

**HAMLET, THE GHOST**  
**AND THE**  
**MODEL READER**

**THE PROBLEMS OF THE RECEPTION AND A CONCEPT OF**  
**SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET***

**Doctoral dissertation by**

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## ABSTRACT

In a comprehensive study of *Hamlet* and its reception, this dissertation offers a concept and interpretation of Shakespeare's work as a complex literary work and play for the theatre. It is argued that the play, through a series of ambiguities, implies two main levels of meaning, which complement each other in a truly dramatic contrast, exploring the main theme of *Hamlet* and dramatic art in general: seeming and being, or illusion and reality. On the surface, which has been usually maintained since the Restoration, Hamlet seems to be a moral hero, who "sets it right" by punishing the evil villain, the usurper King Claudius, following the miraculous return of the murdered King Hamlet from the dead.

At a deeper level, exploring the Christian context including King James's *Daemonologie* (1597), the Ghost demanding revenge is, in fact, a disguised devil, exploiting the tragic flaw of the protagonist, who wishes the damnation of his enemy. Fortinbras, who comes from the north like King James and renounces revenge, is rewarded with the kingdom after the avengers, Hamlet and Laertes, kill each other and virtually the entire Danish court is wiped out through Hamlet's quest of total revenge, pursuing both body and soul.

The aesthetic identity of *Hamlet* is also examined. In addition to the mainly philological and historical analysis of the text, the play, some adaptations and the critical reception, theoretical concerns are also included. Epistemology and semiotics, in particular Kuhn's notion of paradigm and Eco's notion of the Model Reader, are applied to enhance the understanding of the two levels of meaning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as the problems of the reception. The main purpose is to restore and explain Shakespeare's work, so that it can be fully appreciated, again in its original complexity.

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[...] the purpose of playing,  
whose end both at the first, and novve, was and is, to holde as twere  
the Mirrour vp to nature, to shew vertue her feature; scorne her own  
Image, and the very age and body of the time his forme and pressure:

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.19-22)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **A NOTE ON THE TEXT.** Quotations from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Second Quarto text (1604-5), from the website *Hamlet Works* ([www.hamletworks.org](http://www.hamletworks.org)), edited by Bernice W. Kliman et al. (The web page of the Q2 text is <http://trigs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/index.html>, accessed 31 December 2012). For the ease of reference, the conventional act-scene-line numbers are also provided from this source, even though the original Q2 edition had no such markers. For the printed book format, see Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman, eds. *The Three-Text Hamlet. Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio* (New York: AMS Press, 1991; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003). A more detailed discussion of some textual issues follows in Chapter 3, below.

## INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is often described in superlatives: the most popular, most often played and published drama of the past over four hundred years, not only in England, but also in Western culture; therefore also the most influential and most discussed one.<sup>2</sup> Along with *King Lear*, it is esteemed as Shakespeare's greatest work, even as the centre of the Western Canon.<sup>3</sup> However, despite its huge popularity and eminence, it is also regarded as the most problematic play ever written.<sup>4</sup> Its complexity poses major problems of interpretation for critics; it is Shakespeare's most debated work, which has given rise to radically different interpretations. It is also Shakespeare's longest play; a fact that considerably adds to the problems, for it is usually abbreviated on stage, often drastically, as well as in most film adaptations, which are also highly influential. *Hamlet* poses a great challenge to everyone; it has been regarded as an enigma and a mystery by some of the greatest critics.<sup>5</sup>

For these and other reasons, which will be explained below, this is a study of not only Shakespeare's work, but also of its reception; not merely the critical reception, which is already vast, but a range of productions and adaptations too, as well as some theoretical issues concerning reception. As Harold Bloom observes, quoting Polonius, *Hamlet* itself can be regarded as a "Poem vnlimited" (2.2.399); accordingly, Bloom himself has written several

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 13-16 (from hence also referred to as the *Arden 3 Hamlet*).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 65.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Second Series* (London: Methuen, 1982), 122. Jenkins, in turn, cites Harry Levin, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 7. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton Publishers, 1997), 1659; cf. below.

studies on it; one of them having this title.<sup>6</sup> However, if *Hamlet* is unlimited, its reception is indeed infinite and ever expanding; since its origin at the Globe theatre at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the play has long achieved a truly global status. This analysis, as any other on Shakespeare's work, is therefore inevitably selective; yet it aims to be more comprehensive than most so far, or as comprehensive as it is reasonably possible within the scope of a doctorate.

The purpose of this study is thus also dual: beyond offering a reading or interpretation that involves a new concept of the play, it also aims to explain some major problems of its reception. These tend to be related to the remarkably enigmatic protagonist, whose character and motivation are in the focus of most enquiries, both within the play and in its reception. In Ophelia's words, Hamlet is "Th'obseru'd of all obseruers" (3.1.154); many have tried to discover his secret, despite his complaint and warning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Why looke you now how vnwoorthy a thing you make of  
me, you would play vpon mee, you would seeme to know my stops,  
you would plucke out the hart of my mistery, you would sound mee  
from my lowest note to my compasse, and there is much musique ex-  
cellent voyce in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak, s'bloud  
do you think I am easier to be plaid on then a pipe, call mee what in-  
strument you wil, though you fret me not, you cannot play vpon me.

(3.2.363-369)

The other key figure of this study is the Ghost: a no less enigmatic character than the protagonist, exerting a crucial influence on him, and hence on the whole play. The Ghost alludes to Purgatory and a range of other Catholic concepts; Hamlet and the other characters also often speak in religious, Christian terms throughout the play; a central scene is the so-called Prayer Scene (3.3). Some key concepts of the play are thus Christian; it is set in a Christian context, and was written at an age very much characterised and divided by religion,

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Bloom, *"Hamlet": Poem Unlimited* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2003).

which affected the political struggles too, for the state and the church had been uniquely connected through the person of the monarch. Therefore, many issues raised by the play and addressed by this study are related to religion in some ways. However, I should emphasise at the outset that my objective is not merely to offer a religious reading of *Hamlet*, but, again, a fairly comprehensive analysis of Shakespeare's work and its reception.

The issues will be introduced in more detail in Chapter 1; now I would briefly introduce my approach and indicate its difference from recent criticism. Stephen Greenblatt, who has devoted a monograph to the Ghost and its religious significance – specifically to the character's rather problematic relationship to Purgatory – explains his approach as follows.

My goal was not to understand the theology behind the ghost; still less to determine whether it was “Catholic” or “Protestant.” My only goal was to immerse myself in the tragedy's magical intensity.<sup>7</sup>

My goal, when analysing the characters and the related religious issues, by contrast, was to understand the theology behind Shakespeare's work; not only behind the Ghost, which is obviously described in religious terms in the drama, but behind the whole play. This goal is motivated not solely by my own interest in religion, or because this dissertation is submitted at a Catholic university, but mainly because religion is truly central to this tragedy, and I intended to understand how it works.

Positioned between the crucial Play Scene and the equally important Closet Scene, the Prayer Scene is decisive about the rest of the plot. It is the only scene where the protagonist and the antagonist are on stage at the same time, unattended and undisturbed by others. Ironically, it is the supposedly evil antagonist who kneels and prays at length, while the supposedly moral protagonist dismisses this sole opportunity for his revenge before the finale

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

for a remarkable reason: he wants to effect his enemy's damnation. Greenblatt introduces some of the religious problems as follows.

For example, Prince Hamlet does not worry that he, like his father, may serve a prison term in Purgatory (though he does worry that his soul might go to Hell), and Shakespeare never in his career seems drawn to the argument that ghost stories were cynical devices wielded by wolvisish priests to extract wealth from the gullible.

(Greenblatt, *ibid.*)

Shakespeare and his Hamlet are indeed not particularly concerned with the material aspects of religion or Purgatory; their focus is on the spiritual ones, but on those, their concern apparently reaches beyond that of Greenblatt. As Greenblatt notes (even if in brackets here), Hamlet does worry about Hell. However, he is concerned not only about the fate of his soul. Prince Hamlet is also concerned that the Ghost may not be his father, the late King Hamlet, at all, but a disguised devil from Hell.

While this may not be a cause for concern if one approaches *Hamlet* from a modern, secular perspective, which typically views the Ghost simply as Hamlet's father (or as Old Hamlet, as we shall see below), this was a real danger for the Elizabethans, who tended to be religious. As I will argue, Shakespeare's contemporaries had a complex view of ghosts and spiritual phenomena in general, and they were quite discriminating with them, which is reflected in *Hamlet* too. This applies to early modern Catholics too, even though they were only a minority in Elizabethan England. The Protestant majority did not believe in Purgatory and in any form of communication with the dead; moreover, as Greenblatt himself observes, they typically approached the very idea with ridicule and contempt. Nevertheless, the Elizabethans – Anglicans, or Protestants in general, as well as Catholics – still firmly believed in the existence of the Devil and demons; ghost stories were concerned not only with Purgatory but also with Hell.

Therefore, unlike Greenblatt, I do not start my analysis of the Ghost from the common modern assumption that it is the purgatorial spirit of Hamlet's father, but approach it as an ambiguous spirit; a supernatural character whose nature and identity are open to question. Whereas Greenblatt "sets out to explain his longtime fascination with the ghost of Hamlet's father",<sup>8</sup> I set out to explain, among other issues, the significance of the Ghost in *Hamlet*.

These issues on how to discern ghosts or spirits are also discussed in King James' *Daemonologie*,<sup>9</sup> which had been published a few years before *Hamlet* was written. While it is well known that *Macbeth* was specifically written for King James, it is rarely realised that *Hamlet* could also serve to satisfy the king's remarkable interest in demonology and witchcraft, particularly in its longer and more reliable textual versions of the Second Quarto and the First Folio, though all three original editions were published after James's accession to the throne of England, when Shakespeare's company became the King's Men. Moreover, the new king's political concerns, his claim and eventual accession to a long disputed throne, as well as his aversion to revenge, rebellion and particularly regicide,<sup>10</sup> may also be reflected in *Hamlet*, in particular through the character of Fortinbras.

This study, however, is not only about ghosts, religion, politics or history, and their relevance to Shakespeare; these issues are explored mainly in Chapter 5: *Hamlet* in its historical context. The other chapters, while also concerned primarily with the play, examine various issues of its reception. In Chapter 1, The purpose of playing, the-play-within-the-play is first discussed. This is also related to the questionable Ghost, but goes beyond that: it highlights the purpose and the complexity of the theatre itself. As we shall see, a play can reflect various features, and it can be interpreted from various perspectives. However, we need to make certain distinctions. In fact, the play-within-the-play is also based on Hamlet's

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<sup>8</sup> Greenblatt (2001), back cover of the paperback edition of *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

<sup>9</sup> James VI of Scotland [later James I of England], *Daemonologie. In Forme of a Dialogue* (Edinburgh, 1597).

<sup>10</sup> James, *The Trve Lawe of free Monarchies: Or, The Reciproock and Mvtvall Dvetie Betwixt a free King, and his naturall Subiectes* (Edinburgh, 1598); cf. below.

distinction between the Ghost and his dead father; the Prince hopes to get some confirmation concerning the story of the rather ambiguous Ghost. The difficulties of interpretation are also explored through Hamlet's letter to Ophelia, which is read and commented on by a number of other characters, whose interpretations are tested in the later scenes. This will take us to the difficulties of the reception of the play itself, among other issues, to Hamlet's character and delay, and to the various explanations offered to it so far.

Chapter 2 examines the critical reception in more detail. Critics have always found *Hamlet* a rather problematic play, but the notion of problem play developed only in the late-nineteenth century. Since then, *Hamlet* has been regarded as increasingly problematic. This chapter serves not merely as a literature review; the point is to identify and examine the problems of criticism, to see their development from early criticism to Greenblatt and beyond, and also to offer solutions to them. This again involves certain distinctions: some problems of the reception are differentiated from the play itself. It will be demonstrated that the critical interpretations are themselves often quite problematic: either partial, or otherwise arguable. Ultimately, this leads to the question of the aesthetic identity of *Hamlet*. What is meant by *Hamlet*, and what is actually commented on by critics? The ambiguities concerning the identity of the Ghost (who features as Hamlet in Greenblatt's work), thus extend to some ambiguities about the identity of Shakespeare's work, *Hamlet* itself.

In Chapter 3, the text is examined, again involving certain distinctions. While there are major differences between the three early texts too, particularly between the "Bad" Quarto (Q1, 1603) and the other two editions, the "Good" Quarto (Q2, 1604-5) and the First Folio (F1, 1623), some other distinctions are also made. The modernised editions are also differentiated from the original texts, in particular concerning the added list of roles and the designations of the characters. As I will argue, there is a crucial difference between "Ghost" and the usual "Ghost of Hamlet's father" (or similar designations), contained in the

modernised editions; the latter designation involves a major simplification of the originally complex and ambiguous character, and hence of the whole play. In order to realise this, we have to take into account the various meanings of “ghost”, which can be found not only in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but also in *Hamlet*. Examining the original editions, the relevance of the text of other plays will also be considered, in particular *Macbeth*, which directly precedes *Hamlet* in the First Folio.

Chapter 4 explores the issue of aesthetic identity in more detail, which involves several distinctions. The term is taken from Stuart Sillars,<sup>11</sup> and is discussed with some related issues on texts, productions and adaptations, before examining some concrete *Hamlets* from various periods. *Hamlet* can be interpreted not only as a literary work, but also as a play for the theatre; in fact, that is its original function. In addition, there are some other types of productions: *Hamlet* is also famous as an opera and as a film; three film adaptations will be examined briefly. As we shall see, these adaptations tend to be remarkably different from the play, and also from each other. However, there are major differences in the various stage productions too, particularly if we examine different stages and different periods. In fact, the modern stage productions are also adaptations of the text for certain cultural contexts and expectations that are very different from the original; this can be noted from Davenant’s Restoration *Hamlet* to some recent London productions, despite their aim at authenticity in some respects. It will be argued that all these versions of *Hamlet* involve some kind of translation, often resulting in the loss of the text. At the same time, certain translations may actually reveal some aspects of the original, particularly its mystery.

The purpose of the analysis of the various texts and productions is also to show that the critical problems are largely related to these adapted, modernised and usually simplified *Hamlets*, rather than to Shakespeare’s work, the original, complete texts in their own context.

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Sillars, “Globalisation and the Loss of the Text”. (*Trans. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*. Nr. 9 (2001). <http://www.inst.at/trans/9Nr/sillars9.htm>.) Accessed: 23 June, 2012.



Shakespeare's play appears to be problematic for later commentators mainly because it does not really match their expectations, views or concept of it. Chapter 5 examines the play and the main issues set in their original context. This involves a distinction of two levels of meaning of the play itself. As I will argue, the Prince may indeed seem to be a moral hero, even a deeply religious one, whose chief concern is to restore the moral and the political order, as he is interpreted by most critics; most notably by the Romantics, who imagined a morally perfect character. The Ghost may also seem to be Hamlet's father; it may even seem to be returning from Purgatory. Moreover, even the Ghost's command of vengeance may seem to be a moral mission, even as a "sacred duty", as some critics believe.<sup>12</sup>

However, this popular image of a moral hero, who reluctantly obeys his father's dread command and is finally rewarded with heavenly rest, is a rather partial and indeed problematic interpretation of Shakespeare's work, exploring merely its surface. The play, particularly in light of the original stage conventions and religious context, implies another, deeper level of meaning. The melancholy Hamlet, who wishes the damnation of his enemies, is, in fact, abused by an evil Ghost from Hell; that is, by a disguised devil or demon, initiating a tragic spiral of vengeance, bloodshed and destruction, in which the hero takes a major part. In addition to killing the King, Polonius and Laertes, Hamlet does not even spare his schoolfellows and former friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, specifically disallowing their shriving before their deaths. By contrast, Fortinbras, who obeys the King of Norway and abandons his initial intent of revenge, is rewarded with the coveted kingdom of Denmark at the end, even without having to fight for it, after the avengers and other claimants, Hamlet and Laertes, kill each other. Neither revenge, nor regicide can be regarded as moral in the Christian context of the play, to which there is ample evidence in the text, and so is there to the dangers of a disguised, evil Ghost from Hell.

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<sup>12</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1905; first edn. 1904), 146.

Nevertheless, exploring the ironic and comic elements of the tragedy, as well as the original, strongly anti-Catholic context, the Ghost could also be interpreted as a mock-purgatorial spirit, having the same – devastating – effect on the hero and the other characters as the contemporary stage devils through the conventional villain, the Vice. But the notion of a seriously purgatorial spirit, which has been common in the reception since the eighteenth century, is very problematic indeed; as is the traditional view of the moral hero, which can be traced back to the Restoration. It will be argued that the political and spiritual issues of Shakespeare's work, in its own context, at the end of the Tudor period and the onset of the Stuart era, reflected the failed Essex rebellion, which also involved the theatre, and the concerns, life and views, of King James, the King of Scotland and the new King of England.

This complex reading of *Hamlet* is based on the recognition of the dual nature of the play, exploring the contrast of seeming and being, or illusion and reality. These are key concerns of dramatic art and theatrical illusion too, and they also reflect the preoccupations of Shakespeare's contemporaries with the uncertainties after the Copernican revolution. These issues are also covered by modern theories of cognition and semiotics, which are discussed in the last chapter. Kuhn's notion of paradigm, highlighting our capacity to think in models, and Eco's notion of the model reader are particularly relevant to these topics; therefore they can enhance the understanding of Shakespeare's work too – and they can also explain the problems of the reception.<sup>13</sup> The concept of *Hamlet* proposed and described in the study, in fact, involves two different concepts, which are opposing and mutually exclusive; these can be regarded as two different paradigms. Whereas for the most part I discuss two figures, Hamlet and the Ghost, both with a dual nature, for their reception we need a third one: the reader or the viewer of the play. The final distinction is related to this. As we shall see, Eco

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<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1990), esp. 44-63; 101-110; 123-136.

differentiates two kinds of Model Reader, who tend to realise the different levels of meaning implied by texts.

## Chapter 1

### THE PURPOSE OF PLAYING AND OTHER ISSUES

*Oph.* VVhat meanes this my Lord?

*Ham.* Marry this munching *Mallico*, it meanes mischiefe.

(3.2.136-7)

#### 1.1 The purpose of playing in *Hamlet*

In Hamlet's words, quoted above as the general motto of this study, the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up to nature; hence a play can be regarded as a mirror reflecting nature, and the theatre experience as a reflection of the world or reality, particularly ourselves, the nature of the audience who looks into the mirror of the play. This concept of the theatre is perfectly exemplified by "The Mousetrap" (3.2.237), the short play Hamlet produces within *Hamlet*, representing a secret murder at court. As we can see ourselves in a mirror, so can King Claudius see himself in the play-within-the-play; and the hardened villain is so moved by the performance that he rushes out to pray before it ends. The amazingly versatile Prince, who is a model courtier, soldier and scholar in one person,<sup>14</sup> is thus apparently not merely a theoretician of the theatre, but also a highly successful producer and director, who can fully realise his ideas and goals. Or so it seems.

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<sup>14</sup> See Ophelia's description of the hero: "The Courtiers, souldiers, schollers, eye, tongue, sword" (3.1.151). It must be noted, though, that this is how Ophelia *remembers* Hamlet, sharply contrasting the perfect hero of the past with that of the present. In this passage, in fact, the shocked and desperate heroine believes Hamlet mad: "O what a noble mind is heere orethrowne!" (3.1.150)

Shakespeare, however, demonstrates not only the unique power of playing, but also its universal appeal and complexity, even through such a short playlet embedded in the heart of his tragedy. No one is an exception to the concept of the theatre Hamlet describes; not even he, who puts on the show. As the King sees and recognises himself in the mirror of the play, so does Hamlet, when he introduces the murderer of the Mousetrap as the “Nephew to the King” (3.2.244). Hamlet, the nephew of King Claudius preparing for his revenge, thus apparently identifies with the murderer who is setting out to kill the King. Consequently, King Claudius can see himself in two roles; he can rush out and pray in terror as well as in remorse. On the one hand, of course, he can also identify with the murderer, for he has killed a king himself, in very similar circumstances. On the other hand, however, he can also identify with the player King, who is being killed by his nephew. In fact, the latter aspect is more directly and ominously related to the context of the performance at court, as the King is Claudius, and the play is staged by his own nephew, who has already expressed his hostility toward him.

Ophelia remarks that Hamlet is “as good as a Chorus” (3.2.245). But is he indeed? In so far as he comments on a play that does not actually represent his father’s death, yet can also be viewed as an approximate representation of either King Claudius’ past crime or Hamlet’s future revenge, the Prince is certainly as good as a chorus. The staged “murder of *Gonzago*” (2.2.538), as a symbolic representation, can certainly be related to any other murder that is somewhat similar, whether imaginary or real, past or future. But if Hamlet’s aim is to stage an exact representation of his father’s death and so charge the King, possibly enforcing a public admission, the Prince fails disastrously.

The show is interrupted; and Hamlet is overjoyed by this outcome, but Horatio is not so happy, while the rest of the audience at court is perplexed and alarmed. Claudius was the brother, rather than the nephew, of the late King Hamlet, when secretly murdering him during his sleep. Unaware of Hamlet’s intention, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern apparently

fail to see the playlet as a charge against King Claudius with a past murder. At any rate, they do not voice such a suspicion; there is no suggestion in the whole play that they are aware of the murder, which Claudius, by all evidence, must have committed alone. After the performance, they still seek to find out the cause of Hamlet's "distemper" (3.2.338); they cannot comprehend Hamlet's complaint and imagine how he can "lacke aduancement" (3.2.340), when he has "the voyce of the King himselfe" for his "succession in Denmarke" (3.2.341-2). They perceive only the implied threat at the present King by his highly agitated nephew, who may threaten the whole kingdom including themselves; the courtiers express their major concern about the safety of the sovereign and his subjects. As it turns out, they are quite right about that: except for Horatio, none of these characters are alive by the end of *Hamlet*. In addition to the King, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are all killed by Hamlet, who is also killed, and the kingdom falls on a foreign prince.

It is well known that Hamlet's centrally articulated view of the theatre as a mirror, followed by the play-within-the-play, suggests that a play can reflect reality; moreover, it may even influence reality or the world. But it is seldom realised that Shakespeare also demonstrates here that a play can reflect or imply various aspects of reality, or various levels of meaning, which can be viewed and interpreted differently. Far from providing merely a simple and clear reflection or image of the world, the theatre can be quite complex and ambiguous. In the modern reception, the Mousetrap is generally presented and interpreted simply as a spectacular evidence of the King's guilt, which is supposed to vindicate Hamlet's case, along with that of the Ghost, even though in Shakespeare's work the playlet is not an exact representation of the Ghost's story.<sup>15</sup>

Hamlet does manage to "catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.605), who admits his guilt in his ensuing prayer, in the form of a long soliloquy; hence the "Mousetrap" seems to

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<sup>15</sup> Some major interpretations and representations of this scene will be examined below.

function perfectly, as a great success for Hamlet. However, both the play-within-the-play and the play containing it are much more complex and ambiguous. The playlet is primarily a representation of another murder, “the Image of a murther doone in *Vienna*” (3.2.237-8), as it is actually announced by Hamlet, who adds, “your Maiestie, and wee that haue free soules, it touches vs not” (3.2.241-2). But Hamlet’s soul is not free either; he is bent on revenge, and the play clearly touches him too.

The playlet, featuring Lucianus, who poisons a duke called Gonzago, thus secondarily represents an ambiguous mixture of the secret murder by Claudius and Hamlet’s revenge. To some extent, it represents all three crimes, in so far as a king or a duke is murdered by a relative. Hamlet’s identification with the murderer suggests that the hero, staging a past murder and seeking retributive justice, is preparing for essentially the same crime that he condemns. He is also preparing to kill the King, moreover, in the ensuing Prayer Scene, the Prince goes on to explain that a circumstance when King Claudius is “a sleepe” would be a most welcome occasion for his revenge (3.3.89). Lucianus can thus represent both the antagonist and the protagonist in *Hamlet*; neither of them perfectly, but both in part; hence the implication of the playlet is that these characters are not quite as different as Hamlet tends to suggest and as it is usually believed. Having assumed the role of the avenger, the supposedly moral hero is just about to descend to the level of the evil villain. The mirror of the play exposes Hamlet’s dark side too; at the end of the Play or Mousetrap Scene, Hamlet already invokes the powers of Hell.

Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When Churchyards yawne, and hell it selfe breakes out  
Contagion to this world: now could I drinke hote blood,  
And doe such busines as the bitter day  
Would quake to looke on.

(3.2.388-92)

The complexity of the play-within-the play, with the implied parallel between the protagonist and the antagonist, as well as the implication that Hamlet, while clearly resolved to revenge, is not necessarily on the right path, can be noted only with a careful reading of Shakespeare's text, suspending the received, popular notions of *Hamlet* and making some necessary distinctions. First of all, we need to realise that the playlet is not a direct and proper representation of the death of Hamlet's father, or of the Ghost's story; second, that the show is not a real success for Hamlet. In fact, as we shall see in more detail below, it is a turning point toward the hero's downfall.

The Mousetrap is intended by Hamlet mainly as a test of King Claudius, but originally it is also intended as a test of the Ghost. Noting the difference between Lucianus and Claudius, as well as the one between Gonzago and King Hamlet, there is another, related, distinction to be made, which is crucial from the point of interpretation. We must also distinguish King Hamlet from the Ghost, and note that they are not necessarily identical with each other. And as we can distinguish Gonzago from the player King (and from either King of Denmark, i.e. the late King Hamlet and King Claudius), so can we further distinguish the Ghost from the actor playing the character in the context of the theatre. All these aspects of playing are related to each other and are central to *Hamlet*. After all, Hamlet's original reason for putting on the show is that he fears the Ghost merely pretends to be the ghost of his father, but is not really identical to him, playing a role like an actor and abusing him. Hamlet's major fear is that the Ghost may be a devil, which has "power/ T'assume a pleasing shape" and so abuse his victims (2.2.599-60).

In fact, we can realise the real significance of the play-within-the-play, or the purpose of playing in *Hamlet*, only if we observe Hamlet's point that the Ghost is not necessarily identical to his father, the late King Hamlet, but a questionable and very dangerous



supernatural character.<sup>16</sup> And if we take this concern seriously, we can also consider such questions as whether the test the hero devises is an adequate one to determine the identity and the reliability of this mysterious character in the given context, or whether the course of action the Ghost demands and Hamlet follows can be regarded as adequate or moral. In other words, if we can appreciate Hamlet's doubts and seriously consider the Ghost as an ambiguous character, as a potentially evil spirit, we can also consider Hamlet's quest of revenge as a questionable response to his situation.

Ultimately, such distinctions can enable us to start a proper analysis of the play; to reconsider the received notions of Hamlet's revenge as a moral duty requested by his father and delayed unreasonably. However, these issues tend to pose major, if not insurmountable, challenges to the modern, largely secular reception, for several reasons. For many, ghosts or spirits are often restricted to fairy tales; some are inclined to see the whole tragedy as a mere tale.<sup>17</sup> Modern readers and audiences are far removed not only from the Elizabethan notions of spirituality and religion, but also from the original stage conventions, and, indeed, even from the original texts of the play. The Mousetrap is thus a test in many respects, depending on whether one can realise its complexity and its inherent dangers; the test of Claudius is also that of Hamlet or anyone encountering it: it is a mirror for all.

If Hamlet could refrain from commenting on the show, the representation of the Vienna murder could be a perfect representation of Claudius' crime too; not only in the method of poisoning, but also in the possible identity of the criminal. But Hamlet cannot help commenting, and since he presents the assassin as the King's nephew, in the given Elsinore context Lucianus cannot really represent Claudius; as a matter of fact, a nephew can represent

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<sup>16</sup> This issue, the representation and interpretation of the Ghost will also be covered in more detail below.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Catherine Belsey, "Shakespeare's Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 1-27. Belsey's interpretation of the Ghost as Old Hamlet and *Hamlet* as a tale will be considered in more detail below.

only Hamlet. Carried away by the play, Hamlet thus eventually accuses himself. As Hamlet says,

I haue heard,  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play,  
Haue by the very cunning of the scene,  
Beene strooke so to the soule, that presently  
They haue proclaim'd their malefactions.

(2.2.588-92)

King Claudius, however, though deeply moved, does not proclaim his malefaction at court; he reveals it only for the audience of *Hamlet*, merely in asides and in a soliloquy. In fact, the King sits still during the dumb show and most of the playlet following it. Even after the dumb show, which already represents the poisoning of a king, he merely asks, remarkably calmly: “Haue you heard the argument? is there no offence in't?” (3.2.232-3). The King rises and interrupts the performance only after Hamlet publicly identifies with the murderer who kills the player King. Before his private prayer, the King manages to hold a brief conference with Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on how to handle Hamlet’s “madnes” (3.3.2), which poses an obvious danger for all.

The Mousetrap thus proves to be a double-edged weapon, which turns against the Prince, catching him as a self-proclaimed assassin, presenting a threat not only at the King, the “Dane” (5.2.325), but also at Denmark, potentially all Danes. This fact, however, is rarely realised in the reception. And as it is generally believed that the Mousetrap works perfectly for Hamlet, catching merely the King, and hence dispelling any doubts about the hero’s quest of revenge and the Ghost, so is the whole play usually presented and interpreted in simplified and arguable terms. Such problems of the reception, however, are not so surprising if we realise that the play-within-the-play serves as a model for *Hamlet* and the theatre in general.

## 1.2 The difficulties of interpretation

As stated above, this dissertation offers an analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its reception, together with a new reading that involves a new concept of the play; certain elements of which, of course, have been suggested by others before. This reading or interpretation is not merely new, but fundamentally different from most so far, either in the main critical editions or in the vast amount of other commentary, including some major monographs on *Hamlet*. At the same time, despite its novelty and some modern theories applied in the analysis, it is also intended to recover how the original audiences and readers may have experienced and interpreted Shakespeare's play. The purpose of the new reading and of the entire study is thus to recover the most likely original meanings of *Hamlet*, highlighting and explaining a number of points; some of which appear to have been lost or altered during the course of four centuries of reception, or just regarded as "problems".

Of course, meaning itself was rather questionable already in Shakespeare's time, not only in our own, when any inherent meaning in Shakespeare's work has been denied by some.<sup>18</sup> Hamlet early on underscores the problematic relationship of seeming and being, or appearance and reality, in one of his first lines: "Seemes Maddam, nay it is, I know not seemes" (1.2.76). Hamlet refers to his mourning: his outward appearance of solemn black perfectly signifies his character. The protagonist thus emphasises that he is an honest man, who does not merely pretend his grief, like others. Hamlet indeed does not pretend at this stage of the play; it is only later when he puts on his "Anticke disposition" (1.5.172), after which it is also difficult to tell when he is honest, and when he pretends too, merely playing

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<sup>18</sup> According to Terence Hawkes, "Shakespeare does not mean: *we* mean by Shakespeare." Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3. Other critics, though, still rather confidently claim to reconstruct the authors's intention, see e.g. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 244; cf. below. My own concern, as I will explain below, is with the possible meaning or meanings of the text, rather than with the author's intention; our access to which is indeed rather limited and arguable.

his assumed role of madness. At the same time, Hamlet's statement, "I know not seemes", may have further implications. The protagonist himself has major difficulties in differentiating seeming from being, or appearance from reality. This can be noted concerning his efforts to determine whether or not the Ghost is what it claims and seems to be; or whether it only pretends to be his father's spirit, merely assuming his figure. On the other hand, Hamlet has a tendency to identify with the various roles he assumes; not only that of the madman, but also that of the avenger.

In any case, doubt plays a major role in the play, as in the contemporary notions of the world and of cognition in general, which also appears from Hamlet's letter to Ophelia.

*Doubt thou the starres are fire,  
Doubt that the Sunne doth moue,  
Doubt truth to be a lyer,  
But neuer doubt I loue.*  
(2.2.116-9)

In this respect, the play itself seems to observe Hamlet's view about the purpose of playing, to hold the mirror to show the pressure of the time, quoted and discussed above. *Hamlet*, as numerous historicist critics have demonstrated, is firmly rooted in Shakespeare's time, and reflects its concerns. However, as Gary Taylor has shown, the later productions, adaptations and interpretations of Shakespeare's works have also tended to reflect the specific concerns of their own eras, often giving rise to major and very arguable changes.<sup>19</sup> Taylor concludes his comprehensive survey of the reception as follows.

But criticism, at its best, struggles to be free; like the press at its best, its function is to doubt what we have been told; it is sceptical; it is suspicious of power. Sycophancy is no more admirable in literature than in politics.

(Taylor, 1991, 411)

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<sup>19</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Vintage, 1991; first published by The Hogarth Press, 1990).

Both Hamlet and Taylor thus call for doubt: the former within the play, the latter concerning its reception; and in the present analysis I will keep their advice – even concerning Taylor’s own work as an editor of Shakespeare.

Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia is read and analysed by other characters in the play, and it may be worth considering here in some more detail too. As a short poem analysed and interpreted within the play, similarly to the drama of the Mousetrap, it may serve as a reminder and a brief model for the analysis and interpretation of the play as a whole. Although it can be read as a simple and clear protestation of love, the poem, particularly its first three lines, may also pose certain difficulties. As the editors of the latest Arden edition note:

The gist of the stanza is, ‘You may question the unquestionable, but do not question that I love you’. The second line has given editors trouble, since it refers to the Ptolemaic belief that the sun moves around the earth – a belief that Shakespeare (if not Hamlet) knew to be outmoded.<sup>20</sup>

By referring to the Ptolemaic belief and calling for its doubt, Hamlet implicitly refers to the Copernican revolution, and hence to an era of major uncertainties, when all the received notions of the universe had been shaken or actually turned upside down. As the people of the age had learnt, the actual reality may be in direct contrast to our impressions and experiences, and to what we have been told so far. This is also referred to as the epistemological crisis of the late Renaissance, which can be regarded as the pronounced framework of not only the poem, but also the play containing it.<sup>21</sup> The poem, beyond demonstrating Hamlet’s love

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series.* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 246 (Notes to 2.2.114-7 in that edition).

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Alisdair Macintyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” in Joyce Appleby et al., eds., *Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 357-67. For a recent discussion of the question of epistemological crisis, also

toward Ophelia, shows the hero's general attitudes, and touches upon some key issues of the play. In the next line, as the Arden editors note, "the meaning of '*Doubt*' shifts from 'question' to 'suspect'" (ibid). Suspicion, particularly concerning truth or the apparent truth, about which Ophelia and all other readers of the letter are warned, is a recurring motif of the play, relating to a number of characters.

The purpose of this study is also to question the unquestionable: to question some beliefs or received notions of *Hamlet* that seem to be unquestionable or even unthinkable in criticism. As we shall see, this also applies to the latest Arden edition, as well as to the general reception, despite the widespread scepticism of many traditional views on Shakespeare or literature in general. However, let us first see the letter's last line, and consider Hamlet's conclusion, for which the first three lines serve as a mere introduction, so as to highlight the only thing that Ophelia should never doubt: Hamlet's love. Is the hero right about that point?

In the play, the letter is read and interpreted by Polonius, at a fairly early stage of the plot, yet at a moment when Hamlet's sentiments toward Ophelia (and indeed toward the whole world) seem to have changed. The protagonist may have loved Ophelia once, but his thoughts of love have given way to those of revenge; he will soon kill Polonius and drive Ophelia to madness and to her death too. At her funeral, Hamlet again rather emphatically declares his love toward Ophelia, leaping into her grave and fighting with her grieving brother Laertes; claiming the priority in grief, as well as in love. However, if we consider Hamlet's other actions and utterances, we cannot be certain either of his constancy, or of his love. When Hamlet and Ophelia meet in the so-called Nunnery Scene, Hamlet first recalls his past sentiments, his love, but then, within a few lines, he plainly denies that he ever loved Ophelia.

*Ham.* I did loue you once.

*Oph.* Indeed my Lord you made me belieue so.

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citing Macintyre, see Ágnes Matuska, *The Vice-Device: Iago and Lear's Fool as Agents of Representational Crisis*. (Szeged: Jatepress, 2011), 25-32.

*Ham.* You should not haue beleeu'd me, for vertue cannot so  
euocut at our old stock, but we shall relish of it, I loued you not.  
*Oph.* I was the more deceiued.

(3.1.114-19)

Hamlet, just before these lines, questions Ophelia's honesty, but if we examine Hamlet's above words, we may well question his honesty too. Hamlet himself tells Ophelia that she should not have believed him. The situation is even more complex if we take into account some further elements of the context. First of all, Hamlet and Ophelia's interview is being overheard by the King and Polonius. Based on the original texts, there is no evidence that Hamlet is aware of this fact; but if he suspects that, his words may be aimed at the eavesdroppers too, as part of a show or role play, further undermining his sincerity toward Ophelia. Of course, Ophelia is aware of the presence of the eavesdroppers: she does lie about his father's whereabouts when Hamlet asks her; thus she is not really honest or innocent either, even though she obeys her father and the King in a firmly patriarchal society.

Second, we may also recall that after meeting the Ghost, Hamlet confides to his friends that he will feign madness. Ophelia does believe Hamlet to be mad after their encounter, when Hamlet finally leaves her after a lengthy tirade; in a sharp and bizarre contrast with their former encounter, when Hamlet, as Ophelia relates, did not say a word, but also behaved rather oddly. Hamlet deplores insincerity, and censures even the make up Ophelia uses, but the heroine's despair may be the result of yet another show or role play by Hamlet: that of his antic disposition. Even so, Hamlet may still love Ophelia, perhaps in his own, special way; his conduct, at least in part, may indeed be the consequence of thwarted love, as Polonius believes. But the King is probably right to conclude that Hamlet's "affections doe not that way tend" (3.1.162). Later, in the Play or Mousetrap Scene, Hamlet publicly insults Ophelia, in effect treating her as a prostitute; a performance that makes his love toward Ophelia questionable again.

Hamlet's love poem, along with the fate of Ophelia and Polonius, who tries to interpret it rather confidently, may thus remind us that we must be very careful in our response to even the seemingly minor elements of the play. Hamlet himself emphasises doubt concerning various issues, but it seems that even his protestation of love should have been treated with some doubt by Ophelia and Polonius; as it is indeed treated by Claudius. Like Hamlet's poem, the play and its concepts have long been interpreted far removed from their original context, giving rise to various hypotheses concerning Shakespeare's intentions; somewhat akin to the characters' hypotheses about Hamlet's intentions within the play. Like Ophelia or Polonius, critics may believe some of their impressions, some elements and some received notions of the play rather too easily; but they may well be deceived too. Like Polonius or Claudius, who witness a highly artificial and theatrical, pre-arranged encounter, readers and audiences also try to interpret a play laden with contradictory, highly ambiguous statements and remarks, and a series of extraordinary and amazing actions or behaviour, coupled with role play, pretence or other fake elements; which are not always announced or revealed.

Finally, we should note that the modern readers of *Hamlet* are actually in a more difficult position than Polonius is with Hamlet's love letter, even though the consequences of a possible misinterpretation are different: no one's life is at risk, and no one is slain in the reception. But we are much more removed in time from the text interpreted; and the play is, of course, much longer and much more complex than Hamlet's brief poem. And there is a further, crucial difference. Whereas Polonius holds the letter written by Hamlet himself, readers, critics and directors have no access to Shakespeare's manuscript. Moreover, they tend to use much later and modernised editions of *Hamlet*. As we shall see, even the texts interpreted have long been substantially different from those of the original editions; and the changes include not merely spelling. As I have mentioned, even the designations of the



characters are arguable in the modern editions, and they may considerably contribute to the problems of the reception.

### **1.3 Hamlet, the Ghost, and religion**

Having seen the complexity of the play-within-the-play and some other difficulties of interpretation in *Hamlet*, let us return to Hamlet and the Ghost, and to the related issues, including the problems of their reception. Both these characters are highly ambiguous and debated. The former has the leading role, almost always dominating the text, the stage, and the reception; the latter has only a few appearances and speeches, yet is also of great importance. The play itself starts with the apparition; and if Hamlet dominates the play, the Ghost in turn can be said to dominate the hero's thoughts, as well as his actions, even if indirectly or implicitly. Both are mysterious figures: Hamlet because of his uniquely complex, versatile character; he is, at the same time, rather controversial. The Ghost's mystery stems primarily from the fact that it actually represents the supernatural within the play, greatly expanding the horizon, yet also baffling and troubling the characters and the audiences and readers alike. Both characters have furnished a number of riddles for the reception, which will be discussed below.

As I have noted, this dissertation is based on my university diploma work, or M.A. thesis, entitled "Hamlet, Victim of the Evil Ghost". I have also referred to Stephen Greenblatt's monograph on the Ghost, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.<sup>22</sup> Because of its importance, I shall review Greenblatt's work in detail in the next chapter, which is concerned with the criticism, but first I would explain why the Ghost is so important in the play and its reception. As we can see, in Greenblatt's title, "Hamlet" refers not to the protagonist, but to his deceased

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

father, the late King Hamlet of Denmark, who is already dead when *Hamlet* the play starts. Greenblatt thus identifies the ambiguous Ghost as the dead father, whom he believes to have returned from the grave and from Purgatory: if not in its authentic Catholic context of worship, at least in a poet's fiction and in the theatre; but still in an apparently serious representation of the character and the residual Catholic concepts. At the same time, Greenblatt regards both *Hamlet* and the Ghost as exceedingly problematic, mainly because the supposedly purgatorial spirit demands vengeance.<sup>23</sup> However, even before going to the details, several questions can be raised concerning the work of Greenblatt and the problems he suggests. Is it certain that the Ghost comes from Purgatory? Is it certain that the Ghost is Hamlet's father, or Old Hamlet (or "Hamlet"), at all? What is problematic: the character, the play, or their interpretation? What can be the causes of the problems?

These are issues of character, religion, history, but also those of interpretation and reception in general. Greenblatt emphasises the ambiguous nature of both the character and the play; but, as I will argue, Shakespeare's work is in fact more ambiguous than Greenblatt and most modern critics tend to realise. Based on the original texts, the play does not settle the question whether the avenging hero indeed "sets it right", following the purgatorial spirit of his father, or whether the Prince (and indeed, Denmark, as a whole) falls victim of an evil Ghost, a disguised devil from Hell. However, as I will also argue, it is unlikely that the Ghost was viewed as a genuinely purgatorial spirit in the original Christian context; it could also be interpreted as a disguised devil from Hell, which merely claims and seems to be the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Even if the character was considered as a possibly purgatorial spirit by the original, predominantly Protestant audiences, it was probably viewed with much less reverence than it has been since the Restoration; when, in Gary Taylor's words, *Hamlet* was reinvented for the first time after the closing of the theatres at the end of the Renaissance.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 244; cf. below.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor (1991), 7-51, cf. below.

These issues of character concern also their designation and identity. Identity is a hot topic in the recent criticism of the Renaissance or the early modern period. In a recent article, Sylvia Adamson emphasises the importance of philology concerning the new historicist studies of the questions of identity.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is also a question of philology, for it concerns not only the questionable identity of a character, but also some textual issues: the question of the text we use, the designations, and the meanings of certain key words. As for the text, Greenblatt uses the Norton edition of Shakespeare, of which he is the general editor.<sup>26</sup> In this edition, the character is designated as “GHOST of Hamlet, the late King of Denmark” in the list of characters, placed before the text, and thus settling the question in advance. However, there is no such list in the original editions (Q1, Q2, F1); all we have is “Ghost” in the stage directions and in the speech prefixes. As we shall see in more detail below, the word itself has several meanings; and it was considerably more ambiguous in Shakespeare’s time than in it is today.

In a recent essay on the Ghost, Catherine Belsey, commenting on Greenblatt, also doubts the purgatorial nature and origin of the character; moreover, she already seems to realize that the Ghost is not certainly identical to Old Hamlet.<sup>27</sup> As Belsey notes, “Senecan shades undoubtedly contribute something to the presentation of Old Hamlet (if that is who he is).”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, but, one might ask: what if the character is not Old Hamlet? What if the Ghost merely seems and pretends to be Hamlet’s father, so as to deceive him? Again, this seems to be unquestionable or even unthinkable to Belsey too, for she continues to refer to the character as Old Hamlet in her analysis, as if he were actually and undoubtedly the late king returning from the grave.

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<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Adamson, “Questions of Identity in Renaissance Drama: New Historicism Meets Old Philology” (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 56-77.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works. The Norton Shakespeare* (New York and London: Norton Publishers, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Belsey, “Shakespeare’s Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories” (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 1-27.

<sup>28</sup> Belsey (2010), 8.

As it appears from the title, this study is not only about Hamlet and the Ghost; it is also about the model reader. Who is a model reader? And who can be a model reader of *Hamlet*? As has been mentioned, part of this question is what we mean by *Hamlet*: the original texts, the later editions, or perhaps some other manifestations in print, on stage, or in film. In a general sense, every editor, critic, director or teacher can be regarded as a model reader of Shakespeare: their reading or interpretation serves as a model for their readers and audiences. Some famous readings and theories by some renowned commentators have served as influential models of interpretation over the past centuries of reception, some of which we shall discuss below.

In this sense, Greenblatt is certainly a major and highly influential model reader of our time: he is a widely read editor, critic and biographer of Shakespeare, guiding even the theatre audiences. In the programme note of the 2011 production of *Hamlet* at the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe in London, the audience is offered a reading of the play by Greenblatt, entitled "A Message from Purgatory."<sup>29</sup> This is an adapted extract from Greenblatt's best-selling biography of Shakespeare, from the chapter entitled "Speaking with the Dead."<sup>30</sup> In the twenty-first century, modern readers and audiences are thus given a new historicist account of the Ghost as Hamlet's father, returning from the dead and from Purgatory, and longing for pious remembrance; forms of which may have been forgotten not only by modern, secular audiences, but also by early modern, Elizabethan ones, who had been Protestant for several decades – indeed, apparently even by Hamlet himself. The renowned critic imparts these views in more detail in his former, above-mentioned book, whose final chapter, analysing *Hamlet*, is entitled "Remember Me."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Dominic Dromgoole, ed., "*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. On tour" (2011), 12-17.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 311-321.

<sup>31</sup> Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 205-57; cf. below.

How can the notion of revenge, demanded by a possibly demonic Ghost, and the extermination of virtually the entire Danish court including Hamlet, be related to all this? And how can the solemn and apparently peaceful concepts of grief and religious remembrance be linked to those of violence; as well as those of illusion, role-play and deception, irony or even satire? As has been noted, *Hamlet* is a complex play; and, as we shall see, Hamlet himself utters quite a few religious concepts even as he kills or comments on dispatching others. In this study, as has been mentioned, I will use Eco's notion of the model reader. According to Eco, every text implies two kinds of model reader, who realize two levels of the text; and in some cases, the two levels can be radically different from each other.<sup>32</sup> However, before we turn to the textual and theoretical issues in more detail, as well as to the analysis of the Ghost, or some major productions, let us see some further questions of *Hamlet* and its criticism, including some questions that are more commonly asked about the hero.

#### **1.4 Hamlet's delay and some further issues**

*Hamlet* is a drama of great questions: some are universally famous, while others, which may also be important, are discussed only by some scholars and tend to be ignored even by Shakespeare critics. Some of the questions are rhetorical, with no explicit answers to them in the text; while others have very clear answers, which, nevertheless, are interestingly also often ignored in the reception. To some major questions, the play itself seems to offer different answers, even sharply contrasting ones that are mutually exclusive in nature.

Why does Hamlet delay his revenge until the end of Shakespeare's longest play, even though he swears to sweep to it already at the end of the first act? In the long history of

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The renewed interest in the religious aspects of *Hamlet* at the turn of the millennium was marked by another production in London: the National Theatre *Hamlet* 2000 production, which put the play in a church setting. Among some other production, this will also be discussed in Chapter 4, below.

<sup>32</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1990), esp. 44-63; 101-110; 123-136; cf. below.

reception, this still commonly asked question has been by far the most discussed one, hence it can safely be regarded as the question of questions concerning *Hamlet*. Commentators have proposed various theories, even though the protagonist himself gives quite a clear, definite and detailed answer to this when he has the only actual opportunity to kill his opponent before the tragic end; an opportunity that is, moreover, dramatically underscored and rather spectacular. In the centre act, when Hamlet has just dispelled his doubts about his revenge and expressed his thirst for blood, he finds the antagonist alone, completely defenceless, and draws his sword to realize his goal. The King, however, is praying, and the Prince pauses to reconsider his intent, which he elucidates in some two dozen lines (3.3.73-98). He explains that he decides to delay his deed until another opportunity, which suits his purposes better. Any kind of revenge will not do: Hamlet fears that if he kills the praying Claudius, he will go to Heaven; but Hamlet is determined to ensure his damnation. Killing the King is thus apparently not enough for the melancholy Prince of Denmark: revenge to him means destroying both body and soul, that is, causing the eternal suffering of his enemy in Hell; which requires certain, well-specified, circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

Why have critics been reluctant to accept Hamlet's own explanation; why have they ignored or actually rejected it, and sought for alternative ones to explain his conduct, actions and motives; or, rather, to explain them away? How can it be claimed, as John Dover Wilson does, that "Shakespeare, as everyone knows, never furnishes an explanation for Hamlet's inaction. All he does is to exhibit it to us as a problem"?<sup>34</sup> How can such a remarkable view appear in a major monograph by an eminent scholar, who is also a distinguished editor of the

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<sup>33</sup> As we shall see, Hamlet behaves here as though he is God himself, which is a blasphemously pretentious behaviour, supposing that he can pronounce a Last Judgement, sending the King to Hell, Purgatory or Heaven. Although they may have held different opinions on whether Purgatory existed, both Catholics and Protestants believed that the ultimate judgement is in God's hand. I am grateful for Professor Latré for highlighting this point.

<sup>34</sup> John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in "Hamlet"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; first published 1935), 204. Dover Wilson's influential, if at times debated, book, showing "how the play must be seen and heard and to be understood" in minute details, is still in print (the quotation in this note is from the back cover of the 1995 paperback edition). Dover Wilson himself, unlike many other critics and authors, does not completely ignore Hamlet's pronounced motive, but his treatment of it is very arguable.

play, and hence thoroughly familiar with the text? If the above, common question about Hamlet's delay is difficult, these latter ones are far more so, for they require the analysis of not only the play but also its reception, which is even more complex. *Hamlet* itself is by no means simple: it has been rightly called a "poem unlimited,"<sup>35</sup> but then its reception is truly infinite, and only partly because of the sheer volume of the available and ever growing commentary: the reception itself includes a great many forms and factors that may contribute to our notions of the play. As has been noted, this involves the question of aesthetic identity: what do we mean by *Hamlet* at all, when we talk about the work? What do we mean by Hamlet as a character; or indeed, as has been mentioned concerning Greenblatt's study, as characters of the play? And what do we mean by Shakespeare? How are these names used in criticism, or in the general reception?

The criticism has usually focused on the protagonist; and many commentators seem to have undertaken a quest to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery (to use Hamlet's own phrase in 3.2.366) by offering more and more ingenious theories to describe his character. At the same time, a large portion of the commentary, as has been mentioned, approaches both the Prince and his tragedy from the point of his delay. As Margreta de Grazia notes, an adequate explanation for Hamlet's delay, many seem to believe, can also explain the whole play, "this riddle, this sphinx, this Mona Lisa of literature."<sup>36</sup> However, for some curious reasons, most

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<sup>35</sup> Harold Bloom, *"Hamlet": Poem Unlimited* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2003); the phrase is from *Hamlet* (2.2.399). Bloom further notes that Goethe already wrote an essay entitled "Schäkespear und kein Ende!" or "No End of Shakespeare!" (p. 149). We may add two points here briefly: first, since Goethe, the reception of *Hamlet* has dramatically proliferated, as well as diversified and changed in many respects, even though, as we shall see, often suggesting a very similar concept of the hero and the play to that of Goethe. Second, Goethe himself is about midway between the creation of *Hamlet* and our own time, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. His still influential views, however acute in some respects, are therefore already quite removed from the play's original context, cf. below.

<sup>36</sup> Margreta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 158. De Grazia devotes the last chapter of her monograph to Hamlet's delay, discussing several points that are also examined in this thesis. Despite some common concerns, however, this study can be said to start where de Grazia's ends. De Grazia highlights the modern (over)emphasis on character; but I think this, alone, is not a sufficient explanation for the major problems of the reception. Moreover, the protagonist, who is also the title character, as in all great tragedies of the canon, was undoubtedly central already in Shakespeare's time and in his theatre. As I will argue, the problem is not so much with the modern emphasis on character, but rather with the common sympathy toward his quest of revenge, and the usual modern concept of Hamlet as a moral hero.

commentators and authors reject Hamlet's own explanation, if they care to note it at all. Consequently, the history of *Hamlet* criticism, particularly in the past two centuries, can also be described as a sort of an ongoing contest in which the contenders set out to invent more and more ingenious theories to explain away Hamlet's pronounced desire of effecting the damnation of his enemy.<sup>37</sup>

This study is in part concerned with this remarkable phenomenon, in addition to addressing several other questions concerning the play and its reception. De Grazia, as some other critics, points out that in the Renaissance Hamlet's intention must have been taken seriously by the audience.<sup>38</sup> However, she also seems to defend Hamlet, or at least to explain his ominous behaviour by emphasising that his extraordinary gloom is caused by his dispossession of the throne, which is a huge injustice. De Grazia also suggests that Hamlet's dispossession and the political implications in general have been largely ignored at the expense of the analyses of his character. While the politics of *Hamlet* is indeed often ignored in the reception, de Grazia's claim is somewhat surprising, since Claudius has almost always been regarded as a usurper; a point that is actually arguable in the given historical context, at least in political terms, particularly if one considers the elective monarchy emphasised several times in the play.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, Shakespeare's work can certainly be regarded as questionable or problematic, in so far as the text itself raises numerous famous questions and problems, some of which have proved to be extremely difficult even to renowned scholars; and a number of questions are indeed concerned with Hamlet's delay. On the other hand, many points of the reception seem to be very questionable or problematic too, for which Dover Wilson's above quoted view is but one, though perhaps typical, example.

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<sup>37</sup> For such a review, see de Grazia, *ibid.* Some of these will be reconsidered below, but this thesis, again, seeks to go beyond de Grazia's concerns.

<sup>38</sup> De Grazia (2007), 192.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. below.



As for the character of Hamlet, and his frequently discussed morality, one may thus well ask: is he indeed an ultimately good character, as he is traditionally supposed to be? Or is he instead an evil one, with the conventional role of the Vice, as has also been contended by some, particularly by Arthur McGee?<sup>40</sup> Is he a virtually flawless hero, a moral champion who is merely the victim of his enemies, his society or the circumstances? Is he simply fortune's fool, like Romeo? Most would agree that he is not: that is why he can be a great tragic hero in the first place. But is he also a moral hero, as he himself tends to suggest, and as he is usually regarded, fulfilling the role of a virtuous minister of Heaven, as an agent of God's divine providence?<sup>41</sup> Is he indeed a "*Christus medicus*," as Germaine Greer believes,<sup>42</sup> a sacrificial hero or a scapegoat? Or is he rather a villain, an evil minister of Hell – somewhat like Richard III – or merely a scourge of God, in so far as effecting retributive justice, but with not truly divine ambitions, particularly when seeking the damnation of his enemy? This latter goal, it must be noted, is unique to Hamlet in the entire Shakespeare canon: uncharacteristic not only of Claudius, the antagonist, but even of the most notorious villains including Richard III, Macbeth or Iago; and explicitly different from Othello's treatment of Desdemona: although the Moor kills her wife, he does not want to effect her damnation. But how can Hamlet be compared to Christ in the first place, if he seeks revenge and kills several people in his quest? Does he heal anything at all in the total destruction of his country, lost to a foreign power in the end?

Or is the protagonist a more complex tragic hero, who may be admirable for his intellect and for various other reasons, but who nevertheless possesses a certain flaw of character, one particular fault? And if we so consider him as the tragic hero of perhaps the

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<sup>40</sup> Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan "Hamlet"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), esp. 68-137. More recently, Margreta de Grazia also discusses Hamlet as the Vice (181 ff), but despite her impressive review of criticism, she does not refer to McGee, who is perhaps the most determined representative of this view and had made several points suggested by de Grazia in her historical study.

<sup>41</sup> Q2, 2549-51 (3.4.173-5); 3551 (5.2.48); cf. below.

<sup>42</sup> Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 57; this and other points mentioned in this paragraph will be cited and discussed in more detail below.

greatest of all tragedies, what is his fault? Is it indeed his delay: his hesitation or procrastination, as commonly believed and taught even now; or is it something else? Or should we put these moral concerns aside altogether, for instance, by arguing that they are irrelevant from a psychological point, even though they are specifically addressed by the characters in the play? Can Hamlet's own explanation of his motivation in the Prayer Scene thus be rejected, simply by claiming that he does not mean what he says, even in a rather serious and major passage addressing the audience?

In any case, as for the criticism, are we really to accept such a laconic but typical and widely disseminated view that "Hamlet's tragic weakness is hesitation, inability to act when action is needed. He is too much of a thinker"?<sup>43</sup> Or is it reasonable to maintain that the Prince is "too much the student of philosophy and the Christian religion to believe in the morality and logic of revenge"?<sup>44</sup> What may lie behind such views, ignoring or denying Hamlet's own words and actions? Considering such statements in the actual context of the play, is the protagonist expected to have his revenge as soon as he has the chance, hence to kill even a praying person, without any consideration? More importantly, however, is Hamlet's hesitation or delay indeed motivated by pious considerations? Again, does he think and behave like a true Christian, when he wishes the damnation of his enemy? What has the desire of damning someone got to do with the Christian rejection of revenge? Does Hamlet ever give up his intent of revenge at all, rather than merely delaying it, as he himself points out, until he can kill both body and soul?

We can take perhaps the most famous and influential view about the character of Hamlet, that of Goethe, too. How can it be claimed that the protagonist has a "lovely, pure,

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<sup>43</sup> G. C. Thronley and Gwyneth Roberts, *An Outline of English Literature* (Harlow: Longman, 1984), 47. Note that this quotation, similarly to that of the next one, is from a book for students of English literature, therefore indicative of a certain, prevailing interpretation or critical paradigm of *Hamlet*. Hamlet's procrastination will be examined in more detail below.

<sup>44</sup> Wilfred Guerin, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 42. This view, again intended for students, is indicative of how some traditional but very arguable concepts are disseminated and maintained even now; cf. below.

noble and most moral nature,” for whom “all duties are holy,”<sup>45</sup> if he has such sentiments as expressed in the Prayer Scene, besides killing several people himself, while mercilessly sending others to their sudden death; showing no pangs of conscience or any signs of remorse? Given his deeds, by which he considerably exceeds the single revenge he is commanded, why is he believed to be unable to perform such a “great action”?<sup>46</sup> Given his speeches, the soliloquies in which he laments bitterly and at length on his delay in shedding blood – or shedding more blood, even after having killed Polonius –, how can it be claimed that he consciously rejects revenge; as Kiernan Ryan, a more recent and modern critic puts it, in a “calculated sabotaging” of it?<sup>47</sup>

Again, these questions concerning the reception are more complex than those addressing solely the play or the character of Hamlet, which is certainly hardly simple either. Yet these views are unavoidable when one undertakes an analysis of *Hamlet*, which by now carries along with it a heavy burden of commentary and is difficult to see without the various treatments it has received over the centuries. In any case, even if the primary aim is to describe Hamlet’s character and his motivations, it is also interesting to see how and why some influential critics have attributed to him features that are, when seen from a different angle, are perhaps contradicted by the play.

As for Hamlet’s task, is revenge inevitable? Is it indeed his moral duty, as commonly believed? Or is there a choice, a possibility of another solution to his problem in the given historical and political context, suggested in the play? But how can revenge be called a “sacred duty”, as by A. C. Bradley in another major and enormously influential critical study?<sup>48</sup> How can it be ignored that a basic tenet of Christianity is actually the rejection of

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<sup>45</sup> Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795; trans. Thomas Carlyle, 1824), in Arthur M. Eastman, *A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism* (New York: Random House, 1968), 81. Many have shared Goethe’s views, including some recent, otherwise distinctly modern commentators, cf. below.

<sup>46</sup> Also by Goethe, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (London: Harvester, 1988), 48, cf. below.

<sup>48</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1905; first ed. 1904), 146.

revenge, while killing itself is specifically prohibited already in the Ten Commandments? Indeed, how can the hesitation or delay to kill be regarded as a flaw of character in the first place? These issues are interesting both from a historical and a theoretical perspective: to what extent have these views evolved in the course of the reception, and to what extent are they implied by certain elements of the text itself, even though clearly contradicted by others?

Many have noted that the play is packed with religious references, which have been studied in numerous works; as we have seen, Hamlet himself entertains certain kinds of religious sentiments at a clearly decisive moment of the plot too. But what is the specific role and significance of religion in the play and its reception? Can *Hamlet* be classified simply as either a religious, or a secular drama; and what would be an adequate treatment of these points, which, at any rate, seem to be quite important not only to the protagonist but even to such minor characters as the gravediggers, who appear only at the beginning of a scene as clowns, yet set out to pose basic questions concerning the afterlife (5.1)?

After numerous studies on the religion of Shakespeare's age, works and characters, as well as on the possible and highly debated religion of the author himself, Eric S. Mallin has recently offered "the first book to discuss Shakespeare from an atheist perspective."<sup>49</sup> This claim is very interesting, but also questionable and somewhat surprising. On the one hand, some modern critical approaches are distinctively atheist, offering radical revisions of the traditional approaches to Shakespeare; such trends started several decades ago.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, as we shall see, most of the traditional criticism cannot be regarded as particularly religious either. In fact, as I will argue, the religious significance of *Hamlet* has been largely ignored since the Restoration, or approached from a mostly secular perspective, and this has given rise to various problems in the reception.

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<sup>49</sup> Eric S. Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), back cover.

<sup>50</sup> We can think of particularly the English Cultural Materialism here, but, to a somewhat lesser extent, also its American counterpart, the so-called New Historicism. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a detailed review of criticism or the critical approaches; some examples will be further discussed in the next chapter.

But Mallin's claims go beyond the question of the specific approaches to Shakespeare: he also considers Shakespeare as an atheist author, and his works as atheist or godless too, despite the abundance of religious references and such concerns of the characters in his plays. "While the symbolic, thematic elements of Christianity certainly find their way into his work, Shakespeare activates these features in decidedly irreligious or ironic ways."<sup>51</sup> Irony is certainly present in *Hamlet* too; as has been noted above, the protagonist himself behaves in rather irreligious, or at least unorthodox, ways, even as he utters some of his religious sentiments, which will be explored below. However, let us note that, first of all, Shakespeare's characters do not necessarily convey Shakespeare's own beliefs or views, whether religious or atheist, Catholic, Protestant, agnostic, occult or pagan. Second, irony and comic elements can be found already in the morality plays, which can hardly be regarded as atheist, and on which Shakespeare seems to draw on too, at least to a certain extent. Irony or even sarcasm concerning religion does not necessarily mean a rejection of religion per se; it may concern only certain religious attitudes at a time of major sectarian conflicts; in particular, when the Protestant Anglicans condemned and often mocked Catholics.

*Hamlet*, as has been suggested above, does seem to draw on and reflect the religious uncertainties and controversies of the period, which may go well beyond irony: it can also involve sectarian hostility and contempt. Unlike many, if not most, modern commentators, directors and audiences, the Elizabethan or Jacobean audiences – or Shakespeare himself – did not necessarily agree to Hamlet's actions or views: they may well have distanced themselves from the hero and his quest of revenge, and seen him ironically or critically. But this is very far from atheism or godlessness, as it is conceived of today.

*Hamlet* is not just about revenge and its delay, not even only about death or the afterlife, with its various implications, including the moral or the religious ones. However,

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<sup>51</sup> Mallin (2007), 3.

death is certainly a central, overriding theme, and it tends to appear together with its philosophical and religious connotations. Questions of the afterlife are raised concerning every single victim of the tragedy: all eight characters killed in the play, moreover, even concerning the one killed before it: the late King Hamlet, killed before the plot begins. The memory of Hamlet's father, the late king, proves to be crucial for the Prince and, as we shall see, for any interpretation of the play; as has been noted, it has received particular attention in recent criticism too.

As Margreta de Grazia emphasises, *Hamlet* the play is certainly not only about Hamlet the character either.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, such questions can be extended from the protagonist to the other characters, who have gradually also attracted more and more attention. Is the Ghost, the very source of revenge and the initiator of the action from the first scene, for instance, a good, or an evil one; and who or what is it actually in the first place? More specifically, is it the Purgatorial spirit of the deceased king, Old Hamlet at all, as it is usually believed even now; or is it a disguised devil from Hell, abusing Hamlet, as the Prince himself suspects in one of his soliloquies, and as has also been argued by some critics, particularly by Eleanor Prosser?<sup>53</sup> Or is it just a Senecan revenge ghost from an ancient, pagan underworld; drawing on pagan beliefs or superstitions, rather than on Christian concepts? Moreover, is it perhaps merely a hallucination, a figment of Hamlet's undoubtedly extraordinary imagination, as suggested by the Queen in the Closet Scene; and by W. W. Greg, who started the whole critical debate concerning the character a century ago?<sup>54</sup>

Can such issues be decided at all, and if so, on what basis? Or are these but some of the many irresolvable questions, problems or ambiguities of the play, as has often been contended over the past several decades? However, if that is the case, why is the Ghost

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<sup>52</sup> Margreta de Grazia, "*Hamlet*" without Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 1-6.

<sup>53</sup> 2.2.598-603. See, Eleanor Prosser, "*Hamlet*" and Revenge (2nd ed. Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1971; first published: 1967); cf. below.

<sup>54</sup> 3.4.105-139; W.W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination" (*The Modern Literary Review*, Oct. 1917).

commonly regarded simply as Hamlet's father in the modern reception; somewhat surprisingly even by Stephen Greenblatt, who focuses particularly on this mysterious figure in an extensive study, and actually argues for the ambiguities and the irresolvable nature of these issues?<sup>55</sup> Once again, the play and its reception seem to be quite tricky even on this point, making it rather difficult to trace and sufficiently define the various problems, let alone to answer them.

