hero with another man in her bedroom on the eve of their wedding, but he is being tricked (it is really her maid); Leontes feels like a cuckold and thinks that the girl baby he sees has been fathered by Polixenes, but he is wrong; Macbeth thinks that he sees a dagger in the air, but it is an illusion. The examples could be multiplied a hundredfold. They are the consequence of the power of imagination, for, as Plutarch's Cassius says, the human mind is "quick and cunning" to "work" all manner of things "in the imagination". *Julius Caesar* was first performed in 1599, in close proximity to *Henry V*. One or other play was almost certainly the opening show at the newly built Globe Theatre that summer. It does not seem to me a coincidence that Cassius' argument about the "work" of "imagination" is echoed in the Prologue to the other play: "let us ... On your imaginary forces work". In that same Prologue the actors are referred to as "flat unraisèd spirits": that is to say, the players are the ghosts, shadows or spirits of the historical figures they are impersonating.

And for Shakespeare a play is like a dream. Plutarch's Cassius continues his disquisition on the power of imagination as follows: "And this doth the diversity of our dreams shew unto us. For our imagination doth upon a small fancy grow from concept to concept, altering both in passions and forms of things imagined. For the mind of man is ever occupied, and that continual moving is nothing but an imagination." As with the preceding image of the mind as a potter fashioning and forming with the clay of imagination, the language in which Cassius describes the creativity of dreamwork is closely akin to that in which Theseus describes the poet's art in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

The Epicureans did not believe that divine or supernatural forces intervene in the life of man. Cassius is therefore arguing that the ghostly apparition is a mere effect of Brutus' fevered imagination. It is exactly like a dream. He adds that, according to the Epicureans, thoughtful, melancholy men such as Brutus are unusually prone to fancies: their mental restlessness means that they "do easilier yield to such imaginations". Cicero had made a similar point in his *Tusculan Disputations*. Remember, in this regard, that Shakespeare was working on *Hamlet* in very close proximity to *Julius Caesar* – his most thoughtful and melancholy character is also especially prone both to vivid dreams and to the belief – is it an illusion, a delusion, or a reality? – that he has been visited by a ghost. Dreams are visions of the night, as are ghosts, which you never see in the daytime (remember how the Ghost of Old Hamlet vanishes as dawn breaks). According to this reading, the Ghost of Caesar has the same status as Macbeth's visions of a dagger in the air and of the Ghost of Banquo at the feast: it is the effect of a fevered and guilty imagination. Lady Macbeth, you will recall, specifically links the invisible dagger to the apparition of Banquo that is seen by Macbeth and no one else:

This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,
Impostors to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? When all's done,



You look but on a stool.

Some modern productions make the point by entirely confining Banquo's ghost to Macbeth's imagination, but the stage direction in the original Folio text makes clear that Shakespeare intended it to be seen by the theatre audience as well as Macbeth – just not by the other characters on stage. The audience is allowed to see through Macbeth's eyes, given access – as we are in a soliloquy – to the interior of his mind.

Several other ghosts and spirits in Shakespeare come into the category of apparitions during sleep, which is to say dreams. Towards the end of *Cymbeline*, Posthumus, captured in battle, goes to sleep in jail, at which point, to “solemn music”, there is the following stage direction:

Enter, as in an apparition, Sicilius Leonatus, father to Posthumus Leonatus, an old man, attired like a warrior; leading in his hand an ancient matron, his wife, and mother to Posthumus, with music before them. Then, after other music, follows the two young Leonati, brothers to Posthumus, with wounds as they died in the wars. They circle Posthumus round as he lies sleeping.

Posthumus, whose name is a constant reminder that his mother died in childbirth (like Macduff, he was “ripped” by Caesarian section, which in Shakespeare's day meant death for the mother), is granted a dream in which his dead family are all restored to him. They accuse the classical gods – Mars, Juno and Jupiter – of unfair treatment. This provokes Jupiter to descend and release them into Elysium with the prophecy that Posthumus will be restored to freedom and marry Innogen, bringing peace and good fortune to Britain. “Poor shadows of Elysium, hence,” he says, “and rest / Upon your never-withering banks of flowers”. God and ghosts vanish, and Posthumus awakes.

There is a similar sense of divine release for the deposed and condemned Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*, when, again to “sad and solemn music”, a vision of six “spirits of peace” descends upon her as she sleeps. As with Brutus and Lucius, she asks her gentleman-usher Griffith and her woman Patience if they saw anybody enter as she slept, and is told that they did not. Griffith describes the spirits as “good dreams” that “Possess” the queen's “fancy” – figments of the imagination, that is to say.