In general, why is *Hamlet* problematic? Is it indeed "the most problematic play ever written,"<sup>56</sup> or has it become particularly problematic only over the course of its reception? How does the notion of the problem play, which is in fact a relatively modern one, apply to Shakespeare's tragedy?<sup>57</sup> And, perhaps more importantly, to what extent can or should we talk about the problems of the play, if certain problems occur in the process of criticism? For example, is Hamlet's delay indeed an inexplicable problem of the hero's character and hence of the play? Is his intent of damning his enemy, which has bothered and even offended critics for centuries, a problem of a similar kind?<sup>58</sup> Does the Ghost pose truly unsolvable problems, as some believe: for instance, by its command of revenge, which, in any case, is quite an essential element of the play?<sup>59</sup> Or are these aspects valid and integral parts of the given characters and the tragedy as a whole, and in some respects problematic only for the reception; for certain concepts of *Hamlet*? In short, are these real problems of the drama at all, or, rather, merely of the criticism or the reception; and how can they be explained?

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); cf. below.

<sup>56</sup> Harry Levin, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 7 (1958), p. 105; also quoted by Harold Jenkins in his Arden edition of *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 122; cf. below.

<sup>57</sup> See e.g. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), cf. below.

<sup>58</sup> For some early examples, see e.g. *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736, anonymous, probably by Sir Thomas Hanmer), pp. 39-44, cf. below; Johnson, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (1765), in: Raleigh, ed., *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 193; cf. below. For a recent review, see de Grazia (2007), 159ff.

<sup>59</sup> Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, esp. pp. 237-44; cf. below.

But we have posed enough questions to answer. The next chapter offers a detailed analysis of some problems of criticism, in the form of case studies, so as to see the nature of those problems more specifically, and to suggest solutions to them.



## Chapter 2

### SOME PROBLEMS OF CRITICISM, OR *HAMLET* AS A PROBLEM PLAY

"Why, Partridge, you exceed my expectations. You enjoy the play more than I conceived possible."  
"Nay, sir," answered Partridge, "if you are not afraid of the devil, I can't help it.

Henry Fielding<sup>60</sup>

#### 2.1 Early criticism: Moral hero?

Apart from the nearly two-decade break of the closing of the theatres from 1642 to 1660, which marked the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of an entirely new era with the Restoration, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has almost always been on the stage since its creation at the beginning of the seventeenth century: first at the Globe in London, then in an ever more widening circle in Europe and across the globe. However, despite its enormous and almost constant popularity, critics and other commentators have always found some problems concerning the play. In modern criticism, *Hamlet* has been regarded as a problem play, and now it is believed by some major critics that certain problems cannot be solved at all. Before turning to the notion of problem play and some problems of recent criticism, I should examine those of some earlier critics.

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<sup>60</sup> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (London, 1749), Book XVI, Chapter V, cf. below.

The purpose of this section is not merely to offer yet another review of some already famous critics. My aim is to analyse what and how they regarded as problems of *Hamlet*, and also to suggest solutions to them; while starting with a detailed analysis of the reception, I start the analysis of the play as well. As we shall see, neither the hero nor the play was regarded by the early critics as perfect, in contrast with what was the case in the later reception, particularly after the onset of Romanticism. Nevertheless, Hamlet was viewed as a moral character, as he is usually viewed even now; that is why some of his deeds or his conduct and hence the play itself appeared problematic. However, some objections to the play can also be objected to; the critical arguments are at times themselves arguable or problematic.

### **2.1.1 Hanmer's critique of Hamlet's character**

In the early criticism, the first notable problem about the character can be found already in the first book-length study of *Hamlet* published in 1736 by an anonymous author, but usually attributed to Thomas Hanmer. This was written well over a century after *Hamlet* was created, and nearly a century after the end of the Renaissance, in a very different historical and cultural period. From the seventeenth century, we have only briefer commentaries on the play; from the Renaissance, we have only some scattered comments or allusions. As Gary Taylor explains, until the Restoration, "Shakespeare had not yet become the object of literary criticism"; therefore he had to be reinvented almost from obscurity in 1660, when the theatres reopened.<sup>61</sup>

Commenting on Hamlet's conduct in the Prayer Scene (3.3), the author of *Some Remarks* has the following, now quite famous remark:

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<sup>61</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Vintage, 1991), 12. As Taylor explains, in the Restoration Shakespeare was already regarded as old and outdated, who could only be revived by modernised adaptations, cf. below.

Hamlet's Speech upon seeing the King at Prayers, has always given me great Offence. There is something so very Bloody in it, so inhuman, so unworthy of a Hero, that I wish our Poet had omitted it. To desire to destroy a Man's Soul, to make him eternally miserable, by cutting him off from all hopes of Repentance; this surely, in a Christian Prince, is such a Piece of Revenge, as no Tenderness for any Parent can justify. To put the Usurper to Death, to deprive him of the Fruits of his vile Crime, and to rescue the Throne of Denmark from Pollution, was highly requisite: But there our young Prince's Desires should have stop'd, nor should he have wished to pursue the Criminal in the other World, but rather have hoped for his Conversion, before his putting him to Death; for even with his Repentance, there was at least Purgatory for him to pass through, as we find even in a virtuous Prince, the Father of Hamlet.<sup>62</sup>

Hamlet is regarded here as a Christian Prince, and apparently also as a moral hero; therefore his speech is very problematic, for wishing one's enemy's damnation is indeed quite un-Christian, as well as inhuman. It is thus seen as an offence by Shakespeare, and the critic wishes that Shakespeare had omitted it. This aspect is thus not accepted as a legitimate part of the protagonist's character or of the play itself; the critic has certain expectations of a hero and a tragedy, which the author failed to meet.

The King is seen here as a criminal and a usurper; as we shall see, this is arguable in the given political context, for he is in fact an elected king, though in moral terms he certainly usurped the throne. While killing the previous king was a crime, the critic believes that killing the present King "was highly requisite", even in the Christian context of the play; it would "rescue the Throne of Denmark from Pollution." Hamlet is thus deemed morally right in pursuing revenge; that is not regarded as a crime, nor the several other killings it involves, considerably outnumbering the King's initial, sole crime. It is another question to what extent the King's moves against Hamlet should be regarded as crimes, particularly after the Prince expresses his intent of killing him. In any case, if we count the dead at the end of the play,

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<sup>62</sup> Anonymous [variously attributed to Thomas Hanmer or George Stubbes], *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare* (London, 1736), 41.

Hamlet has actually more victims than Claudius, even if critics, along with Laertes, tend to blame only the King for the tragic outcome.

The problem of the above quoted critic is that, in his view, the Christian Prince should have hoped for the King's salvation before killing him: perhaps like Othello before killing Desdemona (who, of course, is different from Claudius in being innocent, even if she is guilty in the eyes of Othello). This is thus regarded as a fault in Hamlet's character, and also a fault of the play, a fault by Shakespeare. As I will argue, I agree that this is certainly a major moral fault of the protagonist, but it is also an important part of his character and his motivation throughout, and hence an essential element of Shakespeare's play. If we eliminate this, as it has actually happened in the reception, we have a very different work: then we tell another story.

Hamlet's morality is indeed questionable; but, as I will argue, not only his treatment of certain elements of Christianity, but also his entire mission, his quest of revenge. The problem is thus not necessarily with the play, but its reception. As I will argue, the real problem is that Hamlet is usually regarded as a moral hero, despite several elements of the play that plainly contradict that interpretation. As for the Ghost, the source of revenge, it is identified by the critic as Hamlet's father, returning from Purgatory, and seen as an unquestionably virtuous character, also despite his vindictiveness. These views are general even now, but they are arguable, particularly if we consider the original texts and contexts, which we shall see below. The contemporary audience or Shakespeare himself may not have viewed these characters as moral; but the presence of immoral characters does not necessarily lessen the aesthetic or even the moral value of a play.

### 2.1.2 Johnson's critique and the notion of poetical justice

Samuel Johnson, in his annotations on *Hamlet*, had similar objections in the 1765 edition of the play.<sup>63</sup>

This speech, in which Hamlet, represented as a virtuous character, is not content with taking blood for blood, but contrives damnation for the man that he would punish, is too horrible to be read or to be uttered.

(Johnson, 193)

Hamlet's speech may indeed be horrible to read, but it is arguable whether he is represented as a virtuous character if we consider the whole play, without ignoring certain parts or wishing them away. It is also arguable whether we should object to Shakespeare for creating such a hero, particularly if we consider some of his other protagonists, from Richard III to Macbeth, or even Othello; even though they do not wish their enemy's damnation, they are quite cruel too.

Johnson has other objections in his Preface to the play. Since Johnson is generally regarded as the greatest critic of the eighteenth century, it may be useful to review him in some more detail, so as to note that several of his still influential points can also be objected to.

The conduct is perhaps not wholly secure against objections. The action is indeed for the most part in continual progression, but there are some scenes which neither forward nor retard it. Of the feigned madness of *Hamlet* there appears no adequate cause, for he does nothing which he might not have done with the reputation of sanity. He plays the madman most, when he treats *Ophelia* with so much rudeness, which seems to be useless and wanton cruelty.

(Johnson, 196)

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<sup>63</sup> Samuel Johnson, ed., *The Works of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765). The quotations and the page numbers are given here from Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare* (London, Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 189-196.

As we shall see, many scenes of Shakespeare's longest play have been cut on the stage since the Restoration; some might have been shortened even before for practical reasons, mainly for temporal constraints. Although these scenes are usually regarded as superfluous, they provide important information on the characters and the plot; without them we have quite a different play. The feigned madness, however, is another matter: it is usually retained, but many critics similarly object to it, as it may be harmful for the reputation of the hero, who is usually regarded as not only completely sane but also moral. But it is also questionable to what extent Hamlet's madness is feigned or real, whether he can control the assumed role. As we shall see, Hamlet's reputation and his antics were probably viewed differently in their original context: the latter may well have been seen as conventional attributes of the Vice, who could be quite cruel indeed. Johnson continues his objections as follows.

*Hamlet* is, through the whole play, rather an instrument than an agent. After he has, by the stratagem of the play, convicted the King, he makes no attempt to punish him, and his death is at last effected by an incident which *Hamlet* has no part in producing.

(Johnson, *ibid.*)

Hamlet can indeed be interpreted as an instrument, not only as an agent; as I will argue, that of the Ghost. The question is how we interpret that character: simply as Hamlet's father, or as an ambiguous Ghost that could be an evil spirit aiming at destruction. But that is not what Johnson means, he has no doubts whatsoever about that character.

Johnson's still common view can be accepted as the exploration of the surface of the play, which I will explore in more detail below. Hamlet is seen as one with authority to punish and kill the King, but he seems to do nothing about his task, rather than constantly delaying it; that is regarded as his fault. We have seen the cause of Hamlet's delay in the Prayer Scene, noted by Johnson too. What is ignored by Johnson here, and by many others in the reception, is that the Prince kills Polonius in the Queen's closet, mistaking him for the King; this

happens right after the Prayer Scene, and hence soon after the Play or Mousetrap Scene: therefore he does not actually delay for very long after “convicting” the King. Hamlet is then sent to England, and he kills the King on the day he returns, taking almost instant advantage of the available circumstances. It is true that after killing Polonius, Hamlet loses the initiative, but that is also a consequence of his declared and actually realised vindictiveness, which is of course not tolerated passively by the King. Although the King arranges or produces the final scene with Laertes, Hamlet has also a part or at least a responsibility in it: the poisonous plot is arranged to revenge the death of Polonius.

Johnson is not satisfied with the conclusion of the play either; he even suggests an alternative solution.

The catastrophe is not very happily produced; the exchange of weapons is rather an expedient of necessity, than a stroke of art. A scheme might easily have been formed, to kill *Hamlet* with the dagger, and *Laertes* with the bowl.

(Johnson, *ibid*)

It is arguable whether the outcome would be much happier if Hamlet were killed by a dagger, not by a poisoned rapier. In fact, Johnson seems to contradict himself in his next sentences, when he further accuses Shakespeare of disregarding poetical justice – or at least Johnson’s notion of poetical justice.

The poet is accused of having shewn little regard to poetical justice, and may be charged with equal neglect of poetical probability. The apparition left the regions of the dead to little purpose; the revenge which he demands is not obtained but by the death of him that was required to take it; and the gratification which would arise from the destruction of an usurper and a murderer, is abated by the untimely death of *Ophelia*, the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.

(Johnson, *ibid*)

Johnson's problem is that Hamlet's revenge demands his death too, which is seen as a huge injustice; the critic thus seems to wish the hero's survival, along with the punishment of the villain and murderer: that would meet his expectations of a proper play. In other words, the murder *by* Hamlet gratifies Johnson, as most others in the reception, but the hero's murder does not. As we shall see this wish has been fulfilled in certain productions of *Hamlet*, though not in Shakespeare's.

Poetical justice, however, can be interpreted differently. At the end, the avengers die at each others' hand, whereas Fortinbras, who gives up his intent of revenge – but is not even mentioned by Johnson – stays alive to win the so much craved and disputed kingdom: the outcome can thus be regarded as observing poetical justice from the point of the characters' attitude to revenge. Shakespeare, rather than Hamlet the avenger, is accused of Ophelia's death too; the poet is thus expected to save the heroine as well as the hero. Finally, the Ghost is seen as of little purpose. The supernatural character is again viewed simply as the dead king, who should not have returned from the dead in want of a better mission or stratagem for his agent, who is viewed as his son.

Such critical sentiments are still common; as we shall see, some of these suggestions have actually been realised in the reception on the stage. However, as has been noted, it is questionable whether the Ghost is actually that of Hamlet's father. If it is not; if it is a disguised devil, as Hamlet fears, and as it may well have been viewed in its original context, it may actually appear for a reason that is fully realised by the end. In that case, the outcome, the destruction of the hero and Denmark, could easily be the very purpose of an evil Ghost. While these aspects of the Ghost are completely ignored by the greatest critics of the eighteenth century, as by most others even now, they were not ignored altogether in the general reception.



### 2.1.3 Fielding on Garrick's performance and its reception

In Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*, a visit to the theatre is described, where the title character sees a performance of *Hamlet*, with Garrick in the lead role.<sup>64</sup> Garrick and his adaptation of *Hamlet* will also be discussed below, in the section "*Hamlet* as a play for the theatre"; now the novel is analysed as a form of indirect criticism of the play. Jones is accompanied by Partridge, who has never been to the theatre in London, and is described as a naïvely comic character, with some highly amusing comments. Partridge is amazingly sensitive to the whole performance; and the humour stems from his difficulty to distinguish drama and particularly theatrical representation from real life. While this is immensely entertaining in the given episode in the theatre, it can be noted that many, if not most, critics also view the dramatic characters as if they were real people, which is typical not only of early criticism, but also of modern psychological criticism.

Partridge is initially reluctant to accept the actor in armour as the Ghost, as "ghosts don't appear in such dresses as that" (360). This is also a comic statement, but it may actually show some familiarity with ghost lore, which will be discussed below. Then Partridge is so much convinced of the reality of the Ghost that even though he knows they are seeing merely a play, he cannot help being afraid of the character, particularly when seeing Garrick's amazement in his very vivid performance.

Jones asked him what was the matter, and whether he was afraid of the warrior upon the stage? "O la! sir," said he, "I perceive now it is what you told me. I am not afraid of anything; for I know it is but a play. And if it was really a ghost, it could do one no harm at such a distance, and in so much company; and yet if I was frightened, I am not the only person." "Why, who," cries Jones, "dost thou take to be such a coward here besides thyself?" "Nay, you may call me coward if you will; but if that little man there upon the stage is not frightened, I never saw any man frightened in my life.

(Fielding, 360)

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<sup>64</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London, 1749), Book XVI, Chapter V. Reprinted in Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 360-63 (the page numbers follow this edition).

Partridge thus totally identifies with Garrick, and hence also with Hamlet, in sharing his admiration and fear of the Ghost. Although Partridge is extremely comic here for his naivety, both he and Garrick's Hamlet are terrified by the Ghost; their approach is not simply based on a reverence of the father returning from the grave. Even though the character was already generally interpreted as the Ghost of Hamlet's father in this period, it had retained some of its supernatural character, and some of its original ambiguity; and it was still quite fearsome. Later on, however naïve though he may seem, Partridge manages to distance himself from the star tragedian and the protagonist he plays. While still thoroughly absorbed by the play, Partridge has some truly critical remarks on the hero's attitudes, along with some unexpected scepticism about the Ghost.

Ay, ay: go along with you: Ay, to be sure! Who's fool then? Will you? Lud have mercy upon such foolhardiness! Whatever happens, it is good enough for you. Follow you? I'd follow the devil as soon. Nay, perhaps it is the devil for they say he can put on what likeness he pleases. Oh! here he is again. No farther! No, you have gone far enough already; farther than I'd have gone for all the king's dominions."

(Fielding, *ibid.*)

Partridge comments on Hamlet's decision of following the questionable Ghost, whatever its actual intentions, nature and origin may be: a key passage of the play that we shall analyse in more detail below. Partridge, like Hamlet's friends on guard, would thus prevent Hamlet from following the Ghost. Albeit in a highly entertaining episode of a novel, Partridge formulates a critical view of the Ghost that is also expressed by Hamlet himself later on, at the end of the second act, yet strangely ignored by Doctor Johnson and many other professional critics and editors: "Nay, perhaps it is the devil."

Tom Jones comments on Partridge's response:

When the scene was over Jones said, "Why, Partridge, you exceed my expectations. You enjoy the play more than I conceived possible." "Nay, sir," answered Partridge, "if you are not afraid of the devil, I can't help it;

(Fielding, 360-61)

Though Partridge may be too much captivated by the play, he continues to express some valid critical remarks on Hamlet's character and his actions, indeed such remarks that are rarely noted by real critics: "Then turning his eyes again upon Hamlet, 'Ay, you may draw your sword; what signifies a sword against the power of the devil?'" (ibid.).

At the end of the chapter, Partridge is again ironically described as suffering from the lasting effect of the theatrical performance, which was, after all, merely a play.

He durst not go to bed all that night, for fear of the ghost; and for many nights after sweated two or three hours before he went to sleep, with the same apprehensions, and waked several times in great horrors, crying out, "Lord have mercy upon us! there it is."

(Fielding, 363)

This again may be most ridiculous, and the whole account of the theatre experience is no doubt intended as a comic episode in *Tom Jones*. But the Ghost has proved particularly fascinating for audiences and critics alike; in fact, in recent criticism it has received more attention than ever before. And, however comic or naïve he may be, Partridge offers some valid critical remarks on the Ghost that few critics seem to take into account; most tend to view the Ghost simply as Hamlet's father or Old Hamlet even now. Of course, critics since then have commented on virtually every single element of the play, including the ambiguity of the Ghost. However, as we shall see, that fact still does not really affect their approach to the character, and hence also to the play itself; both tend to be simplified in criticism, as well as in the general reception.

## 2.2. The Romantic concept of *Hamlet*

### 2.2.1 Hazlitt on Hamlet's moral perfection

By the age of Romanticism, however, almost all the above problems had been forgotten or eliminated concerning not only the Ghost, but also Hamlet's character: he was seen as the representative of human perfection. "It is *we* who are Hamlet",<sup>65</sup> declared William Hazlitt in 1817, who also claimed, rather confidently, that "the moral perfection of this character has been called in question, we think, by those who do not understand it" (p. 78). As with the analysis of the work of other critics, the point here is not merely to repeat the views of perhaps the most famous commentators of Shakespeare, which are widely accessible and often reprinted or reviewed in the modern critical editions of *Hamlet* too. The main purpose is to examine whether these enormously influential views can be regarded as accurate; the secondary purpose is to account for their popularity even now. Who misunderstands Hamlet's character, or the play, and why?

The approach here is not primarily historical, but philological: my aim is not to reflect on the historical context of the Romantic authors and so explain their views, as Gary Taylor does.<sup>66</sup> The Romantic commentators are not particularly concerned with the Elizabethan context of the plays either: their views are based on certain parts of the text, amounting to some highly interesting and influential theories. But do those views represent a sufficiently comprehensive and realistic reading of the play? As has been stated in the Introduction, two main levels of meaning of the play can be differentiated. The Romantic readings are relevant not only because of their enormous influence on the modern reception; they tend to capture

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<sup>65</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London : George Bell and Sons, 1900), 74. The quoted essay on the character of Hamlet was first published in 1817.

<sup>66</sup> Gary Taylor offers an interesting historical explanation for the romantic critics' emphasis on passivity, and their ambivalent identification with Hamlet: the context of the aftermath of the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars; a revolution which the English Romantics viewed with passive admiration. Taylor (1991), 100-161. Taylor provides a thorough critique of the views of the Romantic critics, with numerous instructive observations. While I partly rely on Taylor, my focus is different, mainly philological.

the surface of the play, in an indeed romantic or naively idealistic manner. This can be contrasted to the deeper level of meaning of Shakespeare's work, which – as I will argue – can be accessed from a somewhat more realistic approach, and particularly in a more comprehensive reading. Therefore, in addition to the Romantic readings, the relevant parts of the play are also analysed here.

For Hazlitt, Hamlet's only fault or problem is his inaction, his passivity, his failure to act. But, in Hazlett's view, *Hamlet* the play is not to be acted at all; it is to be read and appreciated as a philosophical and psychological study of character. Hazlitt's problem is that it is performed on the stage: "We do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all 'Hamlet'. There is no play that suffers so much in being transferred to the stage. Hamlet himself seems hardly capable of being acted" (80-81). This is a rather surprising point, considering not only the enormous popularity of *Hamlet* on stage, but the fact that it was originally a play to be performed and seen at the Globe, where a portion of the original audiences must have been illiterate; it was published only later as a text, first probably only in a pirate edition.<sup>67</sup>

According to Hazlitt, Hamlet is "is the prince of philosophical speculators; and because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether." Hamlet is thus not an avenger at all; he is a philosopher who merely contemplates revenge, but actually rejects it. If that were true, Hamlet could indeed be regarded as a highly moral character. However, this view is plainly refuted by several points of the play, some of which we have already discussed. First, of all Hamlet swears revenge, and then, in several soliloquies, he has rather bitter reproaches of himself for his delay and for his failure to kill the King. The Prince never gives up his revenge, merely laments the delay. Second, Hamlet actually dispatches several people in his quest of revenge, starting with

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<sup>67</sup> The text or texts of *Hamlet* will be discussed below in more detail.

Polonius; which is already an attempt at revenge, an actually rather rash attempt at killing the King. Finally, he does accomplish his revenge in the end; in fact, rather spectacularly, by slaying as well as poisoning the King with his own drink. Hazlitt, of course, comments on some of these deeds too:

He seems incapable of deliberate action, and is only hurried into extremities on the spur of the occasion, when he has no time to reflect, as in the scene where he kills Polonius, and again, where he alters the letters which Rosencreus and Guildenstern are taking with them to England, purporting his death.

(Hazlitt, 76)

I entirely agree with Hazlitt in one word: *seems*. This accounts for the popularity of the reading too, why it is convincing for many; or perhaps seems to be convincing. While entering into a philosophical and psychological speculation, searching for the deeper meanings and motivations, Hazlitt perfectly describes the surface level of the play: what Hamlet seems to be, and what he seems to do, particularly if we approach him with wishful thinking. Hazlitt thus completes the work of Hanmer and Johnson, who also viewed Hamlet as a moral hero against an evil villain and an evil world; but himself free from almost any evil traits, with one notable exception in the Prayer Scene.

First of all, no one forces or urges Hamlet to kill Polonius in the Closet Scene. The Queen, being afraid that Hamlet wants to kill her, cries for help; then Polonius cries for help too behind the arras, and Hamlet slays him. Ironically and rather unfortunately for the councillor, his intention to help the Queen, as well as the King, causes his death. Even more ironically, Hamlet has no intention to kill the Queen, though he does want to be cruel to her. However, it has been his sworn intention to kill the King since he met the Ghost; and after the Mousetrap, Hamlet declares that he could “drinke hote blood” (Q2, 3.2.290). Killing is thus not merely an extremity in his character, but a chief purpose, which is expressed and then

realised several times. However excited Hamlet may be in this scene, it is quite reasonable on his part to assume that it is the King, rather than Polonius, who hides behind the arras in the Queen's closet late at night. Second, as for forging a commission to execute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the name of the King, no one urges Hamlet to do that either. And he not merely "alters" the King's letters, supposedly simply changing his name for those of his escorts in haste. As matter of fact, Hamlet takes his time at that ominous night to write a perfectly new commission in an elaborately crafted character and style, which, though similar in content to the original, has one rather specific difference apart from the names, which will be shortly discussed too.

But let us turn to Hazlitt's comment on Hamlet's delay in the Prayer Scene, for that perfectly illustrates his entire approach, and contains the essence of his interpretation.

At other times, when he is most bound to act, he remains puzzled, undecided, and sceptical, dallies with his purposes, till the occasion is lost, and finds out some pretence to relapse into indolence and thoughtfulness again. For this reason he refuses to kill the King when he is at his prayers, and by a refinement in malice, which is in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution, defers his revenge to a more fatal opportunity, when he shall be engaged in some act "that has no relish of salvation in it."

(Hazlitt, *ibid.*)

Hamlet's procrastination, which is seen as his weakness, thus becomes also his moral value, for, in Hazlitt's view, the hero does not want to kill at all – or at least so it seems. Hamlet's malice is regarded merely as pretence, a refinement, another example of his highly sophisticated and admirable thoughts. The moral problem of wishing the damnation of his arch-enemy, abhorred by Hanmer and Johnson, becomes a virtue too; and thus Hamlet's perfection is complete. This can account for the popularity of the theory too: a perfect hero is much more attractive and desirable, or actually wished for, than a morally condemnable one, even if such a view of the character is unrealistic or actually inaccurate. In fact, Hazlitt is not

the first to offer this psychological explanation, he merely elaborates on a late-eighteenth-century theory by William Richardson, which will also be considered below.

But is it “in truth only an excuse for his own want of resolution”? In fact, this still very popular and widely accepted theory is a typically romantic and naïvely idealistic one. The truth is that this interpretation ignores some important elements of the play. What Hazlitt ignores about Hamlet’s forged death warrant of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is that the hero specifically deprives his fellow students of the possibility of shriving (5.2.47): the Catholic sacrament facilitating one’s salvation, particularly as one of the last rites, normally provided even to criminals before their execution. (It is another question whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are criminals at all; they are apparently not, but this will also be discussed below.) Hamlet’s treatment of his former friends therefore actually corresponds to his wish to effect the damnation of the King, and of his enemies in general; hence confirming Hamlet’s own explanation of his motive in the Prayer Scene.

Moreover, Hazlitt and most critics also ignore that there is a further, third occasion, when Hamlet expresses that he does not normally like the idea of seeing his enemies in heaven. This occurs early on in the play, before Hamlet is notified about the Ghost, and well before he meets it and receives the command of revenge. Lamenting on his mother’s hasty remarriage, Hamlet remarks:

Would I had met my dearest foe in heauen  
Or euer I had seene that day *Horatio*.

(1.2.182-3)

At that stage of the plot, it can hardly be regarded as an invented excuse of delaying his task, since Hamlet has not even heard of his task yet. This motive is therefore not invented in the Prayer Scene; it has been Hamlet’s predisposition since his first appearance. In fact, Hamlet’s disposition of wishing or effecting the damnation of his enemies is a recurring motif of the



play; and Hamlet's motivation is therefore not really explained by the Romantics (and the psychologists who elaborate on this view), but actually explained away. This can be understood if we consider further elements of the play and the reception. However, based on the above textual evidence, we can already conclude that it is Hazlitt who misunderstands Hamlet's character and the play, believing the hero to be morally perfect, when he is evidently not, if one reads and takes into account the whole play. Hazlitt's misunderstanding is thus mainly due to the ignorance of some other parts of the text, but it is also related to the general reception of *Hamlet* including the contemporary stage productions or indeed adaptations, offering heavily cut and altered version of the play. Of course, if one chooses to deny a character trait of the hero that is explicitly explained in over twenty lines in a central scene, one may easily ignore it at other parts of the play, where it occurs only briefly and implicitly; but three such occurrences cannot be by chance, nor can they be regarded as atypical of a character.

### 2.2.3. Coleridge on Shakespeare's intentions

The same can be said about Coleridge's very similar but perhaps even more influential interpretation, reprinted in one of the latest critical editions of *Hamlet* too. Coleridge's "Lecture on *Hamlet*, January 2, 1812" starts with the Romantic poet's belief that he conveys Shakespeare's intentions, his design of the play. "He intended to portray a person, in whose view the external world, and all the incidents and objects, were comparatively dim, and which began to interest only, when they were reflected in the mirror of his eyes" (245-46).<sup>68</sup> As we shall see, the belief of representing the author's intention is still common; it can be noted even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even though now some remarkably different intentions are attributed to Shakespeare. Because of their similar views, reviewing Coleridge after Hazlitt involves some

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<sup>68</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Seven Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, ed. J. P. Collier (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), 141-9. Reprinted in Robert S. Miola, ed., *William Shakespeare, Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 245-49. The page numbers follow the latter edition.

repetition, but the poet's rhetoric is also remarkable: starting with a reference to Shakespeare and his supposed intentions, the whole theory sounds much more convincing.

Coleridge, along with Hazlitt, develops the now famous view of Hamlet's passivity or inaction, and quotes the soliloquies in which the hero laments on his delay in killing the King. Concerning the last such soliloquy in 4.4 ("How all occasions do inform against me/ And spur my dull revenge"),<sup>69</sup> the Romantic critic suggests: "Yet with all this strong conviction of duty, and with all this resolution arising out of strong conviction, nothing is done" (248). Unlike Hazlitt, Coleridge does not actually claim that Hamlet declines his revenge; he may want to have his revenge, yet he does nothing. But is that true? It is certainly true that Hamlet has not killed the King yet, and it is also a fact that the hero is particularly frustrated about this, bitterly regretting the delay that is now caused by his travel to England: he must leave the land where he could undertake his revenge. It may also *seem* that Hamlet has done nothing about his goal; he is certainly creating such an impression in this soliloquy, similarly to his former one on Hecuba (2.2). However, as has been mentioned, in the meantime Hamlet has already killed Polonius, mistaking him for the King; that is why he is sent to England now. Therefore, it is a very arguable claim that he has done nothing to achieve his goal so far.

Let us turn to Coleridge's interpretation of the Prayer Scene too, where the Romantic critic comments on Samuel Johnson's critique of Hamlet's character, quoted and discussed above. According to Coleridge, "the fact, however, is that Dr. Johnson did not understand the character of Hamlet, and censured accordingly" (248). But is that indeed a fact? Who misunderstands the character? As with Hazlitt, we must conclude that it is Coleridge, rather than Johnson, who misunderstands the character and the play; or he misunderstands it much more. Hamlet's sentiment, again, can hardly be a "pretext for not acting" (248), if he has the same attitude concerning his enemies at other parts of the play too, even if the Romantic

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<sup>69</sup> 4.4.33ff- quotation from Coleridge's essay.

commentators ignore those parts. The rhetoric of Coleridge is also noteworthy here, as well as a point that concerns the conclusion and the moral of the play.

This, allow me to impress upon you most emphatically, was merely the excuse Hamlet made to himself for not taking advantage of this particular and favourable moment for doing justice upon his guilty uncle, at the urgent instance of the spirit of his father (249).

There is no doubt that the emphasis was powerful enough: Coleridge did manage to impress this theory upon the readers of *Hamlet*, even though he was not actually the first one to conceive and publish it.<sup>70</sup> We have already seen that Hamlet's motivation is not "merely an excuse" made here. The remarkable point in the above quotations is that for the Romantic critic, this moment is favourable for killing: Coleridge believes that the moral Hamlet should have taken the opportunity and killed the defenceless and praying King. Like most others, Coleridge also takes it for granted that the Ghost is the spirit of the father.

According to Coleridge, "all that is amiable and excellent in nature is combined in Hamlet" (249): a remarkable and quite incredible proposition if we consider Hamlet's conduct, not only in the Prayer Scene, but throughout the play, his actual actions toward most of the characters. For Coleridge, the "moral truth" is that "Shakespeare wished to impress upon us" is that "action is the chief end of existence" (ibid.). This, however, is rather a Romantic wish, apparently that of Coleridge's himself, and merely attributed to Shakespeare. In this theory, Hamlet could be more amiable only if he were not so "repugnant to action" and killed the praying King, which is a rather extraordinary "moral truth". Although many have censured Hamlet for his delay, as he himself does in his soliloquies, it is doubtful whether such a deed is truly amiable. Some of Hamlet's words are indeed amiable, but many others are not, and his deeds tend to contradict his elevated thoughts rather sharply.

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<sup>70</sup> William Richardson's theory, first published in 1785, will be cited and discussed below, because of its particular impact on modern criticism and the general reception.

### 2.2.3. Goethe's Wilhelm Meister on Hamlet's soul

Finally, I should briefly comment on Goethe's even more famous and influential interpretation of Hamlet's character in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795).<sup>71</sup> Goethe described the perceived moral perfection of Hamlet actually before the English Romantics; some of his words have already been quoted above. My purpose of quoting and analysing some of his well-known points here is twofold: first, to show that, however attractive and influential, they represent only a partial and arguable concept of the play. Second, to show the popularity and the still lasting influence of this view can be explained by the fact that it nevertheless perfectly describes one level of the play: the surface of *Hamlet*.

Goethe, or actually Wilhelm Meister, quotes two lines of the play as “the key to Hamlet's whole procedure” (245).

The time is out of joint: O! cursed spite,  
That ever I was borne to set it right!

(1.5.195-96)<sup>72</sup>

According to Goethe,

Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to represent a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. There is an oak-tree planted in a costly jar, which should have borne only pleasant flowers in its bosom; the roots expand, the jar is shivered.

(Goethe, *ibid.*)

Goethe then explains this metaphor, the costly jar as the supposed morality of Hamlet, and claims: “All duties are holy for him, the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him” (*ibid.*). As we shall see, recent critics tend to refer to these lines of *Hamlet* in a similar sense; but they are much more complex in their context, and such an interpretation of them is

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<sup>71</sup> Johann Wilhelm von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795), trans. Thomas Carlyle (Edinburgh Oliver & Boyd, 1824), 2:72-5). In: Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 243-45 (the page numbers follow this edition).

<sup>72</sup> This quotation from *Hamlet*, already in modernised spelling, is from Goethe.

very problematic. Hamlet here indeed claims that he “was born to set it right”, and he is quite bitter about this. He does seem to be referring to his task of revenge, and to be reluctant about it, even though he has already sworn to perform it. It is also true that Hamlet seems to be a deeply religious person on numerous occasions, already at his first appearance and in his first soliloquy. Moreover, Hamlet himself tends to regard his quest of revenge as a sacred duty, supposedly sanctioned by God, or at least by a seemingly purgatorial spirit released by God on an apparently divine mission.

However, all this does not actually mean that the present duty is a holy one, that revenge will be a good solution to the problems, and will “set it right”. Moreover, it is not only the morality of the task that is arguable, but also Hamlet’s character, as we have already seen. It is true that Hamlet delays killing the King till the end, but not really because of moral or pious reasons, as he explains, even if the English Romantics attempted to deny the significance of Hamlet’s words. Also, the task is not at all impossible for him, for he kills quite a few people in the process, rather confidently. And, as I have outlined in the preface and will explain below, the Ghost is not necessarily “his father’s spirit” either (244), as it is commonly believed; nor was it necessarily a “venerable ghost” in its Elizabethan context (244). Both Hamlet and the Ghost may seem moral and venerable, but on a closer inspection of the text and the context, we can find that they are much more ominous; and the Ghost can actually abuse a specific and quite real moral fault of Hamlet.

In the context of the novel, it may be useful to quote the characters’ comment on Wilhelm.

Serlo looked at his sister and said, “Did I give thee a false picture of our friend? He begins well; he still has many things to tell us, many to persuade us of. Wilhelm asseverated loudly, that he meant not to persuade but to convince: he begged for another moment’s patience.

(Goethe, 244)

I also beg another moment of patience before turning to the analysis of the play itself in its own context, but first I discuss the problems of the reception. Here we can see that others find Wilhelm's approach – which is typically Sentimental as well as Romantic – as an attempt to persuade them about a certain concept of the character; a charge he passionately dismisses. His aim is to convince; and now we can safely say that, along with Coleridge, he has managed to convince most of the reception for over two centuries. My own reading is very different from that of the Romantics, but my intention is also to convince the reader of a more realistic reading, as well as of a more complex concept of the play; a concept that can contain both readings on its different levels.

#### **2.2.4. A dissident voice: Steevens' critique of Shakespeare**

However, it must also be noted that the Romantics represent only one side of the coin even in their own period. The Romantic response to *Hamlet* was in fact also a response to those contemporaries who were critical of Hamlet's character. After Samuel Johnson, another major critic and Shakespeare-editor who had objections to the morality of Hamlet was George Steevens (1785),<sup>73</sup> who found even more faults with the protagonist's course of actions. Although Steevens may seem too harsh on Hamlet, particularly as compared to the Sentimental and Romantic commentators of the period, I find his account more realistic than most readings of the character, not only the Romantic ones. Nevertheless, I disagree with Steevens on two major points. First, he regarded not only Hamlet's character as immoral, but also the play, which he moreover deemed poorly designed. Steevens accused Shakespeare for both the immoralities and the design, similarly to some other famous commentators including Voltaire or later Tolstoy. In fact, Steevens congratulated Garrick for re-writing the conclusion

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<sup>73</sup> George Steevens, ed., *The Plays of William Shakespeare. Volume the Tenth* (London, 1785), 5-22. In: Robert S. Miola, ed., *William Shakespeare, Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 243-45 (the page numbers follow this edition).

of an already drastically cut contemporary stage version of the play, which was intended to amend the perceived mistakes or faults committed by Shakespeare.<sup>74</sup>

The second point is related to this: Steevens believed that Shakespeare “meant to have enforced such a moral” as Horatio’s eulogy, recommending Hamlet to the angels when he dies, despite his bloody and cruel deeds, his rather arguable actions and conduct (242). Although these lines are still commonly used as the conclusion of the play in the productions as well as in criticism, they do not necessarily represent Shakespeare’s own evaluation of Hamlet’s character; nor even that of the Elizabethan audience. Shortly before these lines, Horatio declares that he is “more an anticke Romaine then a Dane” (Q2, 5.2.341), and nearly commits suicide; a deed that is condemned in the Christian context of the play, which is specifically expressed by Hamlet in his first soliloquy, as well as by the gravediggers and the priest concerning Ophelia’s death. A more important point, however, is that this not the end of Shakespeare’s work, nor even the last lines of Horatio, who has a very different and strikingly impartial speech on the bloody events after the arrival of Fortinbras and the English ambassadors, who report on the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet’s conduct is certainly immoral, particularly in its Christian context, but if we consider the whole play, that is not at all poorly designed or immoral. After all, as has been mentioned, the avengers kill and punish each other: Hamlet and Laertes perish along with the King, who killed his own brother, while Fortinbras, forbearing his revenge, has it all in the end.

If we want to search for an explanation for the early critics’ wish to get rid of the moral problems of the hero, and for the Romantic quest to deny or to explain them away, one possible reason could be that they may have assumed that the greatest hero of the greatest play by the greatest playwright ever, as Shakespeare had gradually come to be regarded, must be morally impeccable too. Another explanation can be that the original religious and

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<sup>74</sup> For Steevens’ letter to Garrick, see James Boaden, ed. *The Private Correspondence of David Garrick* (2 vols), (London: H. Colburn and R. Bently, 1831-32), 1:451-54. In: Robert S. Miola, ed., *William Shakespeare, Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 241-42 (the page numbers follow this edition).

dramatic significance of the play had been gradually lost; a process that started at the Restoration and culminated in Romanticism, but lasts even now. The preferences of genres had also changed: in the eighteenth century, drama and the theatre were sinking, and the novel was rising; but the latter was as yet far from the age of Realism. Not that the later interpretations and adaptations in the nineteenth century were much more realistic; as we shall see, this remained the dominant interpretation in the Victorian period too, an age of likewise dubious morality, as well as an age of appearances. In fact, as we shall see, the Romantic influence has not only lasted even until now, but has even been surpassed by some, who have gone to great lengths to outdo the Romantics. The third explanation is the one I have outlined above and will elaborate on below: the play itself implies two levels of meaning.

In the meantime, Shakespeare's pre-eminence has been challenged; among others by Gary Taylor, whose work I rely on too.<sup>75</sup> On this question, however, I disagree with Taylor. Shakespeare may well be the greatest playwright in Western culture, and *Hamlet* the greatest play, as well as Hamlet the greatest tragic hero.<sup>76</sup> This, however, does not mean that he should be flawless. On the contrary, even tragic heroes tend to suffer from a moral flaw; and that can also be the intention to effect the damnation of one's enemies. This may be strange, but perhaps less curious than regarding it as an excuse; moreover, as evidence of the moral and intellectual integrity of a character.

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor (1991), 373-411.

<sup>76</sup> Taylor describes how Shakespeare's esteem grew over the centuries, and argues that it was not a smooth and natural process, but influenced by the choices of directors, critics and others in positions of power. This may be so, but those choices were clearly not haphazard: if other authors or plays had been aesthetically superior or simply more appealing, or just equally good, they could have been selected too. At the same time, it is perhaps clear that I also argue against some critical opinions concerning Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, and question some treatments of the author and his play, but I do not question their eminence.



## 2.3. *Hamlet* as a problem play

### 2.3.1 The notion of “problem play”

Although critics have always found various problems concerning the work of Shakespeare, including, as we have seen, *Hamlet*; the notion of problem play was introduced only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Frederic Boas originally applied the term not to *Hamlet*, but to three comedies, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure*.<sup>77</sup> These plays are indeed not really comic in the usual, modern sense of the word, but rather problematic in several respects, including their conclusion, the resolution of the conflicts and the solution of the problems raised within the plays. According to Boas, these dramas introduce “highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness” (ibid). He also suggests that some perplexing ambiguities and complications in human life are presented in them. One of several common characteristics is a moral issue and a case of conscience. The characters have to face a morally difficult choice and it is sometimes difficult to know which way to go for the truth. The case is different in *Macbeth*, where there is no doubt of what is good and evil.

I think these are valid observations about these plays, and most of them can be made about *Hamlet* too, even though it is obviously not a comedy. Gary Taylor, however, is somewhat sceptical and ironic about this critical development too. “By redefining Shakespeare as a complex of problems, critics redefined themselves as problem solvers.”<sup>78</sup> Taylor also suggests that “by making the study of English literature difficult, they also made it respectable; English displaced Greek and Latin in the educational curriculum” (247). The first English departments of the universities were established in these decades, and this approach can indeed be seen as part of the efforts of strengthening the case of the discipline, or simply

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<sup>77</sup> F.S. Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors* (London, 1896), 345.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor (1991), 245.

to find justification for one's engagement with Shakespeare. Therefore, it may be necessary to state clearly my own view and approach here.

First of all, unlike some critics I shall discuss, I would not classify *Hamlet* as a problem play, but as a tragedy, which nevertheless does present certain problems for the characters, as well as for the critics and the general reception; some of which we have already seen. Second, critics have indeed proposed various problems concerning the play, and in a critical study I regard it a valid purpose to offer solutions to them, as well as to examine the nature of those problems; to see whether they are actually those of the play, or only those of its reception; and to see whether the solutions suggested so far are sufficient. In fact, Taylor has somewhat similar concerns in his analysis of the reception too, when explaining the problems by the historical contexts of the reception. The third point is related to this: analysing the work of some influential critics, I would like to note that some of their arguments are problematic too, in so far as they offer arguable interpretations of the play, as we have already seen in some examples.

### 2.3.2 Tillyard on the problems of *Hamlet*

In 1950, after several studies including a major book published on the above mentioned problem comedies,<sup>79</sup> Tillyard added *Hamlet* to these works and included it in the first chapter in his *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*.<sup>80</sup> Although Tillyard classifies *Hamlet* as a problem play, rather than a tragedy, he does not regard it as particularly problematic. As he explains,

There are at least two kinds of problem child: first the genuinely abnormal child, whom no efforts will ever bring back to normality; and second the child who is interesting and complex rather than abnormal: apt indeed to be a problem for parents and teachers but designed to fulfilment in the larger scope of adult life. Now *All's Well*

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<sup>79</sup> W. W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (New York, 1931).

<sup>80</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950). The quotations here are from the 1985 Pelican edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin and Pelican Books, 1985).

and *Measure for Measure* are like the first problem child: there is something radically schizophrenic about them. *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are like the second problem child: full of interest and complexity but divided within themselves only in the eyes of those who have misjudged them. To put the difference in another way, *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* problem plays because they deal with and display interesting problems; *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* because they are problems.

(Tillyard, 1985, 10)

In my view, this is a somewhat laconic and arguable claim about the latter two plays, but, as I have mentioned, Tillyard's interpretation of *Hamlet* is rather arguable too; here I would highlight only a few points. One of the reasons that Tillyard does not regard *Hamlet* as a tragedy is the following.

Terrible things do befall its protagonist; while as a tragic hero Hamlet lacks a complication and an enrichment common in much tragedy: that of being to some extent, even a tiny extent, responsible for his misfortunes.

(Tillyard, 1985, 10)

In Tillyard's view, then, Hamlet is not even to a very limited extent responsible for his downfall, and hence for the tragic outcome; which is very arguable. He is thus not blamed for his vindictiveness, for the death of Polonius or any other character either. Though suggesting a different genre for the play than most other critics, Tillyard basically follows the Romantic tradition, and actually goes beyond that, for his Hamlet is not only a perfectly moral hero; he is also in total control of the events. Tillyard describes a character who is morally so superior to the others that he is somewhat like a superhuman or a demi-god; he is beyond any judgment, and the critic's efforts are mainly to defend every single deed of the hero, particularly those that can be regarded as morally arguable and which others have actually found problematic. Tillyard tends to quote Hamlet's own lines of explanation, which he almost always accepts without any reservation, not noting any discrepancy between Hamlet's

words and deeds, or any ambiguity or irony in the play. There is just one notable exception where Tillyard dismisses Hamlet's explanation: perhaps not surprisingly, that of the prayer scene.

This is related to another reason why Tillyard does not accept *Hamlet* as a tragedy: he cannot see any change or development in the protagonist's character, which is usually expected of a tragic hero. For that reason he rejects the notion of Hamlet's regeneration, put forward by several critics including C. S. Lewis or Middleton Murray.<sup>81</sup> These critics, and many others since then, have noticed some problems or dubious elements in Hamlet's behaviour, particularly in the middle of the play: for instance, in his dealing with Ophelia, Polonius and the Queen. However, it is usually claimed that Hamlet is regenerated by the final scene, when he seems to achieve a stoic attitude, a Christian serenity, particularly in his dialogue with Horatio.

Not a whit, we defie augury, there is speciall prouidence, in  
the fall of a Sparrowe, if it be , tis not to come, if it be not to  
come, it will be now, if it be not now, yet it well come, the readines is all  
since no man of ought he leaues, knowes what ist to leaue betimes  
let be.

(*Hamlet*, 5.2.218-23)

Hamlet here alludes to the Bible (Mt 10,29), and thus seems a deeply religious man. As I will argue below, Hamlet's regeneration is in fact arguable, but not really as Tillyard argues against it. It is questionable whether Hamlet is actually ready to die as a true Christian at this stage. After all, he has just told Horatio how he dispatched Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, about whose deaths he has no pangs of conscience whatsoever; nor has he really repented the killing of Polonius, or his treatment of Ophelia.

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<sup>81</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Hamlet, The Prince or the Poem" (British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1942), 13. Middleton Murray, *Shakespeare* (London, 1936), 248.

In Tillyard's view, however, Hamlet's regeneration can be ruled out because he speaks and behaves as a perfectly religious man throughout the play, therefore he does not need to regenerate. The best example for this is the closet scene (3.4), the "supreme scene of the play" (p. 30). The critic describes how Hamlet behaves here as a true Christian preacher, "denunciating the loathsomeness of his mother's sexual sin" (ibid). Although analysing *Hamlet* as a problem play, Tillyard fails to see any problem about the fact that all this happens over Polonius's dead body, whom the preacher has just slain like a rat. Gertrude is a sinner for marrying Claudius, but Hamlet is not for killing Polonius; this is but yet another occasion to prove the protagonist's perfectly religious sentiments. Hamlet believes that he merely fulfilled God's plans, as if killing pleased God or heaven: "Ile blessing beg of you, for this same Lord/ I doe repent; but heauen hath pleasd it so/ To punish me with this, and this with me" (3.4.173). The fact that Polonius does not really show any sign of repentance later, and he is quite callous with the body ("Ile lugge the guts into the neighbour roome"; Q2 2579; 3.4.212), does not concern Tillyard either, for this "did not exclude his pious words quoted earlier about his deed" (31).

Finally, it is also typical how Tillyard comments on Hamlet's motivation in the prayer scene; which, as we have seen, posed problems to several critics. In Tillyard's problem play, this is not a problem at all either. In a twenty-page chapter, he mentions merely "the sparing of Claudius" (29), but not its actual reason. At that point, he refers the reader to an appendix at the end of the book (144-6), where he basically repeats the former critical views, according to which the intent of Claudius's damnation is merely an excuse by Hamlet for his delay, which does not reflect his real intentions. In his actual argument, Tillyard does not even deal with this issue, for he regards that as irrelevant, along with the killing of the King, reiterating the Romantic views.

Hamlet (unlike the world at large) does not really believe that it is relevant to kill Claudius: that will not bring his father back to life. To awaken Gertrude's guilt is his fundamental need.

(Tillyard, 1985, 31)

According to Tillyard, Hamlet suffers two major blows at the beginning of the play, but he can perfectly cope with both of them: one is his mother's indecent remarriage, the other is the visitation by the Ghost, whom the critic regards as the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Unlike Hamlet and some other critics, he does not note any problem concerning that character either.

As for the appendix discussing Hamlet's motivation in the Prayer Scene, Tillyard concludes his interpretation of the play by a long quotation from William Richardson's 18<sup>th</sup>-century analysis, which has been mentioned above, and which Tillyard accepts and repeats without any reservations. Here I would quote and analyse it too, for two reasons: first, because of the significance and enormous influence of this view in the modern reception of *Hamlet*, in effect characterising the past two centuries of the reception; second, because it is a very arguable and indeed problematic theory. On Hamlet's intention to effect the damnation of the King, Richardson suggests:

These are not his real sentiments. There is nothing in the whole character of Hamlet that justifies such savage enormity. ... I would ask, then, whether, on many occasions, we do not allege those considerations as the motives of our conduct, which really are not our motives? Nay, is not this sometimes done almost without our knowledge? Is it not done when we have no intention to deceive others; but when, by the influences of some present passion, we deceive ourselves? ... Sense of supposed duty, and a regard to character, prompt him to slay his uncle; and he is with-held at that particular moment, by the ascendant of a gentle disposition; by the scruples and perhaps weakness, of extreme sensibility. But how can he answer to the world, and to his sense of duty, for missing this opportunity? The real motive cannot be urged. Instead of excusing, it would expose him, he thinks, to censure; perhaps to contempt. He casts about for a motive; and one better suited to the opinions to the multitude, and better calculated to lull resentment, is immediately suggested. He indulges and shelters himself under the subterfuge. He

alleges, as direct causes of his delay, motives that could never influence his conduct.<sup>82</sup>

Richardson here invents a theory of deception, which is very interesting concerning *Hamlet*, as the play is indeed full of deception: the King deceives Denmark by a forged story of the previous king's death; Hamlet attempts to deceive the King by his antic disposition, by his assumed madness; and the hero is afraid that he is deceived by the Ghost. The question, however, is whether there is also a deception concerning Hamlet's soliloquy? And if so, who deceives whom, and why?

First of all, Richardson's highly popular theory can be dismissed on generic grounds: this is a soliloquy, and soliloquies do not lie. On the contrary, their function is to reveal the motives of the characters to the audience. As Gary Taylor explains, "soliloquies are a convention; conventions are a code; if we don't accept the rules of the code, we will mistranslate the message; [...] against a Shakespeare soliloquy there is no appeal."<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, if we seriously consider this theory about the alleged "gentleness" and "scruples" of Hamlet, his "extreme sensibility": all that is refuted if one cares to read *Hamlet* before analysing the "whole character of Hamlet". Tillyard quotes Richardson at length, omitting only a few sentences of the theory: one of them is that Richardson here actually proposes merely a hypothesis to explain Hamlet's conduct.

This hypothesis, however popular, cannot be confirmed; but it can be easily proved wrong, if we care to read the whole play. Indeed, it seems that Richardson had failed to do so before formulating a theory on "the whole character of Hamlet". As we have seen, the motive "that could never influence his conduct" actually appears three times in the play, not only in this central scene, but also in the first and the last (1.2.182-3; 5.2.47). These latter two

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<sup>82</sup> William Richardson, *Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters* (London, 1784), 159; quoted in Tillyard (1950), 146.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor (1991), 233. Taylor actually refers to the work of E. E. Stoll and L. L. Schücking, whom Tillyard ignores.

passages are generally cut on stage or in film, and Hamlet's speech in the Prayer Scene is also often shortened, but it is Hamlet's recurrent motive in Shakespeare's tragedy. Hamlet therefore does not deceive himself, but acts according to his unique character trait, which by the end of the play becomes a habit of his. Therefore, we have to conclude about Richardson's theory, conceived in the age of sensibility and Sentimentalism, that it is rather the critic who deceives himself in imagining a morally perfect hero. But why is Richardson deceived, along with so many others? Below I will explain this question in more detail. Now it can be noted that Hamlet is indeed rather sensitive about the other characters' guilt, particularly Gertrude's. As we have seen, he does behave as a morally superior preacher in the Closet Scene, right after killing Polonius; and such a conduct may indeed be misleading.

Indeed, if we conceive of a moral hero, it is logical to assume that Hamlet cannot mean what he says in the Prayer Scene, for that is most immoral. And if we consider the scene on the stage, when Hamlet does hesitate and delay, it may indeed *seem* that he does not want to kill a defenceless man, or that he does not want to kill at all: that is what is normally expected from a truly moral person. The spectacle onstage is that Hamlet draws his sword, but then he refrains from using it. Until Richardson, Hamlet had been censured for his horrible sentiments here, and critics had wished that Shakespeare had omitted this passage. This can be done on the stage – as we shall see, it was actually done so for a long period – but it cannot be done with printed text. Richardson thus responds to an old wish, but the explanation is truly remarkable. He suggests that Hamlet is censured not for his words here, but for failing to kill a praying person, and therefore he offers a “savage enormity” merely to avoid that contempt. As we have seen, a few years later Coleridge already celebrated this enormity as a “refinement in malice.” However, the fact that Hamlet pronounces this enormity already in the second scene, again, refutes this theory.



Tillyard's Hamlet, then, is similar to that of Hazlitt and the other Romantic authors, but, if possible, even more perfect: he is not an avenger, but he is not weak or passive either. Hamlet is a consciously and actively religious person, apparently free from sin himself, but acutely sensitive to the sins of others, taking great pains at purging them. Again, this goes directly against Hamlet's bitter reproaches of his delay in killing the King, and many other elements of the play, some of which we have already seen. Tillyard, however, fails to notice these aspects of the play, or mentions some of them merely as problems in the sense of being interesting scenes or episodes.

If Johnson realises the surface level of the play, which Richardson and Hazlitt take to perfection, Tillyard's effort can be said to exceed them; he goes to great lengths to offer an even more pure and unproblematic Hamlet in a so-called problem play. However, If I agreed with Hazlitt in one point, I also agree with Tillyard in another. Hamlet indeed does not regenerate, albeit in a different way. Like it or not, Hamlet in fact wishes and tries to effect the damnation of his enemies throughout the play.

## **2.4. Recent criticism: Hamlet? In Purgatory?**

### **2.4.1. *Hamlet* as the most problematic play ever written**

After *Hamlet* had been declared as a *problem play*, even though a fairly unproblematic one, by Tillyard, the focus was renewed on the problems of the play,<sup>84</sup> whether real or only supposed ones, some of which, as we have seen, had been discussed by critics for centuries.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> A former version of this section was presented as a paper "The 'Ghost' in *Hamlet*, or the 'Ghost of Hamlet's father?'" On the designation of characters and the problems of interpretation" at "Local/ Global Shakespeares": 4<sup>th</sup> British Shakespeare Association Conference, London, 11-13 September 2009, in the session: "Shakespeare's Next Editors: Mapping the Field". Another, modified version was presented at the international Shakespeare conference in Szeged, Hungary, 2-4 June, 2011. I am grateful for the comments at both conferences; I have incorporated some and will refer to them below.

<sup>85</sup> In the historical context of the reception, if the introduction of the term coincided with the foundation of the English departments at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it can be noted that Tillyard's book was published at the beginning of the post-war boom of the West in general and the universities in particular; but the purpose of this

Numerous studies and monographs on *Hamlet* were published in the first half of the twentieth century too, and some of them offered fairly complex and comprehensive analyses of the play and its issues or problems, including Hamlet's character and his motivation, or the Ghost, which had been debated since the beginning of the century.<sup>86</sup> But after Tillyard's work in 1950, *Hamlet* suddenly appeared even more problematic than ever before, and in 1958 it was already regarded as the "the most problematic play ever written."<sup>87</sup> In the 1982 Arden edition of *Hamlet*, as we have seen, Harold Jenkins starts the critical introduction by quoting and reinforcing this claim by Harry Levin,<sup>88</sup> while in the 2006 Arden edition the introduction is concluded by a section entitled "The Continuing mystery of *Hamlet*".<sup>89</sup>

In the meantime, Eleanor Prosser has challenged two general basic assumptions concerning the play in a comprehensive analysis of Hamlet's revenge and the Ghost in their original historical context. On the one hand, she argues that revenge is not only un-Christian, but it was also regarded as immoral in the original context, not only by the contemporary religious authorities, but also in numerous Elizabethan plays. Hence killing the King may not have been regarded as Hamlet's moral duty by the original audiences. Second, as for the source of revenge, Prosser offers a powerful argument that it is not in fact the Ghost of Hamlet's father, but, as Hamlet fears, a disguised devil. At the same time, Prosser still has sympathy toward the hero, and emphasises the difficulty of his situation.<sup>90</sup> In another historical study, however, Arthur McGee has no such sentiments: he interprets Hamlet as the Vice, and argues that it was so interpreted by the Elizabethan audiences too, who were Protestant and had little sympathy toward the Catholic concepts themselves; viewing them

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study is to analyse the play and its reception itself, rather than the latter's historical context, which is discussed in great detail by Taylor (1991).

<sup>86</sup> A still influential monograph is John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in "Hamlet"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), offering, among other issues, a fairly detailed analysis of the Ghost, in response to W.W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination" (*The Modern Literary Review*, Oct. 1917).

<sup>87</sup> Harry Levin, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 7 (1958), 105.

<sup>88</sup> Harold Jenkins, ed. *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Methuen, 1982), 122.

<sup>89</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series*. (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 132-137.

<sup>90</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *"Hamlet" and Revenge*, 2nd edn. (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1971; first published: 1967)

scornfully as mere excuses of bloodshed or other horrible deeds, in which they took much delight as presented on the stage.<sup>91</sup>

These interpretations have met with rather fierce opposition or sheer ignorance.<sup>92</sup> Apart from some notable exceptions,<sup>93</sup> critics seem to be reluctant to give up the traditional view of Hamlet as a moral hero fulfilling his duty commissioned by his father returning from the dead, even if perceiving some problems concerning it. While Prosser's views were widely discussed in the late twentieth century, and she was also referred to in the major critical editions of the play, she is not even mentioned in the latest Arden edition (2006), which includes a long list of bibliography; though she is referred to in the latest Norton edition (2011).<sup>94</sup>

But *Hamlet* is still regarded as problematic, and now it has been examined from various critical approaches.<sup>95</sup> Harry Levin's claim about the most problematic play has been not only maintained, but the problem play theory seems to have undergone a remarkable modification. By now it is believed that some major problems cannot be solved at all. Moreover, it is also claimed that *Hamlet* is problematic because it is Shakespeare himself who indented an exceedingly problematic play. The question, however, is still whether it is indeed the play that is so problematic, or rather its reception; merely certain interpretations of it. Let us see some examples.

At the end of his analysis of the Ghost, Roland M. Frye concludes:

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan "Hamlet"* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), cf. below.

<sup>92</sup> See Paul N. Siegel, "'Hamlet, Revenge!' the Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism", *Shakespeare Survey* (1992), 15-26. I agree with Siegel that McGee makes some very arguable points concerning Ophelia and Laertes, which mars his study. However, I think that the whole book should not be rejected on that basis; McGee's main focus is also on Hamlet and the Ghost, not these minor characters. McGee makes some valid points that recent critics seem to have rediscovered too, usually without referring to him, cf. below.

<sup>93</sup> Eric S. Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 59-64.

<sup>94</sup> These critical editions will be examined in the next chapter, which is concerned with the text of *Hamlet*.

<sup>95</sup> See Susanne L. Wofford, ed., *Hamlet. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* (Boston and New York: Bedford/ St. Martin, 1993).

It is all very confusing, and every effort to eliminate the confusion would be counterproductive, because Shakespeare requires us to be confused.<sup>96</sup>

This view is practically echoed by Stephen Greenblatt, who goes on to declare:

What can be made of this? The point is surely not to settle issues that Shakespeare has clearly gone out of his way to unsettle or render ambiguous.<sup>97</sup>

Both Frye and Greenblatt thus argue for an ambiguous Ghost. Moreover, both seem to suggest that their accounts and interpretations convey Shakespeare's own views and intentions; at any rate, they claim to present or represent Shakespeare's requirements and goals. One could note that the notion of the authorial intention is itself a problematic one in modern criticism, but these arguments are particularly striking in their given context. Greenblatt, similarly to Frye, seems to suggest that while in effect nothing is clear about this mysterious character, one thing is, and that is Shakespeare's intention. In other words, although the Ghost in *Hamlet* cannot be clearly identified, Shakespeare's own views or purposes about it can; which is a remarkable proposition.

#### **2.4.2. Greenblatt's new historicist account of religion and the Ghost**

Although it may be conceivable that Shakespeare's intention is to confuse us, and one can certainly blame – or praise – Shakespeare for any confusion, these arguments seem somewhat doubtful, and therefore merit further scrutiny. Greenblatt's more recent work is analysed here in some detail, again not merely as a review, but as part of a new and fresh analysis of the problems Greenblatt suggests. Greenblatt deems several problems unsolvable or at least irresolvable; but perhaps some solutions can be found to them. Greenblatt remarks that

In the ingenious attempt to determine whether the apparition is "Catholic" or "Protestant," whether it is a spirit of health or goblin

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<sup>96</sup> R. M. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet. Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton U. P. 1984), 28.

<sup>97</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 244.

damned, whether it comes from Purgatory or from Hell – as if these were questions that could be decisively answered if only we were somehow clever enough – the many players in the long-standing critical game have usefully called attention to the bewildering array of hints that the play generates.

(Greenblatt, 2001, 239)

Considering Shakespeare's enormous appeal to a largely heterogeneous audience – not only in his own time, but practically ever since – it is doubtful whether it takes some special cleverness either to comprehend his plays, or to arrive at certain decisions of interpretation – perhaps even definite ones – about these suggestions; some of which are quite incompatible, or mutually exclusive. Let us grant, however, that we have a remarkably ambiguous Ghost, whose nature and origin might be any of the above; the point, again, is not so much to settle these issues either, but to highlight the ambiguities and some related problems.

“Does the Ghost come from Purgatory or from Hell?” Greenblatt repeats the basic question – logically narrowing the seemingly vast array of hints of origin to two main options – only to dismiss it as one of the many irresolvable questions, problems and inconsistencies of the play, even though “for generations now, audiences and readers have risen to the challenge” (p. 240). If we consider the modern critical editions or some recent productions, this claim is arguable, or even surprising, as we shall see below. Even so, although it can be argued that the Ghost can come from either place, in one way or another, one must make up one's mind about this question; and sooner or later, one usually does. We have a very different play – or at least a very different interpretation of it – if the hero's tragedy is launched by the spirit of the wronged father, demanding justice, temporarily released from Purgatory on an apparently divine mission, from the alternative possibility: if the protagonist is tricked by a disguised devil or demon from Hell, with evil intent, effecting destruction. Indeed, we have a very different character altogether if the Ghost is the Ghost of Hamlet's father, coming from Purgatory, or if it is a disguised devil from Hell.

As for Greenblatt, his own apparent insistence on the Ghost's indeterminate nature is quite clearly and spectacularly contradicted already by the covers of his book. Illuminated by an illustration of Hieronymus Bosch, *Earthly Paradise: An Ascension to the Empyrean*, the book's title, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, itself seems to identify the Ghost rather unambiguously as Old Hamlet, leaving little doubt about its origins. But if one has any doubt whether the book is actually concerned with the Ghost, or only with the possible fate of the murdered King, the note on the back cover dispels that: "Stephen Greenblatt sets out to explain his longtime fascination with the Ghost of Hamlet's father."<sup>98</sup>

On encountering the Ghost, Hamlet addresses it as:

Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd  
Bring with thee ayres from heauen, or blasts from hell,  
Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,  
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape,  
That I will speake to thee, Ile call thee *Hamlet*,  
King, father, royall Dane, ô answere mee,

(1.4.40-5)

Greenblatt, in his argument quoted above, cites this speech too, when he notes the ambiguity of the Ghost. Yet Greenblatt, like almost all critics and modern editors – and hence, indeed, like almost all people encountering the play – seems to follow Hamlet's example. Whatever its nature and origin, the Prince is determined to regard it as his father and call it accordingly, simply as Hamlet, even before it speaks a word. We may recall that, however amusingly, Partridge objects to this attitude, when Hamlet, enacted by Garrick, follows the Ghost in a

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<sup>98</sup> It may be noted that this inconsistency is not exclusively Greenblattian, but has a long history. See, for instance, Robert H. West, "King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost" *PMLA* LXX (1955) 1107-17, similarly settling the ambiguities already in the title by suggesting that the Ghost, however ambiguous, is that of King Hamlet; or more recently, Bruce Danner, "Speaking Daggers" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 54 [2003]), 28-62. Well ahead the section "Ghost Writing" (43-47), where he elaborates on the ambiguities, Danner points out: "In the uncanny figure of King Hamlet's Ghost, *Hamlet* chronicles one such convergence between the natural and the supernatural" (p. 37). For some other relevant examples, and its relationship to the *Hamlet* editions, see below.

performance described in *Tom Jones*; an attitude Partridge finds a rather upsetting and dangerous carelessness (“Lud have mercy upon such fool-hardiness!”<sup>99</sup>).

The play and the Ghost may be problematic, but what is really problematic is that Greenblatt tends to view and refer to the ambiguous *Ghost* simply as *Old Hamlet* (or just Hamlet) or as *the father* from the outset, as if they were undoubtedly identical, or as if these words were interchangeable synonyms.<sup>100</sup> Of course, in the religious, Christian framework of the play, the Ghost can be the Ghost of Hamlet’s father only if it comes from Purgatory, rather than from Hell. If the Ghost comes from Hell, it can only be a disguised devil, either from a Catholic or a Protestant view. If one approaches the character with the usual modern assumption – as we shall see, relying on the list of characters of the modern editions – that the character is indeed the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, Greenblatt’s choice is understandable, along with his book’s structure. The actual analysis of *Hamlet* and its Ghost constitutes only the final chapter, preceded by three chapters on the concept of Purgatory, discussing numerous authors and texts on the subject; on the whole, the study shows little interest in the other option, the possibility of a demonic Ghost from Hell.<sup>101</sup> This choice, however, entails some major problems in Greenblatt’s argument, which is also reflected in his designations of the Ghost.

Concerning Shakespeare’s work and his supposed intentions, Greenblatt remarks: “The issue is not, I think, random inconsistency” (p. 240). Yet, it is Greenblatt himself, who, while ostensibly arguing for an ambiguous Ghost, tends to identify it simply as Hamlet’s father, apparently taking it for granted from the outset that it is actually the purgatorial spirit

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<sup>99</sup> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (London, 1749), Book XVI, Chapter V.

<sup>100</sup> On this scene, Greenblatt writes: “When Hamlet first receives *his father’s* dread command, he repeats it to himself, in his own voice, as if he wants to ventriloquize the *Ghost’s* words by making them his ‘word’” (p. 228, italics added).

<sup>101</sup> On the other hand, the long study of other texts by other authors before turning to Shakespeare is also a typically new historicist technique. As Gary Taylor’s semi-jocularly remarks concerning another reading, “Greenblatt needs these novel characters because Shakespeare himself can no longer hold our attention.” Taylor (1991), 348.

of the deceased father; which makes his analysis, but not necessarily the play, rather problematic and inconsistent indeed.

In fact, Greenblatt does seem to offer a somewhat tentative argument for a purgatorial Ghost. Indeed, it seems that even the notion of ambiguity – along with the arguable reference to Shakespeare and his supposed intention – serves merely as a rhetorical tool in this argument. The critic discusses the two “famous” problems about the possibility of the purgatorial Ghost: first, the Protestant state religion, which was compulsory and had rejected the belief in Purgatory for half a century; second, the Ghost’s call on vengeance, which is totally un-Christian and unacceptable even from a Catholic point, thus practically excluding the real possibility of a purgatorial spirit.<sup>102</sup>

Greenblatt summarises the problem as follows.

But the problem is that *the father’s design* is vengeance; vengeance, moreover, demanded by a spirit that seems to come from the place that was for Protestants the supreme emblem of the corruption of the Catholic Church. What can be made of this? The point is surely not to settle issues that Shakespeare has clearly gone out of his way to render unclear or ambiguous.

(Greenblatt 2001, 244; italics added)

What can be made of this? Greenblatt’s question seems to be purely rhetorical, but this question can be quite easily answered. If the Ghost is indeed so ambiguous that it is virtually impossible to identify, moreover, if it directly goes against even the basic tenets of Christianity – whether Catholic or Protestant – perhaps we should not regard it simply as the father, and call it accordingly. After all, the fact is that revenge is only *the Ghost’s design*; the father is already dead when the plot starts. All we have in the play is an ambiguous Ghost;

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<sup>102</sup> Several critics have pointed out that even Catholics were highly suspicious about apparitions, and they did not accept a ghost as purgatorial very lightly either, without testing them carefully; this seems to be reflected in the first scene of the play too, where the Ghost’s identity is not actually settled – nor is it in the rest of the play, cf. below.



which, again, may or may not be the Ghost of the father. It may indeed *seem* to come from Purgatory – or at least, so it claims; and it certainly does *seem* and look like the father – but if all this is so problematic, perhaps we should not insist on the notion of a purgatorial Ghost after all.<sup>103</sup> If the Ghost is not simply taken as the father, but considered as a disguised devil from Hell, all this is certainly not a problem at all. What is problematic is thus only a certain concept or interpretation of the Ghost and the play, but not necessarily the character itself or Shakespeare's work as such.

Let us therefore return to the play and see how the problems are presented there. Hamlet's own concern is in fact not so much with the origin of the Ghost. While he is truly concerned about the Ghost, he never asks whether it comes from Purgatory or from Hell. Hamlet questions the *identity* of the Ghost: whether it is indeed his father's spirit at all, as it claims to be at their interview.

I am thy fathers spirit  
Doomd for a certaine tearme to walke the night,  
And for the day confind to fast in fires,  
Till the foule crimes done in my dayes of nature  
Are burnt and purg'd away.

(1.5.9-13)

If this claim is to be accepted, the Ghost must be purgatorial: not only because that is the only option for his return in the Christian context of the play, but also because the character

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<sup>103</sup> Greenblatt does note that this is *only a claim* by the Ghost, but he does not seem to be particularly concerned about the possibility of a disguised devil in his argument; this point is given only in a brief endnote. Note 28 to Chapter 5, p. 306.

Greenblatt makes another – arguable – point in his analysis of the Ghost as a possibly purgatorial one: the Borromeo testament, which “if genuine” (p. 248), may link Shakespeare's own father to the Ghost. But the authenticity of this document – as well as the possible crypto-Catholicism Shakespeare's father – is debated in criticism. See Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*. (London: Macmillan, 2002) 23-7).

In any case, the relevance of such biographical speculations on the play is marred by the fact that the Ghost demands vengeance, rather than trentals or requiem masses; the play itself is about a sequence of revenge, rather than that of pious actions. Even so, the Arden editors start the section “*Hamlet* in Shakespeare's time”, with this point, and also end by quoting Greenblatt. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, ed, *Hamlet* (London: Arden, 2006), 36-43. Greenblatt, however, seems to use only the usual, modern concept of the Ghost; which seems to be reflected already in his designations of the character.

specifically alludes to his suffering in Purgatory. However, as has been mentioned, Hamlet later raises major doubts about the character's honesty, as well its *identity*. Hamlet is afraid that he is abused by an evil spirit, that is, a disguised devil, who is not actually his deceased father:

The spirit that I haue seene  
May be a deale , and the deale hath power  
T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damne me. Ile haue grounds  
More relatiue then this, the play's the thing  
Wherein Ile catch the conscience of the King.

(2.2.598-605)

Hamlet therefore arranges the play-within-the-play to gain evidence of the veracity of the Ghost. As has been mentioned, in the modern reception it is generally believed that the Mousetrap, which does catch the conscience of the King, is also evidence of the Ghost's honesty. In fact, as we shall see, the long and complex scene is usually cut and presented in such a way as to support that interpretation. However, it is only very partial and insufficient evidence: its effect does confirm the King's guilt, but does not actually confirm the Ghost's authenticity. It was common knowledge in Shakespeare's time that the devil or evil spirits in general can abuse their victims with half-truths, which are ultimately lies; as it is specifically explained in *Macbeth*.

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.

(*Macbeth* 1.3.122-5)<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from Shakespeare's plays other than *Hamlet* are from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P, 1986).

Greenblatt himself notes that the test of the Mousetrap “seems to satisfy Hamlet, but it notoriously leaves the question of the Ghost’s origin unanswered” (239). This is true, but considering the modern reception, including the work of Greenblatt, perhaps we should add again that the question is not only, and not chiefly, the Ghost’s origin, but rather its *identity*.

A related problem can be noted in Greenblatt’s argument when he raises the possibility of a Ghost from Hell. On the Ghost’s vindictiveness the critic remarks, “such a call for vengeance – and Hamlet understands that it is premeditated murder, not due process that is demanded of him – could only come from the place in the afterlife where Seneca’s Ghosts reside: Hell” (237). For Greenblatt, then, the character is the Ghost of Hamlet’s father even if it comes from Hell: then it is viewed as a Senecan Ghost. For Hamlet, however, the problem is quite different. As we have seen, he is not particularly concerned with the origin of the Ghost, nor does he contemplate the idea of a Senecan Ghost, possibly from a pagan Hell, at all. Again, what Hamlet is concerned about is a disguised devil. This is in line with the Christian context of the play that Greenblatt actually analyses. Neither Protestants nor Catholics believed in the return of the dead from Hell; in denying Purgatory, Protestants did not really believe in the return from the dead at all, as we shall see in more detail below.

As for the theatrical representation in a Protestant era, as Greenblatt puts it, the “belief in Purgatory could be represented as a sly jest, a confidence trick, a mistake” but “it could not be represented as a frightening reality.”<sup>105</sup> Greenblatt suggests that “Shakespeare, with his remarkable gift to know how far he could go without getting into serious trouble, still uses only a network of allusions” to represent Purgatory (ibid). The critic thus suggests that Shakespeare intended a serious representation of the Catholic concepts, in particular a seriously purgatorial spirit, and the fact that he was not even more explicit about this can be explained by his wish to evade the strict Protestant censorship. However, it is unlikely that the

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<sup>105</sup> Greenblatt (2001), 236.

vigilant censors did not notice the references to the Catholic rites or the expressions concerning Purgatory; as Greenblatt himself notes, these are quite obvious in the play. The reason the play passed the censors is not that these references are not specific enough, but that the censors probably did not take them seriously: they may have conceived of a mock-purgatorial Ghost, or perhaps of a disguised devil too: a character that uses all these references in order to delude and trap his victim.

And what if Hamlet himself is mistaken? Moreover, what if the audience as well as the actors in the Globe were perfectly aware of Hamlet's mistake? If we consider the stage conventions – which Greenblatt seems to ignore altogether – we can realise that the Cellarage Scene provides quite a few suggestions at the jest of the Ghost, beyond the pure fact that the space under the stage signified Hell. As we shall see below in more detail, certain hints seem to indicate that what we have here is merely a familiar, comic stage devil, which – however persuasively – only *pretends* to be a purgatorial spirit – all of which may have been quite clear, as well as immensely entertaining, for a Protestant audience that had long been influenced by fervent and even militant anti-Catholic sentiments. In the lack of further stage directions, we do not know whether or not the trapdoor was used for the ascent or descent of the Ghost; which may have clarified this issue, but Hamlet's utterances are also indicative of a cunning stage devil – which is said to have been played originally by Shakespeare himself. Indeed, from a theatrical and metadramatic perspective, as it will also be discussed below, “this fellowe in the Sellerige” (1.5.151) may have referred not merely to the comic and possibly diabolic Ghost, but also to Shakespeare himself, the famous fellow actor of Burbage, the star tragedian.

In the modern reception this scene is usually taken merely as a comic relief after Hamlet's terrifying encounter with the Ghost; which, again, is simply viewed as his father. Apart from some experts, few are now aware that “olde Mole” (859; 1.5.162), and “Pioner”

(860; 1.5.163) may be functioning here as popular nicknames for the devil, which was, in any case, customarily represented as a comic figure on the Renaissance stage; these hints are rarely noted in the annotations.<sup>106</sup> This seems to correspond to the fact that Hamlet jocularly calls here the Ghost “boy”, “trupenny” and “fellowe” (846-7; 1.5.150-1) rather than his father. The Ghost’s constant movement under the stage disturbs the oath of secrecy proposed by Hamlet. “*Hic, & vbique*” – the ability of here and everywhere at the same time was confined to God and the devil (853; 1.5.156).<sup>107</sup>

How do all these elements affect the interpretation of the whole play, and why is it problematic to view the Ghost simply as the father? As Greenblatt puts it, “The time is out of joint, and *the spirit of the father* has charged *his son* with *setting it right*” (p. 243, italics added). This is a common interpretation of the play, which was suggested already by Goethe, but an arguable one, related to some general problems, including those of the designations. Again, it is only an ambiguous *Ghost* or spirit that has charged *Hamlet*, who might not be its son after all. Moreover, it has in fact charged Hamlet with *revenge*. It is only the Prince who claims that he was born to set it right; he tends to believe that revenge will set things right. Of course, Hamlet is inclined to believe in the Ghost too, but he may be mistaken in all these points.

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<sup>106</sup> John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in “Hamlet”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935; 1995), 78-82 (but see also Prosser and McGee).

The Arden 2006 editors refer only to Margreta de Grazia: “Hegel and Marx used Hamlet’s metaphor on the mole to represent the emergence of modern consciousness” – but it is not noted that Grazia actually considers this as a rather curious view of the Ghost or of a mole itself (1.5.161).

<sup>107</sup> See the note to this Latin tag in the Arden 3 *Hamlet* (which, again, does not provide all the above information about the hints at a devil or demon though).

Interestingly, Greenblatt suggests that “*Hic at ubique*” is also hint at Purgatory, rather than at Hell (235-237); but in the given context this is plausible only if it is meant ironically by Hamlet, who in any case does not at all seem to be undertaking a serious and solemn act of remembrance of the dead, which Greenblatt argues for; cf. below.

Dover Wilson, on the other hand, suggests that the guards here seriously believe that they are in the presence of the devil, moreover, they will die in that belief. Interestingly, however, Dover Wilson claims that the Ghost merely pretends to be a devil; this, however, is doubtful and very arguable. The alternative option, a devil pretending to be a good, purgatorial spirit in order to deceive and tempt Hamlet is much more plausible. As Dover Wilson puts it, Hamlet “addresses the Ghost in the ‘cellarage’ as if it *were* a devil, a ‘familiar’ with whom he has just been holding converse.” “Marcellus to his dying day will believe that he has sworn an oath thrice in the hearing of a powerful fiend.” Dover Wilson, *What Happens in “Hamlet”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935; 1995), 78-82.

Later, Greenblatt perceives a “representational contradiction”, similar to the ones that Protestant polemicists mercilessly mocked about the Catholic concept of Purgatory at the time.

The Ghost comes from Purgatory bewailing his failure to receive full Christian last rites but then demands that *his son* avenge his death, thereby initiating a nightmare that will eventually destroy not only his usurping brother but also Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, and *his own son*.

(Greenblatt 2001, 252; italics added)

This concerns the interpretation of the conclusion of the play, and is an elaboration of Johnson’s critique, which we have seen above. After Greenblatt’s initial insistence on the ambiguous and unidentifiable Ghost, here he seems to take it already as a fact that the Ghost comes from Purgatory – albeit perhaps not from a real one, but from a kind of quasi-Purgatory, which can incorporate elements that are incompatible to the original, Catholic concept – in order to appear to “his son”. Indeed, if one takes the Protestant position reviewed by Greenblatt, it is difficult to conceive of a seriously purgatorial spirit, we can at best have a mock-purgatorial Ghost that plainly contradicts the original, Catholic representations of the concept of Purgatory, along with the basic elements of Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant.

But Greenblatt seems to argue not merely for a mock-purgatorial character, for he lays a rather serious emphasis on remembrance as a residual Catholic ritual in the play: as if this were the Ghost’s primary concern, rather than revenge.<sup>108</sup> And if one seriously considers the

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<sup>108</sup> As has been mentioned, the title of Greenblatt’s chapter on *Hamlet* is “Remember Me” (Chapter 5), which he associates to the Catholic rituals of remembrance described in the preceding chapters in detail. It is, however, arguable whether the Ghost’s farewell phrase to Hamlet means anything else than revenge, or the wish that the call on vengeance is kept in mind. Nor can we know whether or not this phrase had been already in the *Ur-*

Ghost as a pious, purgatorial spirit, the call on vengeance becomes rather problematic indeed; the whole play may seem as rather inconsistent with the very religious concepts it draws on. From such an approach, we have thus a very problematic, inconsistent play, full of contradictions.

However, if we do not insist on the notion of the purgatorial ghost; moreover, if we do not regard the Ghost simply as Hamlet's father, all this ceases to be a problem. Again, if one indeed takes into account the ambiguity of the Ghost, and considers the possibility of a disguised devil from Hell, the tragic outcome is not really problematic, but inevitable. The whole plot is then quite consistent with such a concept of the Ghost, and also with the contemporary religious ideas, whether Catholic or Protestant. Thus, again, the Ghost and the play are not necessarily problematic, only certain views of them, which are also reflected in the designations of the characters.

One final point needs to be noted about Greenblatt's argument, which is also linked to the designation of the Ghost, and also to the arguable use of the sources. Greenblatt concludes that

as Gee perceives, the space of Purgatory becomes the space of the stage where *old Hamlet's Ghost* is doomed for a certain term to walk the night. That term has now lasted some four hundred years, and it has brought with it a cult of the dead that I and the readers of this book have been serving.

(Greenblatt, 2001, 257; italics added).

But perhaps Gee does not really perceive that. More to the point, the Protestant polemicist Greenblatt cites does not actually write about "old Hamlet's Ghost", merely about "*the Ghost*"

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*Hamlet*; Greenblatt claims this distinguishes Shakespeare's work from the original revenge play, whose text, however, is lost (205-6).

in *Hamlet*".<sup>109</sup> Gee's passage is relevant here because this seems to be Greenblatt's ultimate evidence that the Ghost may have been celebrated with almost religious awe as the purgatorial Ghost of Hamlet's father already in Shakespeare's time, providing an apparently serious, though already secular, outlet for the so much missing Catholic rites of remembering the dead at least on the stage.

First of all, it may be noted that a Protestant polemicist is a somewhat odd candidate as evidence for such a far-reaching claim, or even for a serious consideration of the Ghost as a possibly purgatorial one. It is even questionable whether Gee himself patronized the public theatres, which he and other polemicists so condemned and ridiculed; whether he actually saw these briefly mentioned plays at all. Nevertheless, it is true that, however jocularly, Gee does write about "Representations and Apparitions from the dead" at contemporary Play-houses, and he also mentions "*Don Andrea's Ghost in Hieronimo*". But one can hardly perceive any solemnity in either Gee's or Kyd's representation of the Catholic concepts; on the contrary, the *Spanish Tragedy* itself seems to reflect an utter contempt and mockery of these issues, which is perhaps understandable from a play at the time of the Spanish Armada.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, it is quite odd to consider the sheer madness and bloodbath of Kyd's play as an instance of pious remembrance, or as a cult of the dead; unless a rather bizarre one, which actually involves the multiplication of the dead.

By the same token, *Hamlet* is also difficult to conceive of as a pious cult of the dead. Gee's tone is clearly ironic; and he is even sarcastic when he writes about the ludicrously *fake* representations of various spiritual phenomena by the condemned Jesuits, whose practices Gee describes as mere confidence tricks to lure and in effect rob their naïve victims. Gee's

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<sup>109</sup> The relevant passage reads as: "Representations and Apparitions from the dead might be seen far cheaper at other Play-houses. As, for example, the *Ghost in Hamlet*, *Don Andrea's Ghost in Hieronimo*. As for flashes of light, we might see very cheap in the *Comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe*, where one comes in with a Lantern and Acts as *Moonshine*." John Gee, *New Shreds of the Old Snare*, London, 1624, p. 20.

<sup>110</sup> For a recent study of the Hispanophobic perspectives of Elizabethan England that shaped the now so-called Black Legend of Spanish Cruelty, see: Eric C. Griffin, *English Renaissance Drama and the Specter of Spain: Ethnopoetics and Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).



parallel to the similar tricks in the public theatres, involving similarly fake representations or apparitions from the dead, does not seem to imply any seriousness about the theatrical representations themselves; nor even that the *Ghost in Hamlet* was seriously considered as the Ghost of Hamlet's father at all. What Gee seems to perceive is only a fake or a mock representation: an apparently ludicrous Ghost in *Hamlet*, rather than a serious cult of the dead.<sup>111</sup> *The Ghost in Hamlet* is actually mentioned along with Moonshine "in the *Comedy of Pyramus and Thisbe*",<sup>112</sup> that is, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another example of farcical representations, which is also a play-within-the-play: Gee does not really perceive any difference between all these plays and playlets; for him they are equally ridiculous.

The point is, again, not to settle these issues here, but to call attention to the problematic designations and identifications of the Ghost and the problems of interpretation in criticism, which seem to be closely related. It is doubtful that Shakespeare would have been particularly concerned with unsettling or contradicting the religious concepts and authorities of his time when creating his truly fascinating characters and plots; nor is it certain that he would have wished to write problematic, inconsistent or incoherent plays; or that the contemporary audience would have been confused, rather than amused. In the case of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, such critical notions seem to be related to the usual, simplified, modern view of the Ghost as Hamlet's father. On the whole, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is a very ambiguous character indeed, and it is a pity that the original ambiguities are actually precluded from modern readers already by the title of a major critical study on the subject – or, as we shall see, already by the list of characters in the modern editions and productions of the play.

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<sup>111</sup> Greenblatt himself seems to be aware of this problem, for in his Epilogue he poses the question: "How seriously would Shakespeare have taken the notion of his theatre as a cult of the dead?" (p. 259). Greenblatt seems to answer his question positively, but only by referring to the *Tempest*, which is a play of a very different genre and artistic period in Shakespeare's career (pp. 259-61)."

If one approaches the Ghost in *Hamlet* without the usual modern assumption that it is in earnest the Ghost of Hamlet's father, one can consider not only the generally fake representations of the theatre, but perhaps also the possibility of a distinctly fake apparition in the case of *Hamlet*. On that, one could cite or note other Protestant sources too, which are not so jocular about the subject, but may be at least as relevant as Gee. King James's *Daemonologie* (1597) will be discussed below.

<sup>112</sup> John Gee, *New Shreds of the Old Snare*, London, 1624, p. 20

If the play is ambiguous, so is Greenblatt's approach: while the new historicist critic describes Purgatory as a social construct, merely an invention or a fable that was also a lucrative business for the Catholic Church, as we have seen, he seems to accept the Ghost quite seriously as Hamlet's father returning from the grave, and also from Purgatory, even if in the fictitious context of drama and the theatre. Greenblatt suggests that in accepting the Ghost as the purgatorial spirit of Hamlet's father he merely follows the contemporary audience, who (somewhat akin to the modern audiences) probably also unanimously credited the Ghost, whether they were Protestant or Catholic, as they longed for the long-suppressed and hence partly forgotten Catholic rituals that are represented by the Ghost. This, however, is very arguable.

As we shall see, the contemporary people took their religion somewhat more seriously and carefully, as it was for them indeed a matter of life and death. At an age of mandatory religion and religious education, and at an age of violent sectarian conflicts, they must have attended to these religious details with particular attention too; and they were much more discriminating concerning spiritual issues. It is very doubtful that even the crypto-Catholics would have accepted the revenge Ghost in *Hamlet* as that of Hamlet's father without any reservations, as Greenblatt does. The question is, again, whether we approach the play and the Ghost as a representation of a questionable supernatural character, or whether we start from the usual modern assumption and identify the Ghost as Hamlet's father from the outset, taking that interpretation for granted.

If Johnson realised the surface level of the play, conceiving of a moral hero, which Hazlitt took to perfection; and if their views Tillyard again surpassed, in seeing an actively moral and religious protagonist; Greenblatt surpasses all of them. He describes not merely an interestingly problematic play, like Tillyard, but an exceedingly problematic one, which is somewhat like a puzzle, but so intended by Shakespeare. Yet Greenblatt's novelty lies not so

much in his emphasis on the complexity of the play, or in his claim to reconstruct the author's intention: not even in picturing a Shakespeare bent on contradictions and confusion; these are common features of traditional criticism too. The concept of a seriously purgatorial Ghost is not new either; as we have seen, it dates back to at least 1736.

Greenblatt's originality lies in his transformation of the Ghost's command. In Greenblatt's *Hamlet*, the Ghost's command becomes a call on pious actions, a cult of the dead; which can be practised not only by Hamlet, moreover, not only by religious people, but by modern secular audiences as well, if they go and see a performance of the play. Although traditional criticism has also regarded Hamlet's task as a "sacred duty"; a view dating back to at least the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>113</sup> by Hamlet's moral duty the reception has so far meant his revenge, his killing the King, however paradoxical that is in the distinctly Christian context of the play. Greenblatt, on the other hand, suggests that the Ghost's farewell to Hamlet, "Remember me", is not merely a request to bear in mind the apparition and his call on vengeance; it is a call to perform pious deeds of remembrance. These could be prayers or possibly requiem masses, perhaps even trentals, a succession of thirty such masses; but in want of them, one can also patronize the theatre.

In failing to remember the Ghost and his command, Hamlet thus neglects not so much revenge, but his truly holy duties; though, it can be noted, he does find an outlet in the theatre himself. Accordingly, Hamlet's doubts about the Ghost delay primarily his pious remembrance, rather than his revenge. This is, after all, a very happy solution to the moral problems of the play that have haunted critics for centuries. Shakespeare wrote a most problematic play; so much so that some of the problems, like the call on vengeance, cannot really be solved, but at least all the problems are happily explained at last.

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<sup>113</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1905; first ed. 1904), 146. In fact, continental criticism applied the notion of "sacred duty" before Bradley. See, Bernát Alexander, *Shakespeare Hamletje* (Budapest: Aetheneum, 1901).

If Hazlitt, Coleridge, Richardson and Tillyard deny, or rather, explain away Hamlet's moral problems, Greenblatt has a similar rhetoric concerning the Ghost's vindictiveness. That is not the real Ghost: that is merely a Senecan convention retained by Shakespeare to create an interestingly complex and challenging character. Reading Greenblatt, we may have the impression that the real Ghost is pious; and now we have not only an impeccable hero, but also an immaculate father, meeting the major expectations from a purgatorial spirit. If Tillyard relegates the problem of the Prayer Scene to an appendix, Greenblatt relegates the possibility of a deceitful, evil Ghost to a three-line endnote of an over three hundred-page book on the character and its possible origins.<sup>114</sup> The Ghost may be ambiguous, it may even lie, but we should forget our doubts; they would but mar the cult of the dead in *Hamlet*, as well as at its performance in the theatre.

As has been noted, I find this a partial and very problematic interpretation for several reasons; not only does it contradict certain elements of the play, but attributes certain things to Shakespeare's work that are not actually in it. Nevertheless, if I agreed with the former critics in some respects, I also agree with Greenblatt. As I have said, the Ghost indeed *seems* to be Hamlet's father, or Old Hamlet; it may also *seem* to be a purgatorial spirit. The Ghost does utter certain religious sentiments, even some specifically Catholic concepts, but such an interpretation of them is very problematic indeed if we consider the whole play in its original context, without the usual modern preconceptions. As I have said and will explain in more detail, these elements function as means of deception in *Hamlet*, deceiving apparently not only the hero, but also most of the modern reception, including some prominent scholars. The original audiences, however, were not necessarily deceived by the Ghost. While they were

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<sup>114</sup> Note 28 to Chapter 5. Greenblatt (2001), 306.

primarily entertained, they probably did not forget their spiritual education and could perceive the Ghost as an evil spirit abusing Hamlet.<sup>115</sup>

Even so, I also agree with Greenblatt that in the modern reception the play has often been staged and interpreted as a cult of the dead.<sup>116</sup> That tradition, however, can be traced back to the Restoration, rather than to the Renaissance. As we shall see, the Restoration brought the first major simplification; the character has been taken at face value, simply as Hamlet's father, since then; but the ambiguity and the comedy of the Ghost were perceived even in the mid-eighteenth century, as we have seen in Fielding's novel. Greenblatt remarks on the earlier criticism on the Ghost that the "intricate arguments, for me at least, are not completely evacuated by the fact that they are almost certainly doomed to inconclusiveness" (239). The same can be said about Greenblatt's argument too: as the above detailed review may show, he offers a truly fascinating account of one level of meaning of the play, where the originally ambiguous Ghost is identified as the father.

### 2.4.3 Some other recent responses to these problems

As a response to Greenblatt, Clinton P. E. Atchley, points out that the Ghost is not necessarily purgatorial,<sup>117</sup> moreover, in an argument very similar to mine in an earlier article,<sup>118</sup> he also elaborates on the possibility of a demonic Ghost. Nevertheless, Atchley still refers to the character as *Old Hamlet's Ghost*, which is somewhat surprising in such an argument.<sup>119</sup> More recently, Catherine Belsey, as has been mentioned, also rejects the idea of a purgatorial Ghost,

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<sup>115</sup> These issues will be further discussed in chapter four: "Hamlet in its religious context", especially in 5.2. "Spirituality, demonology and the Ghost".

<sup>116</sup> For a recent production, see the analysis of the Royal National Theatre *Hamlet* 2000 in 4.2. "*Hamlet* as a play for the theatre", below.

<sup>117</sup> C. P. E. Atchley, "Reconsidering the Ghost in *Hamlet*: Cohesion or Coercion?" (*The Philological Review* 28/2. [2002]), 5-20.

<sup>118</sup> András Bernáth, "Hamlet, a gonosz Szellem áldozata." [Hamlet, Victim of the Evil Ghost] (*Symposion* 1995/3), 23-41. This is a Hungarian paper published in the former Yugoslavia; my MA thesis, written in English, with the same title, is unpublished.

<sup>119</sup> "This paper will not resolve the ontological nature of *Old Hamlet's Ghost* to everyone's satisfaction." Atchley (2002), 5 (italics added).

noting the otherwise fairly old critical objection: by the call on vengeance, the Ghost is hardly purifying himself.

*Old Hamlet* does not request prayers for his soul, instead, he wants revenge, a demand for gratification scarcely likely to increase his chances of salvation. His allusion to purgatory is intelligible in the first instance as updating to spine-tingling effect the vividly depicted torments of the classical underworld familiar from Senecan convention.<sup>120</sup>

However, as has been noted above, the allusion to purgatory is also intelligible if we do not simply identify and call the Ghost as Old Hamlet, but can conceive of a somewhat more complex character. Again, if we note the ambiguity of the character and consider the possibility of a demonic Ghost that Hamlet himself fears, the allusion to purgatory can easily be understood as a means of deception and destruction. Alternatively, as has also been mentioned, the Ghost can also be taken as a mock-purgatorial character, sneered at by a predominantly Protestant audience. Leaving aside such religious problems, Belsey still interprets the Ghost as Old Hamlet, returning from the dead; the cultural materialist critic relates the character to superstitions, tales and the romances, regarding the play as a sad tale for winter, rather than a revenge tragedy, as it was originally performed, mainly in the summer season. In Belsey's reading the Ghost's main function is to remind Hamlet, supposedly his son, as well as the readers, of the inevitability of death. However, I find this a rather partial and arguable interpretation. After all, the Ghost is not only a messenger of death in the play, but the source of revenge, bringing about the extermination of the Danish court, including Hamlet. Rather than merely informing us about death, the Ghost actually causes the death of the young hero and, through him, many others in the play.

Finally, I would reconsider the work of Eric S. Mallin, who is also concerned with the religious issues, but is not so keen on the seeming piousness of the hero and the play in

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<sup>120</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Shakespeare's Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 11 (italics added).

general. Mallin is not concerned about the Ghost, but with Hamlet's controversial behaviour, which, as we have seen, has been discussed by a number of critics. In Mallin's view, Hamlet's conduct has "all the earmarks of 'bullshit' as Harry Frankfurt defines the term."<sup>121</sup> Mallin also realises that Hamlet's treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is condemnable. As has been mentioned, rather than performing pious deeds, Hamlet actually denies the possibility of shriving from his schoolfellows when arranging for their death. Hamlet, however, covers his deeds by pious words. According to Mallin,

In bullshitting his way to the God zone, where even in helping kill Rosencrantz and Guildenstern 'without shriving time allow'd' (5.2.47) he finds 'heaven ordinant' – Hamlet replicates one of the more ignoble causes of religious fervor: to justify almost any self-serving deed. He cannot see, and thus effectively shields, his own implication in the ruin of an entire kingdom which falls *by reason of his de facto suicide*, his agreeing to the rigged swordfight with Laertes.

(Mallin, 2007, 61)

Mallin notes this from an atheist perspective, as a critique of religion, suggesting moreover an atheist Shakespeare. Interestingly, Mallin is also concerned with Purgatory in several chapters of his book, though not concerning the Ghost, and not exactly from the new historicist perspective of Greenblatt, but from an explicitly atheist one. However, as we shall see, in the given historical context, which was certainly religious, Protestants, particularly Anglicans, had very similar views about the Catholics who threatened their country, their religion and their Queen. At the same time, *shielding* or pretence is also crucial from a metadramatic perspective; not only for Hamlet, but also for the Ghost.

Nevertheless, Mallin's view is also arguable, for in a chapter entitled "Happy Suicide", he notices merely Hamlet's wish for death, rather than his pronounced intent of killing, revenging and indeed possibly damning his enemies. The swordfight, after all, proves to be an

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<sup>121</sup> Eric S. Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 61.

opportunity not only for Hamlet's death, but also for completing his revenge, when the King is engaged in an act "that has no relish of salvation in it." Mallin also claims "that the play labors hard to suggest that its hero is redeemable" (63). This may be so; or, rather, as I will argue, it may *seem* so. For, while certainly more realistic than most earlier readings, it is still a partial interpretation of the play, which is actually more complex than that.

As a conclusion of our review of criticism and the analysis of the suggested problems, we can say that some major problems concerning the characters of Hamlet and the Ghost tend to stem from the fact that critics wish to see and credit the protagonist as a moral hero, even as a pious man, along with the Ghost, whom they generally view simply as Hamlet's father, taking its purgatorial origin for granted. Many still do not really perceive any problem with the romantic view of *Hamlet*, but some critics have realised by now that revenge is not really a sacred duty in the play's Christian context, and that the call on revenge contradicts the very idea of purgation. Noting such facts, however, some are apparently inclined to view the play or the characters or Shakespeare's work as problematic, rather than their interpretation, when insisting on a moral hero or a purgatorial spirit. Let us therefore turn to Shakespeare's text, and analyse the specific problems in more detail. Were they indeed created and actually intended by the author, or did they occur only later, during the reception?



## Chapter 3

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

#### THE TEXT AND THE DESIGNATION OF THE CHARACTERS

*Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.  
There burns a truer light of God in them.*

Robert Browning<sup>122</sup>

#### 3.1 The original texts and the designation of the Ghost

##### 3.1.1 The significance of the original texts and their designation

The three early texts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and their relationship have long been studied by textual critics in minute detail. Most critical editions start with such an account, and it is generally agreed that *Hamlet* has a particularly problematic text. The purpose of this chapter is not to offer yet another such analysis. Since my focus is on Hamlet and the Ghost, I will highlight some problems concerning the presentation of these characters in the various textual editions, particularly the problematic designations of the Ghost in the modern editions. This may explain some major problems of interpretation, not only in criticism, but also in the general modern reception, some of which have been discussed above.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Robert Browning, "Andrea del Sarto (Called 'The Faultless Painter')". In: Frank Kermode and John Hollander, gen. eds., *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. II. (Oxford, O. U. P., 1973), 1331, ll. 78-9.

<sup>123</sup> A former version of this chapter was presented as a paper "The 'Ghost' in *Hamlet*, or the 'Ghost of Hamlet's father?' On the designation of characters and the problems of interpretation" at "Local/ Global Shakespeares":

As for my choice of text, as has been noted above at the first quotation, chosen as the motto of this study, I use primarily the Second Quarto text (1604-5). As I have mentioned, the reason for this choice is that the main subject matter of my research is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the original work, rather than its later conceptions by editors, critics and others; the problems of the reception constitute only an additional part of this research. We have no access to Shakespeare's manuscript or the so called Foul Papers, therefore we can consider only the early editions as the original texts. Of the texts of the three major early editions (Q1, Q2, F1), I use the Second Quarto, because that is the most complete; but I also consider the differences from the other two texts at certain points. As I will argue, the differences between Q2 and F1 are not as significant as those of the later editions, particularly after the Restoration. These texts are now available online, as well as in printed book versions.<sup>124</sup> Apart from the original copies and their facsimiles, these are probably the most authentic editions to study Shakespeare's work: free from any "corrections" and annotations,<sup>125</sup> except the conventional act-scene-line numbers and a brief preface in the book versions.

I will also analyse a number of other editions below, from the Sixth Quarto (1676) to the latest Norton edition (2011), as part of the study of the problems of the reception. My main point of reference, however, is the set of three original texts throughout, to which I compare the modernised editions; the whole enquiry is primarily a study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In fact, all editions of the play offer the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or at least a version of that; but there are some remarkable differences among them, reflecting the editors' preferences and interpretations, which in turn determine – or at least largely influence – the

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4<sup>th</sup> British Shakespeare Association Conference, London, 11-13 September 2009, in the session: "Shakespeare's Next Editors: Mapping the Field". Another, modified version was presented at the international Shakespeare conference in Szeged, Hungary, 2-4 June, 2011. I am grateful for the comments at both conferences; I have incorporated some and will refer to them below.

<sup>124</sup> Bernice W. Kliman et al, eds, *Hamlet Works* at [www.hamletworks.org](http://www.hamletworks.org) (the web page of the Q2 text is <http://trigs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/index.html>, accessed 31 December 2012). Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman, eds. *The Three-Text Hamlet. Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio* (New York: AMS Press, 1991; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003).

<sup>125</sup> Bertram and Kliman (1991), 9.

readers' concept of *Hamlet*. As we shall see, the editorial treatments tend to correspond to some other treatments in the reception, which will also be examined below.

After centuries of using a conflated text, having realised – or at least reconsidered – the need of authenticity, editors, critics and directors now tend to use the early texts separately, likewise preferring either the Second Quarto or the First Folio (1623), but the much shorter First Quarto (1603) has also been studied and used for performance. Despite the aim of authenticity, however, generally the modernised editions of these texts are used; and the modernisation tends to involve not only spelling but other elements as well. As has been mentioned above, the original editions, unlike most modern ones, had no list of characters or *dramatis personae* placed before the text. This is a major difference, since the various designations in these modern lists influence the interpretation of the characters and the whole play from the outset. These designations are, of course, based on the ones within the text; however, similarly to the annotations to the characters' passages, they tend to include the interpretations of the editors, and some editorial interventions, particularly the various additions to the original designations – even if intended to help the reader – are very arguable.

“What’s in a name?”, asks Juliet in the famous Balcony Scene of Shakespeare’s early tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* (2.1.85).<sup>126</sup> According to the heroine, not much, or virtually nothing; it is not an integral part of a man, and it causes only troubles. She would love her lover whatever name he had; the name Montague is their enemy, and she would like Romeo to refuse his own name. Romeo, overhearing Juliet, takes her at her word: “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptised” (2.1.92). So why is the Ghost’s name or designation so important in *Hamlet*? Because in that play, the question is much more profoundly related to that of identity. Romeo eventually does not change his name, that is how everyone knows him; but even if he did, he would be the same person. In *Hamlet*, however, as has been mentioned, an

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<sup>126</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1986). As we shall see, this is a modernised edition, but in *Romeo and Juliet* this fact does not involve such a problem as in *Hamlet*.

essential element of the play is that the Ghost is an ambiguous character, who is not necessarily identical to the late King Hamlet. Nevertheless, the usual designations of the character tend to suggest that he is; hence the whole modern reception is based on this assumption, resulting in a simplified and arguable view of Shakespeare's work, as well as some major critical problems.

The Ghost, as we have seen, is highly debated in criticism: not only the character's nature and origin, but also its identity; and the question of identity is related to that of the designation. Most critics tend to identify and call the Ghost as Hamlet's father (or "Old Hamlet",<sup>127</sup> or "Hamlet Senior",<sup>128</sup> or just "Hamlet"<sup>129</sup>), as if the late king had not died yet; this applies even to those who note the character's ambiguity and offer a detailed analysis, like Stephen Greenblatt in his book-length study discussed above. On the other hand, some others, like Eleanor Prosser, claim that the Ghost is not actually the Ghost of Hamlet's father, as it claims to be, but an evil Ghost, a disguised devil, as Hamlet himself fears.<sup>130</sup> As has also been mentioned, Sylvia Adamson has recently suggested that new historicism meet old philology in the study of the questions of identity in Renaissance drama.<sup>131</sup> After the review of Greenblatt's new historicist study of the Ghost, let us then see some specifically philological issues of the text, along with the meanings of the word "ghost" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

### 3.1.2 The beginning of Shakespeare's text: Names and themes

The play itself starts with the Ghost; or, to be more precise, with two sentinels entering, who soon meet not only Horatio and Marcellus, but also this mysterious supernatural character in

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<sup>127</sup> See the List of Characters in Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Guides: Hamlet* (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 18.

<sup>128</sup><sup>128</sup> R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 146.

<sup>129</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>130</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1971).

<sup>131</sup> Sylvia Adamson, "Questions of Identity in Renaissance Drama: New Historicism Meets Old Philology" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 56-77.

the middle of the dark night. In fact, the sentinels already await the Ghost, for it is said to have appeared twice before. In the original texts, the title is followed by a stage direction, “*Enter Barnardo, and Francisco, two Centinels*” (Q2), which is preceded by another line only in one edition, marking the act-scene division, “*Actus Primus. Scoena Prima*” (F1). The first line of the dialogue is Barnardo’s, who is named in the speech prefix, as well as in the stage direction, in both Q2 and F1, but not yet named in Q1. “Stand, who is that?” (Q1); “Whose there? (Q2); “Who’s there?” (F1).<sup>132</sup>

In the modern editions, we usually have the last version of this line, even in the modernised versions of the Second Quarto.<sup>133</sup> This can be regarded as a reasonable editorial emendation in a modernised text; and this line is not really problematic from the point of interpretation, since in all three texts the question is about the identity of the other character. Francisco, however, does not answer the question. Instead, he asks Barnardo to reveal *his* identity: “Nay answer me. Stand and vnfolde your selfe” (Q2, 1.1.2). Barnardo does not give his name either, but replies presumably with the password: “Long liue the King” (1.1.3). This does reveal his identity to Francisco, who then answers by himself uttering the fellow sentinel’s name: “Barnardo” (1.1.4); to which he agrees: “Hee” (1.1.5).

For the audience, who can hear only the dialogue – and has no access to any designations at the beginning – somewhat ironically, the fourth line thus reveals the name of the very character who starts the questioning. Adding to this irony, Barnardo eventually answers his own opening question by himself giving the other sentinel’s name: “get thee to bed *Francisco*” (1.1.7). The password that prompts the first name is also quite ironic in light of the fact that the previous king was killed not long ago, and the whole play is about killing the king. As we are soon informed by Horatio, the late King Hamlet himself killed a king in a

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<sup>132</sup> Bertram and Kliman, eds., *The Three-Text Hamlet. Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio* (New York: AMS Press, 1991).

<sup>133</sup> See e.g. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Third series* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 147.

combat: King Fortinbras of Norway, whose son is now threatening Denmark to regain the lands gambled and lost by his father. By means of a brief playlet, the killing of the King is also performed in the play-within-the-play in a central scene, actually twice: first only in a dumb show. As has been noted, the playlet is arranged as an adaptation of an already existing play on the same topic, entitled “the murder of *Gonzago*” (2.2.538); which may remind us of the fact that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is also an adaptation of an earlier play and some even earlier versions of the Hamlet story, and it has also been adapted rather variously over the centuries. Similarly to the “the murder of *Gonzago*”, the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* is said to have existed, but has never actually been found or identified.

The first lines thus convey a sense of uncertainty as well as irony, though much of the irony is not readily available at this stage, only later, in retrospect. As for the theme of killing the king, it can be added that Hamlet later also asks the player to recite Priam’s slaughter, from “*Aeneas talke to Dido*” (2.2.447), thus pinpointing an ancient myth as a source of inspiration. Then killing the King is also contemplated by Hamlet in the Prayer Scene, before he actually attempts it in the Closet Scene, where it fails disastrously because of a mistaken identity. “Is it the King?” (3.4.26), Hamlet asks, but he soon realises that, alas, it is in fact Polonius. Later Laertes also charges the King when he returns from France on hearing the death of *his* father (4.5); finally Hamlet does kill the King himself. So quite a few kings are killed in the complex story of *Hamlet*, which draws on a number of other works or texts.

In such a context, it is significant that whereas Barnardo’s identity is revealed by his reference to the King, at the beginning of the play the identity of the King is not clear yet either. Moreover, this uncertainty applies not only to the audience, but also to the readers of the original editions; which, again, have no list of characters informing the reader about this issue. It appears only in the next scene that the King is Claudius, whose name is available again only for the readers (of Q2 and F1, merely at the stage direction to his first entry). The

King is not named at all in the dialogue; he is called and designated only as “King” throughout, whose identity is further defined as being the brother of the late king and the husband of the widowed Queen. In the opening scene we learn only about the late King Hamlet, who has a son by the same name, and we also learn that the kingship is disputed and claimed by young Fortinbras of Norway too.

Returning to the famous opening line, it is thus not only a question of name, but also a question of identity, which applies to every character in the play; as well as to every reader or every member of the audience, as has been frequently noted by editors, directors and critics alike.<sup>134</sup> In this scene, however, it is the Ghost’s identity that is particularly questionable; as it is in the whole play. In fact, in the first line, when Barnardo improperly charges Francisco, who is on duty and is about to be relieved, the sentinel’s confusion probably stems from the fact that he already anticipates the Ghost. Barnardo may wonder whether he sees a ghost in the darkness, or whether it is his fellow sentinel, whom he therefore cannot help asking. The Ghost soon arrives too, and then it proves very questionable indeed to the sentinels and Horatio, and later also to Hamlet. But why is the Ghost still questionable to the critics, after all these centuries? Or is it really questionable at all?

### 3.1.3 Enter Ghost

In the original editions, the character is designated only as “Ghost”; and the first concrete designation occurs only at its first entrance. All we have is “*Enter Ghost*” (Q2, 1.1.40) or “*Enter the Ghost*” (F1), and then “*Exit Ghost*” (Q2, 1.1.66) or “*Exit the Ghost*” (F1), in the stage directions, and “*Ghost*”, in the speech prefixes (first at 1.5.2). Both the original audiences and readers first encountered the character only here, at line 40. The audience could see only a mysterious figure, who is referred to as an “apparision” before it appears (Q2,

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<sup>134</sup> See again the note to 1.1.1 in the *Arden 3 Hamlet*. Thompson and Taylor, eds. (2006), 147.

1.1.28; the character is consistently referred to as “it” by the other characters), and who is “in the same figure *like* the King that’s dead” (1.1.41.; italics added), dressed in armour such as his (1.1.60). The first readers had access to the designation in the stage directions and later in the speech prefixes, but that does not specify or name the character either, leaving its identity in ambiguity throughout the play.

The other characters encountering the Ghost certainly use various other references in their speeches, which are usually annotated in the critical editions, and some of them may be considered as designations too; particularly if we take a liberal approach to designations. However, it is important to note that these are only suggestions about the possible nature and origin of this mysterious, supernatural character, always from the specific point of a character in a given situation; and none of them is definitely or unambiguously confirmed. The first reference to the Ghost in the play is actually “this thing” by the initially very sceptical Horatio: “What, ha’s this thing appeard againe to night?” (Q2, 1.1.21). As we have seen in the discussion of criticism, this is later followed not only by “*Hamlet*, King, father, royall Dane” (1.4.40-5), but by some other, more remarkable references, from “boy” (1.5.150) to “olde Mole” (1.5.162); all uttered by Hamlet. A common reference by Hamlet and the Ghost, as well as the other witnesses, is “spirit” (1.1.171; 1.4.40, 1.5.9 and 2.2.598), but even that word appears in remarkably different situations; the last one is actually in a context of major doubt.

The lack of list of characters applies not only to the three main early texts (Q1, Q2, F1), but to every edition in the Renaissance or early modern period. Then, in 1676, Davenant’s Restoration *Hamlet* – which was already the Sixth Quarto, a so-called “Players’ Quarto” in the entirely different theatrical context of a very different historical and cultural period – added “The Persons Represented” to the text, along with the names of the actors and



actresses who played the roles at the time.<sup>135</sup> This list includes the “Ghost of Hamlet’s father” for the first time, and this designation has prevailed ever since, considerably affecting the entire modern reception of the play. However, there is no real evidence in the original texts and context that the Ghost is indeed the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, while there are quite a few suggestions to the contrary.

The purpose of this chapter is not to decide on the identity of the character; the point is merely to highlight and explain the crucial difference between the “Ghost” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the usual “Ghost of Hamlet’s father” – or similar designations – in the modern editions and reception, and to argue for the restoration of the original designation. This is essential from the point of interpretation, and as such a necessary prerequisite for the study and appreciation of Shakespeare’s work. In the original play, we have a highly ambiguous character, but the still customary designation of the “Ghost of Hamlet’s father” reduces the play’s complexity to a partial, simplified and arguable interpretation, amounting to an indeed very problematic view of the character and the whole play, as we have seen above.

Since the list of characters is added to the text – and is actually placed before it – in virtually every modern edition and production, this designation effectively deprives Shakespeare’s work of its original, real ambiguity from the outset. More to the point, while the list of roles or characters could be a useful tool to the modern reader and audience, the usual modern editorial practice, maintaining Davenant’s designation or offering a very similar version, may actually hinder the proper interpretation and the real appreciation of the play; what is appreciated is already a limited version of Shakespeare’s work.

Less is more: the maxim in Browning’s poem, chosen as the motto of this chapter, is particularly applicable to the designation of this character. Although “Ghost” may seem to be a short designation, it means considerably more than the usual modern ones since Davenant,

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<sup>135</sup> Davenant, William, ed. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. As it is now Acted at His Highness the Duke of York’s Theatre. By William Shakespeare*. London, 1676. (Q6) – also available online at [www.hamletworks.org](http://www.hamletworks.org). See also: Thompson and Taylor (2006), 78, 141; cf. below.

particularly if we take into account the spiritual and religious significance of the character and the play. Of course, we can realise this distinction only if we do not regard “Ghost” simply as an abbreviation of the familiar longer designations, and if we are aware of the various meanings of the word. As for the second line of this motto, the “truer light of God” can also be related to this issue: the characters, as well as some critics, strive to have a truer light too. Not necessarily of God, it must be added, but many strive to have a better understanding of the spiritual and religious issues of the play, particularly concerning the Ghost. For that, however, it is essential to have a true or faithful presentation of those issues, starting with the authentic designation of the characters.

If this study were only on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, this chapter, observing its motto, could also end here, noting that from this point, I will consistently use the original designation of the character; as in fact I have already done. However, there are some further points to be discussed here concerning the designation, so as to highlight and explain its significance. First of all, we have to consider the various meanings of the word; then we can also see how they are realised – or not realised – in the major editions of *Hamlet*. In addition, we should also consider the impact of this issue on the reception.

### **3.2. The meanings of “ghost” and the modern editions**

#### **3.2.1 The *Oxford English Dictionary* and some major critical editions**

Before analysing some editions in more detail, let us therefore take a look at the word “Ghost” in the *OED*.

**Ghost, 8.** The soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence, to the living. (Now

the prevailing sense.) [...] 1602 SHAKS. *Ham.* I. v. 126. There needs no Ghost, my Lord, come from the Graue, to tell vs this.<sup>136</sup>

This – now prevailing sense – is already the eighth meaning of the word in the *OED*, but it is the only reference to *Hamlet* at “Ghost”, even though, as we shall see, the word is used not only in this sense in the play. In his introduction to *Hamlet* in the *Norton Shakespeare*, Greenblatt apparently uses this meaning too, along with the designation introduced by Davenant, when he raises the first question on the character: “How trustworthy is the *ghost of Hamlet’s father, who has returned from the grave* to demand that Hamlet avenge his murder?”<sup>137</sup> Greenblatt then asks: “What exactly is the ghost, and where has it come from?” These two questions are among several other ones concerning the play that, in Greenblatt’s view, cannot be answered decisively. As the critic and editor puts it, “*Hamlet* is an enigma. Mountains of feverish speculations have only deepened the interlocking mysteries” (ibid).

*Hamlet* and particularly its Ghost are quite mysterious indeed, however, such a rendering of the issues is arguable, and so is already the designation of the Ghost. Greenblatt’s rhetoric here is very similar to that in his later monograph on the Ghost and its possible origin, which has been discussed above.<sup>138</sup> Before posing the question on the character’s exact nature and origin, Greenblatt in fact already implies the answers in the first question, suggesting some quite definite interpretive choices, which render these questions purely academic. If the Ghost is actually the “ghost of Hamlet’s father, who has returned from the grave”, it must be quite trustworthy; moreover, in the religious context of the play, it must be a purgatorial spirit, as it actually suggests to Hamlet; as has been mentioned above, neither Catholics nor Protestants believed that one can return from Hell. If we thus use this designation from the outset, the alternative possibility of the disguised devil from Hell is in effect precluded at the

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<sup>136</sup> J. A. H. Murray, ed., *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>137</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton Publishers, 1997), 1659; italics added.

<sup>138</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

very beginning of the interpretation. The question of trustworthiness then seems rhetorical; or perhaps it concerns not so much the identity of the Ghost, merely its reliability about the story of the murder. But if the Ghost is indeed the Ghost of Hamlet's father, why should he lie about that either?

If one is concerned with the nature and identity of the Ghost, and is indeed concerned about its trustworthiness, a somewhat more feasible rendering of these questions could be the following. How trustworthy is the Ghost, who claims to have returned from the dead and charges Hamlet with revenge? What exactly is the Ghost, and where has it come from? Is it indeed the Ghost of Hamlet's father, as it claims to be? Has it actually come from the grave, as Horatio seems to believe, when he so refers to it? If one raises problematic questions on the play or a character, the answers to them will also be problematic; and then the speculations indeed only deepen the interlocking mysteries, rather than clarify the issues.

*The Norton Shakespeare* uses the text of the *Oxford* edition, which relies mainly on the First Folio, but places an additional list of "THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY" before the actual text.<sup>139</sup> The first character in that list is the "GHOST of Hamlet, the late King of Denmark." After such a list and such a designation, similarly to Greenblatt's critical introduction and his later, longer study, any doubt on the Ghost's nature and credibility is purely academic; and this may account for the problems in Greenblatt's interpretation as well. As for the typography, "GHOST", in capital letters, is the designation of the character in the original editions, as it appears in the speech prefixes and the stage directions, though in those early editions the word is not actually in full capital letters. The capitalisation in the modern editions is generally used to differentiate the original designation from the modern editorial additions, but that is not noted either by Greenblatt or by Taylor and Wells in these

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<sup>139</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P, 1986), 654.

modernised editions;<sup>140</sup> nor is it indicated that in fact the entire list of characters is the editors' addition to the text. The addition to "GHOST" is based either simply on the modern tradition or on the editors' own interpretation of the text; this is not explained either, but this is already a choice of interpretation.

In these editions, unlike in the Sixth Quarto, the character in the list of roles is defined not in its (or, in this case, indeed his) relation to the protagonist, but already as an individual. There is clear shift in the editors' addition to "GHOST" from the usual "Hamlet's father" to "Hamlet, the late king of Denmark", amounting to a somewhat longer designation. This, however, is a relatively minor difference: whereas in this case the character's identity is not dependant on Prince Hamlet, its identity as a person is the same as in Davenant; and its identity or role as an ambiguous spiritual entity is precluded. In the title of his book on the Ghost (*Hamlet in Purgatory*), Greenblatt seems to use this designation too, abbreviating already the modern addition to the original "Ghost". Of this, however, we cannot say that less is more: the only ambiguity about the character of "Hamlet" may be whether we mean the late king or the Prince. Of course, if the whole designation or the list of characters itself were authentic, this would not be a problem. However, if we consider the original texts and contexts, again, "Ghost" can mean much more than "Hamlet" or King Hamlet.

In *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Gary Taylor, who has undertaken prime responsibility for *Hamlet* in the Oxford edition,<sup>141</sup> very perceptively describes how Shakespeare's works have been reinvented in the reception: this has usually involved simplification, sometimes major changes to the original. Taylor also describes how *Hamlet* has been altered and simplified over the centuries, starting with the Restoration, which was already regarded as modern as

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<sup>140</sup> I am grateful for Jesús Tronch-Pérez, editor of *A Synoptic 'Hamlet': a Critical-Synoptic Edition of the Second Quarto and First Folio Texts of Hamlet* (Valencia: SEDERI. Universitat de Valencia, 2002) for this and other remarks concerning my paper at the British Shakespeare Association conference mentioned above.

<sup>141</sup> Wells and Taylor (1986), v.

compared to the Renaissance.<sup>142</sup> Aiming at authenticity, the Oxford editors have abandoned the modern tradition of the conflated texts, but they maintain the tradition of the list of characters with the familiar modern designations, even if venturing some minor changes in those designations too. Yet if we consider the original editions, this still involves a drastic simplification of the Ghost's character at the outset: a kind of simplification Taylor is otherwise very critical of. At the end of *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Taylor asks the reader to be critical and actually sceptical of his work too, therefore I merely comply with his request.<sup>143</sup>

In the *Complete Works*, *The Oxford Shakespeare* editors note in the preface to *Hamlet*: “Belleforest's story differs at some points from Shakespeare's, and Shakespeare elaborates it, adding, for example, the Ghost of Hamlet's father” (653). But Shakespeare may have elaborated the story, as well as the character of the Ghost, to a much greater extent. As several critics – including Greenblatt himself at some parts of his argument – have noted, it is not certain that the Ghost is in fact the Ghost of Hamlet's father; this is already a matter of interpretation. As R. M. Frey puts it, “Shakespeare constructed the story so that we are never perfectly sure as to just who or what the Ghost is.”<sup>144</sup>

G. R. Hibbard, the editor of the *Oxford Hamlet* in the series of the individual works, likewise claims that “The Ghost is a masterpiece of ambiguity”,<sup>145</sup> but he similarly includes “GHOST of Hamlet's dead father” in “THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY” (141). This list is inserted between the title and the text of the play, again without indicating that it is added by the modern editor to the text, which is otherwise based on the First Folio, as *The Complete Works* edited by Wells and Taylor. In his General Introduction, Hibbard briefly refers to Eleanor Prosser's suggestion of a disguised devil, but he dismisses it as “much too categorical and explicit” (41). One can note, however, that Hibbard's designation of the ambiguous Ghost

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor (1991), 7-51.

<sup>143</sup> Taylor (1991), 416.

<sup>144</sup> R. M. Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet. Issues and Responses in 1600*. (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1984), 38

<sup>145</sup> G. R. Hibbard, ed., Shakespeare, *Hamlet. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1987), 38.

is also quite categorical and explicit. Hibbard also objects to Prossers's "verdict" because that "goes against the instinctive reactions to the ghost of many generations of playgoers and readers" (ibid). However, the reactions of the modern readers may not be instinctive, after all, if they are presented with such a list of characters and such a designation when they start reading the text, before they could make their own choice. And the reactions of the playgoers are always to an actual production in a certain, modern context, which may be quite different from the original in its own, Renaissance context, not to mention the programme notes or the fact that, unlike in Shakespeare's time, modern playgoers have tended to be readers of the modernised editions for quite a few generations. These issues are therefore worth examining in some more detail, which follows in the next chapter.

Hibbard's choice is also based on his interpretation of the Mousetrap and its effect on the King, but that is again already a matter of interpretation; it is a very debated part of the play, particularly as concerning its significance on the Ghost's identity. According to Hibbard, the "King's response to that test puts the Ghost's honesty (i.e. *genuineness* as well as *truthfulness* beyond question. It cannot be a devil" (42). This, however, is an arguable interpretation, which seems to be based on a partial rendering of the issues. We have already quoted *Macbeth* and referred to the contemporary beliefs concerning spirituality, as well as to the Elizabethan stage conventions; these issues will be discussed in more detail below.

Philip Edwards, editor of the *Cambridge Hamlet*, includes in his "LIST OF CHARACTERS" the "GHOST of Hamlet's father, the former King of Denmark", but he already includes a note too: "A list of 'The Persons Represented' (omitting the First Player) first appeared in the Players' Quarto of 1676."<sup>146</sup> Despite this important note that the list is not from the original editions, Edwards maintains the Restoration designation, and to the 1676 addition to "Ghost" he further adds the royal title, amounting to one of the longest

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<sup>146</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. Ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1985), 74.

designations so far; which is nevertheless substantially the same as virtually all designations of the character since the Restoration.

### 3.2.2 The Arden *Hamlet* and its annotations (2006)

Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, the editors of the 2006 *Arden Hamlet*, also include such a note to the “LIST OF ROLES”, and an additional one to the “GHOST of *Hamlet’s father, the late King Hamlet of Denmark*”,<sup>147</sup> which is probably the longest designation so far. This note on the character suggests that the editors are aware of the fact that this designation may be problematic.

The ‘Persons Represented’ in Q6 include ‘Ghost of Hamlet’s Father’, and this designation has become standard, though it *perhaps* pre-empts any debate as to whether this is an ‘honest ghost’ (1.5.135) or not.<sup>148</sup>

If this designation did not involve an actual decision of interpretation concerning the character’s much-debated identity, this editorial practice could be regarded as a very careful one that strikes a delicate balance between the modern expectations and the original editions. This useful note about the question of honesty, even with the modifying “perhaps”, is certainly a major step forward from the traditional editorial practice since Davenant, whose designation the *Arden* editors nevertheless maintain, perhaps only reluctantly; although the further annotations, as we shall see, suggest that this choice also reflects their own interpretation of the character and the play. Such a designation, however, definitely precludes the original ambiguity of the character, and hence of the whole play. This allows only a partial reading of Shakespeare’s play: as I will argue, realising only the surface level of meaning of a complex work.

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<sup>147</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series). Hamlet* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 140; From hence abbreviated as *Arden 3 Hamlet*.

<sup>148</sup> *Arden 3 Hamlet*, 141; italics added.



The real question concerning this designation is whether the purpose is authenticity, which seems to be emphasised throughout this edition, or to conform to a modern tradition of *Hamlet*, which started after the Restoration. In other words, are we interested in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or Davenant's? And why should the latter be maintained as a standard? The note on the back cover of the *Arden 3* edition claims: "Readers, of both editions have, for the first time, a unique opportunity to study the three surviving texts of Hamlet *as experienced by Shakespeare's contemporaries, fully modernized* and edited by leading scholars" (italics added).

However, the modernisation includes certain elements that make it impossible for the reader to experience the text as Shakespeare's contemporaries, who were free to make up their mind on the Ghost too. The conscious modernization is reflected already in the first note to the "LIST OF ROLES" to the modernised Q2 text: "For the convenience of modern readers, we have in this text adopted the most familiar names of the characters, *even when they are not the ones most frequently used in Q2*" (141; italics added). This practice, however, is arguable. For the convenience of modern readers, a list of characters can certainly be provided, but it is not clear why it should include the most familiar names of the characters, rather than the original ones.

As in most other modern critical editions, the text of the play follows a long introduction, and a separate title page, "The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The Second Quarto (1604-5)" (139), is inserted to mark the beginning of the actual play. However, it is also somewhat problematic that the additional page with the "LIST OF ROLES" is placed between this title page and the text (140). If the emphasis is on authenticity, the list could be provided in an appendix,<sup>149</sup> or perhaps before the title page of the Q2 text, as part of the introduction; or the list could also be put in brackets, to mark clearly

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<sup>149</sup> For such a solution, see the edition by Jesús Tronch-Pérez, further discussed below.

that it is extra material.<sup>150</sup> Although in this modern edition it is at least noted that the original Q2 edition contained no such list, if someone fails to read the notes, one may easily have the impression that it forms an integral part of the Second Quarto edition itself, along with the customary modern names.

But even if one carefully reads all the notes, including the one on the designation of the Ghost, one is inclined to conclude that the “GHOST *of Hamlet’s father*” does in fact suggest the usual modern – and limited – view of the character as being identical with Hamlet’s dead father. It seems that the editors’ note on the Ghost’s debated honesty, similarly to Greenblatt’s introduction to the play in the *Norton* edition, concerns not so much the character’s identity, but perhaps only some other elements of its story, for the note ends as:

Despite the contrast between the physical appearances of *the two men* stressed by Hamlet at 3.4.51-69, it is possible for the actor playing the Ghost to double in the role of the King; this has happened on the stage occasionally since at least John Guilgud’s production in 1939 (see Appendix 5).

(*Arden 3 Hamlet*, 141, Note 2 to the List of Roles; italics added)

In the Closet Scene, Hamlet does compare the pictures of two men: that of his dead father, and that of King Claudius. However, the above quoted sentence in the *Arden* note seems to suggest that the Ghost is but a man too, definitely identical to the late king, rather than an ambiguous supernatural character whose identity is open to question, and who might be a disguised devil as well. The preceding sentence, the middle of this long note on the Ghost, also concerns merely Hamlet’s father and his name: “Hamlet’s father is called Horwendill in Saxo, Horvendile in Belleforest; Shakespeare (or the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*) takes the step of calling the father by the same name as the son”. This is certainly true, but there is no

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<sup>150</sup> For such a solution, see Robert S. Miola’s edition; cf. below.

suggestion in this part of the note either that Shakespeare also takes the step of creating a remarkably ambiguous Ghost, which might not be identical to the father after all.

As for the other two lists of characters in this *Arden* edition, the same long designation is applied both for the Q1 and the F texts, though it is noted at the respective places that “no list in Q1” and “no list in F” were originally available.<sup>151</sup> What is perhaps most remarkable about this practice is that with these other two texts, the editors’ explicit concern is already not the convenience of modern readers, or the inclusion of familiar modern names, but authenticity. The note to Q1 points out that in “this text we have preserved the titles and the spellings of the names that are most frequent in Q1. Notes are provided only where the names or roles differ from those in Q2” (43). Accordingly, in this list, prepared for and added to Q1 (again placed between the title page and the actual text), we have “Corambis” instead of “Polonius”, for that is the name of the councillor in the first quarto edition of the play. Even so, we are given the designation of the Ghost that was introduced only in Q6 by Davenant – and maintained in the Arden Q2 text, with an even longer addition to the original designation – despite the fact that the designation of the character in all the original editions is only “Ghost” throughout, and, again, the character is not necessarily identical to the late king.