Another eve of battle vision is the celebrated scene on the night before Bosworth Field in *Richard III*. In an elegantly symmetrical piece of stagecraft, Richard sleeps in his tent on one side of the stage and Richmond (the future Henry VII) on the other. The ghosts of eleven of Richard's victims enter in quick succession, all of them cursing Richard and some blessing Richmond. After they vanish, “*Richard starts out of his dream*” and delivers a soliloquy in which his previously wholly assured sense of self begins to collapse: “Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I. / Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.” “What? Do I fear myself? There's none else by”: the fear comes from within. The dream of ghosts has pricked his conscience and alerted him to the vengeance that will fall upon him. “*Methought* [my emphasis] the souls of all that I had murdered / Came to my tent”: he believes that the ghosts are but his own thoughts. They are what Freud would have called the voice of the unconscious or the return of the repressed.

Yet they have also spoken to the sleeping Richmond. Are we to believe that the ghosts have *really* returned from their graves or is he just having a similar dream in a different key? As with Brutus and his “evil spirit”, we can try to answer this question by comparing the play with its sources. In Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, Richard has “a terrible dreame” in which he “sawe diverse ymages lyke terrible develles whiche pulled and haled hym, not sufferyinge hym to take any quyete or rest”. This, says Hall, both struck Richard's heart with fear and troubled his mind with “many dreadfull and busy Imaginacions”; Hall expresses his own opinion that the dream was but a “pricke of his synfull conscience”.³ The ghosts come from one of Shakespeare's other sources, either “The Tragical Life and Death of Richard III” in the long poem *A Mirror for Magistrates* or the old anonymous play from the repertoire of the Queen's Men, *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*. In the poem, Richard dreams of “All those murderd Ghostes whome I / By death had sent to their untimely grave”. In the play, which begins with a Prologue in which the Ghost of Clarence appears to

³ Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 3. 291. Hall was the main source for Holinshed's *Chronicles*, from which Shakespeare worked. In the light of my subsequent discussion about Catholic ghosts from Purgatory as opposed to Protestant manifestations of “conscience”, it is significant that Hall's history is a work of Tudor Protestant polemic.



Truth and Poetry, calling for Revenge (“vindicta!”), Richard speaks of how his “wounded conscience” causes him constantly to think, whether sleeping or waking, that “their ghosts comes gaping for revenge, / Whom I have slaine in reaching for a Crowne”.⁴ But the ghosts do not appear on stage: that is Shakespeare’s innovation, as is the idea of having the sleeping Richmond on stage at the same time. The apparitions thus serve simultaneously as agents of conscience and of nemesis for Richard, whilst being like guardian angels for Richmond.

In classical literature, ghosts have three main functions: to call for vengeance if they have been murdered, to warn society of bad times to come, and to demand proper burial, without which they cannot proceed into the underworld. The foundational example of the last of these is the appearance of Patroclus’ ghost to Achilles in the twenty-third book of Homer’s *Iliad*. The question of proper burial rites is a major concern in the first act of *Titus Andronicus*, but that was almost certainly written not by Shakespeare but by the more classically learned George Peele. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles is finally stirred to action and vengeance by the death of his beloved Patroclus, but the ghost scene is not dramatized and the matter of burial not mentioned. In sum, then, Shakespeare’s development of the figure of the ghost is to combine what could be described as the classical *nemesis* and *augury* functions – the ghost as sign that the downfall of the murderer is nigh or that something is rotten in the state – with a modern *conscience* function, the idea that the apparition is a figment of the guilty imagination of the person who thinks they see it.

In the case of *Macbeth*, the ancient and modern functions are clearly split apart. The classical *nemesis* role is given to the weird sisters. Seen by both Macbeth and Banquo, they serve as classical sibyls, predictors of the future. Their prognostications, along with the unnatural events on the night of the murder of Duncan (bad weather, a falcon killed by an owl, Duncan’s horses running mad), are of a piece with those bad omens that foreshadow Caesar’s assassination – a slave unharmed by a flaming hand, an owl hooting at noon, women swearing that they have seen “Men, all in fire, walk up and down the streets”. It is signs of this kind that lead Cassius near the end of *Julius Caesar* to hesitate over his Epicurean skepticism and “partly credit things that do presage”. But in neither *Julius Caesar* nor *Macbeth* is the audience asked to believe that the ghost is anything other than a figment of conscience, anything other than what Macbeth calls, apropos of the dagger, “A false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain”.