If we further examine the annotations of the *Arden* edition, we can cite several problematic ones where the Ghost is simply referred to as the father. For instance, in the Closet Scene of the modernised Q2, the note to 3.4.103-5 quotes Greenblatt’s remark of puzzlement and adds: “Hamlet’s treatment of the *two murdered fathers* present onstage in this scene could hardly be more different” (p. 345, italics added). By “the two murdered fathers present onstage” the Arden editors presumably mean Polonius, whom Hamlet kills as a rat but then totally ignores throughout his long, moralizing diatribe at his mother, and the Ghost, whom Hamlet here approaches with religious awe. This scene is a particularly debated one in

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<sup>151</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds, *The Arden Shakespeare. Hamlet. Third Series. The Texts of 1603 and 1623*. (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 43 and 141.

criticism, and is indeed a very mysterious one because of the unexpected reappearance of the Ghost. If the Ghost is taken – and noted – simply as Hamlet’s father, Hamlet’s behaviour must be truly perplexing here, similarly to that of the Ghost. But if one takes into account the ambiguity of the Ghost, and considers the possibility of a demonic intervention, stepping between Hamlet and Gertrude to disrupt their communication and so foster the tragic outcome (which is though quite inevitable after the killing of Polonius), the whole scene may become somewhat clearer and less problematic, along with Hamlet’s distressed behaviour.

Another example is in the last act, commenting on an episode which has a particular significance in the religious framework of the play, and which we have already discussed. When Hamlet explains to Horatio how he ordered in a forged letter the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “Not shriving time allowed” (*Arden 3 Hamlet*, Q2, 5.2.47), the editors note:

*Hamlet’s father* has complained that his sudden murder did not allow him time for confession (1.5.76-9), and Hamlet decided not to kill the King at 3.3.73-96 in case he was confessing his sins and therefore in a state of grace.

(*Arden 3 Hamlet* note to 5.2.47; italics added)

This note offers an interpretation most modern readers or critics would probably accept, including Greenblatt. However, again, it is only an ambiguous Ghost that has so complained to Hamlet; which might not be the Ghost of Hamlet’s father, particularly if we consider the original editions in their own theatrical and religious context. By referring to the Ghost as Hamlet’s father, this explanation can serve as an excuse for Hamlet’s behaviour, which is otherwise very problematic in moral terms. As we have seen, Hamlet here hardly behaves as a true Christian; instead of performing pious deeds, he actually denies them from his victims, a practice about which he is quite consistent. The Arden note here seems to suggest that Hamlet

merely complies with his father's command, carefully weighing the circumstances, so as to arrange similar conditions to his own victims, who do not deserve any better either.

These scenes pertain to Hamlet's motivation and delay at the same time. Again, if one considers the ambiguity of the Ghost, an evil spirit with supernatural power may foresee and exploit the moral flaw of the protagonist, who explicitly seeks the damnation of his enemies. In fact, this attitude is not requested by the Ghost, but it is Hamlet's own decision, which is based on his own predisposition, marked already in the second scene, as we have seen, even before Hamlet is informed about the appearance of the Ghost (1.2.182-3). Such a predisposition of the protagonist can easily be abused by a demon or devil, as we shall see below in more detail. Such an interpretation, however, is precluded by the editors from the outset, and excluded by this Arden footnote too. It is therefore questionable whether such editorial choices and annotations to the text actually help the reader, or rather limit the interpretation of the play to an already familiar but arguable modern view.

Let us therefore see those parts of the text that suggest a meaning for the Ghost that is different from the usual modern one of a soul of dead man, returning from the grave. Before the Mousetrap, Hamlet again has some doubts, which he shares with Horatio.

Obserue my Vncle, if his occulted guilt  
Doe not it selfe vnkennill in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we haue seene,  
And my imaginations are as foule  
As *Vulcans* stithy; giue him heedfull note,  
For I mine eyes will riuet to his face,  
And after we will both our iudgements ioyne  
In censure of his seeming.

(Q2, 3.2.80-87)

As at the end of the second act, Hamlet here again explains that he will judge the honesty and reliability of the Ghost by judging the King's reaction to the Mousetrap. As has been noted

above in connection with *Macbeth*, this is not really a safe test concerning spirits or possible demons. In fact, as we have seen in the Introduction, the King's reaction is also questionable in this scene, because he is totally unmoved by the dumb show; and during the playlet he rises when Hamlet threatens him by calling the murderer "*Lucianus*, Nephew to the King" (3.2.244). At the time of the play-within-the-play, Hamlet is the nephew of King Claudius; whereas Claudius is the late king's brother. The "murder of Gonzago" thus becomes a representation of Hamlet's killing the King, rather than that of Claudius's killing the late king Hamlet. The Mousetrap Scene is therefore not really a reliable indicator even of the King's guilt; that is confirmed only in the Prayer Scene.

The philological point, however, concerns here the expression "damned ghost". On "damned" the *Arden 3* editors note merely the accent, but also refer the reader to 1.4.40, and the note on that line. Above we have already quoted Hamlet's passage on first encountering and addressing the Ghost in 1.4, which includes the phrase "goblin damned". As it appears from the *Arden* notes, "Goblin" itself means "demon", while "Vulcan's stithy" is also "associated with the notion of hell."<sup>152</sup> Harold Jenkins or Philip Edwards, however, are much more specific about "damned ghost" meaning the devil. As Edwards notes: "the ghost which we have seen came from hell (and was an impostor and a liar)".<sup>153</sup> This explanation is crucial from the point of the complexity of the character, as well as of Hamlet and in fact the whole play, for here "ghost" is used by Hamlet in a sense that is in a sharp contrast to the usual modern meaning of the word and the received notion of the character.

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<sup>152</sup> We may add that "Vulcan's stithy", while drawing on ancient mythology, functions here mainly as simile to describe the blackness and foulness of Hamlet's imagination. "Goblin damned" is a disguised demon from the Christian hell, rather than a Senecan ghost from a possibly pagan hell. The context of the play is predominantly Christian; the ancient Greek and Roman allusions serve mainly as rhetorical tools. In the modern reception, however, the religious significance of the play is largely lost: the recurring and often actually emphasised Christian concepts are either taken also as merely rhetorical elements, or otherwise interpreted rather partially, as we have seen and will further consider below.

<sup>153</sup> Philip Edwards, ed., *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1985), note to 3.2.72, p. 156. Considering the recent reception that we have covered above, it can be added again that hell is meant here in clearly Christian terms: a place from where no man can return, rather than as a possibly pagan hell of Senecan ghosts. "An impostor and a liar" is clearly not a Senecan ghost, but a disguised devil.

### 3.2.3 Another meaning of “ghost” in the *OED*, and some further editions

The *Oxford English Dictionary* contains the following definition as the fifth meaning of the word.

**Ghost, 5.** An incorporeal being; a spirit.  
c. An evil spirit. *The loath, foul, wicked ghost* : the Devil.

(OED, *Ghost*)

The original designation of the character, the “Ghost” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* can thus mean “the devil” as well as the “Ghost of Hamlet’s father”, which became standard only after the Restoration. Both meanings are implied by the text; it is already a question of interpretation which meaning is preferred, and which is rejected or simply ignored. As has been demonstrated, modern editors, ever since Davenant, have tended to exclude, or rather, preclude, the possibility of the devil as an interpretation of “Ghost” already in the list of characters placed before the text. If a list of roles is added to the text, the usual modern additions to “Ghost” should be omitted, and the different meanings of the word should also be noted beyond the questionable honesty of the character.

As for the *OED*, the last occurrence of this meaning of “Ghost” (5c) is dated 1529, that is, several decades before Shakespeare, but already in the Renaissance. However, this occurrence in *Hamlet* is clearly in this specific meaning too; therefore it could also be entered in the *OED*, even if this meaning has been generally lost in the modern reception for the past few centuries; the historical reasons for the simplification of the play will be discussed below. In fact, there is a reference to Shakespeare at the fifth meaning of the word too, before the subcategories: “**Ghost, 5.** An incorporeal being; a spirit [...] c 1600 SHAKS. *Sonn.* lxxxvi”. In *Hamlet*, as we have seen, there are several references to the Ghost as a “spirit”; it is already a

matter of interpretation what kind of a spirit it is: whether a good, or an evil one. In any case, it is certainly not merely – and not necessarily – the soul of a man returning from the grave, but a much more complex character, whose main feature lies in its mysteriousness and ambiguity throughout the play, where its nature and identity is never definitely settled.

Let us, however, look at a modern critical edition that, similarly to the original editions, does not include a list of roles before the text. *A Synoptic 'Hamlet': a Critical-Synoptic Edition of the Second Quarto/ and First Folio Texts of Hamlet*, edited by Jesús Tronch-Pérez, indicates the alternative versions of the phrases within the line, so that they can be seen and read parallel to each other. While this edition has no list of characters placed before the text, it does provide one at the end: “THE NAMES OF THE ACTORS”, including “The GHOST of Hamlet’s father, the late King of Denmark”. The note to the list explains:

Neither the Second Quarto, nor the First Folio texts of *Hamlet* provide a list of roles. Some plays printed in the First Folio append a list at the end of the text under the epigraph ‘The Names of the Actors’. In this list, the first eleven characters are ordered by combining their importance in the drama and their relationship. The rest, in order of appearance.<sup>154</sup>

In this arrangement, Tronch-Pérez’s edition does not eliminate the ambiguities concerning the Ghost’s identity at the outset, which is a major step forward in the line of critical editions that provide commentaries, notes and list of characters. Another important feature of the list is that it is printed within square brackets, which also indicate the fact that list is the editor’s addition. The note also explains: “This ed., om. Q2-5 F1-4; list of roles first given by Q1676). Nevertheless, as for the designation itself, this edition also decides on this issue, maintaining the usual designation of the character first used by Davenant, again with an even longer addition to the original “Ghost”. The epigraph and the arrangement of the list, adopted

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<sup>154</sup>Jesús Tronch-Pérez, *A Synoptic 'Hamlet': a Critical-Synoptic Edition of the Second Quarto/ and First Folio Texts of Hamlet*, (SEDERI: Universitat de Valencia, 2002), 364.



from the First Folio at the end of other plays, may also lend a feeling of authenticity. All in all, of the modernised editions covered here this solution interferes the least with the free interpretation of the original text.<sup>155</sup>

As a final edition, let us see the latest Norton *Hamlet*, edited by Robert S. Miola.<sup>156</sup> In this edition, we are also provided with a “*Dramatis Personae*” (p. 3), which includes “GHOST, of King Hamlet, former King of Denmark”. This designation again precludes the ambiguity of the character and hence of the whole play at the outset, disallowing a more complex reading of Shakespeare’s work. The list of characters is placed after the separate title page of the play, “The Text of HAMLET” (p. 1), and before the actual text, which starts on page 5. The list of characters is put within square brackets, which indicate that it is only an editorial addition to the text. This fact, however, is not noted by Miola, nor is it mentioned in the critical introduction; not even in the section “*Editorial Imaginings*” (xxi-xxv). In fact, since the page numbering of the edition starts with the text of the play, and the pages of the Introduction are differentiated by roman numbers, this arrangement may give the impression that on page 3, this list of characters, with its archaic title, is already a part of Shakespeare’s text. As for the format, as we have seen above at the similar designations of the character, “GHOST”, in small caps, is based on the original speech prefixes and stage directions, whereas the rest of the designation, in italics, is the editor’s addition, but this fact is not noted by Miola either.

Indeed, if we read the Introduction, “*Imagining Hamlet*”, particularly the section “*Critical Imaginings*” (xv-xxi), it appears that Miola also imagines that the Ghost and the late King Hamlet are identical, for he uses these designations as interchangeable for the character

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<sup>155</sup> I am grateful for Tronch’s written response to my paper at the 2009 British Shakespeare Association Conference, circulated among the participants of the session “Shakespeare’s Next Editors”. Tronch finds my “point about the *ambiguity* of the Ghost in *Hamlet* convincing as well as the editorial implications that the usual designation ‘Ghost of Hamlet’s father’ in the list of roles should be avoided and a simple ‘Ghost’ be used instead in order to keep that ambiguity.” Tronch also points out that as editor, he is “inclined to temper as little as possible with features of the early texts that offer multiple interpretations”. As for the list of roles he placed at the end of the play, Tronch notes that he “never questioned the received interpretation of the Ghost as Hamlet’s father and the standard designation slipped through”.

<sup>156</sup> Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011).

of the Ghost. Moreover, Miola tends to prefer the latter designation, for in the Introduction, unlike in his list of characters and in the speech prefixes, he does not use capital letters for “ghost”; he just uses it as an ordinary word, rather than a designation. Miola thus tends to abbreviate the rather long designation in his *Dramatis Personae*, but the abbreviated designation is confined merely to the editor’s addition to the original “Ghost”. As Miola explains,

Like classical spirits, the ghost of King Hamlet begins the revenge section by revealing his foul, unnatural murder and demanding vengeance. But unlike those phantasms, King Hamlet says nothing in his first appearances, then refuses to reveal the secrets of the next life, and finally sounds strangely moral, lamenting his own spiritual unreadiness for death.

(Miola, xv)

Miola then quotes the Ghost’s passage from scene five, where the Ghost refers to the lack of Catholic last rites, soon after demanding vengeance. The critic’s suggestion is thus that these lines are definitely said by “King Hamlet”, rather than by an ambiguous character, the “Ghost”, who may or may not be the ghost or spirit of the late king. A sensitive or informed reader might suspect that the Ghost, requesting vengeance, may not really lament his unreadiness for death; moreover, it might not really be the ghost of King Hamlet after all, but such a reading is disallowed by Miola. The list of characters, as well as the preceding critical Introduction thus reduces Shakespeare’s play to a partial and arguable interpretation at the outset.

As we have seen, such an interpretation of *Hamlet* has been challenged by others; and it is to Miola’s credit that, unlike the latest Arden editors, he refers to those critics, notably Roy Battanhouse and Eleanor Prosser. As Miola puts it, these critics “variously argue that the ghost is a malignant spirit who acts like the devil to entrap Hamlet; penitential spirits, they observe, do not return to earth to demand vengeance by murder” (ibid). This point could also

be summarised and phrased that the Ghost is a malignant spirit who *is* (likely to be) a disguised devil that *acts like* King Hamlet to entrap Hamlet; that is, the Ghost merely claims and acts like or pretends to be the spirit of the late king.

However, it is also interesting how Miola summarises Greenblatt's interpretation as a response to these critics.

Noting such anomalies, Stephen Greenblatt (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 2001) nevertheless identifies King Hamlet as a Catholic ghost from a Catholic (and officially proscribed) Purgatory. Part classical shade, part demonic spirit, part Purgatorial ghost, he sensibly concludes, King Hamlet appears to be a mix of disparate elements and incompatible theologies, classical and Christian.

(Miola, xv)

Without underestimating the work of either Miola or Greenblatt, these lines could also be the summary of R. H. West's "King Hamlet's Ambiguous Ghost" (1955).<sup>157</sup> West, as we have seen above, likewise argues for a complex and ambiguous character, at least ostensibly, for in fact he reduces the Ghost to that of King Hamlet. As we have also seen, it is true that Greenblatt tends to refer to the character as King Hamlet, or merely as "Hamlet". Greenblatt may indeed identify "King Hamlet as a Catholic ghost from a Catholic Purgatory", but the order of that argument would seem to be the opposite. It is in fact the *Ghost* that the new historicist critic, like most others including Miola, identifies as King Hamlet, taking that customary interpretation for granted, fully believing the Ghost's words.

The problem with these accounts of *Hamlet*, again, is that in Shakespeare's work we have a truly ambiguous and complex character, who is not necessarily identical to King Hamlet. King Hamlet, again, is already dead when play begins. As has been mentioned, an essential element of the whole play is that, as Hamlet fears, the Ghost may merely pretend to

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<sup>157</sup> *PMLA* LXX (1955), 1107-17.

be Hamlet's father, but is not necessarily identical to him; although the Prince dismisses his doubts, the ambiguities concerning the character are never fully resolved. If the Ghost is a disguised devil, or a "demonic spirit", it cannot be a "Purgatorial ghost", nor can it be a "classical shade": these entities are indeed incompatible with each other. However, a disguised devil *pretending* to be a Purgatorial spirit is not at all incompatible with the Christian theology, whether Catholic or Protestant; in fact, it is quite consistent with King James' *Daemonologie* (1597). As has been noted, that is also consistent with the tragic outcome of the play. At the same time, the interpretation of the Ghost simply as King Hamlet, or as a ghost from a Catholic Purgatory, is rather problematic indeed.

Another significant notion here is "anomaly". What we should note here, again, is that whereas the above points are indeed major anomalies that can be noted concerning a Purgatorial spirit; these are not necessarily the anomalies of Shakespeare's work and of the particular character. As we have seen, these problems of criticism are the anomalies of the reception; merely of a certain interpretation or *concept* of the character: the anomalies of the concept that identifies the Ghost as King Hamlet or Old Hamlet and interprets it as a Purgatorial spirit. This point is related to the issues of theory and cognition, in particular the notion of paradigm, which will be further discussed below.<sup>158</sup>

In conclusion, I suggest that we consistently use the designation "Ghost", as it is used in the speech prefixes and stage directions of Shakespeare's text, for that is the original designation. In an annotated critical edition, the relevant meanings of the word, involving different interpretations of the character, should also be provided in a note to the designation. I also suggest that we make a proper distinction between the "Ghost" and the late "King Hamlet" or "Hamlet's father", noting that they are not necessarily identical, as this point is essential from the point of interpretation of the whole play. Ultimately I would suggest that

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<sup>158</sup> See Chapter 6, *Hamlet* in the light of theory, below.

the appropriate designation, with this distinction, is a prerequisite of criticism and the reception.

Finally the question remains whether any addition to the designation “Ghost” can be offered at all if we are to remain faithful to Shakespeare’s text. If we append a list of roles to the text, with the purpose of assisting the reader – but possibly not restricting the interpretation – should there be any description added to the designation, and if so, what should that be? As Tronch points out, some other plays have a list of roles already in the First Folio, moreover, those lists already tend to include some descriptions added to the names, thus making the designations somewhat more specific.<sup>159</sup> Tronch also asks that if an editor realises the point about the ambiguity of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, but “were to edit a description, what phrase would be” suitable: “‘disguised as Hamlet’s father’, ‘perceived as Hamlet’s father’, ...” (ibid).

I suggest that if it is clearly noted that the description, as well as the list of roles itself, is the editor’s addition, and not part of the original designation, a descriptive phrase can be edited, but only such that does not preclude the ambiguity of the character and the play. A description like “*in the figure of the late King Hamlet of Denmark*” might be added to the designation “Ghost” or “GHOST”, as that solution would keep the original ambiguity of Shakespeare’s work, and would still allow a sufficiently complex and comprehensive interpretation.<sup>160</sup> Any addition to Shakespeare’s text should be noted clearly: the list of roles

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<sup>159</sup> “The Folio text of *Othello* has a list (at the end of the play), probably made by the scribe Ralph Crane and including, for instance, ‘Iago, a villain’, ‘Roderigo, a gulled gentleman, and ‘Cassio, an honourable lieutenant’, which in his Arden 3 edition Honigmann edited as ‘IAGO, a villain [Othello’s ancient or ensign]’, ‘RODERIGO, a gulled gentleman [of Venice], and ‘CASSIO, an honourable lieutenant [who serves under Othello]’” Tronch’s response to my paper at the 2009 BSA Conference.

<sup>160</sup> As has been noted, this study is concerned with the original texts of *Hamlet*, and mainly with the English (and American) reception. However, I must note that one modern edition of *Hamlet* has a similar designation, or addition to the designation: a translation (a fact that marks the global reach of Shakespeare in the age of globalisation; this was also the topic of the 2009 BSA Conference). In a Hungarian translation by István Eörsi (whose list of characters is actually not bracketed or otherwise marked as an addition to the text), the character’s description is remarkably neutral: “SZELLEM, Hamlet apjának, az elhunyt királynak az alakjában” [GHOST, in the figure of Hamlet’s father, the late king], cf. below. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, dán királyfi tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark], Hungarian translation by István Eörsi (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1990), 8.

should be not only bracketed, but also noted as an addition; and the editor's addition to "Ghost" should also be noted and explained, as in the Arden 3 edition. However, since the usual descriptive additions to "Ghost" can be traced only to the Sixth Quarto (1676), they should be applied most carefully. If possible, "Ghost" should be used consistently concerning the character in any critical discussion, including the editors' introductions and the notes to the dialogues, rather than the various descriptive additions, which tend to limit the interpretation and are therefore arguable.

### **3.3. Hamlet's "addition" and the parallel of *Macbeth***

Examining the designation of the Ghost in the various editions, this chapter has been concerned not only with the proper designation of the character that sets the whole play in motion, but also with the implications of this issue on the interpretation. Considering the editorial additions to "Ghost", we may recall Hamlet's passage before his interview with this mysterious character.

This heauy headed reueale east and west  
Makes vs tradust, and taxed of other nations,  
They clip vs drunkards, and with Swinish phrase  
Soyle our addition, and indeede it takes  
From our atchieuements, though perform'd at height  
The pith and marrow of our attribute.

(1.4.17-22)

This passage, unique to the Second Quarto, is a very debated yet highly significant one, as it can be related to Hamlet's character and his fate, therefore it will be discussed in more detail below. For now, the point is merely about the significance of the word "addition" (1.4.20), and its relation to names and reputation. As for the context, Hamlet refers to the King's excessive feasts and drinking habits, which can mar the reputation of the whole kingdom. The

passage serves as an introduction to Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost, and provides a sharp contrast between the feasting King and the mourning Prince. At the same time, drinking characterises not only King Claudius; it is, in fact, a long-established Danish custom, which should be abandoned in Hamlet's view.

But to my minde, though I am natie heere  
And to the manner borne, it is a custome  
More honour in the breach, then the obseruance.  
(1.4.14-16)

Ironically, the King drinks to Hamlet, who agreed to stay in Denmark at the court assembly in the second scene, and Hamlet himself promised Horatio that "Weele teach you for to drinke ere you depart" (1.2.175). But let us focus on the word "addition".

The *Arden 3 Hamlet* editors gloss merely "name, reputation" to this word, paraphrasing Hamlet's complaint that foreigners "tarnish our reputation by calling us pigs. 'As drunk as a swine' was proverbial."<sup>161</sup> Louise D. Cary, however, draws attention to the fact that in Shakespeare's play, the hero's name is slightly different than it is in the available sources. Although the difference is merely the rearrangement of the final letter "h" into the initial position, in Cary's view, this is a significant change.

The name "Hamlet" closely resembles the name "Amleth" and is easily glossed as an Anglicization of the Danish. But the two are not identical; Amleth loses its propriety, its particularity, in Hamlet, and it does so in a fascinating way. The final H refuses its ultimate position and moves instead to the beginning of the word. In doing so, its function changes.<sup>162</sup>

Although, as we have seen, "addition" may also mean "name" or "reputation", Cary suggests that the rearranged letter "h" is treated in English (probably already in the *Ur-Hamlet*), as if it

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<sup>161</sup> See the note to lines 1.4.19-20 in Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *The Arden Shakespeare (Third Series). Hamlet* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 204.

<sup>162</sup> Louise D. Cary, "Hamlet Recycled, Or the Tragical History of the Prince's Prints", *ELH* 61.4 (1994) 783.

were merely a superfluous addition to the name, which can therefore be freely removed. Moreover, the result, “Hamlet”, containing “Ham”, may be related to pork, hence the original name is spoilt or indeed “soiled” to a swinish one.

Cary’s fascinating argument, of which I have given only a brief and partial account, may be arguable, yet it does concern some major questions, which I also examine. First of all, what is the relationship of the various versions of *Hamlet*? Where does Shakespeare’s work stand in the eight centuries’ treatments of the Hamlet/ Amleth story? Second, what is the significance of names? What factors should be taken into account concerning the names or designations; and what are their implications on the play as a whole? Cary considers Shakespeare’s sources, which date back to the twelfth century; in Shakespeare’s time, the early seventeenth century, the Amleth/ Hamlet story was already as old as Shakespeare’s play is today. The point is that Shakespeare recycled an old and then already antiquated story along with the hero’s name; he thus created a new drama for the English stage from the French and Danish narrative sources, drawing on some dramatic sources too, in particular the so-called *Ur-Hamlet*. In doing so, the playwright created a work that is substantially different from both Belleforest’s and Saxo’s narrative, and from any other drama.

In this regard, Shakespeare was certainly free to alter the hero’s name, for he created a work of his own. However, if we are concerned with Shakespeare’s work, in my opinion, we should be faithful to it, whether approaching it as an editor, critic or director. Accordingly, we should not alter the names or designations either; unless, of course, we want to create a new play or an admittedly new version of the Hamlet story, for which there are also a number of notable examples. As for Hamlet’s name, there is no real problem about that: it has normally remained the same since Shakespeare (at least in the English versions and adaptations of his play). It is also clear that if we take the whole designation, the descriptive title of the protagonist is “Prince of Denmark”, for that is already in the title of Shakespeare’s text in all



three original editions.<sup>163</sup>

We can therefore return to the designation of the Ghost, as that is more arguable in the modern reception, and consider some further points. As we have seen, editors use the designation “Ghost of Hamlet’s father” (or similar additions to “Ghost”) for two main reasons. On the one hand, they resort to conventions and rely on the received designation, which first applied in the 1676 Sixth Quarto. On the other hand, they draw on the text; or rather, on their (or others’) interpretation of the text. According to Jesús Tronch-Pérez, “modern editors have more respect for the dialogue than for stage directions, speech prefixes or other para-textual features”.<sup>164</sup> Among various references to the character, which we have also surveyed above, as at certain parts of the dialogue Hamlet himself calls the Ghost “Hamlet” and “King”. However, the main reason for maintaining such an interpretation – and designation – is that it is usually believed that King Claudius’ admission of his guilt in the Prayer Scene proves the Ghost’s honesty and hence also his identity, as we have seen it in G.R. Hibbard’s introduction to the *Oxford Hamlet* edition (1994, 38).

If we analyse the historical, religious or spiritual context, we can find numerous texts that refute this common modern assumption, as we shall see below. However, on this issue, parallel examples in the Shakespeare canon can also be helpful. The question, again, is what to take into account in the interpretation and in the editorial choices. In their annotations, editors tend to refer to various other texts that they believe relevant, to some extent practising the method of intertextuality. As we have seen, the cited texts can range from the earliest possible sources to the most recent critical interpretations. In criticism too, a large number of other texts have been related to *Hamlet*, mostly depending on the critics’ preferences and perspectives. Now I would highlight a parallel in Shakespeare that I have already cited

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<sup>163</sup> The spelling of the title varies in Q1, Q2 and F, but that is irrelevant from the point of interpretation (“Denmark” or “Denmarke”).

<sup>164</sup> “Tronch’s response” to my paper at the 2009 British Shakespeare Association Conference, circulated among the participants of the session “Shakespeare’s Next Editors”.

concerning the problems of criticism; here I would consider the textual and editorial implications on *Hamlet*.

*Macbeth* is not only another one of Shakespeare's great tragedies; it is also concerned with the supernatural. Moreover, it is the play that is placed directly before *Hamlet* in the First Folio. Therefore, if one takes the First Folio text of *Hamlet*, and reads it after the preceding play in the volume, one is already informed about the following.

But 'tis strange:  
And oftentimes, to winne vs to our harme,  
The Instruments of Darknesse tell vs Truths,  
Winne vs with honest Trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.

(*Macbeth*, Act I, ll. 232-6)<sup>165</sup>

Banquo warns Macbeth about the dangers of equivocation, the technique applied by the three Witches: truth in one respect, particularly a partial truth in a complex issue, does not guarantee honesty and reliability; it can serve as a means of deception too. Even though the Witches tell the truth about Macbeth's future, they can still be the instruments of darkness, or Hell; they can still be evil. As we shall see below at the historical analysis, this was a hot topic at the time, particularly after the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, but it was certainly not new information for the first audiences of *Macbeth*, who had been immersed in religious controversies for decades; and it applies not only to witches, but to any ambiguous supernatural phenomena and even to men using such language.

Modern editions of the complete works of Shakespeare, even if their text is based on the First Folio, tend to follow the supposed chronological order of the plays, and therefore usually place *Macbeth* (c. 1606) after *Hamlet* (c. 1601-2). This is true of the latest Oxford

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<sup>165</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1623 First Folio Edition). Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ShMacF.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>.

edition too, where *Hamlet* is the 26<sup>th</sup> work and *Macbeth* is the 36<sup>th</sup>.<sup>166</sup> However, in the 1623 Folio, which contains 36 plays arranged into three categories (comedies, histories and tragedies), *Macbeth* is the 31<sup>st</sup> play and *Hamlet* is the 32<sup>nd</sup>. As the seventh work in the group of tragedies, *Macbeth* is actually the first of those four plays that critics following A. C. Bradley have tended to regard as the most important ones of the canon, often labelling them as the “great tragedies”.<sup>167</sup> The original order in the Folio can be explained by the fact that Shakespeare’s company was under the patronage of King James I (1603-25), and hence called the King’s Men. As has been mentioned, *Macbeth*, with its topics of Scottish history and witchcraft, was specifically written for King James after his accession to the English throne, and this probably accounts for its pre-eminence in the Folio. These issues of the supernatural, however, should not be ignored concerning *Hamlet* either. In fact, all editions of *Hamlet* were published after King James’ accession (the First Quarto was published in that year), and the play was written a few years after James’ *Daemonologie* (1597), which will be further discussed below.

Therefore, in a critical edition of the text of *Hamlet*, this parallel point about the Witches in *Macbeth* could also be noted concerning the Ghost. What I should emphasise here is that this piece of information concerns not only the interpretation of the character at the relevant scenes (particularly those before and after the play-within-the-play), but also its designation and identity. Accordingly, this could be noted already at the beginning of the play, if a list of characters is provided with annotations, even if briefly, as a third major point concerning the character. First of all, of course, as I have explained, editors should observe the designation “Ghost”, and possibly avoid such additions that typically limit the

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<sup>166</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2005).

<sup>167</sup> In the Folio, *Macbeth* is followed by *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. In A. C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (1904), *Macbeth* is the last play discussed. Bradley, whose study is often regarded as the most influential single work of Shakespeare criticism ever published, interprets Hamlet as a moral hero, the Ghost as Hamlet’s father, and revenge as a sacred duty – all of which are very arguable in the original historical and religious context of the play, as we have seen and will further discuss below.

interpretation. Secondly, as I have argued, the relevant meanings of the word “ghost” should also be noted, not only the usual modern one. Such an approach to the play would allow a more comprehensive and perhaps more faithful interpretation of Shakespeare’s work than has been the case since the Restoration and particularly since the Romantic commentators.

Having seen how the originally ambiguous Ghost tends to be called and identified merely as Hamlet’s father or King Hamlet by modern critics and editors, we should also see how this practice has developed and what further simplifications it has involved in the reception. Then we can return to the original context for a fresh look at the play, and eventually consider some theoretical issues as well. The question, after all, is not only how we should call the Ghost and what is meant by the character, but also what is meant by *Hamlet*.

## Chapter 4

### THE AESTHETIC IDENTITY OF *HAMLET*: SOME ISSUES AND PRODUCTIONS

Every time you are putting on a production of *Hamlet*, you are putting on a new play essentially because you pick and choose what you want. Whether you want it to be 5 hours long – We're trying to come in under 3 hours.

Joshua McGuire<sup>168</sup>

This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.

Laurence Olivier<sup>169</sup>

#### 4.1 Aesthetic identity, translation, and the loss of the text

What do we mean by *Hamlet*? I have already referred to Terence Hawkes, who claims, “Shakespeare does not mean: *we* mean by Shakespeare”.<sup>170</sup> We have also seen that critics have indeed offered various interpretations of Shakespeare's work, demonstrating what they mean by *Hamlet*, as well as by Shakespeare, when attributing various intentions to him. Let us, however, consider this question quite concretely now. What do we actually mean when we refer to *Hamlet*? Is it the text, or a performance of the play in the theatre, perhaps a production

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<sup>168</sup> “Introducing Joshua McGuire as Hamlet” Interview with Hayley Bartley. McGuire played the lead role in the 2011-12 Shakespeare's Globe production of *Hamlet*, analysed in 4.2. below.

<http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/education/discovery-space/adopt-an-actor/archive/hamlet-played-by-joshua-mcguire/introducing-joshua-mcguire-as-hamlet> (accessed 5 February 2013).

<sup>169</sup> Olivier's comment on the tragedy at the beginning of his own film adaptation (1948), cf. below.

<sup>170</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3.

or an adaptation in yet another form or medium; or just a concept that is drawn from a variety of factors? What do we read or see and comment on, when attempting to interpret it? In other words, what is the aesthetic identity of *Hamlet*?

This question can be answered by specifying the text or the production – or adaptation – one refers to: critics, as we have seen, normally note the edition they cite or the production they review. We also have to differentiate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the various adaptations; and that is where the problems tend to start. If Shakespeare's work is complex, so is the question what we mean by that work, and how it is related to the adaptations. As has been mentioned, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be considered both as a literary work and as a play for the theatre: as a text or as a performance of a stage production. However, there are various other manifestations: productions, adaptations or treatments of *Hamlet*, which are not really by Shakespeare, but are based on his work, and are often presented or discussed as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* too. Moreover, even as a literary work or as a play, there are major differences in the various *Hamlets*. Considering these differences, it is questionable whether a certain edition or production can be taken as a faithful presentation of Shakespeare's work, or should already be regarded as an adaptation.

As we have seen, even the original texts are available in three different versions; and the modernised editions tend to be different from all three of them, as well as from each other, at least in some respects. If we also consider the productions, the issue is certainly far more complex: *Hamlet* becomes more tangible and more elusive at the same time. In a sense, there are as many *Hamlets* as there are readers and viewers, in so far as the various views or interpretations are concerned. However, it is safe to say that there are at least as many *Hamlets* as productions, for no two productions are exactly alike, and the differences can be remarkable.

In any study, it is imperative to identify the subject matter precisely, but it is particularly important with such a debated work, which is full of problems for some commentators. The point is that even if one refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one may mean something else, which is only related to the original work; part of the problems may be that the object of the debate is not the same. As has been pointed out, a problem of the reception may not be a problem in the original texts and contexts. We have already seen some ambiguities concerning the play, its protagonist and particularly the Ghost, including the latter character's identity. In the course of the reception, these ambiguities have been largely ignored or eliminated; however, another kind of ambiguity has arisen through the centuries of adaptations: the identity of *Hamlet* itself has become questionable.

Whereas in the previous chapter the focus was on the text, now it is on the productions, or rather, on the relationship of various texts and productions: how the text has been realised on stage, as well as on screen; what kind of texts are actually used for the productions; and how they are related to other texts, particularly those of the original editions and the critical reception. In the comparison of the original and the modern editions, we have seen that the modernisation has usually involved simplification, in particular concerning the Ghost; this, however, is seldom noted or realised even by the expert editors and commentators. In the productions, the simplifications or other alterations tend to be more momentous and therefore more easily recognisable, but they are not always evident either. Whereas editors have at least attempted to be faithful to Shakespeare, this cannot always be said of the productions. At the same time, the productions can also be related to the problems of criticism; in fact, they have tended to go hand in hand in the course of the reception.

The productions discussed in this chapter are very different from each other; in most cases, they are also different from the text, particularly if we consider the whole text of either the Second Quarto or the First Folio. But all are major productions, including various stage

productions in London, from the Restoration to 2012, some of the most famous film adaptations of the twentieth century, as well as a nineteenth-century opera, which has been revived recently and was presented and broadcast live from the New York Metropolitan Opera in movie theatres around the world on 27 March 2010. Despite the major differences, all these versions are called *Hamlet*; moreover, in most cases – except for the opera – they claim to present Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Thomas’s opera *Hamlet*, as we shall see, is useful to consider because it typically realises the Romantic concept of Shakespeare’s work; moreover, despite the obvious differences from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it is comparable not only to some aspects of criticism, but also to those of some other adaptations, even to some features of the stage productions. The purpose of this analysis is twofold: to see what is meant by *Hamlet* in these productions – or at least what is actually presented to the audience as such – and to examine how and why they are different from the original work, what kind of problems can be noted about them, focusing mainly on the text, but taking into account several other factors as well. As a number of productions are discussed, within the scope of this chapter only some major points can be highlighted as representative of the problems of the reception. A related purpose is to see the development of the productions: how the modern notion of *Hamlet* has developed since the Restoration until the twenty-first century, even if only through some representative examples.

#### **4.1.1 The notion of “aesthetic identity”, and its relationship to translation**

In this section, before examining various *Hamlets*, I would consider some general issues relating to texts, productions and adaptations, including the notion of aesthetic identity, drawing on Stuart Sillars’ very informative article on the nature of the text in the age of globalisation and the internet.<sup>171</sup> Sillars examines some of the new ways of rendering texts in

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<sup>171</sup> Stuart Sillars, “Globalisation and the Loss of the Text”. *Trans. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*. Nr. 9 (2001). <http://www.inst.at/trans/9Nr/sillars9.htm>. Accessed: 23 June, 2012.



our modern culture, together with some relevant examples from the past, discussing Shakespeare as a model, but not specifically *Hamlet*. Reflecting on some points raised by Sillars, I would demonstrate their relevance to this tragedy and its reception.

As for the general significance of the productions, it must be noted that although we can read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a literary work, as it is usually interpreted by literary critics, it was originally written for performance: to be seen as a play, rather than merely to be read as a text. Even though we may regard the Second Quarto text as the original, most complete version of Shakespeare's work (at least among the published texts), which can be interpreted as a complex and quite ambiguous literary work, from the point of the theatre it is only a script. It is perhaps inevitable that not all the potentials of the text can be explored or realised in one particular production. In this sense, the text is more complex or richer in meaning than any production; as has been mentioned, *Hamlet* in particular can truly be regarded as a "Poem unlimited" (2.2.399).<sup>172</sup> However, every performance is much more complex than the mere text in other respects. The semiotics of drama and the theatre will also be discussed in Chapter 6, below; but let us first see some points on texts and their applications or adaptations. As Sillars points out, the nature of the text of a play is ambiguous:

Constantly recreated in theatric performance, the printed text is closer to an orchestral score as the basis for continuous reinterpretation than to the deceptively finite text of a poem or novel.

(Sillars, 3)

Every performance is thus already an interpretation of the text, and the text of a play is therefore by definition ambiguous. This is especially relevant from the point of *Hamlet*, which, as we have seen, is widely regarded as the most problematic play ever written, as well

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<sup>172</sup> Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2003). Despite his book's title, however, Bloom tends to limit the play to its romantic reading in regarding Hamlet as a moral hero, or even as a superhuman, and largely ignoring the sinister elements, as well as the historical and religious implications concerning both the hero and the Ghost, whom he regards as Old Hamlet.

as a remarkably ambiguous one. As Sillars observes, the ambiguous text of a play can be interpreted differently in different performances; of course, this applies even more to the different productions. The continuous reinterpretation, however, may also involve that the ambiguities may have been interpreted very differently in Shakespeare's time than today.

There are two further problems related to *Hamlet*. The first one is length: it is Shakespeare's longest play; Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film adaptation of the full text takes over four hours. On the stage, Frank Benson's first uncut version in Stratford, in 1899, took much longer, particularly with the intervals; it was dubbed as the "eternity version".<sup>173</sup> Benson's production of the First Folio text at the Lyceum in 1990 took six hours.<sup>174</sup> Therefore it is inevitable that the text is heavily cut in most modern productions and adaptations; even if producers do not wish to alter or simplify Shakespeare's work, they usually need to shorten it somehow. It is sometimes believed that the text may have been cut already in Shakespeare's time, and that the much shorter First Quarto text could reflect that, but there is no evidence of that; most editors regard Q1 as a very corrupt or "bad" edition, probably because of piracy. Another reason for the significant differences between Q1 and Q2 could be that Shakespeare may have improved the play and the text himself, but I do not want to speculate on the nature and origins of Q1. As I have stated, I am concerned primarily with Q2, and partly with F and some of the later editions too. The problem is that the major cuts of the modern productions tend to involve simplifications.<sup>175</sup>

The second problem is related to this, we have little information about the original, Elizabethan or Jacobean stage productions of *Hamlet*. Although we have some knowledge about the Elizabethan stage conventions, which are also reflected in the reconstructed Globe

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<sup>173</sup> Nick Walton, "Hamlet: Past Productions: On the RSC Stage 1700-1900".  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/hamlet/past\\_productions/rsc\\_stage\\_1700\\_1900.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/hamlet/past_productions/rsc_stage_1700_1900.shtml) (Accessed: 7/11/2012.)

<sup>174</sup> Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 1971), 245.

<sup>175</sup> Branagh's film is therefore particularly interesting from the point of whether the complete text can guarantee fidelity to Shakespeare, cf. below.

theatre,<sup>176</sup> and there are some contemporary allusions to *Hamlet* too, as we do not have the original promptbooks, nor is there any contemporary criticism that would discuss the works or the productions in detail, we do not know which parts of the text were originally enacted or perhaps omitted; nor do we really know how the play was actually performed in Shakespeare's time. We have much more information available about the productions of the later periods; not only from the point of the performed text or script, but also about acting itself. The later in time, the more information we have: since 1900, visual and sound recordings of performances have also been produced,<sup>177</sup> and eventually a number of film adaptations as well. Therefore, there are some special limitations every production and every study has to face if they are concerned with the issue of authenticity.

Sillars explores "the ways in which the aesthetic objects of globalisation have changed from those of the pre-global age", and raises the following questions.

First, how does the identity of the text - literary, visual, or any other - change when it becomes not a product of a single culture but something owned by many cultures or, increasingly, dependent upon a single pan-global net of cultural predicates? Secondly, what complex of biotechnological relations have come to bear upon the way in which texts are constituted and read when they are committed to or generated in cybernetic cultures?

(Sillars, 1)

It is noteworthy that by "text" Sillars means not only literary texts, but visual and other ones as well, which is particularly important from the point of Shakespeare, as is globalisation. Sillars discusses the practice of translation, and notes that in "in translating we lose all the immediacy, which includes complexities, half-heard echoes and deconstructive sideslips, of the original text" (ibid.). By translation, Sillars initially means translation from one language to another, using the word in its most common sense, and considering "translation as a major

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<sup>176</sup> See e.g. Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 2nd ed. 1996).

<sup>177</sup> On Sarah Bernhard's recording, see the *Arden 3 Hamlet* (2006), 108.

act of cultural relocation”, underscoring the fact that “the act of translation involves the loss of the text in all its original complexity and slipperiness” (2). It is important that Sillars’ examples are not only linguistic, but also cultural ones, for instance, concerning the American reception of Ezra Pound.

However, if we consider the modernised editions of *Hamlet* discussed above, I would argue that modern editors also apply the method of translation, particularly in cultural terms, even if remaining within the boundaries of the English language. In a sense, the original text or texts are translated from Shakespeare’s early modern English to the editors’ and their readers’ modern English, involving not only the problems of spelling or punctuation, but also some other important aspects that we have seen above, constituting a “major act of cultural relocation” and losing the “original complexity and slipperiness” of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in these textual versions, at times arbitrarily disambiguating the text.

Another important point is that, according to Sillars, paraphrasing a text is “perhaps another form of translation” (ibid). Paraphrasing Shakespeare’s text is one of the most common forms of Shakespeare criticism: it is widely used in the editorial annotations to the text, particularly of the difficult or ambiguous parts; but it is common in virtually any kind of criticism, traditional and modern alike. The problem is that critics often fail to note that in the process they already translate and usually disambiguate Shakespeare’s complex text into their own interpretation of it; hence the complexity of the original is often lost. Paraphrasing Shakespeare’s text (or already a modernised version of it in a recent edition), many critics apparently believe that they provide some inherent facts of the text, or even Shakespeare’s own views, rather than their own ideas about them; as we have seen above.

#### 4.1.2 The possible advantages of translation: an example

On the other hand, Sillars also points out that “in some cases, the larger cultural consequence of translation may be claimed as an advantage, from which considerable cultural benefits may be said to accrue” (2). An example is “the translations of Shakespeare into German by Tieck, Goethe and Schiller, to which ultimately we must be grateful for the foundation of modern critical study of the canon” (ibid). Sillars also considers “other ways in which translation may be said to enhance, rather than to deny, the origin and identity of the text” (ibid.). Quoting Walter Benjamin, Sillars takes the question “that sees translation as a practice that reveals the mystery of the original, its inviolability” (ibid.).

Here I would briefly return to the issue of designations, and comment on a more recent translation that may indeed reveal “the mystery of the original”. In general, it can be argued that the entire list of characters added to the text in the modern editions of Shakespeare is part of a translation of the original work for the modern readers, who would probably find it difficult to start reading the text without such a list. In the Restoration, when the list was added to *Hamlet* for the first time, this already assisted the contemporary readers, and perhaps also the actors and actresses whose names were included in the so-called players’ quarto of 1676 (Q6). As we have seen, editors of the English language editions have tended to follow this list ever since, even though it does not really reveal the mystery of the original text, but may actually conceal it.

As we have seen, the Arden editors have felt compelled to maintain the designation “Ghost of Hamlet’s father”, as it was first applied by Davenant, despite the perceived problem of precluding the ambiguity of the character, for they regard this as the standard.<sup>178</sup> Most foreign translators, including the Hungarians, have followed this tradition too, or just relied on the recent critical editions like the Arden or the Oxford Shakespeare. Nevertheless, in

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<sup>178</sup> See the analysis of the *Arden 3 Hamlet* (2006) in Chapter 3 above.

translating Renaissance texts, foreigners are probably not so bound by the English cultural traditions that originated only after the Renaissance. As I have briefly mentioned above in a footnote, István Eörsi applied a different descriptive addition to the designation “Ghost” in his Hungarian translation, even though he used the modern English critical editions too. Retranslated into English, the designation reads: “GHOST *in the figure* of Hamlet’s father, the late King”<sup>179</sup>. Perhaps paradoxically, this translation may indeed reveal the mystery of the original character and play, in so far as it restores the ambiguous identity of the character, as opposed to the modernised English editions, which may actually conceal or deprive the mystery and the ambiguity of the original.

Eörsi does not annotate his edition of *Hamlet*, and therefore he does not comment on this designation and its translation. However, in the preface to his translation he explains why he felt the need to translate Shakespeare into Hungarian in the late twentieth century, when the whole canon had already been translated by some of the greatest Hungarian poets. Indeed, it was somewhat risky to retranslate Shakespeare, as the former translations had already been familiar for the Hungarian readers and audiences; many key phrases had become similarly proverbial for the Hungarians in their familiar Hungarian translations as the English original for the English. Moreover, the Hungarian translations of the nineteenth century were still relatively new and modern as compared to the original English texts of early seventeenth century. However, Eörsi argued that the nineteenth-century Hungarian translations sounded already dated or obsolete by the late-twentieth century, a phenomenon that is in sharp contrast with Shakespeare’s English as it must have been experienced in its original context. Shakespeare used the language of his contemporaries; his language was not only uniquely rich and vivid, but also fresh and contemporaneous for the Elizabethan audiences.

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<sup>179</sup> “SZELLEM, Hamlet apjának, az elhunyt királynak az alakjában” [GHOST, in the figure of Hamlet’s father, the late king], italics added. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, dán királyfi tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark], Hungarian translation by István Eörsi (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1990), 8. Eörsi used mainly the Arden 2 series, the *Hamlet* edited by Harold Jenkins (1982).

Eörsi further explains that the translations – even if unconsciously – show the characteristics of their own period, rather than those of the Renaissance.<sup>180</sup> Accordingly, the nineteenth-century translations reflected the cultural conventions of an era that was quite different from the Renaissance; in particular, it was erotically repressed and prudish (one can think of the so-called Victorian values, for instance). In such a context, the ambiguities, puns and sexual connotations of Shakespeare were not well received, and often ignored or eliminated. Eörsi, however, wanted to restore the original taste and ambiguities of the text, even if in translation, however difficult and ultimately impossible the task may be. For instance, it is indeed difficult to translate “Fishmonger” (2.2.174), so that the ambiguity of the word is retained, carrying the sexual connotations of Elizabethan England (and thus allowing Polonius to be considered as a “pimp” too, which has a very special significance concerning Ophelia, as well as to Hamlet’s bawdy jokes about her). Nevertheless, Eörsi took on that challenge too; he retained the ambiguity of the exchange between Hamlet and Polonius. In comparison, it is relatively easy to provide a descriptive label to “Ghost” in the list of roles that does not preclude the ambiguity of the character at the outset, and adequately differentiates the “figure” from the “father”.

#### 4.1.3 Some questions on texts, adaptations, and the internet

Sillars also considers “other kinds of textual change” (3): the text reinvented as a painting, opera, ballet or film.<sup>181</sup> Examining the different “texts”, Sillars raises the following questions.

At what stage in this progress do we move away from one text and into another? Has the verbal text been lost, or has it simply gathered to

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<sup>180</sup> Eörsi (1990), 3-5.

<sup>181</sup> “What happens, for example, when the text is reinvented in terms of a painting or an opera? As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, many people became aware of *Romeo and Juliet* through paintings and engravings showing Juliet on the balcony; in different periods, others knew it through Tchaikovsky's *Fantasy-Overture* (three versions, 1869, 1870, 1880) and Prokofiev's ballet (1935-6), and still more through Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) and Zeffirelli's film (1968)” (Sillars, 2001, 3).

itself a series of new harmonic upper partials that clarify and amplify the original fundamental note?<sup>182</sup>

Sillars suggests that

ballets and operas offer a temporal sequence that, while significantly changing the text, offer us what we might call a continuous tonal analogue of its original form. We might call this another version of the text, an interpretation, or a sustained critical commentary in a different æsthetic medium: whichever way, the current of the text is maintained, whilst the process of transformation becomes part of the currency of æsthetic exchange.

(Sillars, *ibid.*)

Sillars then considers the “ambiguous nature of the ‘text’ of a play”, comparing “the printed script” to an “orchestral score” (*ibid.*).

*Hamlet*, like *Romeo and Juliet*, has opera and film adaptations too; many know Shakespeare’s work through Zeffirelli’s or Olivier’s versions.<sup>183</sup> It can be instructive to compare these forms of the “text” or these “sustained critical commentaries” with each other, and also with the original texts. Thomas’s *Hamlet* opera (1868) and the *Hamlet* films by Olivier (1948), Zeffirelli (1990) and Branagh (1996) may be particularly useful in studying the problems of the reception of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Some other important points related to the verbal or written text are also considered by Sillars, for instance, its applications in cyberspace, and the questionable value of those applications.

It is now possible to download the Arden Shakespeare; but, considering that all the volumes are available at a fairly modest cost and provide immediate access when purchased, whereas printing out the whole of a text costs the user (or, more likely, the user's employer

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<sup>182</sup> Sillars adds the following questions: “How far is it valid to consider hypertext within this frame? More specifically, is the change that a text undergoes when it is presented in cyberspace comparable to earlier ‘translations’ or is it so different qualitatively that it demands a wholly new critical vocabulary?” (*ibid.*).

<sup>183</sup> A highly comic but instructive episode in David Lodge’s campus novel *Changing Places* (London: Penguin, 1975), is when a colleague at the English department of a prestigious American university admits that he has not read *Hamlet*; he has only seen the Olivier movie. The admission occurs during a game called “Humiliation”: players name literary classics they have not read, the winner is the one who displays the most woeful literary lacuna. In this case, the player with *Hamlet* wins the game, but eventually loses his job.



or university) almost as much in terms of paper and laser-printing time and materials it does not seem a worthwhile exercise.

(Sillars, 5)

Sillars is certainly right in these observations, but two points can be noted here. It seems that Sillars, like many critics and translators, regard the Arden Shakespeare as not only the pre-eminent Shakespeare series of the past century or so, but as the edition containing the literary “text” proper, which can be studied or translated into other “texts”; whether into foreign languages, or into other media, like films. However, as we have seen, the Arden editions do not actually contain the original texts either, but already their newly edited, modernised versions, which can be considered as “translations” too; modernised and annotated texts intended for modern readers in a modern cultural context. A considerable part of these publications is concerned with noting the perceived differences between the original texts, as well the differences from them in the newly edited texts; the editors try to explain the differences in the meanings and uses of certain words and phrases in Shakespeare’s early modern English as compared to the readers’ modern English. The annotations tend to highlight and elucidate these differences, focusing particularly on those elements of the text that have become obscure for the modern readers. However, as I have argued, some of the explanations are arguable, and some annotations may involve a simplification of the original text.

A major advantage of cyberspace, however, is that – thanks to websites like [www.hamletworks.org](http://www.hamletworks.org) – the original texts can also be read online; they can be compared to each other, as well as to the various modern editions. If we consider the value of the internet editions, it must be noted that many, if not most, major editions of the past four hundred years are now available and comparable for anyone with internet access. The process takes only a few clicks, and some websites (like hamletworks.org) are specifically designed to assist such comparisons. This recent development is also marked by the “Resources” section of the latest

Norton edition of *Hamlet* (2011), edited by Robert S. Miola, in which the “ONLINE” resources, listed in over two pages, precede those in “PRINT”, that is, the traditional bibliography.<sup>184</sup> This is quite a revolutionary development in the study of Shakespeare, which has taken place over the past couple of decades; its impact can be compared to the opening of the Folger or the Huntington Library in the United States, when some private collections of the limited number of early texts were made available for public use and study in the late nineteenth century.<sup>185</sup> However, the impact of the recent internet revolution is actually far bigger: instant access to almost all major texts, at any time, for virtually anyone, from anywhere around the world. Moreover, a large number of other relevant texts are also available online, contemporary documents, reference works and critical studies alike; though access to these websites is not always free.<sup>186</sup>

Returning to the notion of aesthetic identity, the Arden 3 *Hamlet* is certainly much closer either to the Second Quarto or the First Folio text than, for instance, Olivier’s *Hamlet* or the French opera we shall also consider below. As we have seen, this latest, 2006 Arden edition is also closer the original texts than most other editions, including the Arden 2 *Hamlet* (published in 1982, and available as the “Arden Shakespeare” at the time of Sillars’ 2001 article), which offered not only a modernised text, but also a conflated one of Q2 and F. However, despite some efforts at authenticity, the Arden 3 *Hamlet* is, again, not identical to original texts either, and, as we have seen, different from them in several respects, some of which may be crucial from the point of interpretation.

Finally, I let us consider another useful example of internet applications referred to by Sillars.

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<sup>184</sup> Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 391-7.

<sup>185</sup> See Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1991), 198.

<sup>186</sup> Sillars also discusses the significance of the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as well as the problems of its limited availability: “costly for an individual but much cheaper for a group: it is intriguing and ironic that the use of such devices may well lead to an increase in use of a much more traditional site of intellectual exchange, the library” (Sillars, 5). Above we have seen the significance of the *OED* in explaining the different meanings of “ghost”, which is used usually only in its modern (8<sup>th</sup>) meaning in the modern reception of *Hamlet*.

In Bergen, the University's Seksjon for humanistisk informatikk has produced a hypertext version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (<http://cmc.uib.no/dream>)(10), offering a hyperspace tour of the wood outside Athens (itself a relocation, or translation, of the Forest of Arden) alongside the text of the play and a range of textual glosses and other information. [...] My question is this: has the text been lost by these attentions, or has it merely been retranslated into another medium?

(Sillars, 3)

Sillars concludes that “ultimately, the text is not lost, but undergoes another act of translation and critical commentary” (4). In this case, the text of the play is thus retained, in addition to undergoing an act – or acts – of translation; the whole text is provided, together with additional information, gained as a result of certain translations (though it can be noted that the offered text is also a modernised one; therefore also already the result of a “translation” of the original).

From the numerous websites offering texts and study guides on Shakespeare, I would mention [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com). This website includes “No Fear Shakespeare”, where the text of the plays can be read in two columns, “Original Text” and “Modern Text” side by side: another example for translation. Shakespeare’s early modern English, his uniquely sophisticated and often ambiguous poetry, is translated into prose in a modern, plain English. This translation is relatively faithful, or perhaps quite as faithful as such a venture can possibly get, but part of the ambiguities is inevitably lost.<sup>187</sup> It should also be noted about these texts that the “Original Text” is not exactly the same as any of the three original editions; it is also in modern spelling, that is, basically already a modernised version too, already losing some of the ambiguities. But these involve only a very little part of the text, which is therefore not really lost by these attentions in cyberspace.

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<sup>187</sup> As this study is concerned primarily with Shakespeare’s original texts, I would not go into specific details of the “Modern Text”.

The website also includes a list of characters and their descriptions. That list contains the designation “The Ghost”, with the following – somewhat contradictory – description:

The specter of Hamlet’s recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.<sup>188</sup>

This designation thus retains the ambiguity of the character, and the description is also fairly accurate in this case. Even so, the same contradiction can be noted on this description as on Greenblatt’s above cited Norton introduction to *Hamlet*, as well as on his longer study of the character. If the identity of the Ghost is never definitively resolved, the character should not be described as “the specter of Hamlet’s father”; even though the rest of the description aptly modifies this much too categorical statement, already suggesting that it concerns primarily the level of appearances. In any case, this study guide can be regarded as considerably more accurate than Harold Bloom’s, for instance, which contains the designation “Old Hamlet” for the Ghost;<sup>189</sup> involving a reductive – mostly romantic – interpretation of the character and the play, as we shall see below in more detail.

However, if we consider the productions of *Hamlet*, unfortunately, in most cases, much of the text is indeed lost. As has been mentioned, one reason for the loss is the remarkable length of the original text or texts (both Q2 and F); the other reason, however, is that the text has truly undergone some noteworthy transformations or translations amidst the never-ending “attentions”, so as to meet the needs of new audiences, cultures and media. As we shall see, this can be noted not only about the famous opera or film adaptations, but also

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<sup>188</sup> John Crowther, ed. “No Fear Hamlet.” SparkNotes.com. SparkNotes LLC. 2005.

See <http://nfs.sparknotes.com/hamlet/characters.html> (accessed 18 February 2013).

<sup>189</sup> See the “List of Characters” in Harold Bloom, *Bloom’s Guides: Hamlet* (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 18.

about the modern stage productions. Let us therefore see some examples: the *Hamlets* of various periods and media.

## **4.2 *Hamlet* as a play for the theatre**

### **4.2.1 Davenant's Restoration *Hamlet***

There have been numerous efforts to reconstruct Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the original, Renaissance play, as it may have been played at the first Globe; as we shall see, the *Hamlet* 2000 production at the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe theatre reflects these too. However, as has been mentioned, we have much more information available on the productions after the Renaissance, both as to the specific text that was played and how it was played; and these productions may be very different from the original.<sup>190</sup> As a stage production, Davenant's *Hamlet* was already an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for the Restoration stage, consciously designed to meet the expectations of the new audiences, who found Shakespeare quite old and obsolete already in the 1660s. As Gary Taylor explains, after the two-decade break in the performances, due to the closing of the theatres during the Civil War, Shakespeare had to be reinvented from almost oblivion; in fact, he had been not the most popular playwright by the end of the Renaissance.<sup>191</sup>

After the restoration of the monarchy and the foundation of new acting companies and theatres, Shakespeare could survive – or rather, could be revived – only in heavily adapted forms. The adaptations soon became highly popular, and Shakespeare rapidly regained his

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<sup>190</sup> This section analyses only some of the most important *Hamlet* productions, particularly some early and recent ones. For studies that are concerned specifically with Shakespeare on the stage, see, e.g. Jonathan Bate and Russell Jackson, eds., *Shakespeare: An Illustrated Stage History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), or Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>191</sup> Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1991), 7-49. Drawing on Taylor's highly informative study, I would add some points that may have been overlooked by him.

past glory – or even surpassed that – but it was already a different Shakespeare: modified texts presented in new garbs, interpreted by a new audience. As Taylor points out,

The Restoration differed from subsequent periods only in the extent to which this process of adaptation was conscious, flagrant, unashamed. Later ages would also, in their own ways, reinvent Shakespeare – but unlike the honestly hypocritical Restoration – they would simply deny that they were adapting him at all. The Restoration at least knew what it was doing.

(Taylor, 1991, 20)

*Hamlet* was also “heavily cut and revised” (33). Although compared to the “more notorious adaptations, Davenant’s *Hamlet* seems hardly adapted at all” (47),<sup>192</sup> he makes several hundred smaller changes in wording, which affect the interpretation; and so do the numerous long cuts, but even some shorter ones: the omission of certain crucial lines, and the addition of some new ones. In the Prayer Scene, when Hamlet dismisses his opportunity to kill the praying King, the hero first secures the moral support of the audience by an inserted line, “Where is this murderer?” Then, he notes, perhaps sarcastically, “he kneels and prays”, before actually starting his much debated speech in which he reconsiders his intent (ibid).

While highlighting numerous relevant cuts and other alterations, which amount to an abridged and clear-cut play, Taylor does not note that in Davenant’s player’s quarto edition (Q6), the end of Hamlet’s speech is also marked for omission on stage.

“Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
“And that his soul may be as damn’d and black,  
“As hell, whereto it goes.”

(*Hamlet*, Q6, 3.3 – ll. 2368-70)<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> According to another performance history expert, “although the text of *Hamlet* was not subject to the kind of longlasting adaptations inflicted upon other of Shakespeare’s plays in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was, nevertheless, shortened: long speeches were curtailed, bawdy references, including those of the mad Ophelia, were decorously cut” (Rebecca Brown, “Stage History” of *Hamlet*, Royal Shakespeare Company website, <http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/hamlet/stage-history.aspx>, accessed: 22 Jan. 2013). However, as I will argue, the play has not only been shortened but also adapted since the Restoration, involving some major alterations too; cf. below.

<sup>193</sup> Davenant, William, ed. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. As it is now Acted at His Highness the Duke of York’s Theatre. By William Shakespeare*. London, 1676. (Q6) – also available online at

Thus, whereas Hamlet's unease of killing a praying man was retained, together with his concern that if he kills the King here, he would go to heaven (which, in Davenant's paraphrasing of Q2, "is a reward," not revenge), Hamlet's motivation, his explicit intention to damn his enemy, was cut in performance. The cuts are explained as follows in this edition (after the title page and before "The Persons Represented").

*To the Reader: This Play being too long to be conveniently Acted, such places as might be least prejudicial to the Plot or Sense, are left out upon the Stage: but that we may no way wrong the incomparable author, are here inserted according to the Original Copy with this Mark “*

The lines cut by Davenant's 1661 production were apparently cut on stage until 1897, that is, for over two hundred years;<sup>194</sup> in fact, as we shall see, some later producers and directors went further with the cuts and alterations, even in the twentieth century; the text is often heavily cut even now.

If we reconsider the critical reception in the light of this cut, we may better understand Hanmer's (or Stubbes') shock when he read and commented on the uncut text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (available in the already modernised editions);<sup>195</sup> or the eighteenth-century editor Johnson's horror.<sup>196</sup> These lines may well be horrifying, but they are probably even more so if one has a different concept of the hero, based on one's theatre experiences. Restoration audiences – like most later audiences – were familiar with a heavily cut and accordingly simplified *Hamlet*. The Restoration Hamlet was an unambiguously moral hero;

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[www.hamletworks.org](http://www.hamletworks.org), where the website of Q6 is: <http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/> (the line numbers follow this text, accessed: 10 Jan. 2013). In fact, Davenant's name does not appear on the title page, but the edition is generally attributed to him, as it is based on his production; Davenant had died in 1668, eight years before this edition; he produced the play already in 1661.

<sup>194</sup> See also: Margreta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 159.

<sup>195</sup> Anonymous [variously attributed to Thomas Hanmer or George Stubbes], *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare* (London, 1736), 41. (See Chapter 2, above.)

<sup>196</sup> Samuel Johnson, ed., *The Works of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), 8: 236.

this was the *Hamlet* of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and it served as the basis of the later productions too. “For the Restoration, Betterton’s *Hamlet* was *Hamlet*; the two could not be separated.”<sup>197</sup> The star tragedian of Davenant’s company played the role from 1661 to 1709, for nearly five decades, until the age of seventy-four.

As for the Ghost, the source of revenge, the ambiguities were likewise cut, particularly those parts that suggest an evil Ghost. Hamlet’s soliloquy at the end of act two was drastically abbreviated on stage; the Restoration Prince was not concerned that he could be abused by a disguised devil, nor was he an admittedly weak and melancholy character who could fall victim to evil spirits. Hamlet did not chide himself for his delay; the hero was strong and resolute to do moral justice. Accordingly, the play-within-the play (which was also heavily cut, along with Hamlet’s dialogue with the players) served merely to prove the King’s guilt; and so has it been presented in most productions since then. But even more consequential is the already mentioned innovation of the added list roles, or “The Persons Represented”, containing “Ghost of *Hamlet*’s Father” (played by “Mr. *Medburn*”), placed before the text of the play for the first time in the history of *Hamlet* editions.<sup>198</sup> For the Restoration audiences, the Ghost was already that of Hamlet’s father; this is clear from the contemporary reports too.<sup>199</sup> This, however, is already an alteration, in fact, a simplification of Shakespeare’s work; in the original texts, as has been argued, the identity of the Ghost is uncertain.

The Restoration concept of Hamlet as a moral hero, boldly fulfilling the command of his wronged father, and its differences from the much more ambiguous Renaissance *Hamlet*

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<sup>197</sup> Taylor, 1991, 50.

<sup>198</sup> Taylor fails to note this fact too; as we have seen, as an editor he retains the list (or perhaps a later list), together with the arguable (or a very similar) designation. Taylor highlights Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition, which “adopted another practice usual in editions of contemporary plays, prefacing each text with a helpful list of *dramatis personae*” (Taylor, 1991, 80-81). Rowe “recognised the convenience, long appreciated by prompters, of scripts that regularly identify characters by a single label in place of the sometimes bewildering variety of nomenclature in seventeenth century-text” (ibid). However, as has been argued in Chapter 3 above, it is arguable whether these added lists are indeed always helpful in understanding Shakespeare’s work. In some cases, they may actually limit the interpretation, particularly if they add such labels that limit the originally ambiguous identity of certain characters like the Ghost.

<sup>199</sup> Taylor, *ibid*.



(which will be further explored below) can be explained by several factors. First of all, an unquestionably moral hero was in line with the new genre of heroic tragedy, which satisfied the “neoclassical preferences for unambiguous heroes and heroines, for moral as well as structural contrast”.<sup>200</sup> Second, these generic and aesthetic principles were supported by topical, political ones.

In 1661, Davenant’s company offered Restoration audiences a play about a wicked usurper who had murdered the true king and whose hypocritical prayers were gutted by his crimes. This usurper also tries to murder the old king’s son, driving him out of his kingdom; but in the end that son returns and punishes the villain. In a scenario that so inevitably elicits parallels with English politics from 1642 to 1660, the hero needed to be as straightforward, godly, and admirable as possible.

(Taylor, 1991, 48)

Thus Hamlet was made godly already in 1661, partly – but perhaps primarily – to please Charles II, who restored not only the monarchy but also the theatres as the son of the murdered – though not secretly poisoned – Charles I. The king “officially sanctioned the restoration of English drama” and he attended the performances himself.<sup>201</sup> If the Restoration audience saw a parallel between the Ghost and Charles I, it is perhaps inevitable that the play’s suggestions of an evil, demonic Ghost had to be eliminated. As we shall see, Shakespeare’s play certainly offers the possibility of such a reading, but it is a partial, simplified and therefore arguable interpretation, realising merely the surface of the complete work; moreover, this interpretation is quite problematic indeed, if it is set against the whole play.

Finally, there is a third reason for this altered and simplified *Hamlet*, which is perhaps the most important one; more profound than the historical topicalities or the contemporary generic preferences. This has to do with the new structure of the Restoration theatre itself.

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<sup>200</sup> Taylor (1991), 48.

<sup>201</sup> Taylor (1991), 9.

Davenant's innovation of movable scenery, on the one hand, satisfied the interest of the aristocratic audience in a commercial context: the visual effects attracted more spectators. On the other hand, the introduction of scenes drew on the changed epistemological framework. The new epistemology resulted in new, modern stage conventions, which had a lasting influence; to a great extent lasting even now. In the Renaissance there was no scenery, "no pictorial representation of space and time."<sup>202</sup> In a three-dimensional – but predominantly vertical – framework, the stage represented the earth, "between 'the heavens' above (an overhang painted with astrological symbols) and 'hell' below (an invisible hollow, reachable by trapdoors)" (ibid).

This definition of space is cosmic and human: "we are here" is determined by theological architecture and portable accessories. The post-Restoration definition of space, was, in contrast, Cartesian and Newtonian: there was no theological frame, only a succession of spatial categories.

(Taylor, ibid.)

This can also explain the now usual, but already simplified view of both the hero and the Ghost. If we ignore the original theological architecture of Shakespeare's work and his theatre, even revenge can be viewed as a moral mission, particularly if the parallel intent of damning the enemy is omitted. Hamlet may be godly, but this godliness is meant mostly metaphorically, in a largely secularised context. Although the Renaissance stage had already been attacked and eventually closed by the Puritans for its perceived profanity and immorality, it had, in fact, been based on a theological framework, which was not restored in the Restoration. After the Civil War, religion and piety were actually treated with suspicion by Charles II and the new aristocracy; who were still Christian (and certainly not atheist), but this Christianity was, for the most part, nominal.

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<sup>202</sup> Taylor (1991), 15.

The changed attitude to religion and morality was also marked by the general licentiousness of the aristocracy of the new era; Charles was infamous for the large number of mistresses – who included the leading actresses – and for his illegitimate children. Of course, the Renaissance had not been a particularly prudish period either, but it is remarkable that Sir William Davenant boasted not so much about the fact that Shakespeare was his godfather; he “countenanced and perhaps encouraged a rumour” that he was also Shakespeare’s illegitimate son.<sup>203</sup> Although it may be understandable that Davenant longed to be Shakespeare’s son, Shakespeare’s portrayal of bastards is not so favourable; as it also appears from the character of Edmund, the chief villain in *King Lear*. This issue may be particularly interesting if we consider Hamlet’s attitude to it. In the Closet Scene (3.4.), Gertrude is rather heavily charged by his son with her – alleged – unfaithfulness to her late husband. As we have seen, while Hamlet wishes the damnation of his enemies, he is very concerned that her mother’s conduct may endanger her salvation.

However, the loss of the theological framework in the theatre affected predominantly the perception of the Ghost; not only in the Closet Scene, but in the whole play. Since the Restoration, the character has usually been interpreted at face value, literally as Hamlet’s father; the usurped king, who miraculously returns from the dead, much to the amazement of both Hamlet, the son (enacted by a famously terrified Betterton), and the audience. Whereas at the Globe the Ghost had spoken and come from Hell, there was no Hell in the Restoration

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<sup>203</sup> Taylor, 1991, 14. Given the fact that Davenant must have met Shakespeare in his childhood, one may be tempted to speculate whether he had any knowledge of Shakespeare’s own view of his plays; the view that is so craved by critics who attempt to reconstruct the author’s intention. In 1616, when Shakespeare died, Davenant was only ten years old; moreover, Shakespeare spent his last years in his Stratford retirement. Davenant, nevertheless, claimed authenticity to his production of *Hamlet*, surprising as it may be considering his innovations. However, he attributed the authenticity merely to the fact that he had seen a production of *Hamlet* in the Renaissance, starring Mr. Taylor, of the “Black-Fryars Company”; Davenant then instructed Betterton accordingly. Betterton thus may have played Hamlet’s role as it had been played before; perhaps even as it had been played in Shakespeare’s time – although *Hamlet* was originally performed at the Globe, which was very different from the later indoor private theatres. Taylor notes “the questionable accuracy of such reports” (Taylor, 1991, 14). I would argue that even if Betterton played the role as it had been played before, it is still questionable whether Hamlet was originally regarded as a moral hero, and whether the Ghost was really seen and accepted as his father. In any case, as I have said, the play implies another level of meaning too; cf. below.

theatre below the stage; no trapdoor for the ascending and descending stage devils. Since then, the Ghost's claims, including his allusions to Purgatory, have almost always been accepted unquestionably; not because the Restoration or modern audiences would actually believe in the return from the dead, or particularly in the existence of Purgatory (in fact, Catholicism was illegal in England from 1558 until 1832), but mainly because the religious references have been taken mostly metaphorically.<sup>204</sup> Since the Restoration, the religious elements of *Hamlet* have been either ignored, or actually cut in performance (most such references – including the Catholic ones – are marked for omission in Davenant); or approached as archaic elements of an old play. The religion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* represents a largely alien and unintelligible universe to the modern, secular readers and audiences, even if they find it fascinating, as we have seen in the review of criticism above.<sup>205</sup> This, however, has tended to involve a simplification of Shakespeare's work, both in the productions and in the critical reception.

In Davenant's *Hamlet*, a large part of the text was thus in point of fact lost in translation, as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was transformed or translated into a heroic tragedy, and adapted for the Restoration stage. At the same time, the remaining parts gained a new meaning in a new context, particularly with the added new parts; starting with the list of roles and its designations. Even though Davenant added relatively little to the text, his cuts and innovations could substantially change the general concept of *Hamlet*, modernising Shakespeare's work for the first time.

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<sup>204</sup> Modern, secular critics, retrospectively, often believe that the religious elements were taken only metaphorically already in the Renaissance, in Shakespeare's time too; but, as I will argue in more detail below, that was a very different period from the later (modern or postmodern) ones, which is also reflected in the different stage conventions. In *Hamlet*, the religious references are not only quite specific, but also decisive about Hamlet's motivation and the plot.

<sup>205</sup> In fact, critics found Shakespeare very difficult to understand already in the Restoration; Dryden, in particular, criticised Shakespeare's language, which he found unreasonable and bombastic. Taylor offers a very insightful analysis of Dryden's critique of Shakespeare, though he does not note that the cited passage on Priam's slaughter is relevant not only as a representative of Shakespeare's style and imagery, but also as a parallel to Hamlet's revenge (Taylor 1991, 40-48). In any case, that part was also cut in Davenant's production, and so has it been in most productions ever since.

#### 4.2.2 Garrick's *Hamlet* (1772)

Once Hamlet was viewed as an unquestionably moral hero, and the Ghost simply as his father, Shakespeare's play – the uncut text, as offered in the already modernised editions – appeared more and more problematic; and the difficulties of interpretation have increased with the time gap since the Renaissance. By the end of the eighteenth century, this had led to further cuts and alterations; most notably in David Garrick's adaptation. As we have seen, Samuel Johnson found Hamlet's motivation in the Prayer Scene "too horrible to be read or uttered";<sup>206</sup> Hanmer wished that "our Poet had omitted it";<sup>207</sup> and the end of the soliloquy had been cut in performance since the Restoration. Seven years after Johnson's complaint, Garrick excised the entire "horrid soliloquy" from the play.<sup>208</sup> Hamlet could then appear as perfectly moral indeed, particularly if his actions were also purified along with his words. Accordingly, Garrick, the greatest Shakespearean actor of the eighteenth century, radically abbreviated and altered the end of *Hamlet* in his production, which sought to please the refined audiences of his age, as well as to correct the perceived faults of Shakespeare.

In Garrick's *Hamlet*, Ophelia does not sing bawdy songs in her madness, and her death is not reported either; Garrick, unlike Shakespeare, does not "drown the Lady like a kitten".<sup>209</sup> This, however, also presents the hero in a more favourable light, since Ophelia's misery is caused mainly by his conduct; by the casual slaughter of Polonius. Ophelia, nevertheless, does sing distractedly at the beginning of the final scene, before she leaves (4.5).<sup>210</sup> The schoolfellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are not executed either. Although Hamlet's

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<sup>206</sup> Samuel Johnson, ed., *The Works of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), 8: 236.

<sup>207</sup> Anonymous [variously attributed to Thomas Hanmer or George Stubbes], *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Written by Mr. William Shakespeare* (London, 1736), 41.

<sup>208</sup> Thomas Davies, *Life of Garrick* (1784), in *Critical Responses to "Hamlet" (1600-1900)*, ed. David Farley-Hills (New York: AMS Press), 1995. Vol. 1, 285.

<sup>209</sup> Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (London, 1698), 10.

<sup>210</sup> For the ending of Garrick's *Hamlet* (4.5), see Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 363-6. The quotations in this sections are from this version of *Hamlet*, which is also marked by the modern spelling. In some cases, they are set against the original *Hamlet*; the Q2 text, in its original spelling.

specific command of forbidding their shriving before their deaths had been cut on stage since the Restoration,<sup>211</sup> now his forged letter ordering his escorts' sudden deaths is omitted altogether. Moreover, Laertes is not killed by Hamlet either. There is neither wager, nor duel; though Laertes does revenge his father, sister and king. King Claudius is stabbed by Hamlet after an entirely new piece of dialogue.

KING      We will not bear this insult to our presence  
              Hamlet, I did command you hence to England.  
              Affection has hitherto curbed my pow'r,  
              But you have trampled on allegiance,  
              And now shall fell my wrath. – Guards!  
HAMLET      First feel mine! [*He stabs the KING.*]

In Garrick's *Hamlet*, Horatio wants to take revenge on Laertes, but Hamlet prevents him, thus saving his murderer.

              Hold, good Horatio. 'Tis the hand of heav'n,  
              Administers by him this precious balm  
              For all my wounds.

Gertrude does not die on stage either, but leaves in horror, and reportedly falls "entranced and motionless." Hamlet piously wishes that

              When from this trance she wakes, oh, may she breathe  
              An hour of penitence ere madness ends her.

The most crucial changes, however, may not be these blatant additions; but the alterations of the last lines, which constitute the conclusion with their moral, for they are still influential. Whereas in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the dying Laertes seeks reconciliation with Hamlet, asking for heavenly pardon for the crimes committed by both of them, in Garrick's *Hamlet* it is the

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<sup>211</sup> See Davenant's players' quarto of *Hamlet* (Q6, 1676), 5.2 – line 3549 in the online text at <http://triggs.djvu.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/> (accessed 10 Jan., 2013).

remarkably moral hero who seeks forgiveness, even though he has committed considerably less crimes than in the original work; the virtually innocent Hamlet thus apologises to his own murderer.

[Laer.] Exchange forgiveness with me noble *Hamlet*,  
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,  
Nor thine on me.

(Q2, 5.2.329-331)

[HAM.] Exchange forgiveness with me brave Laertes,  
Thy sister's, father's death come not upon me,  
Nor mine on thee.

(Garrick's *Hamlet*)

According to the stage direction, Hamlet "joins HORATIO's hand to LAERTES's hand", then utters his final words, again invented by Garrick.

To calm this troubled land, I can no more,  
Nor have I more to ask, but mercy, heav'n.

Hamlet thus appears as a perfectly moral and even a perfectly religious person, both in deeds and words. Horatio has the concluding lines.

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.  
.— Take up the body. Such a sight as this  
Becomes the field but here shows much amiss.

These last lines, like most others in Garrick's ending, are familiar to everyone who is familiar with *Hamlet*; they are taken from Shakespeare's work, with an alteration that may not be evident at a first glance; such a conclusion has been quite common since Garrick, as we shall see below. The moral is that Hamlet's soul can now be rewarded with heavenly bliss for his

holy efforts, and his body is also to be singularly celebrated. It is also implied that the hero did not really deserve death at court; the bottom line is that on a less troubled land, in a happier age, he could have excelled as a warrior too. However, there are several alterations from Shakespeare, which significantly affect the interpretation.

First of all, these are not Horatio's last lines; second, two characters and their speeches are missing here; third, even the words of these lines are not rendered exactly, but with a noteworthy difference. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Horatio says only the first two of these lines. Then, English ambassadors and Fortinbras arrive with attendants. An ambassador reports on the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; after which Horatio apparently reconsiders the situation and the events, and gives a strikingly impartial account of the bloody revenge cycle. Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, becomes the new king of Denmark; and he has the last lines: the last two of Garrick's *Hamlet*, preceded by some other important ones. Although the warrior Prince grants a military tribute to Hamlet, even he is appalled by the dismal sight of the corpses of "so many Princes" at court in the original play (5.2.366). Accordingly, not only Hamlet's body, but all four "bodies" (of the King, Queen, Hamlet and Laertes) must be taken up in mourning (5.2.401), as a woeful memento, while Horatio tells their story.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will be discussed in more detail below, the point here is to see and explain the differences in its prominent eighteenth century stage production; which, on the one hand, reflected the contemporary views and expectations, on the other hand, influenced the later reception too. If we reconsider the criticism in light of Garrick's production – which is now widely regarded as an adaptation – we can better understand William Richardson's still influential view of *Hamlet*, including his psychological theory that has served as a basis for the later, psychoanalytical, interpretations too. As we can recall, Richardson claimed about Hamlet's motivation in the Prayer Scene, "These are not his real sentiments. There is nothing in the whole character of Hamlet that justifies such savage



enormity”.<sup>212</sup> In Garrick’s *Hamlet*, there is indeed nothing, unlike in Shakespeare’s. Therefore, a new theory was needed to reconcile the *Hamlet* of the contemporary stage with that in the original work. Hamlet’s sentiments must be a mistake; or rather, he cannot mean what he says. He must be only deceiving himself with his thoughts of damnation; but he cannot deceive the readers, or at least readers like Richardson.

The eighteenth-century editor George Steevens, as we have seen, found it problematic that Shakespeare “meant to have enforced such a moral” as Horatio’s concluding eulogy after Hamlet’s deeds; which are rather controversial in the original work.<sup>213</sup> Now we can see that it is Garrick, rather than Shakespeare, who meant to have enforced such a moral in his adaptation; a moral still common in the reception. Steevens was appalled by Hamlet’s character in Shakespeare’s work, but he congratulated Garrick’s adaptation; the editor and critic did not really like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but he admired Garrick’s. Even so, however popular such a concept of the hero and the play may be, we have to note that that is not Shakespeare.

The views of the Romantic critics also appear more reasonable in such a theatrical context. Although this adaptation was played by Garrick only for four years before his retirement (1772-76), the later productions were to a large extent influenced by him. We can agree with Hazlitt: “the moral perfection of this character” cannot be called in question;<sup>214</sup> there is indeed nothing immoral in the eighteen and nineteen century *Hamlet* on stage. Accordingly, if we consider the rather more complex and controversial *Hamlet* of the book, even his malignant thoughts must be merely a “refinement in malice.”<sup>215</sup> And if we eliminate both major concerns of *Hamlet*: the fear of a demonic Ghost, and the fear that King Claudius

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<sup>212</sup> William Richardson, *Essays on Shakespeare’s Dramatic Characters* (London, 1784), 159.

<sup>213</sup> George Steevens, ed., *The Plays of William Shakespeare. Volume the Tenth* (London, 1785), 5-22. See also: Robert S. Miola, ed., William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 243-45.

<sup>214</sup> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth and Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 74. The quoted essay on the character of Hamlet was first published in 1817.

<sup>215</sup> Hazlitt, 76.

might be saved, Hamlet's delay becomes a puzzle indeed. Moreover, Hamlet may not even be an avenger: "because he cannot have his revenge perfect, according to the most refined idea his wish can form, he declines it altogether" (ibid). This is certainly true of Garrick's *Hamlet*, where the hero does not behave like an avenger at all: even though he still has two victims in this adaptation, Polonius is killed apparently in a fatal accident, rather than because of Hamlet's thirst for blood after the Mousetrap, while the King is killed only when he threatens the hero, who thus apparently acts merely in self-defence.

In Garrick's *Hamlet*, then, an even larger part of the text was lost in translation, as Shakespeare's revenge tragedy was transformed or translated into a sentimental melodrama. This, however, required not only a number of drastic cuts, but also the reallocation of certain speeches and lines, as well as the inclusion of several new ones. In fact, Garrick modernised and purified Davenant's *Hamlet*, whose heroic tragedy had become gradually outmoded too; still not refined, sensitive and pure enough for the age of sensibilities. Garrick, in turn, paved the way for further adaptations on stage, including a Romantic opera, as well for those on screen. But those adaptations are already of different media; hence more obviously adaptations than the above stage productions. Therefore, before considering them, let us see some recent stage productions, which represent a return to Shakespeare in some ways.

#### **4.2.3 The Royal National Theatre's *Hamlet* (2000)**

At the turn of the millennium, the National Theatre's *Hamlet* production in London,<sup>216</sup> directed by John Caird, aimed at a kind of authenticity. First of all, unlike Davenant, Garrick and some other adaptations, Caird used only Shakespeare's text; though also already a

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<sup>216</sup> Also performed at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore, Denmark, and at numerous other theatres in Europe and the US. See: Jonathan Croall, *Hamlet Observed. The National Theatre at Work*. (London: NT Publications, 2001), 7. Croall's book is a very informative, chronological documentation of the evolution of this production. The video recording of the production, with related materials including an audio recording of the director's comments on the play, is available at the archives of the Royal National Theatre in London.

modernised edition, whose text was heavily cut for this production too.<sup>217</sup> Second, he emphasised the play's religious elements, consciously putting *Hamlet* back to its original, Christian context; though also noting that "the time is now, whenever that now is".<sup>218</sup> Tim Hatley's design was originally a cathedral, which was eventually stripped down to a more simple set with "chandeliers, and a collection of trunks that the actors would bring on, rearrange or take off the stage as required" (Croall, 10). This was also practical for the touring production; the candles, particularly with the lighting, still suggested a Christian church; the lights tended to form a huge cross across the stage. The music was also sacred; church bells and motets, which were quite loud throughout; at times interfering with Shakespeare's text, which could hardly be heard. As for the cuts, the Danish politics, together with Fortinbras, was dropped altogether, so as to focus on the domestic tragedy and the spirituality.

As the play starts, the opening scene, with the sentinels, develops from a church procession; the finale's duel is fought for choral music. When the King asks Laertes,

what would you vndertake  
To shoue your selfe indeede your fathers sonne  
More then in words?

(Q2 4.7.124-6)

Laertes replies, "To cut his thraot i'th Church" (4.7.126). In this production, this wish comes true. Although Laertes does not literally cut Hamlet's throat when they kill each other in the duel, now it is not only the central Prayer Scene that is set in a church – which could represent the chapel of the royal castle – but the whole revenge tragedy.<sup>219</sup>

Although this concept, with its focus on religion, along with the omission of some parts and characters (which can be seen already from the list of roles), may suggest a partial

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<sup>217</sup> The actors started the rehearsals and the collective cutting exercise "armed with their Arden editions of the play" (Croall, 14); that is, Harold Jenkins' Arden 2 edition (1982), available at the time as the Arden *Hamlet*, cf. below.

<sup>218</sup> Croall (2001), 14.

<sup>219</sup> The King's prayer is set in the royal castle's chapel in other productions too, as we shall see below.

production, one might expect that at least one aspect: the spiritual, religious layer, and hence the moral concerns of Shakespeare's work can be seen in their original, full richness. At the same time, perhaps those who are not particularly interested in religion could also see a play of tolerable length. Nevertheless, as Nicholas de Jongh observes, whereas Caird's concept is highly original, it is not without perversities.

A Pirandellian ritual in which the characters are forever doomed to enact their bloody revenge drama. Tim Hatley has designed an expressionistic, crepuscular Elsinore that's cross between church, prison and purgatory.<sup>220</sup>

However fascinating, or at least promising, such an approach may be for a spiritual minded person, some questions can be raised already concerning the list of roles, "The Cast."<sup>221</sup> As we are informed, "Hamlet, *Prince of Denmark*" is played by Simon Russell Beale, whereas the next character in the cast is, "Hamlet, *his father*", enacted by Sylvester Morand. Reading this list before the performance, one might wonder whether one can see an entirely new version of *Hamlet*, in which the father has not died yet; but that is certainly not the case. Nevertheless, in a production that focuses on the spirituality and the religion of the play, emphasising Hamlet's pre-enlightenment thoughts,<sup>222</sup> it is striking that there is no Ghost in the list of characters.

Here we can see the significance of the designation of the character in practice, as well as the relevance of the text that is used, and the role of the modern critical editions. Of course, there *is* a ghost in this *Hamlet* too, but it is taken for granted at the outset that it is identical to Hamlet's father, rather than an ambiguous supernatural character whose nature and identity are open to question; such ambiguities are precluded even before the performance starts. The

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<sup>220</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, "Hamlet". *Evening Standard*, 6 September, 2000. Also in: Darvay Nagy Adrienne, *A kor foglalatjai. Hamlet az ezredfordulón* (Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 2006). [Brief Chronicles of the Time. Hamlet at the Turn of the Millenium], "Vaskos Hamlet a Purgatóriumból" [A corpulent Hamlet from Purgatory], p. 236.

<sup>221</sup> Jonathan Croall, *Hamlet Observed. The National Theatre at Work*. (London: NT Publications, 2001), 6.

<sup>222</sup> Croall, 15.

*Hamlet* edition used as a basis of the text of this production is Harold Jenkins' Arden 2 edition (1982), offering a modernised, conflated text, and the usual designation "Ghost of Hamlet's father"; which may account for this designation too. However, this entails a limited concept of not only the character, but the whole tragedy. It is noteworthy that the director "was also playing with the idea of the company becoming a group of strolling players, or maybe ghosts, re-enacting the tragedy of *Hamlet*. This notion inspired the final design" (Croall, 10). That is, this inspired the trunks or boxes too, which suited particularly the Graveyard Scene (5.1). Although this is a very interesting idea, it also shows that the word "ghost" is used primarily in its modern sense, as "as the soul of a deceased person" (*OED* Ghost, 8), rather than as a "spirit" (*OED* Ghost, 5), which may be either good or evil.

The substantial cuts are also in line with this concept of the character and the tragedy. The idea was to lose one hour's running time from the play. As the director suggested at the beginning of the collective cutting exercise: "We need to be bold, look out for scenes that overstay their welcome" (Croall, 15). Accordingly, "the radical intentions are clear from the start, the first scene being cut ruthlessly from 180 to 50 lines" (*ibid*). Altogether nearly a thousand lines were cut; according to Caird, another production could have been made from the cuts.<sup>223</sup> However, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the first scene is not only a – perhaps lengthy – exposition; it is primarily the scene of the questionable Ghost. Although the cuts involve mainly the political concerns with Norway, they also affect the ambiguity of Ghost. In fact, the political, external threat to the country could amplify the spiritual, internal threat too; if such threats are considered at all. In any case, the character appears in robes, like an old man, rather than as an ambiguous spirit; though the lighting does suggest some mystery.

The Cellarage Scene (1.5) is retained, even though there is no "Hell" below the stage in this theatre; not at least in the original, Renaissance sense. In this approach, the references

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<sup>223</sup> As explained at the recorded rehearsal.

to the “old mole” appear to be merely a comic relief, a joyful game between the two Hamlets, father and son, rather than an ironic mockery of the pious concept of the Ghost, involving ominous suggestions to a possibly evil spirit. In line with the usual modern convention, Hamlet’s friends piously swear to the sword that forms a cross, again amplified by the lighting; Hamlet and the oath-takers kneel, thus sanctifying the Ghost’s mandate and Hamlet’s mission, as a follow-up to Hamlet’s private oath of revenge.

In later scenes, much of Hamlet’s concerns about the character are also cut, including his fear of a “damned ghost” before the play-within-the-play (Q2 3.2.80-84). Therefore, as usual, the playlet serves mainly to prove the King’s guilt, rather than to test, however tentatively, the honesty and the identity of the Ghost; these are not really questioned in this production. Although Hamlet’s soliloquy at the end of Act Two is retained, apparently neither the producers, nor the reviewers shared Hamlet’s concern that the Ghost may come from Hell, rather than from Purgatory; that it may not be Hamlet’s father at all, but a disguised devil; a concern that is important particularly in the play’s Christian context.

As we have seen, the modern reception has tended to believe, along with Hamlet, that the Mousetrap furnishes adequate evidence about trustworthiness the Ghost; but that is not really the case, again particularly if we consider the Christian context, which will be further discussed below. The fact that Sylvester Morand doubles in the role of the Ghost (or “Hamlet”) and the Player King reinforces the usual interpretation of the play-within-the-play as a rather faithful and accurate representation of the murder of the late king; indeed, it seems as if King Hamlet were killed here for a second time. The play thus holds a mirror only to King Claudius. With such a cast, the implication of Hamlet’s remark on the murderer as “Nephew to the King” is virtually lost, even if it is retained here too; though some may get the hint that the regicide will be repeated at the end again, with Hamlet as the murderer and Claudius as the King, who will get the rest of the poison himself.

The production, characteristically, ends with Horatio's famous lines,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Fortinbras' conclusion on the dismal sight, showing much amiss, is thus eliminated, even though his comment would be even more pertinent in this cathedral-like set than at a normal setting of a castle; the missing Fortinbras could represent an important parallel on the ethics of revenge. Even though Horatio's role is considered important as the story-teller (Croall, 12), his conclusion, highlighting the horrors of the revenge cycle, is also cut; nor can we hear the ambassador's question concerning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which also raises an ethical issue about the hero and the plot. Instead, as an addition to play, the Ghost – or "Hamlet" [Senior] – reappears on the stage, and goes up to all the other dead; to all victims of the revenge spree he initiated, from Polonius, through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, Laertes, the King and the Queen, and finally to Hamlet.<sup>224</sup>

Accordingly, this production, particularly with the church atmosphere, seems to underscore the usual – but arguable – moral that Hamlet's revenge is a sacred duty, rather than a morally condemnable act in the Christian context; especially as it is coupled with the intent of damnation, beyond the repetition of the regicide.<sup>225</sup> Having completed (or, indeed, overdone) his task, Hamlet is thus apparently rewarded with heavenly rest and a reunion with his father; who can now have his rest too – perhaps, at long last, he is sufficiently purged. Whereas the producers intended to return to the religious roots of *Hamlet*, as a matter of fact, they revived or reinforced only its romantic concept. Although the director was not concerned

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<sup>224</sup> John Peter also found it problematic that despite the emphasis on religion, the question about the ethics of revenge is not really answered. There is no ambiguity or a sense of chaos in this production, which could explain the rottenness of Denmark at least on a spiritual level, if the historical and political implications are omitted. *The Sunday Times*, 9 September 2000.

<sup>225</sup> That the domestic tragedy is not really concerned with the issue of kingship and regicide appears already from the other designations: in the cast, the King is designated merely as "Claudius, his [Hamlet's] father" and the Queen as "Gertrude, his mother".

with the mixed reviews, Simon Russell Beale was naturally pleased with the praises on his part; he “was also pleased that the ones who liked it saw a romantic performance” (Croall, 75). There is no doubt that Beale is a great actor, who gave a magnificent performance; the problem is with the concept of the production, which is quite unrealistic in light of the whole play, especially in its original, religious context.

The viewers could thus enjoy a very spiritual presentation of *Hamlet*; but if one attempts to understand the play’s original spirituality from this production, one is in a difficult position. We get a partial and problematic presentation of the characters and the issues; a questionable and paradoxical representation of Christianity, amounting to a pious bloodbath in a church. Based on this abbreviated version, played with sacred music throughout, one may get the impression that one can find one’s salvation and the deceased loved ones if one embarks on – or demands – a series of revenge, killing quite a few people; possibly with the damnation of some, even excluding their shriving. There is not much hint at irony in this production, almost everything is solemn and pious; therefore this twisted concept of Christianity is apparently meant seriously.

This, however, is not necessarily Shakespeare’s moral, but only of a partial presentation or adaptation of his play. Even though there are no added or rewritten lines in the text, this production is also an adaptation; the play is drastically cut and adapted for the modern stage. Moreover, it can be regarded as a translation too: the pre-modern or early modern religious elements are translated for the modern, mostly secular, audiences, so as to meet their expectations, mainly in the romantic tradition. But whereas in earlier periods the parts that plainly contradict the concept of the perfectly moral and Christian hero and his supposedly purgatorial father were usually cut, or simply rewritten, here they are presented in a church atmosphere; hence Hamlet’s revenge is effectively christened. Even so, a large part of the text is lost (or perhaps sacrificed) in this translation or transformation too, including



some relevant parts that could be useful in an approach concerned with religion. At the same time, some features of the modern theatre and the modernised editions are added; starting with the usual list of characters or the cast, with a typically modern designation of the Ghost.

If we reconsider the criticism in light of this production, we may recall that Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* was published in the following year.<sup>226</sup> Although the production may not have had an effect on the critic, the parallels between the contemporary criticism and the theatre are again remarkable. As we have seen, Greenblatt is also concerned with the religion of *Hamlet*, and he also calls the Ghost "Hamlet". Greenblatt cites Goethe's Romantic account of *Hamlet*,

"When the Ghost has vanished," Goethe's account tellingly begins. 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.

(Greenblatt, 2001, 229)

In this production, the Ghost is not let vanish altogether either; it reappears in the end. As I have argued, I agree with Greenblatt that the Ghost has a decisive influence on the hero and the whole play; religion is truly central to the interpretation of both characters and the entire tragedy. However, as I have suggested, we can begin to answer these questions properly only if we do not view and call the Ghost simply Hamlet or Hamlet Senior, but venture a more complex view of the character and the play after returning to the original texts. As we have seen, according to Greenblatt, the play is rather problematic, but the paradoxes and inconsistencies – which he does perceive concerning the supposedly purgatorial revenge ghost – are intended by Shakespeare. However, if we observe all these *Hamlets*: Shakespeare's,

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<sup>226</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 244 and ff.

Caird's and Greenblatt's, it is not necessarily the original play that is problematic, but, rather, only a certain concept of it, involving partial and arguable (re)presentations of both the character and the play. As we shall see, it is true that such a concept is implied by the play itself; but this is not the whole play. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* implies another level of meaning too, which is very different but much more realistic.

#### **4.2.4 *Hamlet* returns to the Globe (2000)**

After nearly four centuries, Shakespeare's most famous tragedy returned to the Globe; or rather, to the recently rebuilt theatre by the Thames in London, now called Shakespeare's Globe. In order to make the most of this long-awaited opportunity, this production painstakingly aimed at authenticity: the text was relatively little cut, all characters were kept, the costumes were also authentic. Even more important was, however, that the production could draw on the architecture of the open-air theatre, reviving or at least imitating the original stage conditions. But the restoration of the original play and its performance, particularly the original theatre experience, proved difficult; as a reminder of the new context, the noise of the airplanes flying over the theatre could well be heard during the performances. Thus the modern context at the turn of the millennium could not be avoided altogether; the replica of the old theatre has a somewhat ambiguous status as both a tourist attraction and a working theatre. The new Globe is visited by many spectators as a museum or a theme park, but Mark Rylance's *Hamlet* was a flesh and blood Prince, who impressed and captivated audiences and critics alike, many of them to raving reviews.<sup>227</sup>

This production therefore may have been truly similar to the original performances, even if somewhat anachronistic now; the time gap was difficult to bridge, and the problems of

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<sup>227</sup> Co-directed by Rylance, as artistic director, and Giles Block, as "Master of Play". The video recording of the production, with the promptbook, programme, and other supporting material, including a selection of reviews and studies, is available at the archive of Shakespeare's Globe, London. Therefore, the aim of this section is not to give a full analysis, merely to highlight some points related to this study.

the modern reception persisted. As with most modern productions aiming at authenticity, the questions start with the programme notes including the “Dramatis Personae” and the “Synopsis”. The latter starts with a very appropriate reminder.

Below is a short summary of *Hamlet*, which you are welcome to read before the performance. But to follow the story as the original audiences may have done, let the actors themselves guide you.<sup>228</sup>

This is a very useful piece of advice indeed, for the second sentence of the summary is already arguable if one is concerned with the original work and its possible original performance, and not only with this production or interpretation. The summary of the plot starts as follows.

Prince Hamlet is the son of the late King of Denmark, but his father’s brother, Claudius, has succeeded to the throne before him, and married his mother Gertrude. While struggling to come to terms with this, Hamlet is visited by *his father’s* ghost, who tells him that Claudius murdered him and demands revenge.

(ibid., emphasis added)

Later, on Hamlet’s interview in “his mother chamber”, we can read: “The ghost *of Hamlet’s father* appears to him again” (ibid, emphasis added). The synopsis thus does not mention any ambiguity about the Ghost’s identity, settling this question in advance.

But even if one considers the introductory advice and decides not to read the summary before the performance, one is naturally interested in the cast, or the “Dramatis Personae” (p. 12 of the programme). The first character in this list is “GHOST OF HAMLET, THE LATE KING OF DENMARK” played by Tim Preece. The list is essentially the same as in the modernised

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<sup>228</sup> Programme to the Globe *Hamlet* 2000 production, 8.

Oxford Shakespeare edition, discussed above.<sup>229</sup> Therefore, as usual, any ambiguity about the character's identity is precluded from this production too. Paradoxically, the programme, which is intended to enhance the understanding of the play, may actually hinder or limit it by offering a partial interpretation of the play and a partial designation of the character; though we do get to know how they are interpreted in this production. Those who do not read all this information before the performance (and have managed to avoid or resist any modern interpretation of the play) may be open to Hamlet's and the sentinels' concerns about the Ghost. Such audiences may take Hamlet's efforts to discern the Ghost seriously; they may appreciate the hero's hesitation and precautions, resulting in the staging of the play-within-the-play, before he takes action and launches his revenge. For the rest of the audience, however, all these incidents must be part of Hamlet's inexplicable delay, proving merely his passivity and troubled personality; such a hero may appear madly indecisive indeed.

As the synopsis explains, "The Players' play does frighten the King, and Hamlet's suspicions are confirmed". That is, Hamlet's suspicions about his uncle; whereas his suspicions about the Ghost – which are not mentioned in the synopsis – are dispelled. As we have seen above, it is but natural that the King is frightened after Hamlet threatens him by introducing the murderer in the Players's play as "Nephew to the King". The staged murder is not an exact representation the murder of the late King, and the fright of the present King is therefore hardly sufficient evidence even about his guilt, let alone about the trustworthiness of the Ghost. Even though the King later confesses his guilt in his prayer, the Ghost may still be an evil spirit in disguise, particularly if we consider the original context or significance of the play; and such considerations are actually intended or encouraged by the rebuilt Globe. As has been mentioned, a potentially evil Ghost could account for the tragic outcome too. But not in this production.

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<sup>229</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford: O. U. P, 1986), 654.

As at the National Theatre's *Hamlet*, the actor in the role of the Ghost doubles as the Player King; who therefore manages to give a remarkably faithful – or actually perfect – representation of the late King, as if literally reviving him for a brief period, before he is killed for a second time (even though by a nephew now, which usually goes unnoticed). The doubling in these roles again reinforces the traditional interpretation of the play within the play: King Claudius's reaction seems to be perfect evidence; not only about his guilt, but also about the Ghost. However, even though the same actor – in this case, Tim Preece – plays the Player King and the Ghost, these characters are certainly not identical. And as the Player King merely plays the King, the Ghost may also be playing him in Shakespeare's play; merely assuming his figure, however perfectly. However, in this production the possibility of this interpretation is disallowed by the "Dramatis Personae", considerably simplifying the original play.

In fact, as has been explained, the Player King plays primarily Duke Gonzago in the *Murder of Gonzago*; he represents only secondarily the King of Denmark, whether the late or the present one. In Shakespeare's play, this secondary interpretation is applicable to both Danish Kings: one has been poisoned before (even though by his brother), the other one is to be poisoned later, by his nephew Hamlet. However, if the Player King doubles as the Ghost, the past regicide is highlighted, whereas the threat of the future one is easily ignored by the audience; even though it is strongly felt by the characters at court, in particular by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The theological architecture of Shakespeare's theatre is also restored at the reconstructed Globe; therefore the Ghost could quite concretely call from under the stage, or "Hell", in the Cellarage Scene (1.5). Even so, this point is apparently not really appreciated in this production; the Ghost seems to be accepted as a purgatorial spirit. In fact, as the Arden editors explain,

It turned out, however, not to be practicable to have the Ghost speak from under the stage in the London Globe in 2000; the actor could not be heard by the audience; nor could he hear his cues.

(Arden 3 *Hamlet*, note to 1.5.149)

This thus posed a problem of stage technique in the new Globe. The stage or the environment of the original Globe may have been somewhat different, perhaps indeed more quiet; or Shakespeare, who is believed to have played the Ghost, may have overcome this problem with his unique skill. The real question, however, is whether or not such issues or technical problems can affect the interpretation. Another such issue is that of the trapdoor, which was not used either in this production; the Ghost always entered and exited via the other stage doors. If the identity of the Ghost is settled in advance, all these questions or problems are purely academic; the entire episode of the Cellarage Scene can only be taken as a comic relief, perhaps to ease Hamlet's grief and the marvel of the audience.

In any case, in 2000 the Ghost was not presented as a particularly mysterious spirit, but rather as a man; the relationship of the Ghost and Hamlet suggested that of a father and son. Another comic or perhaps charming element of the production was when Mark Rylance embraced the Ghost so passionately that he had difficulty to disengage himself from Hamlet's grip. As Adam Scott observed,

As Hamlet he stands out – and not only by the obvious volume of lines. He uses his physical size to great effect. The moment when the ghost of Hamlet's father, the murdered King of Denmark (played by Tim Preece) embraces his orphaned son rams home his youth, loss and vulnerability all at once.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Adam Scott, "Hamlet", *Midweek Magazine* (London, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2000), 20.

This was thus a revealing moment for theatre critics too, who did not sense any ambiguity about the Ghost either. An even more interesting point is offered on this scene by Cedric Porter:

But Giles Block's unfussy direction makes a virtue out of the fact that, in the open-air Globe, what you see is what you get; even the ghost of Hamlet's father gets a hug from his distraught son.<sup>231</sup>

Porter's point has two sides to it: Hamlet is indeed distraught; he not merely pretends it at the court, for even the Ghost has his share of it. On the other hand, the Ghost is not merely a spirit, an apparition or a departed soul either, but apparently also a rather flesh and blood creature appearing in his own body, who can be felt and seized. Porter also writes about the "ghost of Hamlet's father" and Hamlet as his "son". While touching upon the issue of seeming and being, Porter does not note the possibility that the Ghost may not be what it seems or claims to be; a possibility actually raised by Hamlet later on. In any case, even in a brief review, Porter highlights the problematic relationship of reality and illusion, which works somewhat differently in the Globe than in the usual modern, indoor theatres.

Whereas Simon Russell Beale at the National Theatre was a sane Hamlet throughout, a solemn or even paradoxically pious avenger, Mark Rylance did not avoid the issue of Hamlet's antic disposition. On the contrary, he thrilled in Hamlet's madness; this was his forte in his performance, where he could display his histrionic talent to general acclaim. As Benedict Nightingale observed,

It is also clear that, unlike most Hamlet's, he isn't just faking lunacy. Reeling about in a nightgown streaked with ordure, lying on his back and screeching and grabbing at other people's hands, wiggling and

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<sup>231</sup> Cedric Porter, "Hamlet 'out-Blairs Blair'", *South London Press* (Friday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2000), Pulse 8.

grotesquely parodying Ophelia, bashing what appears to be a severed head but is actually a cabbage in a bag: to the end his mental control is dangerously precarious.<sup>232</sup>

According to Nightingale, the performance did the Globe Theatre justice. Hamlet's antic disposition is indeed a major element of the play, and Rylance's powerful performance may have lived up to that of Burbage in the first Globe. In the history of the reception, many have found the very issue quite awkward concerning perhaps the greatest hero created by the Bard. But how should we interpret Hamlet's madness? What are the causes and its implications? As we shall see, the Prince is referred to as a melancholy character several times in the play; this is explored by the modern psychological and the psychoanalytical interpretations too. However, Hamlet's own fear is that his melancholy may be abused by an evil spirit, by a disguised devil. If this aspect of the play is denied, Hamlet's mental and psychological problems can be interpreted only partially; mainly in modern terms, which may be different from the original concept of the character. The hero can thus be perceived as a neurotic person suffering from a frustration caused by his family, or by the world in general; by an extremely difficult task imposed by his miraculously returned father. On the Renaissance stage, the antic disposition was also important, but its original significance can be appreciated only if we do not limit the interpretation to such modern notions; in particular, if we do not limit the ambiguous Ghost to Hamlet's father at the outset.

As one would expect, of all the productions since the Restoration, this must be the most faithful to the original performances in Shakespeare's theatre; it is certainly the most faithful among the ones covered in this study. The audience may have seen a similar performance as Shakespeare's audience; but, after four hundred years, it is questionable whether they could interpret it similarly. The production and its reception show that it is difficult to restore the original play and its meaning, even in a replica of the original stage

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<sup>232</sup> Benedict Nightingale, "Rylance's mad-for-it prince" *The Times* (Monday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2000), Page TIMES 2 22.



conditions.<sup>233</sup> Some of the information provided in the programme is questionable; while carefully explaining some features of the production, it also involves an element of translation. In fact, several elements of the early modern play are translated for the modern audience in this production too. The text itself, along with the list of roles, is taken from a modernised edition, and a modern synopsis is added, paraphrasing or translating the originally complex play, characters and issues. While many aspects of the enterprise are illuminating, particularly as compared to the usual modern productions, in some respects it may still limit the interpretation, particularly concerning the Ghost – originally played probably by Shakespeare himself – and the character’s effect on the protagonist and the whole play.

#### **4.2.5 Another *Hamlet* at the Globe and on tour (2011-12)**

In the 2011 season another *Hamlet* was staged at the Globe, with Joshua McGuire in the lead role, directed by artistic director Dominic Dromgoole. This production was very different from the one at the turn of the millennium: much shorter, mainly because it was designed as a touring production. The few props for the scenery consisted primarily of a small scaffold erected for playing at the centre of the Globe stage; the costumes were also simple. The production in general and the lead actor in particular were labelled as “pint-sized” by the reviewers, who were struck by the fact that Joshua McGuire was noticeably shorter than the other actors in this “chamber version of the play”,<sup>234</sup> which was nevertheless refreshing in many respects. McGuire was twenty-four when he played the thirty-year-old protagonist,<sup>235</sup> but he seemed like a teenager, particularly as compared to Beale and Rylance, both in their late thirties in 2000 (not to mention Betterton, who played Hamlet until his mid-seventies).

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<sup>233</sup> In fact, a play is based on interaction between players and their spectators. Although the stage conditions may have been reconstructed in the new Globe theatre, at least to some extent, the original players and audiences cannot be reconstructed or revived – I am grateful to Professor Latré for this point. For the contemporary – Elizabethan and Jacobean – attitudes or views on some of the main issues, see the next chapter.

<sup>234</sup> Paul Taylor, “*Hamlet, Shakespeare’s Globe, London*”(review), *The Independent* (Friday, 6 May, 2011). Philip Fisher, “*Hamlet, Shakespeare’s Globe, London*” (review). *The British Theatre Guide*. <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/globetourhamlet-rev> (accessed 6 February 2013).

<sup>235</sup> According to the gravedigger (5.1.145-162), whose evidence has been doubted by some critics.

Despite these limitations, Dromgoole also claimed authenticity; he explained the reason for the abridged and scaled-down play by the touring conventions:

Tours 400 hundred years ago, just as with tours today, would frequently present shortened versions of the text. The further plays travelled from London, the more radically cut they were, and we have evidence that by the time they got to Northern Europe, where they were highly popular, they were radically trimmed down to jokes, dumbshows, and moments of high drama.<sup>236</sup>

This production also travelled to Northern Europe: to Kronberg Castle at Elsinore, Denmark, in addition to a number of other venues, before it returned to the Globe for the 2012 season; but it was not merely a production that was radically trimmed down. Even though the major cuts certainly affect the interpretation of Shakespeare's work, this highly economical production offered some brilliant and thought-provoking solutions to some problems, concerning particularly the purpose of playing. The main speciality of the production was, in my view, none of the above, nor the fact that that some lines of the rarely played First Quarto were added to the abridged Folio text. It was the ingenious doubling, tripling and quadrupling of roles that resulted in a fascinating show; moreover, most actors doubled as musicians too.

If we look at the cast, it is remarkable that only eight actors played the whole play, altogether twenty-eight roles. Whereas several actors doubled in the former Globe production too, here the number of actors was less than half of the actors eleven years before. This time only the lead player did not double, which is natural; apart from a few scenes, Hamlet is almost always on the stage in any performance of the play. But in this production, in fact, every character was on the stage throughout; or rather, every actor, who resourcefully switched from one role into another in rapid succession. This emphasised the concept and the atmosphere of the touring production: the troop of actors playing *Hamlet* was very much like

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<sup>236</sup> Domenic Dromgoole, "Globe Theatre on Tour", in the programme "*Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. On Tour" (London: Shakespeare's Globe, 2011).

the one enacting the play-within-the-play, only slightly bigger; in fact, the two troops were almost the same, which had remarkable implications. As Paul Taylor noted,

Playing multiple roles (there are so few actors that *The Mousetrap* looks as if it is being played as an exclusive command performance for Jade Anouka's lovely, piercing Ophelia) the whole production has a disarming honesty.<sup>237</sup>

Simon Armstrong, for instance, brilliantly quadrupled in the roles of “Claudius/ Ghost/ First Player/ Player King.” He thus went beyond the usual doubling as the Ghost and the Player King, combining that with the less common – but no less thought-provoking – doubling as the Ghost and the King, that is, the two father figures; the resultant doubling as the Player King and the actual King is quite unique and imaginative in the context of the theatre. After assuming and playing the role of the Ghost (who is in the figure of the late King, and actually claims to be him) in the first scene, Armstrong swiftly took the role of Claudius, the present King, so as to make his speech at the court assembly in the second scene. In this speech, the King remembers his recently died brother, the late King (in whose figure Armstrong has just appeared). For us, the audience, this doubling underscored the fact that we were witnessing a play, enacted by players.<sup>238</sup> On the one hand, it had an alienating effect from the play (that is, from the story of the play that has different characters in it), but on the other hand, it involved the audience in the play of the players; highlighting the procedure how they assume various roles. A certain alienation from the characters thus created a strong sympathy for the players as they were juggling with their roles and with Shakespeare’s play.

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<sup>237</sup> Taylor, *ibid.* <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/hamlet-shakespeares-globe-london-2279681.html> (Accessed 6 February 2013.)

<sup>238</sup> I saw the performance on 13 May 2011.

As has been suggested, the peak of the complexities was the Play or Mousetrap Scene, which is crucial in any production of *Hamlet*.<sup>239</sup> Armstrong, as the Player King, enacted Duke Gonzago in the *Murder of Gonzago*, replaying at the same time the poisoning of the late King Hamlet, as it had been told by the Ghost (claiming to be the late King). However, in the same scene, Armstrong also played Claudius, the present King of Denmark, seeing the play-within-the-play as a member of the audience on the stage. Thus the player Armstrong played the Player King, who performed a play for Claudius, the actual King of Denmark; but that King was also played by Armstrong, as was the Ghost, who inspired the whole playlet by claiming to be the late King. In short, Armstrong played the Player King, the past King and the present King, practically all at once. At the same time, Amanda Hadingue also doubled in the roles of the Player Queen and the actual Queen Gertrude. This required a remarkably rapid swaps of roles, particularly between the Player King and Claudius.

All this had a unique effect, which could be gained only by sacrificing part of a more conventional performance of the play-within-the-play. Armstrong could certainly not play the Player King and the actual King at exactly the same time; he resumed the role of the King again when the playlet was practically over. This sacrifice, however – beyond the tour-de-force of concentrated acting, which may have seemed farcical – yielded a particularly important point of the tragedy, which is usually lost in performance. With this solution, the production managed to highlight the fact that the play-within-the-play is not simply a re-enactment of a past murder, the killing of the late King, but also the foreshadowing of a future murder, the killing of the present King of Denmark. Hamlet, while obtaining his proof about Claudius' loathsome guilt, is preparing for essentially the same crime: to kill the king.<sup>240</sup> The

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<sup>239</sup> This was also noted by Philip Fisher: "Unusually, the highlight for many might be the play within a play when the players first put on a very funny dumbshow and then *The Mousetrap*, switching roles with alacrity behind a flimsy curtain in the manner of the best of farceurs". *The British Theatre Guide* (ibid.).

<sup>240</sup> Although the reviewers did not note this point, they tended to praise Armstrong for his versatility. According to Charles Spencer, "there is fine work, though, from Simon Armstrong as a scary Ghost, a guilt-racked Claudius

ensuing confusion at court was also well presented. This direction thus not only highlighted two main, recurring themes – role-play and regicide – at the same; this set of doubling could capture some very important points of Shakespeare’s work.

Another important feature of the list of roles is that the designation “Ghost” is not followed by any additional name or label; hence the ambiguity of the character is maintained. As compared to the former Globe production and particularly that of the National Theatre – or almost any modern production – this designation can be regarded as a major step forward in the reception, for it does not limit the interpretation of the character at the outset; allowing therefore a more comprehensive view and appreciation of Shakespeare’s work. Even so, it is questionable whether the ambiguity of the character was actually maintained in this production. In the heavily cut text, virtually any doubt about the Ghost was eliminated, particularly the suggestions of a possibly evil spirit. Whereas in the Globe 2000 production, as in the National Theatre 2000 production, Hamlet’s fear about the Ghost as a disguised devil abusing him was maintained (even though its significance was annulled by the designation of the character), here it was cut. Consequently the Mousetrap, however brilliantly performed, again served mainly to catch the conscience of the King – and perhaps to foreshadow his murder – rather than to test the Ghost, whose identity is not questioned in this production either. Therefore, this designation, even though very appropriate, may be merely an abbreviation of the usual modern designations, which could be explained by the fact that Armstrong has four roles next to his name in the list, of which the “Ghost” is already the second, but not the last; this short designation may have saved some space for the other roles.

Therefore, even though the play-within-the-play highlighted some important issues about the significance and the complexities of the theatre, a crucial point about the very

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and a fluent Player King, while John Bett proves an exceptionally entertaining, very Scottish **Polonius**.” Spencer, “Hamlet, Shakespeare’s Globe, review” The Telegraph (6 May, 2011).  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8495485/Hamlet-Shakespeares-Globe-review.html>  
(accessed 6 February 2013).

purpose of playing in *Hamlet* was lost. As Hamlet's doubt about the Ghost as a possibly evil spirit was eliminated, so was the suggestion of the character as a mere player of Hamlet's father, thus aiming to achieve his devilish purposes. While was Armstrong juggling with his roles, the point that the Ghost may also be playing a role – likewise merely assuming the pleasing shape of the late King – was omitted. Unfortunately, this cut considerably reduced the complexity of the original play and the significance of the play-within-the-play too; the latter may actually be even more complex in Shakespeare's work than in this production. If Hamlet's point of what is really at stake with his play is cut (which is no less than the fate of his soul), it is no wonder if it appeared only a farce to some reviewers. Whereas the National Theatre production highlighted the religion of *Hamlet* but failed to accommodate a possibly evil Ghost from Hell, this production highlighted the theatrical or metadramatic elements but failed to incorporate a Ghost that may be an ingenious player himself.

That the Ghost is intended in this production as the Ghost of Hamlet's father – and that the above mentioned cut is not by chance – is marked by other materials in the programme. The first sentence of the "Synopsis" mentions the "ghost of the dead King Hamlet", while, at the centre of the programme, the longest article is entitled "A Message from Purgatory": a six-page extract from Stephen Greenblatt's biography on Shakespeare, from the chapter "Speaking with the dead".<sup>241</sup> Even though the Ghost speaks from under the stage, from the "Hell" of the reconstructed Globe (whose stage is actually supplemented by the make-shift scaffold set), the clear suggestion of the programme is that the Ghost comes from Purgatory. The Ghost is thus presented as the deceased father of the protagonist, supposedly purging his soul; however problematic that concept is in the given context, particularly if we consider the character's call on vengeance. Interestingly, while Hamlet's suspicions about the Ghost were cut from the production, some of them are mentioned by Greenblatt; even if briefly, only

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<sup>241</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 288-322.

toward the end of the article, when the notion of the purgatorial ghost has been firmly established. According to Greenblatt, “such thoughts lead to a cycle of delay, self-reproach, continued failure to act, and renewed self-reproach.”<sup>242</sup> In line with the Romantic readings, these elements of the play are thus not appreciated as real or legitimate concerns; they merely show Hamlet’s paralysis and his apparently unreasonable delay. The highlighted, introductory sentence to the article is also remarkable.

According to Stephen Greenblatt, a deep sense of loss and the refusal of Protestantism to acknowledge purgatory, the ghost’s ‘prisonhouse’, lie at the heart of *Hamlet*.

(Programme, 12)

Thus, even though Anglicans, who had been Protestants for decades, refused to believe in Purgatory, we are meant to believe that the Ghost is the purgatorial spirit of Hamlet’s father, despite the contrary suggestions of the play. Accordingly, unlike Hamlet, we should not be concerned with the suggestions of an evil spirit from Hell. The director, in any case, cut those elements from Shakespeare’s play.

This *Hamlet*, though primarily an abridged touring production, is thus also concerned with the spiritual and religious elements of Shakespeare’s work; the problem is that they are presented partially. If we consider the context of this production, 2011 was the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, and the motto of the Globe season was “The Word is God”. The season started around Easter weekend by reciting the King James Bible, and a major premiere at the Globe was Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. In that play, the trapdoor is used to good effect to connect “Hell” with the Globe stage. This possibility, however, was not applied in the *Hamlet* production for the Ghost’s entrances or exits. Considering King James’ significance, there is another work that could be relevant to *Hamlet*,

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<sup>242</sup> Programme, 17.

the Ghost and the theological architecture of the Globe theatre: his *Demonologie*, which has already been mentioned and will be further discussed below.

All in all, Dromgoole's production was a captivating and in many respects brilliant *Hamlet*, but also a partial one, which involved the loss of large parts of the text, including some important ones. Some critics were perhaps too harsh about the self-imposed limitations of the production; while acknowledging the humour of the show, some failed to appreciate its merits concerning the purpose of playing. According to Patrick Marmion,

If IKEA ever gets into Shakespeare plays, this would make a good template. Shorter than usual, Dominic Dromgoole's production is designed to be a show that actors can put up and take down using Allen keys and not waste much time in the philosophical backwaters.

The downside, however, is that although the pocket-sized production, with eight actors, is briskly enjoyable and highlights Hamlet's often overlooked sense of humour, it misses the tragedy's scale.<sup>243</sup>

As I have tried to show, the missing philosophical or religious points concern the highlighted dramatic aspects too. After all, Hamlet considers it quite an important question whether the Ghost is actually the ghost of his father at all, or a player himself, like the superbly versatile actors of this production. Perhaps this question would be worth facing, particularly in such an approach to the play, as it concerns not only the theatre, but the fate of the protagonist and the other characters too; most of whom perish by the end. More to the point, they tend to perish prematurely and violently; in line with the Ghost's command, but not at all in line with a message from Purgatory – much more corresponding to a message from Hell.

Although blurring this important distinction, this overtly partial and comic touring production may have had some authenticity in the presentation of the characters. While

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<sup>243</sup> Patrick Marmion, "This pint-sized production fails to meet the demands of this tragedy. *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's Globe, review". "Verdict: Flat-pack Bard". *Daily Mail* (5 May 2011) <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-1384003/Hamlet-Shakespeares-Globe-review--Fails-meet-tragedys-demands.html#ixzz2K85844a4> (accessed 6 February 2013).



Greenblatt's notion of a seriously purgatorial revenge ghost is very problematic indeed, Armstrong's playful Ghost may have been somewhat similar to the original, Elizabethan concept of the character. As we shall see, the Elizabethan – predominantly Protestant – audiences must have viewed the Ghost as quite a comic character too; whether as a cunning, disguised devil from Hell or as a mock-purgatorial spirit: these two concepts are not very far from each other. In the same token, Joshua McGuire's Hamlet may have also displayed some traits that – even though perhaps strange for modern audiences – must have been appreciated in the first Globe too. As we have seen, since the Restoration, the protagonist has usually been presented and interpreted as a clear-cut, moral, purely tragic or melodramatic hero, but he is, in fact, a very complex and controversial character, who is at times quite comic too.

### **4.3    *Hamlet* as an opera**

#### **4.3.1    The significance of the opera and film adaptations**

Having examined several stage productions of *Hamlet*, the opera and film adaptations are covered here somewhat more briefly. Why discuss Thomas's *Hamlet* opera at all in a study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? As has been stated, this is also a study of the problems of the reception and the aesthetic identity of *Hamlet*. Thomas's opera exemplifies the nineteenth-century, Romantic concept of *Hamlet*, which is still influential. It is obviously not Shakespeare, but a rather free adaptation. However, as we have seen, Garrick's eighteenth-century stage production was also an adaptation, staging an already altered text; in fact, almost all productions can be regarded as abridged adaptations of Shakespeare's longest tragedy. Since the MET *Hamlet* 2010 production was broadcast in many theatres worldwide, it was probably seen by more people than any recent stage production including the touring

ones. Of course, the major film adaptations are even more influential, therefore they will be covered too, even if briefly.

The main point is to see what kind of story these productions tell about Hamlet when adapting the text to a different medium, hence usually more freely than the modern stage productions. All these adaptations tend to represent a certain concept of *Hamlet*, therefore their analysis can be useful concerning the problems of the reception. At the same time, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is also an adaptation of earlier versions of the Hamlet story; as we shall see, when "improving" Shakespeare, the modern adaptations, in some respects, tend to return to Shakespeare's sources, even if unconsciously.

### 3.3.2 The French *Hamlet* opera (1868)

Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* opera abides by the specific generic conventions, featuring major arias as well as choir pieces, which involve many repetitions; the emphasis is on the music, rather than on the text. Therefore, as in any opera adaptation of a play, it is inevitable that a large part of the text is lost, amounting to a shortened and simplified plot. In this case, in fact, the text is not Shakespeare's either, but a rather free French version: the librettists Michel Carré and Jules Barbier adapted Dumas' already rather free translation of the play, which held the French stage at the time.<sup>244</sup> If we compare Thomas's opera to Shakespeare's play, the differences in the plot are so extensive that the opera is not just a drastically abridged version of the original tragedy; it tells a different story altogether. The most remarkable difference is in the conclusion: in the French opera, Hamlet survives and is proclaimed King.<sup>245</sup> In this version, *Hamlet* thus has a happy ending: after fulfilling his duty and administering retributive

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<sup>244</sup> Annegret Fauser, "Hamlet. Ophélie: Shakespeare in Paris". *Hamlet* CD Booklet (1993), 33-41 (Thomas, *Hamlet* with Thomas Hampson, Hamlet; Antonio de Almeida, conductor. EMI France CDCC 7 54820 2). This section partly draws on the Wikipedia entry of the *Hamlet* opera too, which gives a fairly detailed analysis. The point, however, is not merely to highlight some issues, but, as has been stated, to relate the opera to the problems of the reception of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

<sup>245</sup> André Tobeuf and Annie Corbier, "Synopsis". *Hamlet* CD Booklet (1993), 30-32.

justice, the perfectly moral hero is rewarded with the crown. If we compare this outcome to that of Garrick, for instance, the eighteenth-century English adaptation may indeed appear relatively faithful to Shakespeare. How can such a fundamental difference be explained? Several factors can be considered.

On the one hand, some other tragedies of Shakespeare had similarly drastic adaptations on the English stage too; the most notorious being Nahum Tate's version of *King Lear* in the Restoration, in which Edmund and Cordelia survive and marry at the end.<sup>246</sup> In fact, the French stage had had a similar version of *Hamlet* too: whereas Ophelia commits suicide in Thomas's opera, in Jean-Francois Ducis's adaptation of *Hamlet* for the French stage (1769), both Hamlet and Ophelia survive and get married.<sup>247</sup> As the producers of the English Restoration and the age of Sensibility sought to please their refined audiences, so did the French, albeit in a different context. The French were more liberal in adapting the text of *Hamlet*, but one of the reasons was that they had more conservative stage conventions. According to Ducis, the speaking Ghost or the strolling players were "absolutely inadmissible" on the French stage, as was the duel. In fact, Ducis was initially accused of polluting the French stage with Shakespeare; he was only much later charged with mutilating the original.<sup>248</sup>

Interestingly, Dumas already intended to improve Ducis, offering a version of the play that was more faithful to Shakespeare. However, Dumas did not refrain from "improving" Shakespeare either. As the French novelist explained his modifications, "since Hamlet is not guilty to the same degree as the others, he should not die the same death as the others."<sup>249</sup> In

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<sup>246</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Vintage), 20, 24, 30, 61.

<sup>247</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 244. As Prosser explains, Ducis version held the French stage for forty years, and a similar version by Franz Heufeld held the German stage for fifty years. It can be added that Heufeld was a contemporary of Goethe. As Garrick's adaptation is in line with the contemporary English critical reception, so may Heufeld's *Hamlet* account for the still influential contemporary German criticism.

<sup>248</sup> John Pemble, *Shakespeare in Paris: How the Bard conquered France* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 97-98.

<sup>249</sup> Pemble, 109-11.

the finale four dead bodies would have “the most unpleasant effect”; and the Ghost, whom Dumas retained, “must necessarily reappear to be present at the end” (ibid). In Dumas, as in most stage productions and critical studies, the Ghost is identified as the ghost of Hamlet’s father; any ambiguity about the character is eliminated. Although the final reappearance of the Ghost may seem a typically Romantic gesture, as we have seen, the character – designated as Hamlet – reappeared in the London National Theatre’s 2000 production too. In Dumas’s *Hamlet*, the Ghost appears less as a human than as a divine judge, representing God’s vengeance.

As Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes are dying, the ghost of Hamlet's father reappears and condemns each of the dying characters. To Claudius it says: *Désespère et meurs!* – “Despair and die!”; to Laertes: *Prie et meurs!* – “Pray and die!”; and to the Queen: *Espère et meure!* – “Hope and die!”. When the wounded Hamlet asks: *Et quel châiment m'attend donc?* – “And what punishment awaits me?”, the ghost responds: *Tu vivras!* – “You shall live!”, and the curtain falls.<sup>250</sup>

If Dumas is more faithful to Shakespeare than Ducis, Thomas’s opera is more faithful than Dumas’ play, since the opera has two versions: in the alternative ending – which has been less often produced – Hamlet dies. Ducis and Dumas believed that their understanding of poetic justice was better than Shakespeare’s. This may seem strange, but we may recall that Johnson and Stubbes had also accused Shakespeare of violating poetic justice. While gratifying the French audiences, Ducis, Dumas and Thomas in effect realised the desires of the greatest contemporary English editors and critics too, unreservedly going beyond Garrick’s adaptation in imagining and creating a perfectly moral hero. The question, however, is, again, what is meant by poetic justice, and what is meant by *Hamlet*.

In fact, these versions or concepts of *Hamlet* are closer to Shakespeare’s sources than to Shakespeare. In Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques*, Shakespeare’s French narrative source

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<sup>250</sup> Pemble, ibid.

of *Hamlet* (1576), the hero also stays alive and is proclaimed king at the end, and so is he in the earlier Danish source *Historia Danica* (1180-1208).<sup>251</sup> Apparently, Shakespeare had a different concept of *Hamlet* than most authors or directors – or, indeed, most critics – of the Hamlet story in its over eight-hundred-year history. The adapters, supposedly improving, refining or correcting Shakespeare, have in part returned to the sources Shakespeare himself had actually improved in his work – or in his adaptation of the earlier *Hamlets*. The parts that have been lamented or simply ignored in the reception tend to be Shakespeare's own improvements in creating a complex and controversial hero and an ambiguous play in general. But let us briefly see the plot of Thomas's opera – particularly the version that is closer to Shakespeare – so as to see these differences and their significance.