The same may be said of Shakespeare’s very beautiful reported, as opposed to staged, ghost scene. In *The Winter’s Tale*, Antigonus is commissioned to dispose of the baby that the delusional Leontes has convinced himself is the illegitimate offspring of an adulterous union between Hermione and Polixenes. Arriving on the fabled coast of Bohemia, holding the baby, he speaks in soliloquy:

I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o’ th’ dead
May walk again. If such thing be, thy mother
Appeared to me last night, for ne’er was dream
So like a waking.

He tells of how the figure of Hermione came to him “In pure white robes, / Like very sanctity”, how she wept and then told him to leave the child in Bohemia and, since she is “counted lost for ever”, name her Perdita. “With shrieks” the figure “melted into air” (the same phrase that Macbeth uses for the witches). Antigonus then tells of how he collected himself “and thought / This was so and no slumber”. He concludes:

Dreams are toys,
Yet for this once, yea superstitiously,
I will be squared by this. I do believe
Hermione hath suffered death, and that
Apollo would, this being indeed the issue
Of King Polixenes, it should here be laid,
Either for life or death, upon the earth
Of its right father.

⁴ Bullough, 3. 247, 338.



He believes that the dream-ghost is telling him the truth. But all three of his conclusions are wrong: Hermione has not suffered death; the child is not Polixenes' issue; and Apollo's will is for the lost one to be found and restored to Sicilia. At this point, however, the audience does not know that Hermione is alive. We are therefore, at least partially, in the position of Antigonus, and we have the option of deciding whether the dream really was a visitation from beyond the grave or whether it is a manifestation of Antigonus' guilty conscience at being party to the abandonment of the child in the wilderness, expressly against the better judgment of his wife Paulina. Only in retrospect, when we discover that Paulina has preserved Hermione can we be sure that it was pure dream: Antigonus cannot have been witnessed an apparition of the spirit of the dead, since Hermione is not dead.

In this instance, the theatre audience is put into the position of Macbeth at the banquet, the drowsy Brutus and the sleeping Posthumus, Richard and Richmond: the ghosts seem real at the time, but are subsequently discovered to be mental phantasms. Which, rationally speaking, is the experience of anybody who dreams or imagines that they have seen a ghost.

How, then, do these distinctions apply to Shakespeare's most loquacious and celebrated ghost, the role that, according to his first biographer, was the "top of his own performance" as an actor?⁵ In the opening scene of *Hamlet*, the Ghost is initially described as a "thing". Horatio, the honest companion who is the voice of sanity and the chorus to the action, initially takes the Epicurean view that it is a figment of the imagination:

Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us.

But when he sees it with his own eyes, he is forced to acknowledge that it is "something more than fantasy". He then reads it as an omen akin to those aberrations of nature on the brink of Caesar's assassination: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state". He explicates the Roman parallel at considerable length:

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.
And even the like precursor of fierce events,
As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climature and countrymen.

At which point the Ghost re-enters and Horatio calls it an "illusion", asking it whether it has come to predict Denmark's future or to reveal the whereabouts of some hidden treasure ("For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death"). He charges it to speak and it vanishes with the crowing of the cock, confirming the belief that at the first light of dawn "Th' extravagant and erring spirit hies / To his confine". We will come in a moment to the nature of that confine.

When Horatio goes to tell Hamlet about the ghost, he initially gets the impression that Hamlet has seen his late father already – but what Hamlet means is that he sees him in his "mind's eye", which is to say his imagination, the place where Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost and Richard those of his victims. He is haunted by the memory of his father, not least because we may assume that he did not have a chance to say goodbye to him. Though the point is not made explicitly, the backstory clearly suggests that Hamlet was away at university in Wittenberg when his father died. The news would not have reached him until after the burial: Helsingør to Wittenberg is a

⁵ Nicholas Rowe (1709).



journey of over 500 kilometres each way, including a ferry crossing. Hamlet returns in mourning black to find himself at a wedding instead of a funeral. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that he is dreaming nightly, and imagining daily, of his father.