#### **4.3.3 The MET *Hamlet* production (2010)**

An interesting feature of the *Hamlet* opera, produced at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 2010, was that the title role was sung by Simon Keenlyside, an English baritone, in French, for an English-speaking audience; the text of this French *Hamlet* was therefore subtitled in English. Not Shakespeare's text, again, but the English translation of the libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier, whose text is remarkably different from Shakespeare. In an interview in the interval of the international live broadcast of the opera on 27 March 2010, Keenlyside – who gave an impressive and generally acclaimed performance – emphasised that it was not Shakespeare's text; but he did not find it necessary to remark that it was not really Shakespeare's story either. In another interview, he commented on the two different endings of the opera.

I think it's a little embarrassing to a modern audience if Hamlet lives at the end. I've sung that version before and noticed the sound of 2,000

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<sup>251</sup> For these sources of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, see, Robert S. Miola, ed. *Hamlet* (New York: Norton), 207-215.

faint coughs and the shuffling of feet in the stalls. At the Met I get to die, and it's the first time that I've performed that ending. We'll see what the audience thinks!<sup>252</sup>

Anthony Tommasini concludes his review of the Met production as follows.

Until now this production has always used the happy ending. But for the Met the creative team made some trims and combined elements of both endings so that the ghost reappears, but Hamlet falls atop Ophelié's corpse. It was an effective compromise. And really, what does it matter?<sup>253</sup>

Really, what does it matter whether Hamlet lives or dies at the end of *Hamlet*? Again, it depends on which or whose *Hamlet* we discuss, and how we approach that work. Tommasini's title, "This Prince: What a Piece of Work", aptly quotes Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince's philosophical contemplation on the nature of man in his encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2.2); two characters who are missing from the opera adaptation, and hence so is this famous speech. If we consider Thomas's opera as an independent work of art in its own right, it does not really matter indeed. The opera tells a tragic, Romantic story of a highly intelligent and most moral young Prince and his unfortunate sweetheart, amplifying the heightened emotions through some wonderful and heart wrenching music. The main difference between the two endings then is that if Hamlet lives, we can talk only about Ophelié's tragedy, rather than that of Hamlet; in line with the nineteenth-century Ophelia mania in Paris, which started after Harriet Smithson's sensational guest appearance at the Odéon in 1827.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> "Four Questions for Simon Keenlyside".

<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/news/interviews/detail.aspx?id=11438> (accessed: 11 February 2013)

<sup>253</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "This Prince: What a Piece of Work", music review, Metropolitan opera. The New York Times, 18 March, 2010.

<sup>254</sup> David Cairns, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz. Volume One, The Making of an Artist 1803-32* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 247.

But if we consider the opera as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the differences between the two plots are worth considering. In Stuart Sillars's words, we might "call this another version of the text, an interpretation, or a sustained critical commentary in a different æsthetic medium".<sup>255</sup> In this version of *Hamlet*, the hero is a truly impeccable character; his only fault is that he refuses to marry Ophelia-Ophelié after he learns that Polonius was an accomplice in the murder of the late King Hamlet.<sup>256</sup> In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, this point is not made explicit either; as we have seen, the implication is rather the contrary: the crime is secret, which King Claudius must have committed alone. In the original, Polonius believes that Hamlet's madness is the consequence of his thwarted love; it is, in fact, Ophelia who rejects Hamlet. In Shakespeare, the heroine's desperation is caused primarily by the death of his father, who is killed by Hamlet.

In the opera, on the other hand, Hamlet kills no one but the King; and therefore his delay is indeed due merely to his paralysis or his moral scruples over vengeance: the usual Romantic interpretation of Shakespeare's work too. When the King is praying, we cannot hear Hamlet's intention to damn him; instead, Polonius comes to comfort the King, and Hamlet's delay is caused by the sudden and shocking realisation of Polonius' implication in the murder. Even at the end of the opera, Hamlet kills the King only when the Ghost reappears and urges the hero to complete his mission. This is again a fulfilment of the Romantic concept of *Hamlet*; the hero is not really an avenger or a murderer: he kills reluctantly, only because the Ghost repeatedly wants him to do so. We can agree with Dumas that "Hamlet is not guilty to the same degree as the others"; in fact, *this* Hamlet is not guilty at all.

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<sup>255</sup> Stuart Sillars, "Globalisation and the Loss of the Text". *Trans. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*. Nr. 9 (2001). <http://www.inst.at/trans/9Nr/sillars9.htm>. Accessed: 23 June, 2012.

<sup>256</sup> For the Synopsis of the MET 2010 *Hamlet*, see <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?customid=306> (accessed 13 February 2013).

In this *Hamlet*, there is no Fortinbras to succeed on the throne after the Danish royalty exterminate themselves; no Rosencrantz and Guildenstern whom Shakespeare's Hamlet sends to their sudden, unshriven deaths. In the Prayer Scene, Hamlet delays truly because he has mercy over a praying man; the play within the play is real evidence of the King's guilt; the Ghost's identity is never questioned. The opera, like many modern stage productions, begins not with a questionable ghost, but with the wedding banquet, as Shakespeare's first scene is excised. Later, as we are informed by the Met Synopsis, "Hamlet meets the ghost. He tells his son that he was poisoned by Claudius and demands vengeance for his murder. Hamlet swears to obey".

The Ghost, as in most modern productions and their synopsis – and in most of the critical reception – is thus identified simply as Hamlet's father. All in all, while very different from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the opera merely realises the Romantic concept and interpretation of Shakespeare's work, which is still influential. Although the opera can be criticised for trivialising or violating Shakespeare, in fact, it merely conforms the story to the expectations of the audiences as well as most critics, eliminating all problems that are perceived in Shakespeare's work. Indeed, it is more reasonable to claim about this Hamlet that he is morally perfect than about Shakespeare's protagonist; in this piece of work there is nothing to ignore or explain away for such an interpretation. This Hamlet does not delay because of his "refinement in malice", as Hazlitt rather arguably suggested, or because he deceives himself, as Richardson and many others have since believed; but indeed for purely moral reasons. And it is also more reasonable to regard this Ghost as Hamlet's father, representing divine justice, than Shakespeare's highly ambiguous and rather comic character, crying from the cellarage of the Globe.

In this adaptation and rather free translation of *Hamlet*, large parts of the original text and story are thus lost, amounting to not only a simplified version of the original, but a



fundamentally different one altogether. Whereas numerous characters and scenes are excised, among other elements, a love duet between Hamlet and Ophelié is added, and so is a very long aria by the desperate heroine before she stabs herself, which takes up the whole of Act Four. The aria is a beautifully moving piece and a high point of the opera – which was sung brilliantly by Marlis Petersen at the Met – but it is in sharp contrast with Ophelia's bawdy songs in Shakespeare. This *Hamlet* thus perfectly realises and satisfies the Romantic concept of Shakespeare's work. The altered plot is supported by some truly emotional music, which is though less powerful than that of Verdi.

Indeed, perhaps the relative weakness of the music is in part compensated for by the major alterations in the text. This becomes even more apparent if we compare Ambroise's *Hamlet* to Verdi's *Otello*, which is not only an occasional production but a constant success at the Met repertoire. Verdi's opera is also based on an abridged version of Shakespeare's *Othello*; the Italian libretto is also already a free translation. But Verdi does not contradict Shakespeare when shortening the plot. Ultimately, the difference lies not only in the music, but primarily in the original tragedies. Whereas *Othello* can serve as a perfect material for a Romantic grand opera or any romantic narrative, *Hamlet* – with its bloody revenge cycle – cannot really; only some elements, and even those only with major alterations. Nevertheless, as has been mentioned, part of the play can indeed prompt such romantic interpretations; but they realise only the surface of Shakespeare's work, as we shall see below in more detail.

#### **4.4 *Hamlet* as a film**

Many film adaptations have been made of Shakespeare's most famous tragedy, and they have already been analysed by a number of studies in detail.<sup>257</sup> As has been stated, this study is

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<sup>257</sup> See, for instance, Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 2001; first edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114-150. Brode discusses nine *Hamlet* films in detail.

concerned not primarily with these adaptations. Therefore, only three films are examined here briefly, perhaps the most important ones, as part of the study of the aesthetic identity of *Hamlet* and the problems of the reception. The focus is again mainly on the plot, the hero and the Ghost. Which parts of the play are presented, and how are they presented? What are the main differences from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and what are the possible reasons for them?

#### 4.4.1 Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948)

Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet*, the first sound film of the tragedy in English, is almost certainly the most influential film adaptation of Shakespeare's work; it is also the most successful one, if the success is measured by its popular as well as critical recognition and particularly by the film awards. For several decades, it was regarded as "the definitive cinematic rendition of Hamlet"; it won four Academy Awards, including best picture and best actor in a leading role; it was the first non-American film to win this award; Olivier is still the only actor to win an Oscar for a Shakespearean role.<sup>258</sup> It also won the Oscar for best art direction-set decoration and best costume-design; and it had three further nominations, which are also noteworthy: Olivier, who directed himself in the title role, was nominated as best director, and Jean Simmons, who played Ophelia, was nominated for best supporting actress, while William Walton was nominated for best music score.

These facts are worth mentioning because all these artistic elements – from the acclaimed acting to the highly emotional music, in addition to the resourceful and powerful cinematography, using deep focus photography, many close ups and flashbacks – serve to realise Olivier's concept of *Hamlet*. The direction approaches the play from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, drawing on Ernest Jones's famous and still very influential

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For a catalogue and brief review of numerous films and a bibliography of their criticism, see, Kenneth S. Rothwell, "An Annotated and Chronological Screenography" (2002), in Robert S. Miola, ed., *Shakespeare, Hamlet* (New York: Norton, 2011), 309-327.

<sup>258</sup> For these facts, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet\\_\(1948\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet_(1948_film)) (accessed 15 February 2013); the article also includes a summary of the film's plot and an analysis, which I seek to go beyond.

interpretation; Olivier consulted Jones before making the film.<sup>259</sup> In this theory, Hamlet's character and delay are explained by his Oedipus complex: Hamlet is supposed to be in love with his own mother and is paralysed into indecision and inaction because of this repressed but suddenly awakened love.

This conception is also supported by the fact that Eileen Herlie, who played Gertrude, was eleven years younger than Olivier, playing her son. In this direction, the Closet Scene is in effect a love scene of Hamlet and his mother; the Prince repeatedly kisses Gertrude on the lips throughout the film.<sup>260</sup> This interpretation is somewhat more plausible and attractive – and certainly less offensive – in this cast than in a normal cast, with an actress twice of Herlie's age. Polonius's slaughter is almost completely ignored in this direction, as if nothing had happened at the arras. The Prince does slay the eavesdropping councillor like a rat, but he is not particularly concerned about that; even though he is somewhat disappointed that it is not the King. But the focus is on Hamlet's emotions toward his mother; if anyone is to be blamed, it is only the old man for having disturbed the love scene. The trouble is that Gertrude is also blind to Hamlet's love, at least initially, as she cries for help in fear of her life.

In this scene Olivier follows the text quite faithfully, but the effect is different than in a theatre. In a stage production, with Polonius' dead body on stage throughout the scene, Hamlet's moral diatribe at her mother – telling her to confess and refrain from her trespass of sleeping with the King, her new husband – is much more ironic. In Olivier's direction the body is left in front of the arras too, but the camera, with the usual close ups, tends to focus on Hamlet's self-righteous face and the embracing and kissing couple at the king-sized bed (indeed, the setting itself is more of a bedroom than a closet or a private room for dressing). This presentation thus helps to sidestep the fact that Hamlet does not actually delay or hesitate long after the Mousetrap; his hasty killing of Polonius is a mistaken attempt to kill the King

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<sup>259</sup> Brode (2001), 120.

<sup>260</sup> This also noted by Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 217.

shortly after the performance. Even though Hamlet's romantic attraction to his mother is at least as arguable as his professed moral superiority when chastising her, a lover – even a supposedly jealous one – is certainly a much more positive character than a cold-blooded and arrogant murderer.

Despite its huge success, some have found Olivier's *Hamlet* not only partial but also reductive.<sup>261</sup> Although it is a relatively long film: over two and a half hours (155 minutes), it omits nearly half the text and several important characters and scenes. Even so, this film adaptation is certainly more faithful to Shakespeare than Thomas's opera adaptation; moreover, it is also more faithful than Garrick's adaptation for the stage. Whereas the Romantic opera emphasises Hamlet's love toward Ophelia, this film highlights his supposed love toward Gertrude; the latter can be achieved by less drastic alterations from the original play. Olivier uses Shakespeare's text, adding only one line to it, but the substantial cuts and the reallocation of certain passages amount to a different work, with a particularly different conclusion. Even though this concept of *Hamlet* may be regarded as very modern with its Freudian bias, which is enhanced by the application of some film techniques that were also novel at the time, in fact, it draws on the above discussed Romantic concept of the play,<sup>262</sup> as well as on the eighteenth-century psychological interpretations represented mainly by William Richardson.

Olivier's added line defines the main theme of Hamlet's tragedy by his unreasonable indecision and delay, already at the beginning of the film: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." This notion is presented as Hamlet's tragic flaw; the verdict

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<sup>261</sup> Brode (2001), *ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> The capital "R" in "Romantic" is not random: this refers to the general concept of *Hamlet* in the age of Romanticism, discussed above, which is influential even now. When I use the adjective "romantic", with a small "r", I use the word in the usual, more general, sense, meaning imaginative but impractical and unrealistic, naïve, sentimental, emotional, usually centred on love. As I will argue, whereas the Romantic *Hamlet* is certainly typically romantic, many, if not most, later concepts or interpretations can be regarded as romantic too. More to the point, Shakespeare's work itself already implies a romantic meaning too, actually encouraging such interpretations, but only on one level, which is merely the surface of this complex tragedy; cf. below.

follows a quotation from Hamlet's passage from Act One, Scene Four; this quotation begins the film.

So oft it chances in particular men,  
That through some vicious mole of nature in them,  
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,  
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit grown too much; that these men  
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,  
Their virtues else - be they as pure as grace,  
Shall in the general censure take corruption,  
From that particular fault...

According to Freud, "the play is built up on Hamlet's hesitations over fulfilling the task of revenge that is assigned to him; but its text offers no reasons or motives for these hesitations."<sup>263</sup> Insofar as the notion of the too much hesitating and inactive Hamlet is a valid one at all, this production, with its drastically cut text, certainly allows hardly any reason for uncertainty, apart from the hero's affection toward his mother. As for Hamlet's suspicion about the Ghost as a disguised devil abusing him, that motive is cut in this production too, along with most of Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of Act Two. Thus, although the whole film is concerned with Hamlet's psychology, the point that he is a melancholy character who is susceptible of demonic abuse is characteristically omitted.

Consequently, as usual, the play within the play serves merely to catch the conscience of the King and to prove his guilt; the abridged Mousetrap proves to be an absolute success, even more than in the usual stage productions. Only the dumb show is retained, after which the King rises and leaves in a rage; the whole court clearly perceives the King's guilt. In Shakespeare's tragedy, in contrast, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the King does not move after the dumb show; he rises only after the actual performance with the dialogue, when

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<sup>263</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900; Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 4. London: Penguin, 1991), 367.

Hamlet introduces the murderer as the King's nephew; but that part is cut here. Even more remarkable, however, is that at the dumb show the same images are repeated which we can see during the Ghost's earlier account of the murder; in other words, the recorded dumb show of the players in 3.2 is presented as a flashback in 1.5, before the performance takes place. So even though no suspicions are raised about the Ghost in this version of *Hamlet*, the Mousetrap is presented in a way that perfectly confirms the character's story, as they are in effect identical.

Interestingly, however, the Ghost is not credited in the film; it appears as a phantom, speaking in Olivier's own recorded voice, which is slowed down to a deeper tone. This may be in line with the notion of the Ghost as a projection of Hamlet's own mind or psyche; however, this conception is contradicted by the fact that in the first scene the sentinels can see the Ghost too, when Hamlet is not present; the character is established as an independent figure early on in the play and in the film too. In any case, whatever the source of the mandate, Hamlet's revenge is presented as his moral duty; the hero, even if belatedly, does moral justice in the end. Following the Romantic tradition, this Prince is perfectly moral and just. His other motive of delay, to damn Claudius – though retained in the film – is uttered so softly by Olivier in the Prayer Scene that it may truly appear merely as a pretext for missing the opportunity to kill. This Prince is so pure and gentle that we may indeed be unwilling to believe his explicit motive here.

As with other productions, the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as well as Fortinbras are excised from the film is explained by Olivier with the point that they are sacrificed to save time; and the focus is on the psychology rather than on politics.<sup>264</sup> This Prince does not leave Elsinore; his sea adventure and resourceful return with the pirates is omitted; hence Olivier's Hamlet is indeed more passive than Shakespeare's. Some lamented

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<sup>264</sup> Laurence Olivier, *On Acting* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 290.

the loss of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for “robbing the film of what could have been some of its best comedic moments.”<sup>265</sup> However, even if providing some comic moments, these characters are ultimately tragic rather than comic; as they are Hamlet’s victims, their omission presents the hero in a much more favourable light.

In the absence of Fortinbras, his concluding lines are uttered by Horatio, similarly to Garrick’s adaptation; the concluding speeches are typically cut and rearranged. Horatio’s conclusion, impartially summarising the bloody revenge cycle, is also cut; as usual, the bottom line is that the perfectly moral, though vacillating, Hamlet is taken to his rest by the “flights of angels” after finally dispatching big bad Claudius. Fortinbras does not take over the kingdom; instead, the court kneels before the dying Hamlet who sits and dies on the throne. Hamlet, though not proclaimed as king, is effectively presented as such at the end; in sharp contrast with the court’s charge of treason when Hamlet kills the King in Shakespeare’s tragedy: “*All. Treason, treason*” (5.2.323).

It thus appears that in this film version a large part of the text is again lost in translation, as the text is translated or adapted for the screen; but particularly as it is translated or rendered to convey the actor-director’s interpretation of the play as a manifestation of the Oedipus complex. Olivier’s *Hamlet*, as an independent work of art, or as a reconsideration of the old Hamlet story, may well be an outstanding and highly artistic film. However, as a production of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* it is so partial that it actually violates Shakespeare in many respects. Nevertheless, the film is a typical representative of not only the Romantic, psychological and naively moralising line of interpretations; this drastically abridged *Hamlet* typically realises the surface meaning of Shakespeare’s work. Although it is unlikely that Shakespeare conceived of a romantic attachment between the hero and his mother; on the surface of the play, in a very partial interpretation, if we unconditionally trust the hero and

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<sup>265</sup> Also at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet\\_\(1948\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet_(1948_film)).

focus on some of his sentiments and deeds, while ignoring many others, such a concept of *Hamlet* is possible. Then it may indeed seem that Hamlet is a loving, adorable and pure young man, who may even shrink from violence, rather than a bloodthirsty and quite cruel avenger who does wade in blood by the end of Shakespeare's tragedy, well outnumbering the victims of his adversary.<sup>266</sup>

#### **4.4.2 Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990)**

Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, in contrast, does not rob the protagonist of his original role of the avenger; the film presents Hamlet as an action hero who is a steadfast retaliator, shrinking neither from violence nor from blood. To this effect, the director cast the title role on Mel Gibson, the star of action movies like the *Lethal Weapon* trilogy, who acts as an unsentimental and realistic revenge hero. At the same time, Zeffirelli retains much of the protagonist's initial doubts concerning his mission, including some of the long philosophical soliloquies, and many of the play's ambiguities. Although shorter than Olivier's *Hamlet* (130 minutes), also presenting an abridged text, with a considerably brisker direction and hero, this film includes some important parts cut by Olivier.

Among other elements, Hamlet's fear of an evil Ghost abusing him is retained, therefore the play within the play serves to obtain some independent confirmation about this ominous character too, beyond merely proving the King's guilt. "The Ghost", played by Paul Scofield, is credited as an independent character in the cast; moreover, this designation does not deprive the character of its original ambiguity, even though the entire first scene of the play is cut. The film thus does not start with the appearance of this mysterious figure, but with an added scene, the funeral of the late King Hamlet, where the new King, Claudius, addresses

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<sup>266</sup> It must be noted, however, that Olivier's Hamlet is actually quite resolute when he eventually kills the King, rather spectacularly, and, as we have seen, he does not really shrink from violence already in the Closet Scene. Most of the time, however, he is indeed a romantically pensive hero, particularly as compared to Gibson's Hamlet, cf. below.



Hamlet as his son, with words taken from the second scene of the play. This is followed by the King's speech at the throne room, announcing his marriage to Queen Gertrude; then we quickly move to other parts and rooms of the castle, where the rest of the play's second scene is enacted. The effect is a lively beginning of the film, apparently focusing on the domestic and psychological aspects, rather than on the spiritual ones, represented by the Ghost, or on the foreign threat, as that line is cut here too.

In the central and crucial Play Scene, the Mousetrap is not limited to the dumb show; in fact, now it is the dumb show that is omitted. However, the dialogue is enacted in Elizabethan style, with a male actor playing the Player Queen, retaining some ambiguities again. Before the poisoning, Hamlet announces the murderer as "Lucianus, nephew to the King"; when the King rises, Hamlet asks, "What, frightened with false fire?" Nevertheless, this Prince is also content with this evidence to embark on his mission of revenge; which is definitely a bloody mission here. Unlike in the usual productions with a more romantic bend, Hamlet's desire to "drink hot blood" is retained at the end of the scene; and so is the confusion of the court: the courtiers are perplexed at the behaviour of both the King and the Prince. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also kept, and they are represented not merely as comic characters, but as two real, if somewhat unsuspecting, courtiers, who apparently try to serve both their King and Hamlet, their schoolfellow and friend. They hire the players on their way to Elsinore to entertain Hamlet; then, after his killing of Polonius, they escort the banished Prince on his sea voyage, where he rewards their services by sending them to their sudden deaths, changing the sealed letters while they are sleeping.

Despite the major cuts and the rearrangement of some parts, this film, shot over four decades after Olivier's, is thus a more complete and more realistic, as well as more authentic, presentation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* than the first major attempt in this medium. The authenticity is also supported by the setting and the costumes; the film was shot at a medieval

castle by the sea, suggesting the atmosphere of Elsinore as described in Shakespeare's play (these efforts resulted in the two Oscar nominations received by the film: best art direction and best costume design, for Dante Ferretti and Francesca Lo Schiavo).

However, the direction does not really depart from the psychoanalytic interpretation that has been found reductive concerning Shakespeare's work; Hamlet's attraction toward his mother, played by Glenn Close, is not only romantic but rather sensual. As Douglas Brode observes,

Zeffirelli extends the oedipal impulse to an almost obscene limit. Hamlet speaks his famous lines to his mother not only while beside her at the bed but also literally mounting her. If he weren't sidetracked by the realization that someone else is in the room, this Hamlet would surely rape Gertrude.<sup>267</sup>

It is apparently not only Gibson's Hamlet who is characterised by his basic instincts, equally thirsting for blood and lusting even his own mother, Glenn Close's Gertrude also appears as a "sexual predator".<sup>268</sup> This Queen is also quite young; she does not really look like a woman who had spent thirty years of marriage with her former husband. She is still a stunning lady who does not look much older than Hamlet (Gibson is only nine years younger than Close); but at least she is not younger than her son. In any case, the Ghost's sudden reappearance in the Closet Scene is a relief for the audience. Gertrude is desperate when she believes Hamlet mad, but the devastating implication of the ghostly visitation, appearing only to Hamlet, is lessened. Although the Ghost disrupts any meaningful communication between the hero and his mother, no one really minds if such a communication as the one between Gibson and Close is obstructed. The Closet Scene is thus not only a love scene in this direction, but virtually a sex scene; the moral and spiritual elements appear to be secondary here.

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<sup>267</sup> Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 2001; first edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137.

<sup>268</sup> Brode, *ibid.*

The conclusion of this version of *Hamlet* is again partly similar to Olivier's, but Zeffirelli is more realistic, or indeed more naturalistic, in the depiction of the bloody catastrophe. We are still presented with a heavily cut, partial or even reductive ending; which is, at the same time, less sentimental and more authentic. Instead of a Hamlet gently dying on the throne, or a Gertrude calmly and consciously accepting her death from the poisoned cup, so as to save her son, we can see several characters suffering from major pains in their final agonies as a consequence of poisoning. Eventually the scene is littered with four bodies, including Hamlet's, as the camera peers down, gradually moving away. This direction powerfully presents the devastating effect of the revenge cycle, even without Horatio's concluding summary of the bloody events or Fortinbras's comment on the dismal sight; as those parts are cut again. However, the bottom line is the same as usual: Horatio's farewell to the dying Prince, wishing him flights of angels to sing him to his rest. We may sense a contrast between this devout wish and the actual, rather depressing sight, right after the massacre, perhaps suggesting some of the ambiguity of Shakespeare's tragic closure and also of the hero's controversial, bloody mission. However, the fact that Fortinbras does not arrive at the end to take over the kingdom leaves the outcome in a void.

As we have seen, Fortinbras is often cut from the productions and adaptations; but the question is how we interpret his absence, if noting that at all. Brode laments Zeffirelli's omission of Fortinbras, because in this way, "the carnage we have witnessed" is "violence without purpose"; this pessimism is therefore "Zeffirelli's, not Shakespeare's".

The appearance of Fortinbras is necessary for the author's vision of chaos replaced by a return to order. [...] Though Olivier eliminated Fortinbras, he did approximate the notion of catharsis achieved through terrible sacrifice; the camera moves up, up, up, following Hamlet's body, which is carried to the very top of the tower.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Brode, 139.

It is true that Fortinbras is an important character, who finally represents a return to order; however, Brode's view, preferring Olivier's conclusion, is also arguable. Neither Olivier, nor Zeffirelli is faithful to the conclusion of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's catharsis lies not in Hamlet's celebration as a sacrificial hero, for the Prince of Denmark is also an active participant in the massacre. Olivier's ending, as we have seen, involves more extensive alterations from Shakespeare's text, which he not only heavily cuts, but freely rearranges among the characters. Fortinbras is necessary as a parallel prince and a would-be avenger, who eventually renounces revenge and survives to win the kingdom, after the avengers, Hamlet and Laertes, kill each other in addition to the poisonous King. The Prince of Norway as the new King of Denmark condemns the bloody sight at the Danish court, representing a fresh start (indeed, perhaps, also a new royal house),<sup>270</sup> rather than the confirmation of the past.

Zeffirelli's cinematography, as a matter of fact, approximates Shakespeare's ultimate condemnation of the pointless pursuit of revenge, but we are still left with the partial notion that only "the king's to blame" for all these tragic events; Hamlet is apparently an innocent victim who is rewarded with heaven. This is also reinforced by the fact that not only Fortinbras is missing at the end, but so are the English ambassadors to ask for their thanks for the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reminding us – as well as Horatio – of Hamlet's responsibility in the tragic outcome. Fortinbras does restore order, but that restoration means that the crown falls on a foreign prince, who thus not only regains everything lost by his own father to the late King Hamlet, but is also rewarded with Denmark.

In this film, a large part of the text is also lost in translation, as Shakespeare's longest play has been translated or adapted for the screen, resulting in a film of tolerable length even for the average moviegoers. The film proved to be a commercial success, and this is due not

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<sup>270</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, King James, the founder of the Stuart dynasty, came from the North, like Fortinbras. Moreover, James was also related to Denmark, as his wife was Queen Anne of Denmark.

only to the major Hollywood stars, but primarily to the highly creative and – apart from the major cuts – quite authentic direction; the film received mostly positive critical responses and it can certainly be regarded as a significant artistic success too. Although some important elements of Shakespeare's work are undoubtedly missing from the film, and the presentation of some scenes are arguable, this production represents a major departure from the still influential Romantic tradition that is very different from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Aiming at authenticity, Zeffirelli successfully returns to the original revenge tragedy, which has quite a lot of action, but is not only about a succession of bloody events; it involves a much more ambiguous and controversial hero, story and conclusion than usually realised in the modern reception.

#### 4.4.3 Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996)

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* represents a further development, as it is a film adaptation of the full text. As Branagh explains about "The Choice of Text" in the published screenplay,

The screenplay is based on the text of *Hamlet* as it appears in the First Folio – the edition of Shakespeare's plays collected by his theatrical associates Heminges and Condell and published in 1623 by a syndicate of booksellers. Nothing has been cut from this text, and some passages absent from it (including the soliloquy 'How all occasions do inform against me...') have been supplied from the Second Quarto (an edition of the play which exists in copies dated 1604 and 1605). We have also incorporated some readings of words and phrases from this source and from other early printed texts, and in a few cases emendations from modern editors of the play. Thus in I, 4, in the passage (from the Second Quarto) about the 'dram of eale', we use an emendation from the Oxford edition of the *Complete Works* (edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 1988): 'doth all the noble substance over-daub' - rather than the original's 'of a doubt'.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Kenneth Branagh, *"Hamlet" by William Shakespeare: Screenplay, Introduction and Film Diary* (the latter by Russell Jackson) (New York: Norton, 1996), 174.

Unlike almost all productions and adaptations, this film therefore presents an unabridged *Hamlet*, achieving an authenticity from this essential point; in fact, with the conflated text, it is more complete than any of the three original editions. This effort was widely appreciated by critics as well as the American film academy: Branagh had an Oscar nomination for best writing (adapted screenplay); the three other nominations included best art direction (Tim Harvey), best costume design (Alexandra Byrne) and best original score (Patrick Doyle), similarly to the former two film adaptations discussed above.

Branagh's film has been much praised by critics, but it did not prove to be a commercial success. This is "mostly due to its limited release",<sup>272</sup> but another reason may have been its length; its chief merit may have proved a disadvantage in the popular reception. Despite featuring numerous Hollywood stars, even in minor roles, at over four hours (242 minutes), the film may have been too long for the average moviegoers. In fact, an alternate, shorter version was edited of this film too (135 minutes), with much the same cuts as usual, omitting, among other characters, the English ambassador at the end, though retaining Fortinbras.<sup>273</sup>

As Olivier, Kenneth Branagh directed himself, but, as Roger Ebert observes,

Branagh's *Hamlet* lacks the narcissistic intensity of Laurence Olivier's, but the film as a whole is better, placing *Hamlet* in the larger context of royal politics, and making him less a subject for pity.<sup>274</sup>

Yet, as the Arden (3) editors point out,

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<sup>272</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet\\_\(1996\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamlet_(1996_film)) (accessed 25 February 2013).

<sup>273</sup> "Two versions should have been theatrically released at the same time: a complete 242-minutes director's cut shown only in selected venues (large key cities) and a shorter, wide-release version that ran about two-and-a-half hours. After some critical backlash, Castle Rock decided to release the complete 4 hours everywhere in the US and use the shorter version for some overseas territories."

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116477/alternateversions> (accessed 25 February 2013).

<sup>274</sup> Roger Ebert, "Hamlet" (*Chicago Sun-Times*, 24 January 1997).

Some of the great English Hamlets since 1900 – Gielgud, Olivier, Branagh and Mark Rylance – have also combined the roles of actor and manager or director. Perhaps for this reason, their Hamlets have tended to be sympathetic, even heroic figures.<sup>275</sup>

Presenting the full text, enacting the title role and directing this major international production is a remarkable achievement. My aim is therefore not to criticise Branagh's interpretation, not even to explain it, particularly as Branagh himself, rather humbly, admits: "for I believe I've come happily to realize that I cannot explain *Hamlet*, or even perhaps my own interpretation of *Hamlet*" (ibid). I would merely consider some aspects of this adaptation and its reception, and relate them to Shakespeare's play and some other productions and adaptations.

While presenting the full text, Branagh did not aim at authenticity in every respect. Unlike Zeffirelli, who attempted to achieve historical authenticity, Branagh put the play into a Victorian setting: for the exterior scenes of the Danish royal castle, Blenheim Palace was used, which was built in the eighteenth century, while for the costumes and internal furnishings, a decisively Victorian style was adopted. As Branagh explains, this is "a period setting that attempts to set the story in a historical context that is resonant for a modern audience but allows a heightened language to sit comfortably".<sup>276</sup> This setting, which is already modern as compared to the Renaissance, befits the direction and the apparent underlying interpretation of *Hamlet*. Set against Shakespeare's work and its original context, this presentation is both modern and romantic, apparently drawing on the Romantic concept of the play, which also dates back to the chosen period setting, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This Victorian Hamlet is essentially Romantic, but perhaps even more perfect: not merely an excessively contemplating character but a delaying retaliator who is at the same time confident and ultimately victorious.

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<sup>275</sup> Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare. Third Series* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 111-112.

<sup>276</sup> Branagh (1996), xv.

Indeed, perhaps the most remarkable feature of this adaptation is that Branagh's Hamlet appears to be a moral hero too, even though – unlike in the age of Romanticism and usually even now – none of his controversial deeds and speeches are cut. Unlike in Olivier, all his bloody deeds and victims are retained. Zeffirelli also presents and actually emphasises these aspects, but he cuts great portions of the text. Whereas Zeffirelli only suggests the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, merely by some brief images, here we can hear Hamlet's detailed account of how he carefully forged his escorts' death sentence, specifically disallowing their shriving; in line with his pronounced intent to damn his enemies, particularly the King. Even the English ambassador is kept to remind us about this deed at the end, prompting Horatio's extended conclusion about the devastating revenge cycle.

So how can such a merciless hero be sympathetic, how can he appear as moral? Douglas Brode, who undertakes to explain Branagh's interpretation, suggests,

Branagh (notably generous to his costar) seems willing to suggest that Claudius may be the tragic hero. Hamlet, after all, is presented as good throughout; Claudius better fits the classic definition of a good man who does bad things. [...] He appears to have murdered his brother less out of ambition than owing to honest emotions for the woman, thus becoming strangely sympathetic.<sup>277</sup>

So, at least according to Brode, even Claudius is good in this film, though he does bad things, but Hamlet is presented as good throughout: a good man doing the right thing all along. Branagh thus manages to present a remarkable interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for many have argued that the hero and particularly his deeds are not really good; they may actually be condemnable, either from a moral or a legal point. In addition to the critics, some lawyers have analysed Hamlet's case and convicted him as a serial murderer, deserving a life

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<sup>277</sup> Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 2001; first edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 143.



sentence for five murders and one manslaughter.<sup>278</sup> So how can this Prince appear as good throughout?

This can be explained by several factors. Hamlet dominates Shakespeare's play; when we read the text, we are likely to identify with him, partly because we can see the events primarily through his eyes, through his long soliloquies, commenting on every single event from his perspective. In the film, the artistic cinematography, the many close ups on Hamlet's self-righteous face, supported by the acclaimed acting and direction, showing the events mainly through the hero's perspective, along with the powerful music, all enhance this effect. But Brode has some other noteworthy remarks on Branagh's interpretation.

If we consider Hamlet the hero, however, then Branagh's interpretation is of a man who wants, more than anything else, to do the right thing. Branagh's Hamlet is a moral absolutist. This (and this alone) explains his bitterness toward Gertrude, Ophelia, and ultimately even himself. As a moralist, he knows he must do what the Ghost commands; as an absolutist, he must have proof positive. So he hesitates not out of cowardice but out of idealism.

(Brode, 2001, 144)

Hamlet as moral absolutist who hesitates and acts not out of cowardice but out of idealism: here we have the Romantic interpretation in essence, lasting even to date. This is an idealist moralisation indeed, which is very different from the Christian ethics on which the play is based, with its Christian imagery permeating the whole text. Hamlet indeed believes he must do what the Ghost commands, but, as we have seen, he has certain doubts about the Ghost's identity and intentions. The hero's doubts are dispelled by the Mousetrap, but the King's distress over the performance (or even his admitted guilt at his ensuing prayers), does not really prove the Ghost's identity and reliability; nor does it imply that revenge is a moral or

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<sup>278</sup> Kevin Thomas Duffy, et al. *The Elsinore Appeal: People v. Hamlet* (New York: A Wyatt Book for St. Martin's Press, 1996).

even an adequate solution in the given context – that is, in the original historical, political and religious context.

I would consider two further points concerning Branagh. One is the film's conclusion, which is different from Shakespeare's. This is also observed by Brode, who mostly praises Branagh.

Here, though, Branagh departs from Shakespeare, not the text but the intent. Fortinbras was the Bard's device to portray order restored via a proper prince. Branagh's Fortinbras, however, appears so menacing throughout that we feel queasy about his assuming control. In contrast to Shakespeare's vision of a friendly visit, Fortinbras's men attack Elsinore.

(Brode, 2001, 144)

Here we can cite Branagh's screenplay too. After Horatio's famous benediction to the dying Prince, he continues with the following, usually cut, question: "Why does the drum come hither?" According to the screenplay,

Because it is an attack! Boom! Through every door in the room, by force, emerges Fortinbras's Army, in SAS style. The Soldiers from the top gallery break through the door in shower of glass, already on ropes with which they abseil down into the hall. Within seconds they are in control.

(Branagh, 1996, 171)

It might be argued that Branagh does not contradict the text; this is his interpretation of Shakespeare – but this interpretation is arguable. Osric, played by Robin Williams, "shows his bloodied hand" when he reports the arrival of Fortinbras, who gives the ambassadors of England "this warlike volley".<sup>279</sup> Osric refers to the drum, greeting the English ambassadors; Branagh suggests that this greeting involves a wound for Osric and an attack on Denmark.

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<sup>279</sup> Branagh, *ibid* (the first quote is the screenplay's direction, the second is Osric's line from Shakespeare).

However, Branagh's interpretation is apparently contradicted by the text. Fortinbras's first question is on the dismal sight, while his last but one sentence is to note,

Such a sight as this  
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.

Therefore, the imagined attack, including the bloodied Osric, contradicts Fortinbras's words. The Prince of Norway marches in as a soldier, but he needs no effort or force whatsoever to assume control and to take over the kingdom; the Danish royalty have already exterminated themselves.

Branagh's conclusion suggests that regardless of Hamlet's actions, Fortinbras would have seized the throne anyway. This direction diminishes Hamlet's responsibility in the tragic outcome. The supposedly good, moral and peaceful Hamlet is contrasted with the supposedly bad, cruel and destructive Fortinbras. The Prince of Norway does raise an army, initially with the purpose of invading Denmark, but in the meantime he gives up his intent of revenge and uses that army against Poland. Fortinbras fights a battle fought at he battlefield, rather than within the walls of a royal castle. Branagh suggests that Fortinbras is vindictive, rather than Hamlet; but in Shakespeare's play the opposite is the case. Moreover, Hamlet's revenge is against his own countrymen, as we are also reminded by the ambassadors. Thus, even though Branagh presents the uncut text, his presentation is unfaithful to Shakespeare, apparently seeking to conform to the usual, romantic interpretation.

Even though Brode notices this problem, his interpretation is also arguable.

Fortinbras's first command, as newly crowned king, is to pull down statues of old Hamlet. To visually convey Shakespeare's vision, they should rather raise up old Hamlet's statue, which Claudius had knocked down.

(Brode, 2001, 145)

Brode refers to Branagh's arguable addition to Shakespeare, but Brode's interpretation seems to me somewhat romantic too. Brode seems to conceive of Fortinbras as Hamlet's man, the hero's substitute after his tragic death. However, it is unlikely that Fortinbras would raise statues to the late King Hamlet, who had killed Fortinbras's father and had won his lands in a duel; lands which Fortinbras now reclaims. Fortinbras is not Hamlet's representative but his rival: an alternative to his mission of revenge, which involves disaster. Fortinbras's war against Poland, as an outlet for his vindictive purpose and energy may be arguable; but, in contrast to Hamlet, at least he wages a war against another country at the battlefield.

In Branagh's translation or adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into a movie, the original text is thus not lost but retained; however, its meaning is significantly modified by the direction, placing the story into a different context and adding some arguable actions and images, amounting to a different conclusion. One final point from Brode, his ultimate praise of Branagh, can conclude this chapter and lead to the rest of this study.

Branagh has fashioned not only a *Hamlet* for the common man but a commonsense *Hamlet* stripped of the interpretive layers successive generations imposed. This is a *Hamlet* that has returned to its essential meaning, as discovered in Shakespeare's words, which prove less ambiguous than scholars and directors have suggested.

(Brode, 2001, 147)

Brode intends this as praise, but he seems to contradict himself, at least about the conclusion of *Hamlet*. While presenting the whole text, it is doubtful whether Branagh has indeed returned to the essential meaning in his ending of *Hamlet*; as a modern director, he may well have imposed his own interpretive layer on it, which may be different from the original meaning or meanings, or the original interpretations. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a complex work; some of his words, characters and the whole play may well have more than one meaning. One exclusive meaning can easily involve a simplification; moreover, it may not

even be the original or essential meaning implied by Shakespeare or understood by his audience. As we have seen, most productions and adaptations of *Hamlet* have offered partial, drastically cut or altered versions of Shakespeare's work, while the one presenting the whole text is also arguable and unfaithful in some major respects. Let us, therefore return to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – that is, the text or texts of the original, early editions – and examine it in its own context, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

## Chapter 5

### ***HAMLET* IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ASPECTS OF A COMPLEX PLAY**

*For.* For me, with sorrowe I embrace my fortune,  
I haue some rights, of memory in this kingdome,  
Which now to clame my vantage doth inuite me.  
[...]  
Take vp the bodies, such a sight as this,  
Becomes the field, but heere showes much amisse.

(5.2.388-90; 401-2)

*Ham.* My father, me thinkes I see my father.

*Hora.* Where my Lord?

*Ham.* In my mindes eye *Horatio*.

(1.2.184-5)

#### **5.1 Hamlet and his task**

##### **5.1.1 The role of history and historicist criticism**

Fortinbras's concluding remark on the bloodbath at the Danish court, chosen as the first motto of this chapter, has often been cut on stage as well as on screen, along with the very character taking over the kingdom, as we have seen above, in the study of the productions. Occasionally, some of Fortinbras's lines have been retained and given to Horatio, as in Olivier's film adaptation. In some productions, the future king himself appears at the end; but even then he is usually presented as a negative character, as in Branagh's film. In almost all

productions, as in most critical interpretations, the remembrance or the celebration is limited to Hamlet's body and soul, when he finally completes his revenge.

The title character is certainly in the centre of the play and hence also of its reception – and therefore also of this study – but several other characters, who are often ignored, are also important in Shakespeare's work: from the Ghost, who effectively begins the plot and sets it into motion through the protagonist, to the Prince of Norway, who concludes it as the next King of Denmark. All these characters gain a much richer set of meanings if they are viewed in the light of history, and so does the whole play. The second motto of this chapter quotes a crucial moment: Hamlet *thinks* that he sees his father, when Horatio is just about to tell him about the Ghost. As I have already argued, in contrast to the general assumptions, Shakespeare's play as a whole does not necessarily vindicate Hamlet's revenge; moreover, the Ghost, the source of the mandate, is not necessarily identical to Hamlet's father either. Before examining these issues in more detail, let us first consider some general points concerning the significance of history and historical criticism.

Hamlet's view about the purpose of playing, quoted above as the general motto of this study, has been discussed in the first chapter. As the protagonist instructs the players, the theatre holds a mirror up to nature, and it is concerned primarily with moral issues, focusing particularly on "vertue" and "scorne", but it also aims to show "the very age and body of the time his forme and pressure" (3.2.21-22). A play functions as a mirror for the audience, hence the moral issues of the characters reflect those of their audiences, situated in a certain historical context, always taking a specific form as a response to the given pressures. This applies primarily to the play within the play and its audience, including not only the King but also Hamlet and the other characters; in general, however, it applies to any play, hence also to *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's notion of the theatre has been spectacularly proved by the various *Hamlet* productions and their audiences over the past four centuries. As we have seen, ever since the Restoration, Shakespeare's work has been constantly adapted, so as to suit the moral and political preferences of the given historical eras of the productions; the play has also been adapted to reflect the new artistic and psychological concepts, the different stage conventions, or the different medium of the opera or film. The cuts and other alterations from the original play have not been accidental; they have always conformed to the notions and tastes of the producers and directors, and ultimately to those of their audiences. However, if we intend to understand the challenges and dilemmas of the characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we need to return not only to the original texts but also to the original contexts, and consider the issues as they appeared – or may have appeared – to Shakespeare's audiences, whose views may have been very different from those of the ensuing, modern or postmodern periods.

Observing this point, Shakespeare's work has been examined by a number of historical or historicist critics in long and detailed studies, some of which have been discussed above. As R. M. Frye explains, "an historical criticism can provide safeguards against the precarious subjectivism of individual critics and to the provincialism of critical schools"<sup>280</sup>. Although the origins of Hamlet's story date back to several centuries before Shakespeare's time, the playwright considerably reworked and improved on the sources. The historical parallels to the protagonist's situation can therefore be considered as events or issues to which the play may have held a mirror at the beginning of the seventeenth century; the chronicles and the contemporary legal or theological documents can enhance the interpretation of the play.

However, with such a complex work, written over four hundred years ago, history can be a two-edged weapon; the historical facts and documents, as any other texts – including those of *Hamlet* – can be used variously. As Paul N. Siegel argues, historical criticism can be

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<sup>280</sup> Roland Mushat Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet. Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 8. In this chapter, among other sources, I draw on Frye's comprehensive study, but I suggest different conclusions.



used as well as abused.<sup>281</sup> We have seen that historicist critics have also taken various approaches, themselves belonging to different schools, even in the past few decades; for instance, new historicism has somewhat different concerns from cultural materialism. Critics have focused on different aspects of the play and its contexts, and they have come up with radically different conclusions.

Therefore, although the purpose of this study is to restore some aspects of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in this chapter I do not claim to reconstruct the play or to offer a definitive interpretation. My aim is merely to highlight and explain some points, and to suggest some conclusions, which are different from the usual views of *Hamlet*. Although it has often been noted that the play is remarkably complex, particularly as compared to the earlier versions of the Hamlet story or the other Renaissance revenge tragedies, the issues and the characters tend to be simplified in the reception.

The main purpose is to show here that the play, similarly to the play within the play, itself tends to suggest different aspects of the issues it raises, implying various solutions; some of which tend to be ignored in the reception, even in historicist criticism. Moreover, the aspects or solutions that are generally realised may not be the real or final answers to the questions; in some cases, the alternative suggestions or implications may be more valid and realistic than those that may appear at a first glance, or appreciated at the first level of meaning. As I will argue, for the most part, this can be inferred from the text itself – that is, from the original editions – as Shakespeare provides us with all the necessary information to understand his play. However, the complexity of the tragedy can be much more appreciated in light of the historical context, if we realise how *Hamlet* mirrors some contemporary events and ideas concerning succession, the theatre, or ghost lore.

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<sup>281</sup> Paul N. Siegel, “‘Hamlet Revenge!’ The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism” (*Shakespeare Survey*, 1993) 15-26.

### 5.1.2 A complex era and task, with parallel characters

The Ghost tells Hamlet the secret of the murder, *and* commands him to revenge it. The Prince immediately accepts the task and swears revenge, but then he starts to hesitate. Eventually he executes the mandate, however, this involves the deaths of most of the characters, including Hamlet. The question arises, whether there could be another solution to the problem. The examination of Hamlet's task in its historical context, together with a close reading, may answer this question. Although the call on vengeance is quite clear and straightforward – the Ghost commands it even before unfolding the murder (1.5.7) – Hamlet's challenge is a complex one, involving several issues, which are considered and represented only partly by the hero. Shakespeare introduces two parallel avengers, and the other characters have also important contributions to the main themes. Hamlet claims that he “was borne to set it right” (1.5.189), but he does not consider any other option than revenge; that is the task he is given by the Ghost and he pursues till the end. However, as I have argued, the play, as a whole, does not necessarily endorse revenge or regicide; moreover, it implies some other solutions to Hamlet's problem, realised in particular by Fortinbras, who was also born to set it right.

First of all, however, the historical context itself needs to be identified, which again involves certain distinctions. The context of the story of the play, taking place at Elsinore, at an unspecified time, is not exactly the same as the context of creation and the first productions in London, at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Shakespeare himself creates and suggests a certain context to his own, mostly fictitious, story, which is merely based on a medieval legend; the play itself provides a certain political, moral and religious framework, as the characters comment on the events and their choices. However, the Elizabethan historical context is also relevant, as Shakespeare and his audiences must have viewed and interpreted *Hamlet* as it appeared to them, at the Globe theatre in their own time. Shakespeare's age can be further considered from an artistic, philosophical, theological or political perspective; all of

which were also quite complex.

This period is now usually referred to as the early modern, just like Shakespeare's English; as an overall label of the age, this tends to emphasise its modern aspects, as distinct from the earlier, medieval epoch. Indeed, "early modern", as an alternative term for the English Renaissance, suggests that it is already a part of the modern, even if only as its initial phase. These two terms are often used interchangeably, as synonyms, and I do not intend to enter into a detailed discussion of this issue of terminology. The English late Renaissance indeed shows many modern elements, pointing toward or anticipating the Enlightenment; but, in my opinion, the label "early modern" may be somewhat restrictive, if the focus of attention is primarily on the modern aspects, those that connect Shakespeare's epoch to the later ones, or to our own, modern – or already postmodern – world.<sup>282</sup> I prefer the view that regards Elizabethan and Jacobean England as perhaps the most complex in cultural history; a transitional period between the Middle Ages and the modern world, also strongly characterised by the revival of the ancient Greek and Roman culture, hence the earlier label English Renaissance, which defines the age by referring backward rather than forward. In any case, although the medieval tradition was still influential, confidence in it had been shaken, and this is often referred to as the epistemological crisis of the late Renaissance, which we shall further discuss in the last chapter.<sup>283</sup>

The significance of the influence of the earlier epochs is demonstrated by the fact that, as has been mentioned, the Renaissance – Elizabethan and Jacobean – theatre, unlike that of the Restoration, was still based upon the medieval, primarily religious, world concept, with "Heavens" above and "Hell" below the Globe stage; even if the religious elements were often

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<sup>282</sup> For a discussion of these issues, see: Hugh Grady, ed., *Shakespeare and Modernity. Early modern to millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1-19. In addition to Grady's Introduction, the volume includes an informative essay on *Hamlet* by Linda Charnes, "The Hamlet formerly known as Prince", 189-210; cf. below.

<sup>283</sup> W. R. Elton, "Shakespeare and the Thought of His Age". *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P. 1986), 17.

used ambiguously by Shakespeare. In this respect, the Renaissance theatre was still quite religious, whereas the Restoration was already far more modern and secular, which is also reflected in the topics, the imagery or the language of the plays. At the same time, when describing these historical periods, we need to avoid overgeneralizations. Christianity, or the religious significance of *Hamlet*, should not be limited to one particular historical period, and it should be comprehended by modern readers and audiences too, if they are attentive to the details. However, the religious issues were probably more easily accessible to the Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences than for the usually more secular audiences of the later periods. In Shakespeare's age, certain issues of Christianity, including the conflicts of Catholics and Protestants, were often a matter of life and death, which also manifested in politics, as we shall consider shortly.

As for the context of the story of the play, I believe it is an important feature of Shakespeare's work that no definite time is given, therefore it is complex even in this respect. In the King's suggestion of "our neglected tribute" of England (3.1.170), we may note an allusion to the Danegeld,<sup>284</sup> dating back to the Viking invasions, roughly contemporaneous with the original Hamlet story, several centuries before Shakespeare. At the same time, Rosencrantz's comment on the travelling players may also refer to some recent developments, when he explains, "I thinke their *inhibition* comes by the meanes of the late innouation" (2.2.331-2, italics added). As the Arden editors note,

I.e. *the restriction on their performances* (in the city) is because of recent and unusual events. Editors have interpreted the late innovation as a reference to the political disturbances – perhaps the death of the elder Hamlet and the preparations for war in the Danish context, *or the Essex rebellion in 1601 if an English topical allusion is intended*. In the other texts the innovation could mean the revived fashion for children's companies.

(Thomson and Taylor, 2006, 259)<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> See the Arden 3 *Hamlet* note to 3.1.169. Thompson and Taylor (2006), 294.

<sup>285</sup> Note to *Hamlet*, 2.2.295, italics added.

This point can be taken as a typical example for the multiplicity of possible meanings of the text, or indeed texts, including some important differences in the Second Quarto and the Folio. The play can thus be interpreted as a representation of a medieval story, taking place in another country in the past, suggesting England's subordination to Denmark; but it can also be interpreted as a contemporary play, with some distinctly Elizabethan connotations, both from the point of the theatre and that of politics, which were closely connected. These historical events will be considered in the next section; let us first focus on the text itself, the context created by Shakespeare, in light of some relevant documents.

The main social and political problems of the tragedy reflect the attitudes of this transitional period. From this respect, the play displays the imagery of the medieval kingdom. The King, Claudius, had acquired his crown by secretly murdering the former King, and hypocritically abuses the traditional role of the Christian king. On the other hand, Hamlet, a student of Wittenberg, the city of Reformation and thus the symbol of progress, seems to represent the modern world. This side of probably the most complex figure in literature easily lends itself to a simplified and, in my opinion, mistaken explanation of Hamlet's delay in executing the Ghost's command: the Prince does not really want to be King, he is merely a scholar and not a courtier; a modern, peaceful philosopher.<sup>286</sup> In this view, similarly to the traditional interpretations, Hamlet's revenge is considered as his moral duty, but it is believed to be alien to his enlightened personality; a moral duty belonging to the dark past, with its own revenge code. Let us, therefore, consider Hamlet's following passage:

I am my selfe indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse mee of such things that it were better my Mother had not borne mee: I am very proude, reuengefull, ambitious, with more offences at my beck, than I haue thoughts to put them in, imagination to giue them shape, or time

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<sup>286</sup> This view is represented, among others, by Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare and the Reason: A Study of the Tragedies and the Problem Plays* (London: Routledge, 1964), 35.

to act them in.

(3.1.121-7)

Agitated though he may be in this scene – or perhaps consciously and quite convincingly displaying his antic disposition – Hamlet does not really deceive either Ophelia or himself; he may even be threatening the King, particularly if suspecting him or Polonius eavesdropping. The protagonist does not picture himself as a romantic hero or a peaceful philosopher. He regards himself as *vengeful*; he knows his purpose and that it is not at all an admirable, solemn deed, but an *offence* which will probably involve more. His three comparisons to mark the nature and number of the offences make his words particularly stressed. Note also the word *ambitious*, which is unlikely to refer to anything else but the crown.

Hamlet later further states that the King “Pop’t in betweene th’election and my hopes” (5.2.65). The Prince tells this to Horatio, his confidante. Therefore, Hamlet wanted to become King, despite his wish, after not being elected, to return to Wittenberg; a thing that is easy to understand in his disappointment. Accordingly, his delay cannot really be explained by the above assumption. This line reveals an important characteristic of the Danish political system, and also the fact that Hamlet is aware of it. Unlike in England, the crown is not hereditary, the Danish monarchy is elective. As Robert, first Viscount Molesworth, reported, the King of Denmark was “chosen by people of all sorts”, and if they found “that they had advanced a cruel, vicious, tyrannical, covetous, or wasteful person, they frequently deposed him”.<sup>287</sup> As there are two more references to the elective system in the play, it is apparently a significant factor that Shakespeare highlights in the political context he creates for his characters.

This problem is also related to Hamlet’s task and to a much disputed issue of the age: the action to be taken against tyrants and the question of tyrannicide. In the final Elizabethan doctrine before *Hamlet*, the Protestant Bishop Bilson wrote that an hereditary monarch who

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<sup>287</sup> Robert, first Viscount of Molesworth, *Account of Denmark* (London, 1694), 43, in Frye (1984), 356.

becomes a tyrant may be opposed and restrained by force of arms, but he “may not be deposed”.<sup>288</sup> However, if a ruler owes his crown to election, princes and nobles “may lawfully resist him... or else repel him as a tyrant, and set another in his place by the right and freedom of the country” (ibid.). Thus, King Claudius, as an elected monarch, could be lawfully deposed, which actually happened to some Danish kings. This point, however, as so many others in *Hamlet*, can be interpreted differently. On the one hand, this can be cited as a confirmation of Hamlet’s case, his right to take action against the King. But on the other hand, this also implies that should Hamlet not insist on revenge, he might avoid the tragic outcome. By winning the electorate to his case, he might attempt to repeal the King’s rule and arrange a new election.

In the play, significantly, the first reference to the elective monarchy describes such a situation. When Laertes returns to Denmark after his father has been killed, the people want him to become King:<sup>289</sup>

The cry choose we, *Laertes* shall be King,  
Caps, hands, and tongues applau'd it to the clouds,  
*Laertes* shall be King, *Laertes* King.

(4.5.107-9)

Although the King’s Messenger talks about a riot that is against the custom – probably because the King is still in office and there is no apparent reason for a new election – this may be a hint for an opportunity Hamlet completely ignores, despite his knowledge of the elective crown. His situation is almost identical to that of Laertes’; they both have a murdered father. The King himself offers to give his kingdom to Laertes if he is found guilty, together with his life.

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<sup>288</sup> Thomas Bilson, *The True Difference Between Christian Subjection and Unchristian Rebellion* (London, 1585 and 1595), 513, in Frye (1984), 265.

<sup>289</sup> Despite his thorough study, Frye ignores this reference to the elective monarchy; this may have led him to the usual, in my opinion, wrong conclusion, approving of Hamlet’s revenge (Frye 1984, 264), cf. below.

Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,  
And they shall heare and iudge twixt you and me,  
If by direct, or by colaturall hand  
They find vs toucht, we will our kingdome giue,  
To you in satisfaction;

(4.5.205-209)

Of course, he knows well he will not have to. It was not him, but Hamlet, who killed Polonius. Hamlet's intention was to kill the King; who is therefore not guilty even by collateral hand in this act. Ironically, Hamlet's first attempt at revenge has as a result that another young man gets into the same situation, a young man seeking justice for the murder of his father. It is even more ironic that the King himself suggests a solution for the problem: his own deposition, implying a solution that Hamlet could consider too, were he not bent on revenge.

This scene has another implication. The Queen too is present, therefore she is also aware of the elective system; she witnesses an attempt to depose the King, even if a misguided one in the given situation. In the Closet Scene, it becomes apparent that Queen Gertrude is not involved in the murder of the late King Hamlet (3.4.30). If she knew that she married her former husband's murderer, it is conceivable that she would not only leave King Claudius, but may also take the initiative in deposing him. Either with Hamlet, or, as it appears that the Prince can conceive only of revenge, she might act even without him. The Queen, however, never learns that Claudius murdered her first husband.

The last reference to the elections is also by Hamlet.

But I doe prophecie th'ellection lights  
On *Fortinbrasse*, he has my dying voyce.

(5.2.355-6)



Hamlet, executing the Ghost's mandate when already dying, cannot become King. By the time he fulfils his task, the entire court is in effect exterminated, and he himself has to die as the last victim of a series of revenge. Horatio is more of an outsider, the scholar from Wittenberg, and Osric is certainly no candidate for the throne. A foreign Prince, Fortinbras, becomes the new King. The outcome is far from ideal, particularly from the protagonist's point, and Shakespeare clearly refers to the elective monarchy, which implies the possibility of another solution, three times in the play.

The significance of Hamlet's choice is pronounced early in the play by Laertes:

He may not as vnualed persons doe,  
Carue for himselfe, for on his choise depends  
The safty and health of this whole state,  
And therefore must his choise be circumscribd  
Vnto the voyce and yeelding of that body  
Whereof he is the head.

(1.3.19-24)

Although Hamlet's duties are described here in connection with his choice of marriage, these sentences carry a broader meaning, containing crucial information. Besides the point that Hamlet does have a choice in certain issues, implicitly, we are provided with a description of an elected monarch; Laertes anticipates Hamlet's succession to the throne. Laertes points out that the monarch's choices must be carefully weighed, and the "voice" and "yielding" of the people, that is, public consent is necessary to arrive at decisions. The elective system implies that Claudius became King through public consent, he is thus not a usurper.<sup>290</sup> His guilt is that he acquired the throne by murdering the former King, but he manages to keep that in secret; he is a usurper only from a moral point, but not in a political sense. At the same time, public consent is required for repelling or deposing a monarch too.

Hamlet's choice is revenge, which clearly does not result the "sanity and the health" of

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<sup>290</sup> See also Jenkins (1982), 433.

Denmark at the end of the tragedy. Although Denmark's "sanity and health" are certainly questionable throughout the play, things go but worse when Hamlet starts to take action and, as his first attempt at revenge, kills Polonius. Revenge itself was a much debated issue in the age of *Hamlet*. It was an expressly forbidden thing in the Christian tradition, which was a fundamental teaching of both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. Traditionally, the Christian man was to suffer injuries passively and patiently, revenge was considered to be the privilege of God (Deut. 32.35; Rom. 12.19).<sup>291</sup> However, there was a distinction between private revenge and the revenge of one in authority. Frye points out that in both Catholic and Protestant views, though "retribution was forbidden for a private person, it was required of rulers".<sup>292</sup> One in authority was seen as "God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Rom. 13.14).<sup>293</sup> Private revenge, on the other hand, was not only strictly forbidden, but also deeply condemned almost unanimously.

It is apparent that in order to comply with the Ghost's command, Hamlet seeks private revenge, and after the Mousetrap he delays it only in want of a "proper" opportunity to dispatch *and* damn the King; though, as we have seen, he does not really delay long, as in the Closet Scene he already attempts to achieve his goal. Nonetheless, it should be noted that towards the end of the play Hamlet does seem to regard himself as King, that is, the ruler with authority. He proclaims himself King passionately at Ophelia's burial: "this is I/ *Hamlet* the Dane" (5.1.257-8), that is, the ruler of Denmark.<sup>294</sup> This might be understood as his logical conclusion, having convinced of King Claudius' guilt. The problem is that, except for Horatio, no one else knows about the secret of the murder, and Hamlet, in striving for his

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<sup>291</sup> László Kéry, "A bosszúálló Hamlet". In: Tibor Fabiny and István Géher, eds. *Új Magyar Shakespeare-tár* (Budapest: Modern Filológiai Társaság, 1988), 76.

<sup>292</sup> Frye (1984), 31.

<sup>293</sup> Aquinas, *de Regimine Principum*, I, 7, in *St. Thomas Aquinas Theological Texts*, ed. Thomas Gilby (London and New York), 1955, entry 436, and *Summa Theologica* (II-II, qu. 108 art. 1) ed. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, 1947, vol. 2), 1656. Frey discusses Aquinas and some other theologians in detail, however, he regards Hamlet as the rightful ruler, and argues that his revenge is therefore lawful (*ibid*). As I will argue, this view is not supported by the play, particularly in the context of the elective monarchy.

<sup>294</sup> Jenkins 1982, 391

private revenge, does not seem to intend to reveal it. Although the Mousetrap is generally interpreted as a clear accusation or even evidence against the King, as we have seen, Hamlet does not actually charge him explicitly; the performance, as well as its reception by the court, is quite complex and ambiguous.

Hamlet's conviction of his mission and position may also be the reason for his using his father's signet to seal his "earnest coniuration from the King" (5.2.38), in which he orders the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, as he is not in fact the elected King, this is certainly forgery, and the more serious it is if we consider the innocence of the victims. Hamlet believes them to be villains, but his former friends apparently do not know about the real purpose of their voyage. The commission they are to deliver to England is sealed, and there is no indication that King Claudius may have risked to tell them its content.<sup>295</sup> They may well believe that it is indeed better and safer for Hamlet to move to England for a while, after he has killed Polonius; Laertes does take his revenge when he and Hamlet return to Denmark.

Some critics, in identifying with Hamlet, are too ready to overlook the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They view the case as lightly as Hamlet does; it is often simply claimed that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deserve their fate for serving the evil King Claudius.<sup>296</sup> However, it is unlikely that they know how the King acquired the crown; they are

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<sup>295</sup> Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968) aptly describe the difficult situation of these characters. On this point, however, Stoppard significantly alters from *Hamlet*. In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern break the seal and read the letter, then seal it again; therefore their innocence can be questioned, and the effect is the confirmation of the traditional interpretation, by which they deserve their fate. There is no such hint in Shakespeare's tragedy.

This can be noted about Frye's interpretation too. Frye quotes Hamlet's lines on these characters, when the Prince justifies his deed; however, Shakespeare and his audience, unlike the general modern reception, may not have always approved of the protagonist's deeds and words. Frye's historical analysis is also arguable here. Justifying Hamlet's deed, Frye suggests that "we can see Hamlet either as the rightful king, who executes justice upon two would-be assassins; or we can take Hamlet's own analogy of a war in process, and assume that Hamlet as a combatant has the rights of war, allowing him to kill his enemies before they can kill him" (1984), 259-63.

However, even though critics often see Hamlet as the rightful king, in the context of the elective monarchy, underscored several times in the play – and also if we consider the original designations of the characters – it is evident the King is Claudius and Hamlet is the Prince; it is Hamlet who is regarded as an assassin and charged with treason when he kills the King at the end. It is also clear that the escorts, bearing the sealed royal mandate to execute Hamlet, are perfectly innocent; they are on a royal mission to escort Hamlet to his exile after the murder of Polonius, moreover, they are probably unaware of the actual content of the royal letter they bear. Frye,

called home after the action has started, that is, after the coronation, and there is no suggestion of their awareness of the murder. Returning to the idea of Hamlet as King, no one else regards him as such in the play; he remains the Prince until the end. When he wounds King Claudius in the final scene, the people's reaction is: "*All: Treason, treason*" (5.2.323). This marks that, although the sympathy of some of the audience may entitle Hamlet to kill the King, the public consent of the elective monarchy has not yet done so. Even after his death, both Horatio and Fortinbras remember the protagonist as the Prince, who was not "put on" the throne.

Commenting on the dispatching of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet claims that "euen in that was heuven ordinant" (5.2.48), which, of course, presents his deed in a very favourable light. After slaying Polonius, he likewise considers himself Heaven's "scourge and minister" (3.4.175). These concepts were well known at the time of the play, and are also related to Hamlet's task. We have seen above that one in authority was considered as "God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil". The exact meaning of these Biblical metaphors has been widely debated in the case of *Hamlet*. According to Eleanor Prosser, the two notions are mutually exclusive in meaning. A *minister* of God was conceived to be a divine agent not only in his punitive function but also in his motives and methods. "Such a man may be a severe but compassionate judge, who may sentence a criminal to death, but seeks only to save the condemned man's soul, warn other sinners, and restore order."<sup>297</sup>

On the other hand, the concept of "the scourge of God" was used to explain the paradox that Divine Providence operates even when evil appears to triumph. It was believed that God may choose an evil man as his agent of punishment, using "the wicked against the wicked, for the good of his, without good to themselves".<sup>298</sup> As Prosser points out, this means that God elects as his scourge only a sinner who already deserves damnation. Hamlet applies

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however, is right in perceiving that Hamlet wages a war against his own people, even though the critic fails to see any problem about this; cf. below.

<sup>297</sup> Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), 202.

<sup>298</sup> George Moore, *A Demonstration of God in his workes* (London, 1587), in Prosser, *ibid.*

both terms to himself. This may mark his uncertainty about the nature of the mandate, but having accepted the Ghost, he undoubtedly means only the positive sense: he views both the Ghost and himself as divine agents of justice and retribution. As we shall see, in this sense, Hamlet is only a scourge.

Some have suggested, however, that the notions of God's "scourge" and "minister" are not necessarily different in meaning, and they were used in the Renaissance almost interchangeably, apparently as synonyms.<sup>299</sup> In this case, however, the question is whether Hamlet is in fact Heaven's instrument, as he believes; whether it indeed pleases Heaven that he slays Polonius and dispatches several other people. Hamlet attempts to fulfil the Ghost's command; he is, in effect, the Ghost's instrument. But the Ghost cries from below the stage, which was referred to as Hell in the Elizabethan theatre. Indeed, Hamlet, who becomes in effect a serial killer by the end of the play, may well be a minister of Hell, rather than that of Heaven, as we shall see below. For a parallel in Shakespeare, we can recall a reference to the character of Richard III, whom Lady Anne initially rejects as "Avaunt, thou dreadful *minister of hell*".<sup>300</sup> Of course, Richard Gloucester is clearly an evil character, while Hamlet's character and case are more complex and ambiguous. Nevertheless, the fact that Hamlet follows and obeys the Ghost requires a more detailed analysis of both these characters and their relationship.

Hamlet, however, is not the only avenger in the play; as has been mentioned, Shakespeare introduces Laertes and Fortinbras to the Hamlet story. These characters are usually described as parallels who not only elaborate the issues but heighten Hamlet's case and character. Whereas Hamlet apparently carefully contemplates his situation and the course of action to be taken, these parallel characters appear to be much more straightforward avengers. As we have seen, Hamlet's delay has led some commentators to believe that he

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<sup>299</sup> Jenkins (1982), 523.

<sup>300</sup> *Richard III*, 1.2.46; italics added.

ignores or even rejects revenge. Indeed, in most productions, as we have seen, Laertes is presented as the avenger, as well as Fortinbras, if he is retained, whereas Hamlet is a character who apparently transcends revenge as a wise or even pious man. In fact, some elements of the play indeed encourage such an interpretation, but these characters are worth considering in more detail.

Fortinbras is mentioned several times throughout the play as a parallel prince preparing to avenge the death of his father, the late King of Norway. Like Hamlet, he also bears his father's name, who had been killed by Hamlet's father, the late King Hamlet of Denmark in a duel. As we learn in the first scene from Horatio, the two Kings had a wager by which King Fortinbras lost not only his life, but also some of his lands, which his son now seeks to recover by force.

Young *Fortinbrasse*  
Of vnimprooued mettle, hot and full,  
Hath in the skirts of *Norway* heere and there  
Sharkt vp a list of lawelesse resolute  
For foode and diet to some enterprise  
That hath a stomacke in't, which is no other  
As it doth well appeare vnto our state  
But to recouer of vs by strong hand  
And tearmes compulsatory , those foresaid lands  
So by his father lost.

(1.1.95-104)

Fortinbras is thus a strong and determined avenger who is bent on war: a hot-headed youth who “sharks up” his army of similarly resolute, “lawless” young man. From Horatio's description, Fortinbras appears as rather negative character; although he is a man of action, not hesitating too long to achieve his goal of revenge, his army gives the impression of unruly desperados.

Later on, however, Fortinbras obeys the current King of Norway, who – after negotiations with the King of Denmark – forbids Fortinbras to attack Denmark, and orders

him to go against Poland instead. Then Fortinbras' army is already described as a most disciplined one, marching peacefully across Denmark, according to the agreement with Denmark. But even then his war seems useless, hardly worth the loss of men. As the Captain explains,

Truly to speake, and with no addition  
We goe to gaine a little patch of ground  
That hath in it no profit but the name  
To pay fife duckets, fife I would not farme it  
Nor will it yeeld to *Norway* or the *Pole*  
A rancker rate, should it be sold in fee.

(4.4.18-23)

In Hamlet's last soliloquy, which can be found only in the Second Quarto text, he claims to see

The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That for a fantasie and tricke of fame  
Goe to their graues like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tombe enough and continent  
To hide the slaine, ô from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.

(4.4.60-67)

Fortinbras thus fights an apparently meaningless war; his chief role in crossing Denmark is to remind Hamlet of his seemingly neglected task, and finally to return to take the vacant throne. Hamlet praises Fortinbras's determination "when honour's at the stake" (4.4.57), even though it involves bloodshed, apparently on a far bigger scale and for a far lesser cause than Hamlet's. Despite Hamlet's admiration, Fortinbras is perhaps not an ideal Prince either, and many have expressed their concerns about his succession, believing him unworthy to be the next King of Denmark. Lamenting the death of Hamlet, critics tend to

argue that the throne falls on an inferior character.<sup>301</sup> However, the fact is that Hamlet looks upon Fortinbras primarily as a role model to shed blood. Moreover, even though Fortinbras does risk the lives of many, he marches into a battle to fight the enemy, whereas Hamlet sheds the blood of his own people at court; he treats his schoolfellows and escorts as his enemies.

Indeed, if we compare the two Princes as parallel avengers, Fortinbras, though initially much more determined or even desperate about his revenge, ultimately gives up his claim of revenge against Denmark. Then he is already a “delicate and tender Prince” (4.4.49), who sends his captain to “greet the Danish King” (4.4.1). Even though his war against Poland may seem unreasonable, that is clearly not an instance of revenge, but already a conventional war that is quite common even in modern times, when there is a disputed piece of land, however small that may be.<sup>302</sup> Whereas at the beginning Fortinbras is a wild avenger, and Hamlet is an ideal Prince, the observed of all observers; by the end, the roles are reversed. Hamlet, assuming the role of the avenger, along with that of the lunatic, gradually loses control over the events, and ultimately falls. Conversely, Fortinbras, abandoning his revenge, gradually assumes control; his development in character is followed by a rise in rank too: he survives to gain the disputed and coveted throne, without having to fight against Denmark.

As has been mentioned, Hamlet’s first attempt at revenge at the Closet Scene brings another young man into the same situation as he is in. That parallel avenger in Denmark is Laertes, who is also introduced by Shakespeare as a new character in the old Hamlet story. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes has no doubts about his revenge whatsoever. As he declares,

To hell allegiance, vows to the blackest deuil,  
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit  
I dare damnation, to this poynt I stand  
That both the worlds I giue to negligence,

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<sup>301</sup> See, for instance, Frey (1984), 267.

<sup>302</sup> We need not necessarily seek examples here, but in modern history one may recall the 1982 Falklands War, fought for some tiny islands off the coast of Argentina. A referendum in March 2013 confirmed the British sovereignty over the islands.



Let come what comes, onely I'le be reueng'd  
Most throughly for my father.

(4.5.132-7)

Laertes is often contrasted with Hamlet. The Prince is believed to be an ethical avenger, who carefully considers his task before taking action, moreover, he delays his revenge far too long; that is supposed to his tragic flaw by many critics as well as directors like Olivier, for instance. In this respect, Laertes is indeed a parallel avenger who does not delay at all: he rushes home from France and charges the King straight away, even without having been convinced of his guilt. As we have seen, although he is not a Prince, he is chosen as King by some of the people. Laertes may seem immoral, while Hamlet may seem moral; however, the outcome is that both avengers die at the end, moreover, they kill each other, while Fortinbras, the only son who gives up his revenge, is rewarded with the kingdom, even though he is a foreign Prince.

Hamlet, in his soliloquy at the end of the second act, charges himself for his delay.

Why what an Asse am I, this is most braue,  
That I the sonne of a deere murdered,  
Prompted to my reuenge by heauen and hell,  
Must like a whore vnpacke my hart with words,  
And fall a cursing like a very drabbe; a stallyon, fie  
vppont, foh

(2.2.252-7)

Hamlet believes that he is prompted to his revenge by Heaven *and* Hell; later on, as we have seen, he considers himself Heaven's scourge *and* minister. As I have argued, the question is not so much whether he is a scourge *or* a minister, but rather, whether he is prompted by Heaven *or* Hell.

Laertes, by contrast, dares damnation; he knows that is the consequence of revenge in the Christian framework of the play. He is rightly regarded as rash and even immoral, but at

least he has no illusions about the nature and the ethics of revenge; he does not attempt to connect it either to Heaven or to Purgatory. Laertes is an important parallel also because his mind is not affected by the supernatural, by a mysterious ghost, with claims or at least allusions to Purgatory. However immoral Laertes is, his declaration is a reminder of the moral and religious framework that Hamlet himself subverts when seeking his revenge. Laertes refers to his vows of allegiance to the King; now he assigns those vows to the blackest devil: his conscience and grace to the profoundest pit, that is Hell. This may be deplorable or even horrifying, but Hamlet also swears revenge after meeting the Ghost; as has been mentioned, the Ghost cries from the space below the stage, commonly referred to as Hell in the Elizabethan theatre. Hamlet himself fears that the Ghost may be a disguised devil; a suspicion he eventually dispels. However, if his suspicion is right, Hamlet's vows are directed in a very similar fashion to those of Laertes; these two avengers may therefore not be quite as different as they seem, or as they are usually supposed to be. But before we discuss these characters and these religious issues in more detail, let us consider some historical parallels.

### **5.1.3 Succession, revenge and rebellion in contemporary Britain and Denmark**

In Shakespeare's age, Denmark – unlike England – was an elective monarchy; as we have seen, this fact is emphasised in *Hamlet*, particularly toward the end of the play, when Laertes and Hamlet turn against the King, and when Fortinbras is suggested as the next King. At the beginning, most readers and audiences are probably unaware of this fact and therefore expect a hereditary monarchy, with Hamlet as the rightful ruler; this must have been the initial attitude of the original, Elizabethan audiences too. The full title informs us that the play is about the Prince of Denmark, and most people approach the play already knowing this fact, but if one begins to see a performance without any prior information, one might suppose that “young *Hamlet*” (1.1.170), first mentioned by Horatio at the end of the first scene, is the

current King of Denmark. Such audiences are then probably taken by surprise soon afterwards, at the beginning of the second scene, when it turns out that the King is, in fact, Claudius.

At the first Globe, some of the audience may have been familiar with the Hamlet story, particularly with the *Ur-Hamlet*, but the others must have been surprised by the succession of Claudius. Then they either realised already at this stage of the play that the kingdom in question was not hereditary, or they may have suspected a usurper. As has been mentioned, from a moral point, the King can certainly be regarded as a usurper, as he has murdered his predecessor; from a political point, however, he is an elected King. The form of monarchy is thus somewhat different in the play than in contemporary England, but the historical context and the parallels may be worth considering.

In Shakespeare's time, there were no problems of succession in Denmark: King Christian IV reigned from 1588 to 1648, and he succeeded his father, King Frederick.<sup>303</sup> The Oldenburg dynasty began with Christian I in 1448, and his descendants succeeded on the throne for centuries. As Linda Charnes points out, "during Shakespeare's entire lifetime, then, Denmark was a de facto successive monarchy, since the Rigsrad always elected the King's oldest son".<sup>304</sup> Therefore, even if one notes the differences, it can also be argued that Denmark was not very different from England from the point of succession: although Denmark was an elective monarchy, the electors tended to elect the eldest son.

In fact, the elective system is significant in *Hamlet* primarily because it is Shakespeare himself who emphasises it, certainly for his own dramatic purposes. As I have argued, it is suggested that, on the one hand, King Claudius is an elected monarch, but on the other hand, this system entails certain opportunities to depose him, if the electors realise that he abuses

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<sup>303</sup> Steve Sohmer, "Certain speculations on Hamlet, the calendar, and Martin Luther". *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2.1 (1996), 5.21.

<sup>304</sup> Linda Charnes, "The Hamlet formerly known as Prince" in Hugh Grady, ed., *Shakespeare and Modernity. Early modern to millennium* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 195.

the role of the King. As I have argued, in *Hamlet* the electors are apparently unaware of the fact that the King murdered his predecessor, moreover, the court apparently regards Hamlet's madness or antic disposition, rather than the rule of King Claudius, as a threat to the kingdom. As a matter of fact, the King indeed handles the Norwegian conflict quite efficiently, whereas Hamlet's antics lead to the killing of Polonius; which is then followed by the escalation of revenge at the Danish court.

Interestingly, Charnes further claims that "King Hamlet continues to govern from behind the grave and seems oblivious to Hamlet's political rights as royal heir".<sup>305</sup> Charnes, as most critics, thus takes it for granted that the mysterious Ghost is identical to the late King Hamlet; she seems oblivious to Hamlet's point that the character may also be a disguised devil. As I have argued, this factor should be taken into account in any interpretation, even in those that are concerned primarily with the politics of the play. After all, we have a very different work if Hamlet is indeed governed by his father, even from the grave – however arguably, but probably with good intentions – from one in which Hamlet is abused by a disguised Ghost from Hell, with obviously evil intentions. Nevertheless, Charnes makes an acute observation about King Hamlet, highlighting his rather risky and therefore truly arguable rule while he was still alive. King Hamlet

staked a major portion of his kingdom on a wager with King Fortinbras of Norway. Both fathers were prepared capriciously to gamble away their sons' patrimonies, thereby breaking the laws of entail that in Shakespeare's day bind fathers as well as sons.

(Charnes, 2000, 197)

This event, described by Horatio at the beginning of the play, is emphasised by two facts later on, toward the end. First, as we learn from the gravedigger, "euery foole can tell that" Hamlet

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<sup>305</sup> Charnes, *ibid.*

was born on the same day that his father overtook Fortinbras; second, that memorable day was thirty years ago (5.1.146). We can infer the protagonist's age primarily from this information. King Hamlet, whom Hamlet tends to idolize in his memory, thus risked his life and gambled part of his kingdom even as the Queen gave birth to their only son. As has been mentioned, after the death of King Hamlet, Denmark faced a threat of invasion from young Fortinbras, who wanted to recover the lands gambled away by his father. The electors' reason to elect Claudius may have been exactly this military threat; they may have regarded him better suited to defend the country than Prince Hamlet, the student or scholar at Wittenberg. This is not made explicit in the play, but we are informed of the initial preparations for war and of the ensuing negotiations, the King's political handling of the foreign threat; whereas Hamlet is concerned solely with the internal and the moral issues, deeply absorbed in thoughts of melancholy, suicide and vengeance.

In the Denmark of Shakespeare's time, there were no such problems at all as described in the play. If we take the legend of Hamlet, or Amlodi, that story, as has been mentioned, dates back to medieval times, several centuries before Shakespeare; but the play elaborates on the original story too, adding several new characters who reflect on the protagonist and his deeds. Those characters, along with Hamlet, may thus mirror some contemporary events or issues in England, where succession was a major issue at the turn of the century. Although the monarchy was hereditary, the Queen had no heir, and the throne had long been disputed. England, like the Denmark of Shakespeare's play, was under a threat of a foreign invasion. In fact, she had already been attacked by the Spanish Armada in 1588; the Catholic countries of the continent had formed an alliance to depose the Protestant Queen. Elizabeth I had been excommunicated by the Pope,<sup>306</sup> and many regarded her as a tyrant who should be opposed; as has been mentioned, shortly before *Hamlet* was written, the Queen had to deal with the

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<sup>306</sup> Frye (1984), 53; cf. below.

Essex rebellion. However, it was also decided that King James of Scotland would succeed on the throne, and by 1603, when *Hamlet* was first published, Shakespeare's company was already called the King's Men. All these events seem to be reflected by *Hamlet*. Now I would focus on two main events and their parallels in the play: the Essex rebellion and James's succession.

#### 5.1.4 The Essex rebellion and the theatre

Hamlet, as we have seen, arranges a play within the play, which has several functions. First of all, it aims to confirm the story of the Ghost, or at least to gain some independent information about this mysterious and very ambiguous character. On the other hand, however, Hamlet also intends to depose the King. After meeting the Ghost, the Prince swears revenge, but first he puts on the play to test the Ghost and the King. Hamlet hopes that seeing the performance, the King will publicly reveal his guilt. As Hamlet explains,

I haue heard,  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play,  
Haue by the very cunning of the scene,  
Beene strooke so to the soule, that presently  
They haue proclaim'd their malefactions:  
For murther, though it haue no tongue will speake  
With most miraculous organ: Ile haue these Players  
Play something like the murther of my father  
Ile tent him to the quicke, if a doe blench  
I know my course.

(2.2.588-98)

Hamlet does not specifically mention that the King's possible proclamation of his guilt might furnish public support for Hamlet's actions, aiming at the King's deposition, but the Prince may have such hopes too. As we have seen about the purpose of playing, Hamlet's primary concern is that he can proceed with his revenge and regicide; he does not explicitly charge the King, but at the end of the scene he expresses his wish to "drinke hote blood" (3.2.390).

However, a similar incident in England was arranged with the hope of gaining public support to depose the monarch.

In early 1601, the Earl of Essex's uprising against Queen Elizabeth I involved the theatre too; more to the point, it involved Shakespeare's theatre shortly before *Hamlet* was written. The investigations following the conspiracy revealed that Essex and his followers paid the Lord Chamberlain's Company to

stage Shakespeare's *Richard II*, complete with the deposition and eventual assassination of Richard, on the day before their attempted coup. Essex and his followers took to the streets of London on Sunday, February 8, 1601, attempting to gather popular support for their insurrection, but it was abortive, and within a few hours the principal rebels were all captured.

(Frye, 1984, 265-6)

Essex was beheaded on 25 February 1601; *Hamlet* was most probably written later that year or early next year, as it was entered in the Stationers' Register on 26 July 1602. The investigations involved Shakespeare and his company too, but they were exonerated of wilful complicity.

Frye also points out that in *Hamlet*, "dramatizing a scene in which a sympathetic and attractive hero kills a crowned king" may have been objectionable and even hazardous at the time; Frye believes that the repeated emphasis on the elective monarchy serves primarily to differentiate the setting of the play from the English hereditary monarchy, so as to prevent any objections. As has been noted, in his comprehensive historical study, Frye justifies Hamlet's revenge and regicide. In my opinion, however, Shakespeare's audience may not have identified with Hamlet and his mission, or at least not in every respect; they may not have viewed him and his deeds as attractive and sympathetic, particularly his intent to damn his enemies.

Whether *Hamlet* reflects the unconscious involvement of the Globe in the abortive Essex rebellion is uncertain, but quite likely, as the parallels are striking. Shakespeare's play does represent the indented overthrow of a monarch, backed by a performance whose players are unaware of Hamlet's underlying intentions. At the same time, the play apparently draws on other contemporary stage practices too. As Margreta de Grazia observes on Hamlet's evil intent,

Like grotesque visors and black costumes, such extreme malice on the early stage was the devil's hallmark. [...] In uttering the devil's sentiments, Hamlet crosses the divide between the natural and the unnatural, the human and the monstrous, in egregious violation of the "special observance" he has imposed upon the Players to "o'erstep the modesty of nature."

(Margreta de Grazia, 2007, 197)

Indeed, if we recall Hamlet's discussion with the players on the purpose of playing, the protagonist himself apparently "out Herods Herod" in his extreme cruelty (3.2.13). *Hamlet* may thus draw on the morality plays and the mystery cycles too, which were popular until the Elizabethan period and featured the Devil and Herod as the epitome of evil, often presenting them in comic terms. For the Elizabethan audience, Hamlet was not necessarily a sympathetic avenger, he may have also been reminiscent of the conventional Vice.<sup>307</sup>

Let us, however, return to the Essex rebellion. If Hamlet can be said to reflect the Earl of Essex, so can Laertes, who also turns against the King, rather desperately. I have already quoted the last lines of the Messenger when discussing the elective monarchy, but his whole passage is worth considering as a vivid description of an eventually abortive rebellion.

Saue your selfe my Lord.  
The Ocean ouer-peering of his list  
Eates not the flats with more impitious hast

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<sup>307</sup> While de Grazia observes that Hamlet behaves as a stage devil in certain scenes, she fails to note that the Ghost also behaves like one; in fact, these traits pertain more to the latter character; *ibid.*, cf. below.



Then young *Laertes* in a riotous head  
Ore-bears your Officers: the rabble call him Lord,  
And as the world were now but to beginne,  
Antiquity forgot, custome not knowne,  
The ratifiers and props of euery word,  
The cry choose we, *Laertes* shall be King,  
Caps, hands, and tongues applau'd it to the clouds,  
*Laertes* shall be King, *Laertes* King.

(4.5.99-109)

Although the cry “choose we” may be a reference to the elective system, *Laertes*’s attempt “in a riotous head”, which is swiftly diverted by the King, may well have reminded the Elizabethan audiences of the Essex coup too.

These two separate efforts by Hamlet and *Laertes*, if considered together, can be regarded as reflections of the Earl of Essex’s abortive attempt against Queen Elizabeth I: Hamlet resembles Essex in staging a play, while *Laertes* in taking to the streets and gathering some followers. The audiences, as well as Shakespeare, may have had some sympathy toward both Hamlet and *Laertes*, two young men grieving their fathers and seeking justice. Some of the audience may have also sympathised with the move against the monarch, who is presented as a highly unsympathetic character, whose right to rule is disputed throughout; as we have seen, not only by Hamlet, but initially also by Fortinbras and later by *Laertes*. However, both Hamlet and *Laertes* have to fall in Shakespeare’s play; moreover, these two avengers kill each other in the end. Eventually Hamlet, unlike Essex, does kill the monarch. However, then the Prince is already dying, and his deed is still regarded as treason – just like Essex’s coup was at the time: the Earl was convicted and executed for high treason.

### **5.1.5 James, the King from the north**

If Hamlet can be taken as a parallel to the Earl of Essex, so can he to an even more important historical figure: King James VI of Scotland, who was looked upon by many as the next King

of England when *Hamlet* was written.<sup>308</sup> He succeeded on the English throne as King James I in 1603, a couple of years after the abortive Essex rebellion. James, like Hamlet, had a murdered father, moreover, his mother married the murderer of her husband soon after the assassination. Queen Gertrude can thus be viewed as a parallel to James's mother Mary Queen of Scots. According to Roland M. Frye,

In the world of the play, Hamlet is virtually alone in knowing of the regicide, but his reaction to it and to the subsequent remarriage was essentially the same as that which everyone in Europe (from king and pope and lord to pamphleteer and peasant) had to Mary Queen of Scots.

(Frye, 1984, 110)

Frye provides a detailed account of the allegedly scandalous life of Mary Queen of Scots, James's mother, who was deposed from the throne in July 1567; she was forced to abdicate in her son's favour.<sup>309</sup> The Queen was imprisoned and she never saw her son again.

James's father, Lord Henry Darnley, was called King Henry after his marriage to Queen Mary, of whom he was the second husband. King Henry was assassinated in February 1567, and his dead body was found lying in an orchard; just like that of the poisoned King Hamlet. The murder was committed in secret – again similarly to that of King Hamlet – but the assassin was almost certainly the Earl of Bothwell, who married the widowed Queen less than three months after the crime of regicide. At that time, James was an infant, and when the Queen abdicated later that year, a period of regency followed until the King's adulthood.

James – like Hamlet – was charged with the duty of revenge; though not by a mysterious ghost: a monument called *The Darnley Memorial* was commissioned by his

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<sup>308</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the issues, see Lilian Winstansley, *Hamlet and the Scottish Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; first published: 1921) and also the other sources cited below.

<sup>309</sup> Frye (1984), 29-37 and 102-110.

grandparents to remind him of the death of his father, as well as of his subsequent duty of revenge. An inscription on the oil painting by Livinus de Vogelaare reads,

Arise, O Lord, and avenge the innocent blood of the King my father  
and, I beseech thee, defend me with thy right hand.

(Frey, 1984, 34)

Eventually, however, James did not revenge the death of his father. He did not have to, as Bothwell died in a prison in Denmark in 1578; he was imprisoned for crimes committed in Scandinavia.<sup>310</sup> In this case, Denmark being the location is merely a curious coincidence with the scene of Hamlet's story: a remarkable instance of how reality and fiction, or history and legend can be related. Nevertheless, when James saw or read Hamlet's dilemmas, the parallels to his own childhood must have occurred to him, and Shakespeare – who evidently drew on the chronicles for his plays on English history – must have been familiar with James's past too.

Because of her hasty marriage to Bothwell, James's mother was suspected of complicity in the murder; this is again very similar to Hamlet's suspicions about Queen Gertrude, when he charges her in the Closet Scene. But Bothwell's "confession declared that Mary was innocent and that she had no connection with the murder plot or its execution".<sup>311</sup> Queen Gertrude's surprised reaction to Hamlet's charge also suggests that she is innocent about King Hamlet's death. Hamlet can thus be regarded as a parallel figure to King James. However, whereas the initial situation, the murder of the late King Hamlet, followed by the hasty remarriage of the Queen, is very similar to the murder of James's father, and so is the charge of revenge, the outcome is significantly different, as we have seen, in three main respects: (1) James did not perform his revenge, as the murderer was imprisoned and died in

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<sup>310</sup> Antonia Fraser, *Mary Queen of Scots* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 448-49, in Frye (1984), 33.

<sup>311</sup> Frye (1984), 33-34.

prison; (2) the Queen was forced to abdicate; (3) consequently, James succeeded onto the throne of Scotland.

All this had happened in Scotland over thirty years before *Hamlet* was written, and the story of the Scottish succession must have become interesting in England at the turn of the century mainly because of James's expected succession to the English throne. Negotiations and an initially secret correspondence on James's succession started in early 1601,<sup>312</sup> shortly after the Essex rebellion and before the probable creation of *Hamlet*. In fact, James's ambassadors were supposed to meet the Earl of Essex in February 1601, but he was already dead when they arrived in London.<sup>313</sup> James succeeded on the English throne on 24 March 1603, eight months after *Hamlet* was entered in the Stationers' Register. When the play was first published, in 1603, Shakespeare's company was already called the King's Men.

In the play, as has been mentioned, there is a third avenger, Fortinbras, who is a parallel to the protagonist. At the same time, Fortinbras can also be viewed as a parallel to King James. Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is a Prince who intends to take revenge for the death of his father. However, like King James, eventually he does not avenge the death of his father; he need not, as the murderer has already perished. Fortinbras is also similar to James in that his father was killed in his childhood. Fortinbras wins the throne of Denmark thirty years after the death of his father; James succeeded on the throne of Scotland soon after the murder of his father and the deposition of his mother, but he won the English throne thirty-six years later. From an English perspective, another similarity can be noted: Fortinbras, like James, comes from the north, to take a vacant throne with no other heir in that kingdom. As Fortinbras declares at the end,

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<sup>312</sup> John Bruce, ed., *Correspondence of King James VI. of Scotland with Sir Robert Cecil and others in England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London: Camden Society, 1861). The title page adds: "with an appendix containing papers illustrative of transactions between King James and Robert Earl of Essex. Principally pub. for the first time from manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, K.G., preserved at Hatfield". Available online at <http://archive.org/stream/correspondenceof00jamerich#page/n3/mode/2up>.

<sup>313</sup> Bruce (1861), xxix.

For me, with sorrowe I embrace my fortune,  
I haue some rights, of memory in this kingdome,  
Which now to clame my vantage doth inuite me.

(5.2.388-90)

These lines must have had a special significance at the first Globe, shortly before James's accession to the throne of England, and particularly afterwards, when Shakespeare's company became the King's Men. James's right to the kingdom of England was that he, like Queen Elizabeth, was the grandchild of Henry VII; as Elizabeth had no heir, James, "with sorrow", could embrace his fortune. King James became King of both Scotland and England after the union of the English and Scottish thrones on 24 March 1603. Fortinbras's situation may reflect this too: the Prince of Norway becomes King of Denmark at the end of the play, but he is undoubtedly the successor of Old Norway too, as no other heir is mentioned in the play; and hence he can become the King of both monarchies in the world of Shakespeare's play.

In *Hamlet*, we may find further allusions to King James, who was the author of several books, both on politics, particularly on the theory of monarchy, and on spirituality or demonology. In the *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598), published a few years before *Hamlet* was written, James set out his theory of the divine right of kings.<sup>314</sup> This work was republished in 1603, on the occasion of James's accession to the English throne. As has been mentioned, all editions of *Hamlet* were published after James's accession, but his thoughts seem to be reflected particularly in the later, longer editions of the play, especially in the Second Quarto of 1604-5. According to James, a monarch is not subject to earthly authority, he derives the right to rule directly from the will of God. This doctrine asserts that only God can judge an unjust king, therefore any attempt to depose the monarch is contrary to the will

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<sup>314</sup> James VI of Scotland (later James I of England), *The Trve Lawe of free Monarchies: Or, The Reciproock and Mvtvall Dvetie Betwixt a free King, and his naturall Subiectes* (Edinburgh, 1598). For a modern-spelling edition, see: James I, *The True Law of Free Monarchies and Basilicon Doron*, eds. Mark Fischlin and Mark Fortier (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 1996). See also: Pauline Croft, *King James* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), cf. below.

of God and hence a sacrilegious act. James's view may also be reflected at the end of the play, when Hamlet kills the King, who is evidently poisonous; as we have seen, Hamlet's deed is referred to as treason by the people.

The play within the play, which we have also discussed, is usually presented and interpreted in the modern reception as evidence against the King; moreover, the Mousetrap is often supposed to vindicate Hamlet's revenge. Therefore it may be worth quoting the reaction of the courtiers, and consider them in light of James's views. The Mousetrap, as we have seen, represents the murder of a king by his nephew Lucianus, hence implying a threat by Hamlet, the nephew of King Claudius. As Guildenstern emphasises to the King after the performance,

Most holy and religious feare it is  
To keepe those many many bodies safe  
That liue and feede vpon your Maiestie.

(3.3.8-10)

And if this were not enough to highlight the divine right of the King, Rosencrantz adds,

The single and peculier life is bound  
With all the strength and armour of the mind  
To keepe it selfe from noyance, but much more  
That spirit, vpon whose weale depends and rests  
The liues of many, the cesse of Maiestie  
Dies not alone; but like a gulf doth draw  
What's neere it, with it, or it is a massie wheele  
Fixt on the somnet of the highest mount,  
To whose hough spokes, tenne thousand lesser things  
Are morteist and adioynd, which when it falls  
Each small annexment petty consequence  
Attends the boystrous raine, neuer alone.

(3.3.11-23)

On the one hand, this may seem as mere flattery from these courtiers, who are despised by Hamlet, and hence also by most critics; they are usually regarded simply as spies, who

deserve their fate for serving the evil King. On the other hand, however, the courtiers may voice a real concern about the safety of the kingdom, and their concern is actually justified by the ensuing bloodbath, engulfing them too.

These lines must have pleased King James too, who could hear or read an exposition on the role of the king that was very similar to his own views, practically echoing him. In the *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, James compares the relationship of the monarch and his subjects to that of a head and other members of the body: “The king towards his people is rightly compared to a father of children and to a head of a body composed of divers members.”<sup>315</sup> As we have seen, at the beginning of the play, anticipating Hamlet’s succession to the throne, Laertes also talks about “that body/ Whereof he is the head” (1.3.23-24).

In the *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, James deems it “monstrous” and “unnatural” to rise up against a monarch:

consider, I pray you, what duty his children owe to him and whether upon any pretext whatsoever it will not be thought monstrous and unnatural to his sons to rise up against him, to control him at their appetite, and, when they think good, to slay him or to cut him off and adopt to themselves any other they please in his room.

(James, 1598, *ibid.*)

James plainly rejects revenge of any kind: not only private revenge, that is, revenge “upon a private adversary”, but also “the use of the sword” “against the public magistrate”; in fact, the latter is even less lawful than the former:

And if it be not lawful to a private man to revenge his private injury upon his private adversary (since God hath only given the sword to the magistrate), how much less is it lawful to the people or any part of

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<sup>315</sup> James, from *The True Law of Free Monarchies; or, The Reciprocal and Mutual Duty Betwixt a Free King and His Natural Subjects* (Edinburgh, 1598), modern-spelling extract in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Norton Topics Online*.  
[http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/17century/topic\\_3/truelaw.htm](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/17century/topic_3/truelaw.htm). (Accessed: 22 March 2013)

them (who all are but private men, the authority being always with the magistrate, as I have already proved) to take upon them the use of the sword, whom to it belongs not, against the public magistrate, whom to only it belongeth?

(James, 1598, *ibid.*)

According to James, a rebellion against a king cannot be justified; it does not relieve “the commonwealth out of distress” but “shall heap double distress and desolation upon it”:

Next, in place of relieving the commonwealth out of distress (which is their only excuse and color), they shall heap double distress and desolation upon it; and so their rebellion shall procure the contrary effects that they pretend it for. For a king cannot be imagined to be so unruly and tyrannous but the commonwealth will be kept in better order, notwithstanding thereof, by him than it can be by his way-taking.

(James, 1598, *ibid.*)

James came from the north, like Fortinbras, but he deplored violence, particularly disobedience and resistance to an anointed King. Accordingly, he may have been pleased to see that the conclusion of the play apparently conforms to his views.

Indeed, if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s concerns may mirror James’s theory on the welfare of the monarchy, the outcome, with altogether eight victims as a consequence of Hamlet’s pursuit of revenge against the King, may confirm the theory in practice. As has been mentioned, Hamlet’s first attempt at revenge and regicide produces another avenger, Laertes; Hamlet’s first move can thus be said to “heap double distress and desolation upon” the kingdom and “procure the contrary effects that they pretend it for”. Eventually the avengers kill each other; when Hamlet kills the King, he is already dying, and there is no Danish heir left amid the turmoil and massacre initiated by Hamlet’s quest of revenge. The “distress and desolation” in Denmark is thus complete when the English ambassadors arrive with the news of the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two courtiers with typically Danish names,



who have also been affected by Hamlet's overriding vindictiveness and thirst for blood. In contrast, Fortinbras, who obeys the King of Norway to refrain from his revenge and intended attack on Denmark, survives and is rewarded with the coveted Danish throne.

Fortinbras is a relatively minor character in *Hamlet* and, as we have seen, he is not represented entirely positively either; the play is ambiguous in this respect too. Therefore it is uncertain whether King James could actually identify with Fortinbras, or whether he or the audience could indeed realise in this complex play the above parallels to his life or to his published views. Nevertheless, I suggest that it is most likely that James and at least some of the audience realised the strong parallels between Hamlet's situation and his own childhood; moreover, they may well have realised the parallels to Fortinbras too.

Thus, it is possible that the beginning of the play reminded James and many others of his own father's murder and to her own mother's hasty remarriage, as well as of the charge of revenge. Moreover, James's succession to the Scottish throne, as a relatively recent historical parallel, may have inspired Shakespeare not only in the initial situation. James's example could also suggest a possible solution to Hamlet's problem too, were he not bent on revenge: the Queen of Scots' enforced abdication and the imprisonment of the murderer in Denmark set a concrete historical example in which the King's murderer was duly punished and the rightful heir could survive and succeed. At the same time, the outcome, Fortinbras's succession to the Danish throne, may well have reminded the contemporary audiences of James's succession to the English throne: in both cases, a new king from the north takes the vacant throne after rather a long time of waiting for his turn, but not long after the kingdom's major internal conflicts that pave the way for a foreign ruler. Given his theory of monarchy, with its clear theological foundation, it is also probable that James disagreed with Hamlet's revenge and regicide; therefore he must have appreciated the play, from the initial dilemmas

to the central speech on the sanctity of the monarch until the very end, with Horatio's conclusion on the devastating revenge cycle as well as the succession of Fortinbras.

In my opinion, the play's parallels to King James's life and views are so strong that their neglect in the reception can be explained primarily by the lasting influence of the Romantic tradition; which had, in turn, developed from the Restoration *Hamlet*. As we have seen, Hamlet has traditionally been viewed as a moral hero, and his revenge as a "sacred duty"; the contrary implications of the play have usually been ignored or explained away. In fact, James had a special relationship with Denmark, beyond the fact that his father's murderer died in a Danish prison. King James's wife was Queen Anne of Denmark, the daughter of King Frederick II and the sister of King Christian IV, who was the King of Denmark when *Hamlet* was written and first performed. During his visits to Denmark, James developed an interest in witchcraft,<sup>316</sup> the study of which he regarded as a form of theology.<sup>317</sup> As we shall see, this is particularly relevant in the interpretation of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the character that in effect starts the play; to which now we shall turn. As I will argue, because of this character, James must have enjoyed the play even more.

## **5.2. Spirituality, demonology and the Ghost**

### **5.2.1 The character of the Ghost in Elizabethan ghost lore**

The Ghost in *Hamlet* can be approached from several perspectives. There are hints of so many kinds in connection with the Ghost that it should be familiar to every layer of the audience, with their different attitudes towards spectres. The play displays all the possible attitudes. At first glance, the Ghost may be identified according to almost any category of the various beliefs concerning spiritual beings. Conversely, the other extreme also seems

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<sup>316</sup> Pauline Croft, *King James* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 26.

<sup>317</sup> David Harris Willson, *King James VI & I* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1963), 103.

plausible: as many of the assigned features are exclusive and contradictory to others, it may be convenient to say that the precise nature of the Ghost cannot be decided, which is a fairly common view in recent criticism, as we have seen above. Let us, then, first examine these main attitudes when confronting the Ghost.

Before entering the world of Elizabethan ghost lore, it is useful to highlight the typical attitude of the audience of the modern, secular world. R. M. Frye explains that

For most modern audiences, ghosts exist only in literature and folklore, so this ghost seems little more than a theatrical device for beginning the play and for commanding Hamlet to discharge the revenge incumbent upon him. By virtue of that convention, typical modern readers accept the Ghost for literary purposes as the authoritative spirit of the murdered king, and if the Ghost is so perceived as a literary convention to trigger action, then the Prince is perceived to be at least dilatory and perhaps even madly indecisive in his responses to the Ghost's commands.

(Frye 1984, 14-5)

This approach to the Ghost has two main implications which may endanger the correct perception of its character and function in the play. First, as to its nature, modern readers tend to judge the Ghost from a predominantly modern, secular, i.e. "human" perspective. This means that they not only accept it (and from this perspective indeed rather "him") as the spirit of the murdered King, but they may actually perceive it as a human being, old Hamlet himself, with the only difference that it can appear and vanish unexpectedly. This often results in such essentially human features as indignation, anger, pride, and, most of all, vindictiveness actually arousing sympathy towards the Ghost, for they seem to be in place in the case of a murdered man "himself".<sup>318</sup> Such a view ignores the fact that the souls of the departed, while being in the process of purgation, are described quite differently by the contemporary authors; as we shall see, these are the very features these spirits are amending,

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<sup>318</sup> For such a reading, see Hibbard (1994), 42.

if they are truly purgatorial, as they claim. Secondly, and more importantly, such a limited image of the Ghost greatly underestimates its power and potential influence on Hamlet and thereby on the entire action. Being a supernatural figure, free from the limitations of the earthly dimensions of space and time, a spirit was supposed to be able to foresee events, and influence people for its own ends. Therefore, most careful behaviour was advised on the occasion of an encounter with such an apparition.

Although modern critics may learnedly marshal the various contemporary attitudes, they may at the same time make the above mistakes themselves in their interpretations; as we have seen, Greenblatt also tends to identify the Ghost simply as Hamlet's father or the murdered King Hamlet in his monograph;<sup>319</sup> Belsey also refers to the character as "Old Hamlet" in her recent article.<sup>320</sup> Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in the play itself some of the various references to the Ghost may support this view too. When Hamlet gives an evasive answer to Horatio for his inquiry about the Ghost, Horatio says:

There needes no Ghost my Lord, come from the graue  
To tell vs this.

(1.5.125-6)

As we have seen, this is the only reference to *Hamlet* at the entry "Ghost" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, even though the word also appears in its other meanings in the play, when the character is approached as an ambiguous and possibly diabolic spirit. The initially sceptical Horatio seems to identify the Ghost with the King coming from the grave already in the first scene, when he draws a parallel with a legend of ancient Rome:

A little ere the mightiest *Iulius* fell  
The graues stood tennatlesse, and the sheeted dead

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<sup>319</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 205-57; for a review, see 2.4, above.

<sup>320</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Shakespeare's Sad Tale for Winter: *Hamlet* and the Tradition of Fireside Ghost Stories" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 61/1 [2010]), 11.

Did squeake and gibber in the Roman streets.

(1.1.114-6)

This comment goes on to suggest that the Ghost is identical to the dead King, who left his grave in his own body. Although there is a considerable amount of antique Greek and Roman reference in the play's imagery, there is no more such comment on the Ghost. Furthermore, the antique Greek and Roman culture was considered pagan, and its underworld with its ghosts was viewed as Hell from an authentic Christian point of view at the time of the drama.

Hamlet, as we have seen, also identifies the Ghost as his father when encountering him (1.4.44-54; 3.4.106). On these occasions, Hamlet loses his suspicions of the Ghost, which can be understood because of his emotional involvement. However, this is by no means evidence of the Ghost's honesty. In Elizabethan ghost lore, the Ghost may as well be a devil in disguise, as Hamlet suspects when he is left alone (2.2.598-603).

Horatio changes his mind about the Ghost on several occasions in the course of the play. The first such change is when Horatio has to abandon his sceptical attitude on the first appearance of the Ghost. The scholar from the University of Wittenberg is not only a scholar of antique culture, as his name also suggests, but may also be a representative of the modern world. His first reaction to the news of the Ghost is that of a sceptical rejection of the old superstitions. However, when he himself encounters the Ghost, he addresses it in various ways according to his education. The Ghost's appearance to four other people before Hamlet demonstrates that it is not merely the Prince's fantasy. Thus, the play excludes the sceptical version.

The Christian references to the Ghost tend to dominate as the action proceeds, and, as we shall see, the influence of the Christian faith has a vital impact on Hamlet's decisions and hence on the development of the plot. Elizabethan ghost lore classified spectres primarily according to the Christian view. Protestant opinions did not deny the possibility of ghostly apparitions, but they typically regarded such phenomena as tricks of the devil. In Protestant

belief, the dead entered either Heaven or Hell, and could not return from either place. Ghosts assuming the figure of a man, and especially of someone who had died not long before, were supposed to be disguised devils, or demons, who wished to abuse the witnesses for a devilish purpose. According to Sir Thomas Browne,

Those apparitions of ghosts of departed persons are not the wandering souls of men, but the unquiet walks of Devils, prompting us unto mischief, blood and villainy.<sup>321</sup>

As R. M. Frey notes,

King James I also pictured the Devil as leading his victim on to guilt through desire of revenge, as appearing in the likeness of one dear to the victim in order to secure his attention, as taking advantage of his victim's despair to entice him to his own destruction.

(Frye 1984, 23)<sup>322</sup>

King James VI of Scotland published his *Daemonologie* in 1597. When *Hamlet* was written at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was agreed that James would succeed as the next King of England and hence would also become the Supreme Head of the Church of England; when the play was first published, James held both titles. Therefore, there can hardly be a more prominent authority on ghost lore than King James himself. According to Raymond Nighan, “of all the Renaissance writers who took demonology seriously, few proved more zealous than James I”.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, LXXXVII, in Norman J. Endicott, *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne* (New York: Norton, 1968 and 1972), 45; also quoted by Frye (1984), 23.

<sup>322</sup> Interestingly, Belsey also refers to James, though merely in passing in a note on the Protestant views, yet she continues to refer to the Ghost as Old Hamlet in her analysis. Belsey (2010), 9-10 (note 30). Thus, while marshalling the contemporary religious views that contradict the notion of the Ghost as the spirit of Hamlet's father both from the Catholic and the Protestant views, Belsey nevertheless regards the character as identical to the late king.

<sup>323</sup> Raymond Nighan, *Hamlet and the Daemons: An Inquiry into the Nature of the Ghost and Its Mission*. An online book. Nighan provides a detailed discussion of the contemporary authorities, including King James, on ghost lore; he argues that the Ghost is a disguised demon intending to abuse and damn Hamlet, but the Prince eventually rejects the Ghost and triumphs. While I agree with Nighan on the Ghost's nature, I do not believe that Hamlet would actually reject the Ghost or the mission of revenge; on the contrary, the Prince, in fact, overdoes

Let us, therefore, quote King James himself on the deceitful ways of the Devil. As James argues,

These two degrees now of persones, that practises this craft, *answers to the passions in them*, which (I told you before) *the Deuil vsed as meanes to intyse them to his seruice*, for such of them as are in great miserie and pouertie, he allures to follow him, by promising vnto them greate riches, and worldlie commoditie. Such as though riche, yet burnes in a *desperat desire of reuenge*, hee allures them by promises, to get their turne satisfied to their hartes contentment.

(James, *Daemonologie*, Book II, Chapter II, p. 33, italics added)<sup>324</sup>

That is, the Devil can entice someone to his service, for instance, a person with a desperate desire of revenge, despite being rich. As for Hamlet, he may not be vengeful before meeting the Ghost; it is the Ghost that demands vengeance, but Hamlet's mind may be prepared for such a deceit. The Ghost, if it is a disguised devil, may only be answering a passion in Hamlet, as we shall see below. According to James, the Devil entices someone whose mind is prepared beforehand.

*Their mindes being prepared before hand*, as I haue alreadie spoken, they easelie agreed vnto that demande of his: And syne settes an other tryist, where they may meete againe. At which time, before he proceede any further with them, *he first perswades them to addict themselues to his seruice*.

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. II. 34, italics added)

James also describes how evil spirits, or the Devil, can assume the form of someone newly dead and abuse their victim.

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the mandate by killing several people in addition to the King, intending, moreover, the damnation of his enemies, too; cf. below.

<http://www.stjohns-chs.org/english/hamlet-new/coverpage/coverpage.html> (accessed: 3 April 2013).

<sup>324</sup> King James I, *Daemonologie. In Forme of a of a Dialogue* (Edinburgh, 1597), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/kjd/index.htm> (accessed: 3 April 2013).

PHI. And what meanes then these kindes of *spirites*, when they *appeare in the shaddow of a person newlie dead*, or to die, to his friendes?

EPI. When they appeare vpon that occasion, they are called Wraithes in our language. Amongst the *Gentiles* the *Deuill* vsed that much, *to make them beleeeue that it was some good spirite that appeared to them* then, ether to forewarne them of the death of their friend; or else *to discouer vnto them, the will of the defunct*, or what was the way of his slauchter, as is written in the booke of the histories Prodigious. And this way hee easelie decciued the *Gentiles*, because they knew not God:

(James, *Daemonologie*, III. I. 60-61, italics added)

Whereas the Devil can easily deceive the gentiles, because they do not know God, he can also appear in that manner to some ignorant Christians.

And to that same effect is it, that *he now appeares in that maner to some ignorant Christians*. For he dare not so illude anie that knoweth that, neither can the spirite of the defunct returne to his friend, or yet an Angell vse such formes.

(James, *ibid*)

Ignorance here means the lack of knowledge that no spirit can return from the dead, which is the official Protestant attitude; James was a staunch Protestant.

Angels were presumed to be able to assume a human form and, in theory, could also appear in the likeness of the dead. However, it was not thought that an angel would desire or need to appear in the figure of someone departed. In *Hamlet*, there is no reference to the Ghost being an angel; if the Ghost were an angel, the assumption of old Hamlet's figure would be confusing for Hamlet rather than helpful. In fact, Hamlet receives no help from the Ghost, but merely a rather problematic mandate. Thus, in the Protestant interpretation, which was dominant in contemporary England, the Ghost can only be a tempting demon or devil, with evil intent. If Hamlet, a student at Wittenberg, were consistently Protestant, he should not give credit to the Ghost, despite the fact that it speaks truly about the murder of Hamlet's



father. As we have seen, Hamlet does raise major concerns about the Ghost, but he ignores this latter point.

The Ghost speaks truly, as far as revealing the murder. As this telling the truth about the murder is the main argument for the Ghost's benevolence and honesty, it is worth examining contemporary opinions concerning this question. According to James,

Yea, he will make his schollers *to creepe in credite with Princes*, by fore-telling them manie greate thinges; *parte true, parte false*: For if all were false, he would tyne credite at all handes; but alwaies doubtfulsome, as his Oracles were.

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. VI. 23, italics added)

That is, the Devil can tell the truth, so as to deceive, but this is only a partial truth, or equivocation, ultimately a lie. As has been mentioned, such prophecies are central to *Macbeth*, but partial truth, as a means of deception, can be relevant to *Hamlet* too.

According to the Protestant Lewis Lavater

the devil sometimes uttereth the truth, that his words may have the more credit, and that he may the more easily beguile.<sup>325</sup>

The Roman Catholic Pierre Le Loyer wrote that the Devil

often exhorts man to do the commandments of God; very often speaks the truth; preaches virtue; dresses his ministers as ministers of Justice, making night pass for day, death for life, despair for hope, apostasy for faith.... In brief, the Devil intermingles the good with the evil, and the true with the false.<sup>326</sup>

Thus, the Ghost's true words in one context, even though important, guarantee neither its benevolence nor its honesty.

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<sup>325</sup> Lewes Lavater, *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking By Night*. ed. J. Dover Wilson and May Yardley (Oxford, 1929), 173; also quoted in Frye 1984, 20.

<sup>326</sup> Pierre Le Loyer, *IIII Livres des Spectres* (1586); in Prosser (1971), 113.

Catholic doctrine also warned that ghostly apparitions may be devils, but, with the belief in Purgatory, it was thought possible for the souls of the departed to return in exceptional cases. These purgatorial spirits could only be benevolent, because they were under the process of purgation, and Heaven awaited them. The Ghost describes itself exactly as a purgatorial spirit.

I am thy fathers spirit,  
Doomd for a certaine tearme to walke the night,  
And for the day confind to fast in fires,  
Till the foule crimes done in my dayes of nature  
Are burnt and purg'd away.

(1.5.9-13)

These lines suggest that the Ghost is a purgatorial spirit, with good intentions toward Hamlet, “his son”. The Ghost’s laments claiming to have missed the Catholic last sacraments: “Vnhuzled, disappointed, vnanueld” seem support this, too (1.5.77).

In the above light, in Elizabethan ghost lore or pneumatology, the only possibility to accept the Ghost as honest and/ or benevolent (i.e. that it is indeed the Ghost of Hamlet’s father and/or appears in order to help Hamlet and his country – and not to bring about destruction) is based on this Catholic belief in Purgatory. However, this does not mean that it should be accepted as purgatorial without any further consideration. We have seen that both Catholics and Protestants warned of the tricks of the Devil, and the description of James I suggests a case that could actually suit that of Hamlet. Protestants regarded the ghostly affirmations of Purgatory typically as the deceits of the devil, and Catholics were also to judge these spirits very carefully, particularly as regards whether the apparition acts, or requires witnesses to act, against the teachings of the Church. Revenge is such a thing.<sup>327</sup> According to Robert H. West, the major twentieth-century authority on ghost lore, orthodox

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<sup>327</sup> Frye (1984), 19-21.

Elizabethan pneumatology, whether Catholic or Protestant, hardly “gives any account of an apparition that demands revenge unless it is a devil usurping the likeness of the dead.”<sup>328</sup>

Thus, according to Elizabethan ghost lore pneumatology, if we choose to rely on it without any preconceptions about Hamlet and the Ghost, and apply it in a consistent manner, the Ghost can only be a devil, tempting Hamlet to revenge. Surprising as it may be considering the well-known, traditional interpretation, perhaps we should not dismiss the opinions of contemporary authorities on ghosts too lightly, for *Hamlet* is a product of its age, with its own beliefs and thinking. The outcome of the play, the tragic deaths of nearly all the major characters, including Hamlet, seems to support this. Of course, we have to examine the dramatic sequence carefully before concluding whether Shakespeare relied on the contemporary ghost lore consistently, or used it merely to create a mysterious figure as a theatrical device to inform Hamlet of the murder of his father, ignoring any other implications.

Because of the modern popularity of the notion of the purgatorial Ghost, fostered partly by the recent work of Greenblatt, perhaps it is useful to reconsider the above-mentioned Catholic references in a little more detail, in their own context. Seemingly lamenting the loss of the last Catholic sacraments, the Ghost claims,

Thus was I sleeping by a brothers hand,  
Of life, of Crowne, of Queene at once dispatcht,  
Cut off euen in the blossomes of my sinne,  
Vnhuzled, disappointed, vnanueld ,  
No reckning made, but sent to my account  
Withall my imperfections on my head,  
O horrible, ô horrible, most horrible.

(1.5.74-80)

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<sup>328</sup>R. H. West, “King Hamlet’s Ambiguous Ghost” *PMLA*. LXX (1955), 1107. The adjective “orthodox” is perhaps worth noting too. I could not find *any* contemporary literature on ghost lore that would seriously consider a revenge ghost as a truly purgatorial one; nor could the modern proponents of the theory of the purgatorial Ghost provide one, yet they continue to refer to the character as Old Hamlet or King Hamlet, as we have seen.

If we accept these lines at their face value, without any reservations, as most critics including Greenblatt do, the Catholic Ghost bitterly regrets that he had no opportunity to confess his sins before his death; consequently now he must endure the terrible torments of Purgatory, until he is sufficiently cleansed. Again, this *seems* to support the common view that the Ghost is indeed the purgatorial spirit of Old Hamlet or King Hamlet, as the character is usually called in criticism.

However, as has been explained above, the original audiences did not automatically identify the Ghost as King Hamlet, but they approached it as an ambiguous supernatural character, as a questionable spirit. Moreover, the Elizabethan audiences were predominantly Protestant, and hence highly suspicious of such spirits; as has been mentioned above, the Anglicans had firmly rejected the doctrine of Purgatory decades ago. Since 1558, the accession of Queen Elizabeth, that belief had been strictly forbidden and often ridiculed; that is how it was taught in all churches in England.<sup>329</sup> Because of the Papal excommunication of the Queen, and because England was at war with the Catholic countries of the continent, it was high treason to be a Catholic; several Catholic priests, Jesuit monks, and even Catholic laymen were actually executed for their faith.<sup>330</sup> Censorship examined all plays vigilantly from the point of religion: it was impossible to represent Catholic belief either positively or seriously on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

If we reconsider these lines of *Hamlet* in the light of this information, perhaps we may better sense the inherent irony in the passage. All these lines of the *seemingly* purgatorial Ghost occur only after it has demanded revenge from the protagonist. Since the spirit demands vengeance, that is, murder coupled with regicide, it can hardly be regretting and

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<sup>329</sup> See Greenblatt's study, providing a detailed discussion throughout his study (2001), or McGee (1987), 13-74.

<sup>330</sup> Greenblatt himself reports on the Elizabethan persecution of Catholics and the censorship in his biography *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), esp. 87-117. Greenblatt, however, suggests that in representing a seriously Catholic Ghost, Shakespeare managed to evade the censorship; which is a very arguable interpretation, as we have seen above. McGee also discusses the censorship and argues that the censors must have admitted *Hamlet* only because for them the Ghost was evidently a disguised devil, and so was it for the contemporary audience (1987), 24-42.

amending past sins; it can hardly be in point of fact purifying. In a careful reading, it is difficult to accept the Ghost's alleged repentance; it is difficult to believe that the Ghost is intended as a seriously purgatorial spirit. All these laments are therefore mere subterfuge to deceive the ignorant hero and entice him to sin: to murder, gradually involving a series of murders and his ensuing destruction. "O horrible, ô horrible, most horrible", cries the Ghost for having missed the chance to confess his sins before his death (1.5.80).

For a true Catholic, and for a seriously repentant soul, the prospect of missing the last rites and particularly the chance to repent may have been horrible indeed; so is it even now to some devout Christians. There is a tendency in criticism to see Shakespeare as a crypto-Catholic; that is Greenblatt's argument too. For Catholic readers or audiences, the Ghost means a real challenge, for, as we have seen, their faith allows the communication with the dead, as well as the return of the souls from Purgatory on rare, exceptional, occasions. But the fact that someone is Catholic does not involve a blind acceptance of any spirit as purgatorial; Catholicism does not imply spiritual ignorance or naivety. In Shakespeare's time too, Catholics were required to examine such spirits very carefully, whether they passed the tests of their faith, or whether they were evil spirits tempting them; the latter case that was considered much more common in Catholic teaching too.<sup>331</sup>

If there were some crypto-Catholics in the original audiences, they must have been in a particularly difficult situation. In addition to seeing and discerning the Ghost, and finding that it can hardly be purgatorial, as it claims, then seeing the escalation of violence and bloodbath on the stage, caused by the appearance of that allegedly purgatorial spirit, they had to endure the contempt of the Protestant majority too. If Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic, as is often believed, but which cannot be proved beyond doubt, he did seize the opportunity to communicate the lamentable lack of the Catholic rites, even if in a negative context, through a

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<sup>331</sup> See Prosser (1971), 97-144.

revenge Ghost that is only allegedly purgatorial, but is in point of fact demonic, whether from a Catholic or a Protestant perspective, that is, for a discerning reader and audience.

For a Protestant audience, however, these lines from the Ghost, even as demanding vengeance, could imply not only a huge irony but also a satire of the condemned Catholic faith. Rather than sympathising with the Ghost, the Protestant audiences, who tended to entertain strong anti-Catholic sentiments in Elizabethan England, may have actually burst into laughter, when hearing the repeated laments, “O horrible, ô horrible, most horrible” (1.5.80).<sup>332</sup> From a Protestant perspective, the enormous gap between the solemn ideas or religious principles and the actual, vindictive purposes and practices could suggest that the supposedly pious rites serve merely to cover and promote sin. In Hamlet’s case, this turns out to be the most heinous sin imaginable: the wish to effect his enemy’s damnation.

The traditional interpretations, as we have seen, accept Hamlet’s revenge as his moral duty and the Ghost as his father. This requires the acceptance of the Ghost as an honest figure, and the rejection of the idea that it is an evil spirit, even at the cost of asserting that Shakespeare used ghost lore or pneumatology inconsistently. Supporters of this interpretation are therefore inclined to claim that the precise nature of the Ghost cannot be decided according to Elizabethan ghost lore. It is a very popular belief that as “Shakespeare subtly combines learned theological ideas about ghosts and their place of origin with popular beliefs and superstitions concerning them,” pointed out by J. C. Maxwell, this also means that the Ghost cannot be identified.<sup>333</sup>

But learned theological ideas and popular beliefs may actually refer to the same origin, by different wording. It should also be realised that the references according to the various beliefs of origin certainly do not mean that the Ghost can belong in several places simultaneously or in every single place with equal likelihood. The character further needs to

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<sup>332</sup> For such a reading, see Arthur McGee, *The Elizabethan Hamlet* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 24-74.

<sup>333</sup> J. C. Maxwell, “The Ghost from the Grave: A Note on Shakespeare’s Apparitions”. *Durham University Journal*. NS 17. (1956), 57-60; cited in Hibbard (1994), 41.

be subtle if it originates from one concrete place. For the sake of the dramatic impact, it is especially necessary if it comes from Hell, in order to be able to deceive. Otherwise, Hamlet may appear not only ignorant, but even a dull figure. Conversely, it is much more difficult to explain why the Ghost, if indeed an honest spirit with good intent, should show the signs of an evil spirit; doing so not only to the guards but also to Hamlet, “his son”. This question will be further discussed below. We shall see that not only the above criteria of Elizabethan pneumatology suggest an evil spirit, but also many hints in the play. Although there are indeed some contrary suggestions when the characters try to identify the Ghost according to the various possibilities, all are refuted as the action proceeds. Hamlet’s own assurance of the Ghost’s honesty after the Mousetrap reveals only his ignorance, probably caused by his wishful thinking; unfortunately, critics often adopt his attitude without reserve.

### **5.2.2 The Ghost in the dramatic structure**

The dramatic sequence supports the view of the evil spirit. Under careful examination, the references according to the various beliefs concerning spectres do not really contradict each other, but contribute to this image. Although there is indeed ambiguity surrounding the Ghost, which is by all probability created on purpose to enhance the dramatic impact, the hints at an evil spirit seem to outweigh the suggestions for another kind. While none of the references proves that the Ghost is indeed to be trusted, there are several clear indications towards a demon or devil in disguise.

In Act I, Scene I, Horatio is asked to join the guards as a scholar, in order to help and identify the Ghost. He knows how to “charge” a spirit, and invokes Heaven for protection, as Prosser points out (1.1.51).<sup>334</sup> The Ghost vanishes. Horatio further suggests that the Ghost “usurps” the night in the form of the departed King, which reveals a Protestant attitude. The

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<sup>334</sup> Prosser (1971), 109.

Ghost is armed, and, according to Prosser, such an appearance was attributed to demons. The time and place are likewise typical of evil spirits, and the guards are frightened by the sight.

What art thou that vsurpst this time of night,  
Together with that faire and warlike forme,  
In which the Maiestie of buried Denmarke  
Did sometimes march, by heauen I charge thee speake.

(1.1.46-49)

What should therefore be noted at the outset of the play is that, unlike in the modern reception – even in scholarly works, as we have seen – the Ghost is not identified automatically as Old Hamlet or King Hamlet by Horatio and the guards, but approached very carefully, as an ambiguous spirit that may usurp the time and the form of the late King.

On its second appearance, Horatio tests the Ghost as a possibly purgatorial spirit (1.1.133-5). It does not answer, but vanishes again like a “guilty thing” when the cock crows (1.1.147-48). This is a most telling reaction according to popular folk belief, as is explained in a lengthy discussion; the cockcrow is said to keep away fairies and witches, so that they have no “power to charme” (1.1.163). Thus, we can see that although there is a “confusion” of different theological ideas with popular folk beliefs and superstitions, all seem to indicate that the Ghost is probably evil. In this sense, there is no confusion, or inconsistency with the contemporary pneumatology; as we have seen above, the inconsistencies occur only if one wishes to identify the Ghost as the late King returning from Purgatory. Indeed, if we consider that the state religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean England was strictly Protestant, and so was King James, who had recently written a book on demons and witchcraft, these words, uttered by one of the King’s Men, must have been music to many ears, particularly those of the King.

It faded on the crowing of the Cock.  
Some say that euer gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Sauours birth is celebrated



This bird of dawning singeth all night long,  
And then they say no spirit dare sturre abraode  
The nights are wholesome, then no plannets strike,  
No fairy takes , nor witch hath power to charme.

(1.1.157-63)

If the Ghost entered or exited via the trapdoor, ascending from and descending to “Hell” below the stage of the Globe theatre, the indications of a disguised devil must have been all too evident for the original audiences. The predominantly Protestant spectators probably relished in the efforts of the guards, who strived to discern the Ghost, apparently very cautiously, yet not voicing explicitly the official Protestant viewpoint that firmly dismissed such apparitions as the works of the Devil.

In the next scene, Hamlet is naturally excited to hear about the Ghost. However, he is also “troubled” when he is told that the Ghost had vanished on the crowing of the cock (1.2.220; 224). He is also surprised that it was armed, which may mark his familiarity with ghost lore.

My fathers spirit (in armes) all is not well,  
I doubt some foule play.

(1.2.254-6)

It is typical of the influence of the traditional interpretation that these lines, though they describe Hamlet’s trouble and suspicion about the Ghost, are often interpreted as if they already provide the reason for the Ghost’s appearance. In this sense, the “foule play” refers not to the highly suspicious figure of the Ghost, but to the King’s crime. Although this duality perhaps demonstrates the ambiguity and the artistic merit of the play, there is no reference to the murder so far. Hamlet is aware of the danger, but decides that

If it assume my noble fathers person,  
Ile speake to it though hell it selfe should gape  
And bid me hold my peace.

(1.2.243-5)

Hamlet is thus apparently aware of the dangers of Hell, yet his curiosity is stronger than his caution. Here James may again be relevant.

*Curiositie in great ingines: thirst of revenge, for some tortes deeply apprehended: or greedie appetite of geare, caused through great pouerty. As to the first of these, Curiosity, it is onelie the inticement of Magiciens, or Necromanciers: and the other two are the allureres of the Sorcerers, or Witches, for that olde and craftie Serpent, being a spirite, hee easilie spyes our affections, and so conformes himselfe thereto, to deceaue vs to our wracke.*

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. II., 23, italics added)

Then, in Scene IV, his friends cannot restrain him even by force (1.4.60-86). Seeing the image of his father, Hamlet loses all his suspicion. In the next part of this chapter, another reason will be suggested for this strong effect by the Ghost. The friends here seem to regard the Ghost as evil unanimously. The Ghost intends to separate Hamlet, a further characteristic of evil, tempting spirits, or the works of the Devil, whereby they could exert a stronger influence on their victim and the evil purpose remained a secret.

In Scene Five, the Ghost talks to Hamlet. The sad effect of this rather controversial speech on Hamlet's mind and hence on the action will be discussed together with the corresponding parts of the drama. Identifying ourselves with Hamlet, we may be inclined to give credit to the Ghost. Yet, at the end of the scene (and also that of Act I, which could be called the exposition, and is to a great extent the act of the Ghost), it cries from under the stage three times. As has been mentioned, by convention, the cellarage represented Hell in the Elizabethan theatre; it was the place of the Devil.

The only Latin words of the play are uttered here: "*Hic, & vbique*" (1.5.156), which is of special significance, for the ability to be here and everywhere at once was confined to God and the Devil; Latin was the language to be used with demons. The Ghost disturbs Hamlet

and the guards, who swear secrecy about having seen the ominous spirit; therefore the oath takers need to shift their ground. The Ghost is called an “olde Mole” and a “worthy Pioneer”; these were popular nicknames for the Devil (1.5.162-3).<sup>335</sup> Thus, Shakespeare provides the audience with some clear clues right before the end of the scene, and apparently does not want us to be deceived by the Ghost, despite the fact that Hamlet gets deceived. These references have a particular significance, for as the drama progresses, we are likely to see with Hamlet's eyes, who later trusts the Ghost.