At the end of the scene, Hamlet is in a state of uncertainty: in one speech, he says that something is assuming his father's shape and in the next he assumes that his father's spirit is really up in arms. There is a similar progression in the first speech he addresses to the ghost once he is up on the battlements. It begins with the assumption that the figure is either "a spirit of health or goblin damned" bringing "airs from heaven or blasts from hell" – that is to say, either a good angel like the spirits who will descend on Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII* or a devil like Marlowe's Mephistopheles, tempting him to evil. But because of the uncertainty as to its nature ("Thou com'st in such a questionable shape"), he decides to make the assumption that it genuinely is the ghost of his father. The other characters on stage remain in a state of uncertainty. Horatio says that Hamlet "waxes desperate with imagination", suggesting that he is reverting to his Epicurean line of regarding the ghost as a mental illusion of the kind to which his friend is unusually susceptible because of his melancholy disposition.

The ghost only speaks when alone with Hamlet. Since this is the case, we cannot rule out the possibility that it is an illusion shared by Hamlet's friends Marcellus and Barnardo, and then Horatio – significantly, it is not seen by the other sentinel Francisco, who is not a friend of Hamlet's. Like the ill omens that are mentioned in *Julius Caesar* and cited by Horatio, the ghost might just be the embodiment of the knowledge of the Hamlet faction that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

But when it speaks to Hamlet, it becomes another kind of ghost. It is at this point that it says where it has come from:

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.

The word "purged" leaves little doubt that he is in Purgatory. In place of the classical idea that a figure such as Patroclus in the *Iliad* returns as a ghost because he has not had the proper burial rites that will allow him access into the underworld, we get the Roman Catholic idea that many of us will have to spend time in Purgatory, doing penance for our sins upon the earth. A principal source of income for the Roman church was the sale of indulgences, which, along with prayers for the souls of the departed, were supposed to reduce the duration of the time served in Purgatory before translation to Heaven. Corruption of this kind, together with the absence of any Biblical warrant for the idea of Purgatory, was one of the driving forces of the Protestant Reformation, which accordingly abolished Purgatory. Lavater's treatise *Of Ghostes and Spirites* was a Protestant polemic, arguing against the idea that supposed ghosts were souls returned from Purgatory because there was no such thing as Purgatory and the Bible had made clear that the dead only rise from their graves on the Day of Judgment at the end of time.

The classical ghost has turned into a Catholic ghost. Given that Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg University, birthplace of the Lutheran Reformation, this leaves him with a dilemma: if he has been trained to believe that there is no such thing as Purgatory, should he believe the Ghost? Initially, he finds the case so persuasive that he does. He swears "by Saint Patrick", the keeper of Purgatory, that "It is an honest ghost". And he chides his fellow-student for his Epicurean skepticism about the supernatural: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than our dreamt of in your philosophy."⁶

Subsequently, however, his own philosophical spirit of doubt and self-interrogation leads him to reconsider. Perhaps it is not an honest ghost after all:

⁶ "Your" in the Quarto text, "our" in the Folio.



The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil, and the devil hath power
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me.

As with the remarks about Brutus attributed to Cassius by Plutarch, this confirms the idea that people of a thoughtful and “melancholy” humor are especially likely to conjure up fanciful imaginings of spirits from another world.

Prompted by his fear that the ghost might actually be a devil, Hamlet comes up with the idea of staging the play within the play in order to test the veracity of the murder story by watching Claudius' reaction. Famously, when the Ghost returns to complain about the delay caused by this process, it is seen by Hamlet alone and not by Gertrude. She regards its apparent manifestation as a sign of Hamlet's madness. Her language is identical to that of Lady Macbeth chiding her husband in the banquet scene: “This is the very coinage of your brain: / This bodiless creation ecstasy is very cunning in.” We thus have an act one ghost first seeming to be a classical augury of troubled times and a Senecan revenant demanding vengeance, then announcing itself as a departed soul coming from Catholic Purgatory, but an act three ghost who appears to be a voicing of Hamlet's disgust at his mother's “incest” and a projection of his own “conscience”, which in “To be or not to be” he has said is the cause of his delay. The act three ghost is more like those of Banquo and the victims of Richard III: an emanation from within the mind, not an emissary from another world.

The Shakespeare of *Hamlet* may therefore be in some sense dramatizing the road to modernity. Let me explain this proposition a little more fully. There are a number of extant references to an older *Hamlet* tragedy that clearly had a classically Senecan ghost, calling for revenge. Thomas Nashe wrote of how “English Seneca read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar* and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfults of tragical speeches”. The prologue to a play called *A Warning for Fair Women* recalls tragedies in which “a filthy whining ghost” comes “screaming like a pig half-stickt / And cries *Vindicta*, revenge, revenge”. And in Thomas Lodge 1596 work *Wit's Misery and the World's Madness*, there is a reference to the ghost “which cried so miserably at the Theatre *O Hamlet revenge*”. The starting-point, then, is the Senecan ghost calling for revenge. This is echoed in Hamlet senior's line “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” – though the choice of “his” as opposed to “my” is perhaps enough to sow a seed of doubt.

Overlaid upon this model is the other classical idea, articulated so ably by Horatio, of the ghost as symbolic “precurse of fierce events ... And prologue to the omen coming on”.⁷ There is then a deliberate disjunction between the desires of the classical and the Catholic ghost: solicitation to murder is hardly a good way of reducing your time in Purgatory. As the ghost departs, his refrain becomes not “revenge” but “remember” – a mental action replaces a physical one and signals a progression towards the process of self-examination and inner exploration that characterizes Hamlet the student and speaker of soliloquies.

There is thus a progression from a Senecan ghost calling for revenge and an equally classical ghost-as-harbinger to a Catholic ghost coming from Purgatory to, in the third act, a Protestant ghost-imagining that is purely a mental state. This mirrors the historical progression from ancient Rome to modern Catholic Rome to Protestant northern Europe. Denmark became an officially Lutheran state by royal decree as early as 1536 and Shakespeare knew perfectly well that he was writing for a Protestant court and city in London. The evolution of the Ghost within *Hamlet* is of a piece with that larger project I outlined in my first lecture, whereby the drama of Shakespeare and his fellow-Elizabethans was a major part of a national endeavor to create an English Protestant culture that opposed itself to modern Rome even as it drew inspiration from ancient Rome.

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⁷ Could Horatio's speech with the Julius Caesar comparison have been cut from the Folio text of the play because Shakespeare or his actors thought that it was over-complicating matters to have quite so many contradictory interpretations of the nature of the ghost?



What is a ghost? An emanation from the past. For which another word is a memory. Remember me. What is a historical play? An emanation from the past, in which the actors are shadows – which is to say ghosts – of their historical or fictional originals. When do ghosts most frequently appear? In dreams, or dream-like nocturnal states. What is a dream? An imaginary world pieced together from memory. What is a play? An imaginary world pieced together from memory. A shared dream. “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.”

The recurring idea, present in all the examples I have been discussing, is that ghosts and spirits may be phantasms or mental states, not supernatural phenomena. The device for dramatizing this idea is that of having some characters see the ghosts and others not see them. This technique is also used for Shakespeare’s two magical spirits, Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Ariel in *The Tempest*. No mortal character ever sees Puck. No one but Prospero ever sees Ariel – though he is sometimes made visible in the metamorphosed form of a flame, a harpy or a spirit in a wedding masque. His music is heard by Caliban, but he is not seen, just as neither the lovers nor Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* see Puck executing his tricks to metamorphose them.

As the agents of, respectively, Oberon and Prospero, Puck and Ariel are the engines of the plots of Shakespeare’s two most magical plays. There is a sense in which Oberon and Prospero are playwrights, or directors, with Puck and Ariel as their stage managers. And it is this analogy between dreams, magic, invisible spirits and theatre that Shakespeare persistently plays upon. Theseus’ description in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* of the power of the poet is also a description of the work of Puck, who “Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven”. Shakespeare’s ghosts and airy spirits are the local habitations of the trick of what Theseus, speaking just after the midsummer night’s dream has come to an end at dawn, calls “strong imagination”.

So too, after Prospero stages his play-within-the-play – the wedding masque bringing to life the classical figures of Iris, Juno and Ceres – he makes explicit the parallel between supernatural imaginings and stage players:

These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.

This is the same melting metaphor that was used for the weird sisters in *Macbeth* and the ghost in *Hamlet*.

Once one sees this analogy, one perceives another layer to the question of whether or not the ghosts in *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, *Cymbeline*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the angels in *Henry VIII*, the sprite in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the airy spirit in *The Tempest* are *real*. No, of course they are not real. They are actors, for which another word in Shakespearean usage was “shadows”. Puck: “If we shadows have offended”. The ghosts and spirits are actors no more and *no less* than all the others characters in the plays are actors. They are “merely” actors. In Shakespearean usage *merely* doesn’t only mean *only*: it also means *absolutely, entirely and without qualification*. To acknowledge this is to confront the full force of Jaques’ reminder in *As You Like It* that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players”. One day we will all be ghosts.