As we have seen above in the critical review, this episode with the cellarage has remained an unsolved problem for the supporters of the traditional interpretation; some critics admit this, others evade the question, ignoring this part. According to John Dover Wilson, the Ghost, though identical to Hamlet's father, here plays or pretends to be the Devil, with Hamlet's assistance, so as to deceive the guards; which I find a very improbable and unrealistic explanation.<sup>336</sup> Why should the Ghost play the devil and deceive anyone, if it is otherwise an honest Ghost? The logical explanation appears to be the opposite: as Hamlet suspects later on, the Ghost must be a devil that plays or pretends to be Hamlet's father, so as to deceive and ruin him through his quest of revenge. Hamlet's agitation in the Cellarage Scene could be due to the sudden awakening of this suspicion too, when hearing the Ghost from underneath, that is, “Hell” in the Globe theatre, after blindly and unconditionally trusting, following and talking to this mysterious character.

Alternatively, the line may have an additional or dual significance. The actor enacting Hamlet, beyond conversing with the guards, may be stepping out of his role and address the audience too, as was customary in the daylight performances of the first Globe. In that context, Hamlet's

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<sup>335</sup> See the review of criticism in chapter 2, above.

<sup>336</sup> John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 81.

Ha, ha, boy, say'st thou so, art thou there trupenny ?  
Come on, *you heare this fellowe in the Sellerige*,  
(1.5.151, italics added)

can be an indication: look here and listen carefully, “this fellowe” is not necessarily my father, as he claims to be, but an evil spirit in disguise, or a stage devil talking from its proper place, the cellarage, that is, from “Hell”. Moreover, “this fellowe” may be not only a degrading term for a character that pretends and claims to be the late King; it can also be a reference to the fellow actor, rather wittily and amusingly enacting the conventional stage devil that cunningly tempts the hero. That is, the star tragedian Burbage, enacting Hamlet, could so refer to the fellow actor Shakespeare, ingeniously enacting the Ghost, thus revealing the real role and function of this key character. “Trupenny” is similarly telling as an apostrophe: the devious, cunning Ghost is hardly true or honest, when talking from “there”, down below; yet it may be worth seeing and hearing, as great fun, a supreme form of entertainment. “Boy” is likewise hardly a word that one would apply to a father, particularly a revered one recently passed away and just returning; it is more appropriate with the cunning stage devil, originally enacted by Shakespeare.

Thus the dramatic figure of the Ghost conforms to the character identified by Elizabethan ghost lore, which was predominantly Protestant; but the revenge ghost must have been regarded as a disguised devil also from a Catholic perspective. As we shall see, the dramatic structure corresponds to this too, notwithstanding that Shakespeare did his best to create an ambiguous play with an ambiguous spirit, which indeed *seems* to be the late King Hamlet.

The above signs can be explained either by the logical conclusion that the Ghost is indeed an evil spirit, or by the rather weak assertion that they are merely for the sake of entertainment and excitement, for the Ghost is otherwise honest and well-intentioned. Again, it is difficult to believe that if the Ghost were honest, and were indeed the Ghost of Hamlet's

father, it would desire to show the signs of an evil spirit. It is even more difficult to conceive of its wish to do so in order to keep Hamlet in uncertainty, so as “to lead him, in due course, to question its reliability and therefore stage the Murder of Gonzago,” as G. R. Hibbard believes, who claims that this test “puts the Ghost’s honesty (i.e. *genuineness* and *truthfulness*) beyond question,” and therefore it “cannot be a devil”.<sup>337</sup> This simple assertion does not take proper account of a basic element of Elizabethan ghost lore, which has been discussed above, and pointed out by many authors including King James and elsewhere by Shakespeare himself: the Devil was described as capable of telling the truth for the sake of a successful temptation.

It should be noted, however, that Hamlet follows this course too, and if we identify with the hero without reservation, this may be a natural consequence. As is typical of most modern spectators, Hibbard initially regards the Ghost as a theatrical device, whose “main function in the play is to tell Hamlet the great secret of the murder”.<sup>338</sup> Later, however, he identifies the Ghost as old Hamlet. It is then not viewed as a simple messenger of the murder, but as an authoritative spirit, whose mandate too must be executed. This interpretation is not only incoherent, but ignores essential implications concerning the Ghost and Hamlet’s task, such as contemporary conceptions of spirits, religion, revenge and succession. If the Ghost is viewed merely as a theatrical device, theatrical conventions need to be acknowledged, particularly the implications of “Hell” below the Elizabethan stage; if it is viewed as a real character, these other implications are also to be taken into account.

Robert H. West offers only one objection as “evidence” against the “devil theory” about the Ghost. He claims that if Shakespeare “wanted the apparition understood to be a devil, he must have eliminated the ghost’s concern for Gertrude”.<sup>339</sup> In Act One, Scene Five, the Ghost leaves the Prince with a request which is apparently that of a benevolent spirit.

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<sup>337</sup> Hibbard (1994), 41.

<sup>338</sup> Hibbard, *ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> West (1955), 1110.

But howsomeuer thou pursues this act,  
Tain't not thy minde, nor let thy soule contriue  
Against thy mother ought, leaue her to heauen,  
And to those thornes that in her bosome lodge  
To prick and sting her.

(1.5.84-8)

Although this may seem a valid note on the character of the Ghost, it is certainly not evidence against the Ghost as a devil. We have seen that contemporary authorities on ghost lore warned that the Devil, being capable of subtle tricks, may preach virtue and intermingle the good with the evil, the true with the false. Thus, this request of the Ghost does not make it inconsistent with Elizabethan ghost lore if it is a devil. I believe that critics who are aware of this point in pneumatology, and still insist that Shakespeare should have eliminated this part if he had wanted to create an evil Ghost, suggest that they expect Shakespeare to write simple and clear-cut plays, removing the dramatic tension. After the assumption of old Hamlet's figure, this seems indeed a most subtle and effective trick, which is worth consideration. In this way, the Ghost not only appears to be a spirit with the best of intentions, but also establishes itself, or, in this sense, rather "himself", as the departed, loving husband of Gertrude. Hamlet is then more inclined to accept it as "his father", and so is the audience.

On this problem, R. M. Frye notes that:

One could argue, of course, that a demonic ghost knew that Gertrude was in a state of mortal sin, and was attempting to divert Hamlet's attention from the fact. In such an interpretation, "leave her to heaven" was mere subterfuge, designed to prevent Hamlet from the attempt he later makes to bring his mother to repentance and a state of grace. Even so, the argument would remain inconclusive without the introduction of much stronger evidence than I know.

(Frye 1984, 313)

Below I will introduce such evidence for the Ghost as an evil spirit, when considering the Ghost's effect on Hamlet's mind. For now, however, it is enough to consider that the Ghost's

appearance in the Closet Scene has exactly the above function: it prevents the Queen from her repentance, as Prosser had pointed out.<sup>340</sup> Queen Gertrude's mortal sin is that she married her former husband's brother, which was considered adultery and incest at the time of the play.<sup>341</sup> This is a major concern for Hamlet, who would like to save her mother, and therefore tries to bring her to repentance, though Hamlet's moral preaching, immediately after killing Polonius, gains a rather ironic overtone in the scene, with the corpse on display. As the Ghost appears only to Hamlet, the Queen believes that the Prince, who talks to the Ghost, is mad, which is understandable in such a situation. It is rather ironic from the Ghost that first it tells Hamlet not to taint his mind, and then it is exactly the Ghost to create a situation in which Hamlet is perceived as mad. This is also a sign of the Ghost's power and evil character.

Furthermore, with this appearance, the Ghost prevents Hamlet from telling the Queen about the murder.<sup>342</sup> Hamlet is on the verge of revealing it; he has already referred to the King as a murderer, but the Queen missed the point (3.4.96). Considering the elective form of the monarchy, the Ghost has a good reason to keep Hamlet away from the Queen. Since the King could be deposed, that is, forced to abdicate without killing him, the Queen might prevent Hamlet from his revenge. Thus, even if Hamlet observed this request of the Ghost, it would have no positive effect whatsoever on the outcome of the play. However, as Hamlet ignores it, and the Ghost intervenes, it has a much stronger dramatic impact. The artistic merit of this

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<sup>340</sup> Prosser (1971), 200.

<sup>341</sup> This argument was based on Leviticus 20:21: "If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless." <sup>341</sup> Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon because of this, as she had been the wife of Henry's brother Arthur. At the time of the marriage, Henry obtained a Papal dispensation, but twenty-four years later, when Catherine could not produce a male heir, this was the grounds for the divorce; Henry then claimed that his marriage to Catherine was incestuous and void. This became a doctrine of the Anglican religion too, and it was a major issue that shaped English history, of which Elizabethan audiences must have been familiar.

<sup>342</sup> In this scene, the Ghost appears already in a night gown, as indicated by a stage direction in the First Quarto. The relevance of the night gown can be interpreted in various ways. To Greenblatt, it means that the Ghost has already been purified: if the gown is white, the colour might indicate a clean soul (2001), 223. I find this interpretation difficult to accept, as a night gown is not really a spiritual attire; it may have even evoked laughter from the contemporary audiences, who were very sceptical about – or even hostile to – spirits, particularly about allegedly purgatorial ones. In any case, the Ghost appears to reaffirm Hamlet's duty of revenge. Of course, one might also argue that Hamlet's duty is to pray for the Ghost and perform pious deeds of indulgences, but the Ghost never actually requests that.

episode is remarkable: Hamlet indeed charges his mother passionately in an effort to bring her to repentance. Therefore, the Ghost's intervention can be viewed as the deceased, loving husband's move to protect his wife. The Queen has even expressed her fear that Hamlet would murder her (3.4.20), though the Prince has no such an intention, as he explicitly explains before the scene (3.3.387).

To summarise the Ghost's function in the play, it not only "bodes eruption" to Denmark, as Horatio foretells after sighting it for the first time (1.1.72), but in fact causes it. It gives Hamlet a rather problematic mandate, but no help to execute it. The Ghost is careful that no one else can learn either about the murder of the late King Hamlet (even though Hamlet reveals it to Horatio) or Hamlet's goal; we have seen that in an elective monarchy this is of particular importance, where the tragic outcome might be avoided in a legal and peaceful way. By the time Hamlet can execute the mandate, everyone else has died, except for Horatio, who has to tell the story. The death of each character is related to Hamlet, either directly or indirectly. So exactly does Hamlet fulfil the task prescribed for him, that King Claudius is the only character whom he murders not only consciously but also on his own. Conversely, the Queen's death is the only one in which he is entirely innocent. The sad irony of it is that the Queen drinks to Hamlet, from his cup (5.2.292). In his thirst for revenge, Hamlet first mistakenly kills Polonius, then dispatches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with a method also bearing the influence of the Ghost. He loses the initiative, and is forced into a duel, where he is killed, but, although not on purpose, he also kills Laertes.

The Ghost has a significant influence not only on the action, but also on Hamlet's mind, and the two things are in fact interrelated. Although Hamlet puts on an antic disposition as a role-play (1.5.180), he cannot always control his feelings and mind. This is most expressed in his behaviour towards Ophelia, whom he addresses as a sexual object, after his disappointment in his mother and hence in women. Losing his father soon afterwards, the



young lady indeed gets mad and commits suicide, not only pretends or contemplates them as Hamlet. In one way or another, everyone except Horatio, falls victim of Hamlet, who himself seems to be the victim of the evil Ghost.

### 5.3 Hamlet and the Ghost: The tragic flaw of the protagonist

The suggestion is that the Ghost, even though *seemingly* Hamlet's father, *claiming* to have returned from Purgatory, is evil in character and comes from Hell in the Christian context of the play; both in spiritual terms and according to the stage conventions of the Elizabethan theatre including Shakespeare's Globe. It is, in fact a disguised devil, as Hamlet himself fears, abusing and destroying the hero and, through him, numerous other characters. Questions arise, however: if this is indeed so, why and how can the Ghost enter the play, and how can it exert this strong influence? We have seen that in Elizabethan ghost lore supernatural figures were held to be extremely powerful, and thus could be very dangerous for the ignorant; both Protestant and Catholic authorities warned that the Devil was capable of very subtle tricks, as was specifically described by King James, who published his work a few years before *Hamlet* was written. Yet why and how should it trick Hamlet, who is described to have been

The Courtiers, souldiers, schollers, eye, tongue, sword,  
Th'expectation, and Rose of the faire state,  
The glasse of fashion, and the mould of forme,  
Th'obseru'd of all obseruers,

(3.1.151-4)

that is, the ideal man of the Renaissance before the action of the play? Although Ophelia actually believes Hamlet mad in the Nunnery Scene, when desperately recalling his lover's past perfection, the Prince initially indeed seems faultless. Hamlet's grief makes him morally superior to the other characters, especially King Claudius, who is feasting soon after

murdering his own brother, the late King Hamlet. How could Hamlet fall victim to an evil spirit, then? Perhaps the Ghost does contradict both Elizabethan ghost lore and the theatrical conventions, and is not evil after all. Answer to these questions would not only explain the action, but also verify our hypothesis concerning the Ghost.

To understand these problems, we need to consider the notion *tragedy of consciousness* and have some insight into the Christian world concept, upon which the structure of the drama is based. John Bayley points out that in three of Shakespeare's tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*) the mental processes of the central character are of vital importance, and influence the action. "For Hamlet and Macbeth the events of the world have become what is going on in their minds, and the two merge together".<sup>343</sup> For this reason, we can call these plays tragedies of consciousness. Walter C. Curry argues that in the Renaissance, although some people of the age may have been unaware of it, the scholastic tradition was still influential. Curry points out that "the scholastic synthesis in its golden age represented not merely a splendid body of doctrines, but also a form of thinking and a way of life",<sup>344</sup> and argues that Protestantism, although its differences to scholasticism were emphasised in some questions, was in fact also developed from that system.

Curry demonstrates that in *Macbeth* the scholastic influence is especially strong, and in fact "determine[s] the progress of both internal and external action".<sup>345</sup> Attila Kiss, referring to the work of Curry, points out that in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* a common structural pattern can be discerned, based on scholastic philosophy. Kiss considers that evil supernatural beings enter both plays and influence the minds and the actions of the protagonists by setting

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<sup>343</sup> John Bayley, *Tragedy and Consciousness* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 165.

<sup>344</sup> Walter Clyde Curry, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (3rd. ed. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 11.

<sup>345</sup> Curry (1968), 24.

them a task; in the process of fulfilling their tasks, the protagonists' minds disintegrate.<sup>346</sup> Although this disintegration may be debated; it is questionable to what extent Hamlet feigns madness after he puts on his antic disposition, or whether he is sane throughout, we shall see that the Ghost indeed has a negative influence on Hamlet's mind, particularly on his perception of the moral issues. The essence of the matter is that Hamlet's mental processes have a vital influence on the action, but his mind is also influenced by the evil Ghost.

As this can be understood in light of the scholastic philosophy, a very brief account of this is required, particularly for the modern, secular readers, who may have difficulties with a number of spiritual issues; of course, the point is that so has already Hamlet himself. The following extracts are actually from Renaissance or early modern Protestant authors who drew from the scholastic tradition, whereby Curry demonstrates that the medieval heritage lived on in Shakespeare's time. Later, we shall consider how the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism may influence the action of *Hamlet*; though these differences are, again, not so major concerning the main points, the character of Hamlet, the Ghost, and the mission of revenge.

In the medieval world concept, God appears as a Supreme Maker, who created things in his own knowledge and will, according to their natures; this is called Providence, and the execution of providential design is Government.<sup>347</sup> This complex world is governed by rules: Divine Wisdom means the moving of all things to their proper ends with the help of the Law. Eternal Law is "that order which God before all ages hath set down with himself, for himself to do all things by" (ibid.). All other laws are dependent on the Eternal Law, for instance the Law of Nature, or Natural Law, and the Law of Reason. The place of man is as follows in this system:

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<sup>346</sup> Attila Kiss, "A tragikus hős tudatának felbomlása Shakespeare két tragédiájában (Egyezések a *Hamlet*-ben és a *Macbeth*-ben)" (Szeged: *Acta Universitatis Szegediensis, Acta Iuvenum, Sectio Litteraria, Tomus IV.*, 1987), 79-95.

<sup>347</sup> Curry (1968), 16.

Man is subject to the Eternal Law in the most excellent way possible: he is provided with the light of natural reason, the imprint of Eternal Reason, whereby he may know good from evil (Curry 1968, 17).

The Law of Reason impels man toward his proper end and actions. At the same time, man is endowed with the psychological liberty of free choice and also the ability to control the end which he pursues. Free choice, or Free Will, is described as follows:

Since goodness is perceived by the eye of the intellect and the light of the eye is reason, the two principal fountains of human action are Knowledge and Will; and the Will in process of tending toward the good or apparent good - it cannot desire evil as evil.

(Curry 1968, 18).

However, man may also fall into sin, either due to his defective knowledge or to his passions:

as intellect is led astray in its judgements of defective knowledge, the will follows the wrong direction and man falls into sin. He may also err when passions, reinforced by habit, so fascinate the will by their show of temporal felicity that it is led to prefer the lesser good to that ultimately good which reason might dictate.

(Curry 1968,18)

Supernatural creatures, or supernatural agents, are also participants of the Government; they are also God's instruments and must obey the Eternal Law. Angels must of necessity participate in the Eternal Law. Demons, or devils, which are regarded as "fallen angels", cannot influence man directly, as man may know good from evil. However, through defective knowledge, or his passions, man may fall victim to these demons. In general, some fault must already be present in man which the devil or demon (evil spirits in general) can abuse. This is the abuse of reason: will then follows the wrong direction, it tends towards what appears to be good but is in fact evil.

To turn to the great tragedies of consciousness, the situation is clear in *Macbeth*. The

witches or weird sisters are clearly evil in character, with the purpose of tempting and destroying Macbeth. Macbeth's fault is ambition, which the weird sisters can abuse. In *Hamlet* the situation is perhaps not so obvious. While the weird sisters also appear on their own, revealing their evil intent and preparing to meet Macbeth, we can see the Ghost only in relation to the other characters. The situation is also considerably different in the two tragedies: whereas Macbeth murders the innocent King due to a desire for power, Hamlet intends to do justice, to punish and remove the guilty King. Hamlet appears as faultless before encountering the Ghost, and therefore it may seem improbable that he is abused by a demon. It should be noted, however, that Macbeth likewise appears as faultless before meeting the weird sisters; he is the loyal hero of the war that has just come to an end.

Kiss holds that the reason for Hamlet's abuse is his melancholy.<sup>348</sup> Prosser also notes that it appears from Hamlet's first soliloquy that "Hamlet's grief and loathing, together with his desire for suicide, have made him exactly the type of melancholic who is especially subject to the abuse of demons".<sup>349</sup> In the Renaissance, classification of the personality types into four categories was well known; the "diverse temperatures and complexions of men, according to the humours that bear most sway in them",<sup>350</sup> was a most popular topic. Of the four types, the melancholic, with the dominance of black humour, was regarded as particularly vulnerable spiritually and sensitive to great emotional effects and losses. Once his emotions were raised, they could be extremely passionate and lasting. According to Timothy Bright,

though the melancholy man be not easily affected with any other passion as with those of fear, sadness, and jealousy, yet being once thoroughly heat with a contrary passion, retaineth the fervency thereof far longer time than any other complexion, and more fervently boileth therewith.

(Bright 1586, 129)

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<sup>348</sup> Kiss (1987), 89.

<sup>349</sup> Prosser (1971), 123.

<sup>350</sup> Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*. London (London, 1586), 129.

In such a case: “If choller have yeilded matter to this sharp kind of melancholie, then rage, revenge, and furie, possesse both hart and head, and the whole bodie is caried with that storme, contrarie to persuation of reason” (ibid.).

We have seen that, according to the scholastic philosophy, man may err and fall into sin when overwhelmed by passions which “fascinate the will”. A melancholic, then, if carried away by passion, may act contrary to his reason. We must remember that “natural reason” is very important in the scholastic system, for man may know good from evil through this. Although it is well known that a man in passion may commit things contrary his reason, in the modern (or postmodern) world concept there are no spectres or supernatural agents. In the scholastic concept, on the other hand, demons and devils were considered to be those agents that could influence and harm man through his passions. It is possible, then, that Hamlet, a melancholic in a critical state of mind, is abused by a demon. The Ghost urges revenge, and melancholic people were thought to be prone to violent action, especially revenge, when their passions were aroused. We have seen that Protestants likewise considered such apparitions, particularly in such situations, as tricks of the Devil.

As we have seen, Hamlet is aware of the danger himself.

The spirit that I haue seene  
May be a deale , and the deale hath power  
T’assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
Out of my weakenes, and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damne me.

(2.2.598-603)

Kiss claims that in this passage Hamlet gives the correct “diagnosis” of what is happening to him.<sup>351</sup> This passage is often quoted as a reference to the possibility of the Ghost as a devil, but it is generally claimed that it is intended merely to make the Ghost somewhat ambiguous,

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<sup>351</sup> Kiss (1987), 89.

for the sake of dramatic impact. It may be clarifying, then, to consider Hamlet's passage immediately before he encounters the Ghost in Act One, Scene Four. While awaiting the Ghost, Hamlet himself gives us the key to understand the play: in his comment on the King's feast, there are also hints at Hamlet's character and the Ghost's ensuing effect on him.<sup>352</sup>

This heauy headed reueale east and west  
Makes vs tradust, and taxed of other nations,  
They clip vs drunkards, and with Swinish phrase  
Soyle our addition, and indeede it takes  
From our atchieuements, though perform'd at height  
The pith and marrow of our attribute,  
So oft it chaunces in particuler men,  
That for some vicious mole of nature in them  
As in their birth wherein they are not guilty,  
(Since nature cannot choose his origin)  
By their ore-grow'th of some complexion  
Oft breaking downe the pales and forts of reason,  
Or by some habit, that too much ore-leauens  
The forme of plausiue manners, that these men  
Carrying I say the stamp of one defect  
Being Natures liuery, or Fortunes starre,  
His vertues els be they as pure as grace,  
As infinite as man may vndergoe,  
Shall in the generall censure take corruption  
From that particuler fault: the dram of eale  
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt  
To his owne scandle.

(1.4.17-38)

Hamlet first comments on the drinking habits of the King and then the Danish people in general, and the ill-fame connected to it abroad. Later, however, he turns to some "particuler men" (l. 23), and talks about "some vicious mole of nature in them" and "their ore-grow'th of some complexion", which may have a harmful effect on reason. This is a reference to the bodily humours: complexions.

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<sup>352</sup> The following passage can be found only in the Second Quarto text from the three early editions. G. R. Hibbard, the editor of the Oxford *Hamlet* omits it, as his text is based on the Folio. While this passage greatly helps our interpretation, its omission does not affect the basic pattern of the play, cf. below.

Since humours are mentioned only in reference to Hamlet in other parts of the play, and his melancholy is explicitly referred to twice (2.2.601; 3.1.167), this may be an implicit allusion to his melancholy and its dangers for his reason. It is certainly not suggested that Hamlet is conscious of it in this passage, and realises the dangers inherent in his own character; he may be unaware of the significance of his words as regards his own case. The reference, however, is there; and as the play unfolds, this becomes more meaningful, particularly when he highlights the dangers of the Devil on his melancholy character at the end of Act Two.

That the passage refers to Hamlet himself may be supported by Louise D. Cary's point on Hamlet's name and its "addition", which we have discussed above. As Cary argues, while the story of Hamlet had been several hundred years old in Shakespeare's time, the dramatist himself created the present form of the name of the protagonist, by altering the formerly used *Amleth* for Hamlet.<sup>353</sup> In this way it has a more English-like quality, but the original name is changed or "soiled", especially its "addition", the letter *h*. According to Cary, and as already mentioned, Hamlet's name, ham-let, may be interpreted as a little pig, like piglet, which is a kind of swine: that is how the addition of Hamlet's original name is soiled by a swinish phrase. If we accept this argument, it implies that Shakespeare consciously reflects on Hamlet's name and, as the context suggests, on his character and fate. Thus the passage may indeed refer to the Prince, even to his name, though this is not the most important point of this passage; the key to the play lies in the rest of it. Nevertheless, one should note that Shakespeare changed not only the protagonist's name, but almost the entire story, transforming the happy ending with the victorious hero into a gloomy tragedy, involving the fall of the hero too.

In the second part of the passage, Hamlet mentions "some habit", which is over "the

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<sup>353</sup> Louise D. Cary, "Hamlet Recycled, Or the Tragical History of the Prince's Prints" (*ELH* 61.4, 1994), 783.



forme of plausiue manners”, that is, unacceptable. As opposed to complexion, which is innate (but may overgrow in certain circumstances), *habit* usually means an acquired characteristic, which “corrupts the pattern of approved behaviour”.<sup>354</sup> Hamlet states that whatever the reason is for this “defect”, an otherwise perfect character (ll. 33-4) may take corruption from “that particuler fault” (ll. 35-6). “The dram of eale” or evil may lead to “his owne scandle” or scandal. The Ghost enters after this line, and, as I will argue, Hamlet will undergo in a change just described.

Jenkins comments on the last lines (ll.36-8) that the “little drop of evil often drops out all the noble substance and so (the evil but not the nobility being visible) brings it to disrepute” (ibid). I believe that it is possible to distinguish between two meanings of this sentence in *Hamlet*, both having the same impact on the entire play, intensifying each other. Firstly, this minute amount of evil can be the *particular fault* in man that blots out his virtues, and brings him *to his own scandal*. Secondly, evil and the dram of evil may equally refer to an outside influence. In this sense, the Ghost, just appearing, may be the evil of which merely a little is enough to bring one into his own scandal: an invented and imposed plot. However, even if this *dram of evil* is only a fault in man's character, it may certainly be intensified and abused by an outside, evil power. I will argue that is what will happen.

Hamlet's behaviour after the Mousetrap can also be explained by his melancholy, which is abused by the Ghost. As has been pointed out, when the play is interrupted, Hamlet makes no effort to reveal and announce the King's guilt to the court amid the confusion, even though that may have been his original purpose when staging this play within a play. On the contrary, identifying with Lucianus, the murderer, Hamlet is wildly agitated, waiting for his revenge. We have seen that the melancholic type is not easily affected, but once thoroughly heated with passion, his fervency is particularly strong and lasting. Similarly, the melancholy was

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<sup>354</sup> Jenkins (1982), 210.

regarded as slow in his deliberation, but then he was the more consistent with it. Hamlet had to wait a long time to gain evidence of Claudius's guilt. Once convinced, he “could drink hot blood”, which is a clear allusion to the practices of the Black Mass.<sup>355</sup>

‘Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out  
Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on.

(3.2.379-383)

In Elizabethan revenge tragedies the night speech was a familiar convention on the stage. It was a sign of fiendish villainy, and in this speech the murderer either invoked night to aid him in his black purposes, or simply hailed night as suitable to his purpose (Prosser, *ibid*). It seems that Hamlet conforms to the tradition, and degrades to the level of conventional avengers. Hamlet's agitated melancholy leads to the rash killing of Polonius, and may also explain his ensuing treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Hamlet's rage and vindictiveness is now boundless, reaching even innocent, former friends. It must be noted, however, that towards the end of the play the Prince's temperament calms down temporarily before the duel, and then finally in his agony; but this does not alter the tragic outcome that accelerates after Polonius's death.

Melancholy thus basically explains the Ghost's influence on Hamlet and the action, as has been pointed out by Prosser and Kiss. King James also discusses melancholy in his *Daemonologie*, particularly in relation to witchcraft; Hamlet's reference to the “witching time of night”, right after the Mousetrap, therefore must have pleased the King (that is, King James, rather than King Claudius), even though he probably did not approve of Hamlet's invocation of Hell and his thirst for hot blood. The protagonist, aiming at revenge and regicide, apparently also conforms to James's ideas of a melancholy man practising

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<sup>355</sup> Prosser (1971), 183.

witchcraft, and voices them just before embarking on his killing spree, starting with poor Polonius.

James maintains about witchcraft that it is “*Proued by the Scripture, that such a thing can be: And the reasones refuted of all such as would call it but an imagination and Melancholicque humor.*”<sup>356</sup> James goes on to explain,

Anie that pleases Physicallie to consider vpon *the naturall humour of melancholie*, according to all the Physicians, that euer writ thereupon, they sall finde that that will be ouer short a cloak *to couer their knauery with: For as the humor of Melancholic in the selfe is blacke, heaue and terrene, so are the symptomes thereof, in any persones;* that are subject therevnto, leannes, palenes, desire of solitude: *and if they come to the highest degree therof, mere folie and Manie.*

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. II., 30, italics added)

As for the relationship of these “*Melancholicques*” and “*the deuill their master*”, James asserts,

*The Melancholicques neuer spares to bewray themselues, by their continuall discourses, feeding therby their humor in that which they thinke no crime.* As to your third reason, it scarselie merites an answere. For if *the deuill their master* were not bridled, as the scriptures teacheth vs, suppose there were no men nor women to be his instrumentes, he could finde waies inough without anie helpe of others to wrack al mankinde: wherevnto he employes his whole study.

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. II., 30, italics added)

Hamlet does betray himself with his almost continual discourse, which admittedly is at times elevated and solemn, seemingly even pious, but predominantly circulating around his

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<sup>356</sup> James, *Daemonologie*, I. II., 28 (italics in the original). For a discussion of James and other contemporary authors on witchcraft, and their relevance on *Hamlet*, see also Nighan’s analysis, particularly on Reginald Scott’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft: An excellent Difcourfe of the Nature and Subftance of Devils and Spirits*; in Nighan, *Hamlet and the Daemons*, cited above.

revenge. As we have seen, for King Claudius, as for the courtiers, it becomes clear that Hamlet is preparing for regicide. In his interjection of the play within the play, the Prince, as nephew to the King, identifies with the murderer Lucianus, whose thoughts are also black; more to the point, Lucianus invokes Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft.

*Luc.* Thoughts black, hands apt, drugges fit, and time agreeing,  
Considerat season els no creature seeing,  
Thou mixture ranck, of midnight weedes collected,  
VVith *Hecats* ban thrice blasted, thrice inuected ,  
Thy naturall magicke, and dire property,  
On wholesome life vsurps immediatly.

(3.2.255-60)

Nevertheless, one may have the feeling that melancholy – even with his inclination to witchcraft – may not be a completely satisfactory explanation for Hamlet’s fall, for it is an innate characteristic, which is understandably intensified in Hamlet’s grief. Hamlet himself argues about “complexion” that “for some vicious mole of nature in them/ As in their birth wherein they are not guilty,/ (Since nature cannot choose his origin)” (1.4.24-26). Although moral justice, similarly to poetical justice, is not necessarily a requirement of a play, one might instinctively object to the interference by an evil spirit in Hamlet’s situation. If Hamlet is innocent and faultless in any other respect, at least at the beginning of the play, this is rather a bitter and perhaps even illogical solution by any dramatist; therefore the concept of the evil Ghost is dismissed by most critics, although Hamlet’s melancholy is widely discussed as a reason for his often scandalous behaviour. If we insist on our stance, we have to seek a more convincing reason for an evil, tempting spirit to enter the action, another fault, perhaps a “habit,” in Hamlet’s character.

King James describes

*two kindes of Spirites, whereof the one followes outwardlie, the other possesses inwardlie the persones that they trouble. That since all Prophecies and visiones are nowe ceased, all spirites that appears in these formes are euill.*

(James, *Daemonologie*, III. II., 63; italics in the original)

As for the reasons for the appearance of these evil spirits, James goes on to explain,

Two kindes in speciall: Either such as being guiltie of greeuous offences, God punishes by that horrible kinde of scourdge, or else being persones of the beste nature peradventure, that yee shall finde in all the Countrie about them, G O D permittes them to be troubled in that sort, for the tryall of their patience, and wakening vp of their zeale, for admonishing of the beholders, not to truste ouer much in themselues, since they are made of no better stuffe, and peradventure blotted with no smaller sinnes (as CHRIST saide, speaking of them vppon whome the Towre in *Siloam* fell:). And for giuing likewise to the spectators, matter to prayse G O D, that they meriting no better, are yet spared from being corrected in that fearefull forme.

(James, *Daemonologie*, III. II., 63-64)

If we apply James's theory to Hamlet's case, the evil Ghost may appear merely to test Hamlet's patience and religious zeal. In Nighan's view, as we have noted, that is the only reason, and Hamlet ultimately passes that test; but I think the Ghost has other reasons to appear and abuse Hamlet, who succumbs to temptation. Elsewhere, James differentiates between three kinds of people who may be tempted by the Devil,

PHI. But will God permit these wicked instrumentes by the power of the Deuill their master, to trouble by anie of these meanes, anie that beleeeues in him?

EPI. No doubt, for there are three kinde of folkes whom God will permit so *to be tempted or troubled; the wicked for their horrible sinnes, to punish them in the like measure*; The godlie that are sleeping in anie great sinnes or infirmities and weakenesse in faith, to waken them vp the faster by such an vncouth forme: and euen some of the best, that their patience may bee tryed before the world, as IOBs was. For why may not God vse anie kinde of extraordinarie

punishment, when it pleases him; as well as the ordinarie roddes of sicknesse or other aduersities.

(James, *Daemonologie*, I. V., 47-48; italics added)

Again, God may try even some of the best, like Job; but first of all, God permits the temptation or troubling of the wicked for their horrible sins, to punish them in the like measure. Is it possible that the seemingly perfect Hamlet is wicked; that he has some horrible sin that is punished accordingly?

In Act One, Scene Two, Horatio and the sentinels visit Hamlet to inform him about the nightly apparition. The Prince, still under the devastating effect of the announcement of his mother's second marriage, has his friend to share his indignation, demonstrated in his first soliloquy, as if a continuation of it:

Would I had met my dearest foe in heauen  
Or euer I had seene that day *Horatio*.

(1.2.182-3)

As Jenkins explains, the expression *dearest foe* resembles the “nearest and dearest enemy” (1H4 3.2.123); *dear* is applied elsewhere by Shakespeare also in the sense of “grievous”, this adjective was “applied to whatever affects us closely, whether in a good or bad sense”.<sup>357</sup> In any case, Hamlet expresses, as Hibbard puts it, “his strong dislike of the idea that any enemy of his should go to heaven”.<sup>358</sup> What Hibbard fails to notice is that in Christian belief this is a major sin or sinful disposition, an extreme malice or wickedness, for a Christian man has no right to wish or seek his enemy's damnation. On the contrary, it is his duty to forgive and possibly even pray for his enemy.

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<sup>357</sup> Jenkins (1982), 191.

<sup>358</sup> In his textual notes, Hibbard rightly finds this “a fascinating anticipation of the reason he [Hamlet] gives for sparing the praying Claudius in 3.3,” but his preconceptions of Hamlet, the Ghost and the entire play seem to prevent him from drawing the logical conclusion about Hamlet's motivation and the Ghost's ; Hibbard, as most critics, retains the traditional, romantic reading in his General Introduction. Hibbard (1994), 165; cf. below.

The conditions of forgiveness are, of course, debated and discussed at length by theologians; my aim is not to go into these details, as Hamlet, pursuing his revenge, never actually considers forgiveness. Unconditional forgiveness is not required in the gospels either; the duty to forgive applies particularly when the party that did the wrong truly repents.<sup>359</sup> In this respect, we have already discussed the Prayer Scene, where the King at least attempts to repent, and Hamlet witnesses that. If Hamlet considered forgiving the King at his prayers, rather than wishing his damnation, the tragic outcome, involving the deaths of both characters, in addition to several others, could be avoided.

Considering the necessity of forgiveness, we can quote here the best-known passage, the *Lord's Prayer*, ending in the following lines:

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is  
the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

(Matthew 6.12-3)<sup>360</sup>

The next line of *Hamlet* is:

My father – me thinkes I see my father -

(1.2.184)

Hamlet *thinks* that he sees his father, but no one actually appears to him at this stage in person; Hamlet sees a mental image, which may be a misapprehension. Jenkins notes that this seems to be a reference to the Ghost (though by the Ghost, Jenkins, like most critics, means the Ghost of Hamlet's father, as we have seen). However, if we consider the possibility that

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<sup>359</sup> I am grateful to Professor Latré for highlighting this point.

<sup>360</sup> King James Bible (1611). At the time of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare probably used the Bishops' Bible or perhaps the Geneva Bible, but the wording is not decisive in this case. Considering the significance of James on demonology, politics and the historical issues of the play, we can perhaps also cite the famous bible edition issued by him, even if it was published only a few years after *Hamlet* (though already well before the Folio edition).

the Ghost may not be Hamlet's father, but an evil, tempting spirit – as defined according to Elizabethan ghost lore – we may realise that it already seizes the opportunity to enter Hamlet's mind, right after he utters his evil sentiment.

These two sentences of the Prince seem to relate to the above lines of the Lord's Prayer as their negative fulfilment. Hamlet does not want to forgive his debtors; on the contrary, he wishes their eternal suffering in Hell. Accordingly, Hamlet is led into temptation; he is not delivered from evil. After his evil thoughts, the Devil himself is allowed to enter Hamlet's mind; and later also to appear to him in person, so as to cause his destruction. Hamlet, at any rate, pronounces here an extremely sinful idea in the Christian framework of the play; this evil disposition, in scholastic terms, can subject him to the power of evil. Melancholy, therefore, is only Hamlet's general, vulnerable state of mind and character; the concrete moment, in both dramatic and moral-philosophical or moral-theological terms, is the above.

Incidentally, after his encounter with the Ghost on the platform, Hamlet claims that he intends to pray: "and for my owne poore part,/ I will goe pray" (1.5.131-2). The Ghost, however, crying almost immediately from the cellarage, appears to hinder the Prince from praying; there is no hint of that later in the play, and Hamlet already speaks of "cursed spight" at the end of the scene (1.5.188). This incident may gain relevance if one considers that the Lord's Prayer is introduced with the order "After this manner therefore pray ye" (Matthew 6.9). Moreover, we can also consider the Biblical warning immediately after the Lord's Prayer:

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

(Matthew 6.13-4)



The Ghost appears in Hamlet's mind only for a brief moment in Scene Two, as the Prince himself may have meant here no more than a brief metaphor to express his disappointment over his mother's marriage. If this were the only occasion that Hamlet expresses his wish to damn his enemies, this could indeed be dismissed as a mere metaphor. This statement, however, can be enough for the Ghost to arouse the interest of Hamlet, who will subsequently talk to it at any cost. This may also explain why his friends are unable to divert Hamlet from following the Ghost in Scene Four, even by force. Then, in Scene Five, the Ghost hammers into Hamlet's mind the mandate of revenge, and the Prince, though he hesitates, will not even consider any other solution for his situation. As we have seen, he never considers the possibility of the deposition of the monarch via the electorate, or perhaps his possible imprisonment, which was the fate of the murderer of King James's father. No, Hamlet wants revenge, and his thoughts tend to be black and bloody whenever he contemplates it, or when he laments his delay; and so are his consequent deeds.

Whereas in the second scene it is only an idea of Hamlet that he does not wish his enemy to go to heaven, in the central scene we can see it realised in act. The purpose of damning the enemy proves to be not only a recurring, central theme of the drama, but a turning point of the action. In the Prayer Scene, Hamlet pronounces his wish to send the King to Hell. With his drawn sword above the kneeling and praying King, Hamlet, though bloodthirsty, spares his enemy, at least for a while. He realises that the moment is not suitable for his purpose, as the praying King might go to Heaven.

*Ham.* Now might I doe it , but now a is a praying,  
And now Ile doo't, and so a goes to heauen,  
And so am I reuendge , that would be scand  
A villaine kills my father, and for that,  
I his sole sonne, doe this same villaine send  
To heauen.  
Why, this is base and silly , not reuendge,  
A tooke my father grosly full of bread,  
Withall his crimes braod blowne, as flush as May,

And how his audit stands who knowes saue heauen,  
 But in our circumstance and course of thought,  
 Tis heauy with him: and am I then reuendged  
 To take him in the purging of his soule,  
 When he is fit and seasond for his passage?  
 No.

(3.3.73-87)

“No,” answers Hamlet his own question, rather laconically, in perhaps the shortest line of the play; creating a caesura in the middle of his soliloquy, when no one hinders or interrupts him.<sup>361</sup> Hamlet does not kill the King here, but not because he rejects revenge; what he rejects is his enemy’s salvation.

Vp sword, and knowe thou a more horrid hent,  
 When he is drunke, a sleepe, or in his rage,  
 Or in th'incestious pleasure of his bed,  
 At game a swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of saluation in't,  
 Then trip him that his heels may kick at heauen,  
 And that his soule may be as damnd and black  
 As hell whereto it goes; my mother staies,  
 This phisick but prolongs thy sickly daies. *Exit.*

(3.3.73-95)

It should be noted that the dramatic climax of the scene is entirely consistent with the Ghost's tricky tactics. The Ghost claims that “he”, being the late King Hamlet, has been deprived of the Catholic last offices. Although the Prince may not believe in Purgatory, especially if he is a Protestant (though the relevance of Wittenberg has been argued in this respect),<sup>362</sup> this reference is enough for him to worry about his father’s audit. As seen above, if the Ghost were indeed the spirit of Hamlet’s departed father, released temporarily, he would not be in danger of hell, and Hamlet should not have such concerns either. A strange logic is the

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<sup>361</sup> It can be noted that Hamlet’s speech is not a proper monologue in the sense that he is not alone on the stage but behind the kneeling and praying King; nevertheless, the protagonist’s words are intended only for the audience.

<sup>362</sup> For instance, by McGee, who argues that the whole play is set in a Catholic Elsinore, and all the avengers are Catholic, much to the amusement of the Elizabethan, Protestant audience (1987), 13-137.

consequence of this evil trick: although Hamlet trusts the Ghost, which implies that his father cannot have been damned, a proper revenge for his father's alleged sufferings means the damnation of King Claudius.

Harold Jenkins points to the horrible irony, which is at the same time a theatrically spectacular one: "the revenger, with his passion at its climax following proof of his enemy's guilt, is presented with his victim defenceless and alone; and yet it is revenge itself that provides an incontestable reason why this seemingly perfect opportunity is one impossible to take"<sup>363</sup> There is yet another kind of dramatic irony involved. Hamlet does not know what we are told: the King, as he admits at the end of his prayer, is unable to repent. Thus, although Hamlet is assured of the King's guilt and is also given the perfect opportunity to execute the Ghost's mandate when the King gives up his attempt at repentance, he spares him out of the mistaken belief that his enemy is in a state of grace. This twofold irony may well reflect Shakespeare's opinion on revenge, as well as on Hamlet's mission.

Hibbard, although admitting that Hamlet's reasons for refraining may be deplorable, tries to view the scene from another perspective. He compares this scene with the murder of the late King Hamlet, who was sleeping and therefore also defenceless. Hibbard claims that "Hamlet, unlike Claudius and Pyrrhus, does not kill the man who is at his mercy, and so does not sink to their level in our eyes".<sup>364</sup> However, the situation is not so simple. Although the King's life is indeed at his mercy, Hamlet does not spare him because he has mercy on him. That can be a valid interpretation only if we merely look at the scene, without attending to Hamlet's words, realising merely what we see, the seeming level the scene. As a matter of fact, Hamlet sinks below the level of Pyrrhus in the eye of the discerning audiences and readers, for, after some delay, Hamlet not only replicates the dead, killing several people, but he also wishes his enemy's damnation. Frye correctly notices the significance of Hamlet's

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<sup>363</sup> Jenkins (1982), 515.

<sup>364</sup> Hibbard (1994), 56.

intention to damn his enemy in the play's Christian context: "His thirst for hot blood carries him far beyond any humane concern for proper justice and into the usurpation of divine prerogative so that like Lucifer he seeks the everlasting torture of Claudius in hell."<sup>365</sup> That is the point of the drama. In Christianity, man's concern for proper justice cannot take the form of seeking his enemy's damnation.

If we reconsider the above Biblical warning after the Lord's Prayer, we may better understand the ensuing scene and its consequences in the further development of the drama. Hamlet demonstrates that his actions are faithful to his words uttered at the beginning of the play, that is, the passing remark proves to be his real principle, even if the Romantic tradition denies the significance of the whole scene, or praises Hamlet for his refinement in malice. Hamlet spares his enemy lest he should go to heaven; then, in the next scene, he kills the eavesdropping Polonius, mistaking him for the King. As Frye aptly notes, "Hamlet first refuses to kill the King at prayer, and then almost immediately thereafter strikes through the arras of his mother's chamber to give him his fatal blow"<sup>366</sup> The Prince commits a serious crime by killing a man and, what is more, an innocent man, even though he does not mean to kill Polonius, but the King, and he certainly acts rather rashly; in any case, as we have seen, he could not have expected anybody else in her mother's closet late at night. When referring to providence in an attempt to justify his deed, he expresses an awareness that the fact that he killed Polonius punishes him too:

For this same Lord  
I doe repent; but heauen hath pleasd it so,  
To punish me with this and this with me,

(3.4.172-4)

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<sup>365</sup> Frye, however, claims that Hamlet's deplorable intent is not lasting, and lays the emphasis on the Prince's apparently more reserved behaviour in the final act. That, however, does not influence Hamlet's underlying motive, and the way he dispatches the King also contradicts this view (however one may believe that the King deserves his fate). Frye (1984), 198.

<sup>366</sup> Frye (1984), 199.

It should be taken into account that Hamlet has clearly been preparing for murder since his speech after the Mousetrap; or, as a matter of fact, ever since swearing revenge in the first act. His deed is therefore premeditated murder, however rash it may seem, which makes his deed more serious, even though he slays the wrong man. While the Praying Scene may be regarded as ironic, this one is perhaps too tragic for that term, particularly from the perspective of Ophelia. Instead of his promised repentance, Hamlet himself then plays hide-and-seek with the body, thus displaying his wit. However, he cannot alter the tragic turn of the action: Polonius's murder will have its consequences.

I suggest that the first consequence is the sudden apparition of the Ghost in the Closet Scene, preventing Hamlet from revealing the King's guilt to his mother, as well as preventing the Queen from taking her son seriously, trusting his mind. Thereby, any real, mutual understanding is hindered, let alone initiatives or agreement on some common action that might positively influence the outcome; the only option left is thus a series of revenge and counter-revenge. The reason for the Ghost's intervention in this scene, and the nature of this apparition, are certainly subjects of debate in criticism. Whereas most interpreters view the scene merely as it *seems*: a lamentably incomplete family reunion, where the Queen is woefully unable to see her late husband returning from the dead, what I suggest is that an evil spirit can freely enter Hamlet's world after his previous words and deeds, and so influence the events.

That is, the Ghost now not only tempts Hamlet and appears momentarily in his mind, in consequence of an evil idea of his, as in Scene Two; but, as a consequence of Hamlet's more extended evil thoughts and deeds, it also appears in the action and influences it to its own ends. The point is that this spectacularly horrible and tragic peak of the action in the Praying and Closet Scenes is related to the brief, generally unnoticed episode in 1.2, which is fully developed here. Just as the tempting, evil Ghost appears in Hamlet's mind when he

expresses his dislike of the idea that his enemy should go to Heaven, so does it appear again when Hamlet acts according to this principle; this time the Ghost too enters at the level of action, not merely in the realm of ideas.

The sad deaths of the former friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with the exclusion of shriving, is a logical development of the above; it appears that the *particular fault* of this otherwise perhaps virtuous Prince indeed becomes a *habit* with him, also in the present-day meaning of the word. Again, the significance of shriving could be dismissed here, if this were the only occasion that Hamlet spoke or acted according to the principle of effecting – or at least intending – the damnation of his enemies. In that case, “shriving time” could be regarded merely as a metaphor (5.2.47), to indicate and urge swiftness, especially if Hamlet is seen as a Protestant hero; but in that case, it would be a rather curious requirement to specify. Since Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are schoolfellows, Hamlet’s suggestion that his former friends might require shriving before their deaths makes it unlikely that they are Protestant, despite attending school in Wittenberg.

In any case, the logical explanation for Hamlet’s order must be that he is specific on purpose; he withholds shriving from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because it was also withheld from his father, as is dramatically emphasised by the Ghost – whom Hamlet believes to be his father. The Prince apparently wants his escorts to suffer no less than the Ghost. Hamlet does not explicitly state that he wants their spiritual torment after their sudden deaths; nor does he relate whether he desires to send them to Hell, like he does with the King, or perhaps now he is content with their temporary punishment in Purgatory. But it can be inferred that he would not like to see his foes in Heaven; although he sends them to their deaths, he would rather not send them to Heaven. As it is already the third occasion in the tragedy that Hamlet speaks or acts accordingly, it is a truly recurring motif, which cannot be by chance in a major literary work, particularly in a play created by Shakespeare. The

principle turns into action; Hamlet is abused by an evil, tempting spirit throughout. At the same time, this abuse is not unmotivated: evil, or the Devil himself, has a reason to enter the play and influence the protagonist's mind and hence his actions.

This parallel between Acts I and III, reinforced by Hamlet's account of his dealing with his escorts in Act V, just before the bloody finale, explains the entire dramatic structure with its causes and effects, providing a model for the plot; particularly for the discerning spectator or reader, as will be further explained in the last chapter. It also verifies the concept of the evil Ghost; the play is not inconsistent with the contemporary, Elizabethan, ghost lore or pneumatology, the prevailing religious views, or the theatrical conventions. Thus, unlike the general modern reception including most critics, Shakespeare did not ignore all these factors after all. As noted above (and will be elaborated on below), the romantic reading is undoubtedly encoded in the drama, creating a real ambiguity; but its dominance in the reception can be explained mainly by the developments after the Restoration, and particularly with the Romantic vogue. That reading alone, however, involves the neglect, or the rather casual and arbitrary considerations of many elements of the play, particularly the religious ones, amounting to some major simplifications of the characters and the events.

An examination of the symbolic use of language, drawing on the religious framework of the play, may further help us understand Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the mental processes of the protagonist, the effect of the Ghost and also the conclusion. After the two crucial lines in Scene Two, Horatio asks Hamlet where he can see his father. The Prince replies: "In my mindes eye *Horatio*" (1.2.185). The *mind's eye*, or *mentis oculus*, was a widely used metaphor, going back to Plato.<sup>367</sup> In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it was used in connection with religious concepts, as seen in the extracts on the "eye of the intellect" above. Accordingly, passion and defective knowledge result in Hamlet's fall, his abuse by an evil

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<sup>367</sup> Jenkins (1982), 191.

spirit. The eye of Hamlet's mind is apparently abused, launching him on his desperate, tragic destiny; because of the troubles in his mind's eye, Hamlet cannot properly tell the difference between good and evil. Apparent or seeming good deceives him to his ruin.

In the first scene, Horatio remarks when first encountering the Ghost: "A moth it is to trouble the mindes eye" (1.1.112). That is, the Ghost troubles the mind's eye; it may appear to cause trouble. In the final scene Horatio's last sentence hastens to tell the story:

But let this same be presently perform'd  
Euen while mens mindes are wilde, least more mischance  
On plots and errores happen.  
(5.2.393-4)

People's minds are wild: the sentence refers to the witnesses of the bloody, tragic final scene. However, like so many other things in *Hamlet*, it can have a more general meaning, which may be taken as the conclusion of the play by its main witness. Horatio's intent with his telling the story is to make people wiser, to clear the wild minds and prevent further evils due to errors.

As for Hamlet, his error or fault is his faith in the evil Ghost that calls for revenge, mistakenly believing it to be the spirit of his departed father, falling victim to it, becoming basically its tool. We have also seen, however, that the Ghost exploits only a fault already present in the Prince; therefore, Hamlet is in fact the victim of his own particular fault. Nevertheless, Hamlet is a tragic hero; even though his fall is not due solely to his circumstances, the evil court, but rather his own particular fault.

Thus, Hamlet's tragic flaw is that while applying a basically Christian world concept, he ignores some of its main principles. First of all, he ignores a foremost tenet of Christianity, the refusal of revenge. Secondly, however, this general flaw is coupled with another, more specific one: his *particular fault* is that he wishes the damnation of his enemy, pursuing him also in the afterlife. Hamlet thus attempts to play God; but, as a matter of fact, he takes on the



role of Lucifer.<sup>368</sup> In that respect, Hamlet does follow the Devil himself in the play, who also appears as a character in disguise, tempting and abusing the hero. Hamlet's universe is a religious one, where life does not cease with death, but continues in Heaven or Hell; perhaps also in Purgatory, but the revenge Ghost in *Hamlet* certainly does not qualify as a purgatorial one, even from a Catholic perspective. From a Protestant perspective, the Ghost might be interpreted as a mock-purgatorial spirit, but it perfectly conforms to both the theological accounts of the Devil as well as the convention of the Elizabethan stage devil. The world of *Hamlet* is dramatically inhabited by spirits, which may be good or evil, but Hamlet cannot properly discern the spirit he encounters, which causes his fall. In a spiritual sense, Hamlet's fall is due to his weakness in his melancholy character, to his inclination to witchcraft, and particularly to his troubled mind's eye, which is unable to tell good from evil. All this must have fascinated the contemporary audiences, particularly King James, the author of *Daemonologie*, and the patron of Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, after he eventually succeeded on the vacant throne of England, just like Fortinbras on the throne of Denmark.

#### **5.4 The conclusion: Hamlet's fall and the rise of Fortinbras**

In most of this chapter, we have discussed the events mainly from Hamlet's point, as he is the protagonist, dominating the play with his appearances and lines. However, when finally considering – or reconsidering – the conclusion, we must also take into account the other characters, particularly Fortinbras, who concludes Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the next King. We have already discussed the conclusion of several *Hamlet* productions, as well as the significance of Fortinbras in the historical context. Therefore now it is enough to cite and analyse the last passages only briefly, as they appear in Shakespeare's text.

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<sup>368</sup> I am grateful to Professor Latré for highlighting this point.

As we have seen, most productions have a partial conclusion, ending in Horatio's farewell to the dying Prince. Therefore, it may seem that Hamlet is rewarded with heavenly rest after fulfilling his duty of revenge. Moreover, some of the passages *before* this common conclusion support this notion too. The dying Laertes, though actively participating in the poisonous plot, puts all the blame on the dying King Claudius, and asks for Hamlet's forgiveness, who accepts it. It is therefore easy to forget the protagonist's earlier intent to damn his enemies. The dying Prince may indeed undergo some purification and attain a final calmness; though one of his last efforts is to kill the King, rather violently, both stabbing and poisoning him. While this may seem a just deed, especially in terms of the wicked killing each other eventually, it may still be debated, both from a political and a moral point, particularly in the Christian context. As we have seen, Hamlet's deed is still regarded as treason by the bystanders, and Hamlet refuses to forgive his archenemy even when he knows that he is already dying. Nevertheless, Hamlet prevents Horatio from committing suicide with the rest of the poison; therefore the protagonist, after having killed numerous people, finally saves one, at least his best friend, even though his motive may be somewhat selfish: to cleanse Hamlet's name and tell his story.

But what is the story Horatio is going to tell, as an appointed orator? We must consider and appreciate his conclusion – that is, the rest of what he has to say, after his farewell to Hamlet – the more so as it is usually cut in the productions and ignored in the critical interpretations too. We must also realise that Hamlet has a very high esteem for Horatio's character at a crucial moment of the play, just before the Mousetrap.

Nay, doe not thinke I flatter,  
For what aduancement may I hope from thee  
That no reuenew hast but thy good spirits  
To feede and clothe thee, why should the poore be flatterd?  
No, let the candied tongue licke absurd pompe,  
And crooke the pregnant hindges of the knee

Where thrift may follow fauning; doost thou heare,  
Since my deare soule was mistris of her choice,  
And could of men distinguish her election,  
S'hath seald thee for herselfe,

(3.2.56-65)

This long praise of Horatio is, in fact, still only an introduction, after which Hamlet explains the real reason for his admiration, which is worth considering from the point of Hamlet's character too.

for thou hast been  
As one in suffring all that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortunes buffets and rewards  
Hast tane with equall thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and iudgement are so well comedled,  
That they are not a pype for Fortunes finger  
To sound what stop she please: giue me that man  
That is not passions slaue, and I will weare him  
In my harts core, I in my hart of hart  
As I doe thee.

(3.2.65-74)

Horatio is not *passion's slave*, and he is not a *pipe for Fortune's finger*, particularly because his *blood and judgement* are impeccable. As we have seen, Hamlet's passion carries him astray after the Mousetrap, when he desires to drink hot blood and soon does kill Polonius, by which he loses control over the events. It is even more important that it is his blood and judgement that causes Hamlet's fall: the melancholy Prince fails to discern or correctly judge the evil spirit manipulating him to his destruction.

In this light, we can perhaps better appreciate Horatio's conclusion, which is prompted by the arrival of Fortinbras and the English ambassadors. In fact, it is the latter that forces Fortinbras to reconsider the situation – and apparently also Hamlet's mission. As the ambassador observes,

The sight is dismall

The eares are sencelesse that should giue vs hearing,  
To tell him his commandment is fulfilled,  
That *Rosencraus* and *Guyldensterne* are dead,  
Where should we haue our thanks?

(5.2.367-72)

After Hamlet's death, amid the dismal scene of four corpses, then, we are reminded that there are further victims of the Danish massacre. Beyond the royal heads, or "so many Princes" (5.2.366), whose bodies are scattered around at court, much to the amazement of Fortinbras, we must also remember the Danish courtiers perishing abroad. Unlike some other characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have typically Danish names, well representing the fate of their country at the arrival of the foreigners. More to the point, we are reminded of Hamlet's victims. Therefore, perhaps we should also reconsider the protagonist's character after his virtual glorification.

While the ambassador's question reminds us of Hamlet's deed, Horatio's answer clarifies how to evaluate it. With the bodies of both Hamlet and King Claudius at his feet, Horatio focuses our attention on the fact that the ambassadors expected the gratitude of the King, but it was not him who ordered the execution of the courtiers.

Not from his mouth  
Had it th'ability of life to thanke you;  
He neuer gaue commandement for their death;

(5.2.372-4)

Hamlet thus abused the name of the King, for the protagonist never actually held this title. His deed has to be regarded as forgery, which caused the deaths of two further people, who were probably ignorant of the content of both letters they carried; both that of the King, and that of the Prince. Because of the remarkably cunning Prince, the courtiers did not even notice the exchange of those letters by Hamlet while they were sleeping. Horatio then gives a strikingly impartial account of the tragedy:

But since so iump vpon this bloody question  
 You from the *Pollack* warres, and you from *England*  
 Are heere arriued, giue order that these bodies  
 High on a stage be placed to the view,  
 And let me speake, to yet vnknowing world  
 How these things came about; so shall you heare  
 Of carnall, bloody and vnnaturall acts,  
 Of accidentall iudgements, casuall slaughters,  
 Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause  
 And in this vpshot, purposes mistooke,  
 Falne on th'inuenter's heads: all this can I  
 Truly deliuer.

(5.2.375-86)

“Of deaths put on by cunning, and for no cause”: while cunning characterises the whole poisonous plot in Denmark, originally started by Claudius with the murder of King Hamlet; it is Hamlet’s cunning, the execution of two people “for no cause”, “this bloody question” by the English ambassadors that makes Horatio realise not only the actual extent of the carnal acts, but also Hamlet’s active involvement in them. Horatio does not praise Hamlet, nor does he strive to cleanse his wounded name. Horatio sets out to tell Hamlet’s story, but that story is not necessarily a favourable one about the protagonist; it is rather a story that must be told and performed, so that no “more mischance/ On plots and errores happen” (5.2.393-4). Horatio is a scholar, and his aim is to instruct, so as to prevent such disasters in the future.

If the English ambassadors remind us of the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we may also recall their first encounter with Hamlet, in particular their exchange on Fortune. Then Guildenstern claimed to be “happy, in that we are not euer happy on Fortunes lap” (2.2.229), while Hamlet concluded their witty discourse that “the secret parts of Fortune, oh most true, she is a strumpet” (2.2.235). As all these Danish characters are now dead, the Wheel of Fortune has indeed turned around. Fortinbras of Norway has the last word, who, like Hamlet and Laertes, also started as a would-be avenger, but eventually abandoned his plan of invading Denmark. As Hamlet, Prince of Denmark falls, Fortinbras, Prince of Norway rises to

embrace his “fortune” (5.2.388), the vacant Danish throne. The usually ignored or mistreated Fortinbras thus prevails, and this conclusion, the idea of a new King from the north must have been very familiar in Shakespeare’s England, particularly when King James of Scotland finally succeeded on the English throne, in less than a year after *Hamlet* was entered in the Stationers’ Register.

## Chapter 6

### ***HAMLET* IN THE LIGHT OF THEORY: TWO LEVELS OF MEANING**

Paradigms cannot be avoided; they can only be replaced.

Gary Taylor<sup>369</sup>

Fortunately, every text is always, more or less consciously, conceived for two kinds of Model Reader.

Umberto Eco<sup>370</sup>

#### **6.1 Two concepts of *Hamlet* and the notion of paradigm**

##### **6.1.1 The significance of theory in the reception of *Hamlet***

Having analysed the play in the historical context of its creation and first performances at the beginning of the seventeenth century – which marked the end of the Tudor line and the promise of a new era with King James – let us return to the present, the early twenty-first century. In recent decades, literary theory has played a major role in criticism, hence also in the study of Shakespeare. As the most discussed play of the canon, *Hamlet* has been examined from a number of modern critical approaches by a great many critics, who tend to find that the play mirrors their theoretical principles too, or even their personal situation.

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<sup>369</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Vintage, 1991), 372.

<sup>370</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1990), 136.

The aim of this last chapter is not to offer an overview of the various theories and interpretations, some of which have been discussed above in the critical review and also concerning some productions. For instance, as we have seen, the new historicist Greenblatt sees in Hamlet a Prince mourning his father, trying to come to terms not only with death but also with a religion that is largely alien to him; a situation that is similar to that of the critic.<sup>371</sup> Many have seen in Hamlet an enlightened, modern man, struggling with his past and present, but somehow being above their limitations, rather than a Renaissance revenge hero on an ultimately bloody mission. My goal here is to suggest a theoretical framework that can be related to Shakespeare's age and work, and so to enhance the understanding of the play. First of all, we need to realise certain problems of the reception; then we may also be able to solve them. Such theoretical considerations are usually provided at the beginning of a study; I referred to two theories, Kuhn's notion of paradigm and Eco's semiotics, at the outset. Having discussed some issues of criticism, the text, some productions and history, let us therefore return to our starting point.

As we have seen, *Hamlet* is not only Shakespeare's most popular play; it is also regarded as the most problematic one. As I have tried to demonstrate, the problems are not necessarily, or not only, due to Shakespeare, but also to various factors in the reception: partly to the modernised textual editions, partly to the usually partial productions or adaptations of Shakespeare's longest play; these can also be related to the changing attitudes in the new historical contexts. Accordingly, the problems of criticism in the various periods have been mostly the problems of the reception, rather than those of the work itself. In the examination of the original texts in their historical context, I argued that the play must have been

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<sup>371</sup> As we have seen in chapter two, Greenblatt interprets Hamlet as a Protestant – but not particularly religious – Prince mourning his Catholic father, apparently returning from Purgatory and requesting pious deeds, rather than revenge (in particular through his farewell to Hamlet, “Remember me”). As the new historicist critic explains, his starting point for the analysis of *Hamlet* was his mourning of his own recently deceased father, who had arranged that kaddish would be said for him after his death. “This practice, then, which with a lightly ironic piety I, who scarcely know how to pray, undertook for my own father, is the personal starting point for what follows”. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 9.



interpreted very differently by the first readers and audiences than in the later reception. Although the play has almost always been highly esteemed, in Shakespeare's time the protagonist was probably seen as a much more controversial character than in later periods, and the Ghost was probably also interpreted differently in its religious context: not simply as Hamlet's father, but rather as an evil, demonic spirit, particularly according to King James's *Daemonologie* and also according to the stage conventions. However, the play does seem to imply two radically different sets of meanings, even in its own context, the Globe theatre. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a complex and ambiguous work, and if we attempt to reconcile the various, often contradictory, suggestions of the play, we may easily find it a very inconsistent work indeed.

So how can theory help in overcoming the major difficulties of interpretation? And how can modern theories be relevant to a work created several centuries before? Terry Eagleton's semi-jocular statement is often cited, though not always with approval.

Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida.<sup>372</sup>

Gary Taylor remarks on Eagleton that "'conclusive' evidence for an impossible proposition is indeed 'hard to come by'."<sup>373</sup> Therefore, I do not mean to suggest that Shakespeare was aware of the ideas of the later theorists I draw on, but I do believe that they can be useful in understanding his work. Moreover, as we shall see, Kuhn's theory is largely based on a discovery that was already known in Shakespeare's time, and is actually alluded to by him; while Eco himself has applied his theory to texts considerably older than Shakespeare's.

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<sup>372</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), ix-x. Gary Taylor offers a harsh critique of Eagleton. Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Vintage, 1991), 318-20.

<sup>373</sup> Taylor (1991), 319.

The main point of this chapter and the choice of theories is that Shakespeare's work has given rise to such major difficulties of interpretation that they involve the very nature of thinking and the interpretation of signs in general. Therefore, these theories of cognition and semiotics may enhance the understanding of *Hamlet* too.

### **6.1.2 Two opposing readings and the notion of paradigm**

Throughout this study, while arguing for a new reading that is very different from most earlier interpretations, I have also argued that the play itself implies two main levels of meaning, which are contradictory in nature and can be related to the dichotomy of *seeming* and *being*: a key theme that is fully explored in *Hamlet*. In brief, Hamlet *seems* to be a moral hero who seeks and does justice; a seemingly pious man obeying his father's command, which may seem not only a moral duty, but even a sacred one – even though this already involves a major problem or paradox: that of revenge in the Christian context of the play. Nevertheless, the Ghost does *seem* to be Hamlet's father, and may even seem a purgatorial spirit; while Hamlet does seem to be a sacrificial hero who is rewarded with heavenly rest at the end, when he finally "sets it right". Such a reading is indeed suggested by some parts of the play.

In another – somewhat more complete and perhaps also more realistic – reading, however, we can find that both these characters can be interpreted differently, as well as their mission. Hamlet, while killing several people, seeks the damnation of his enemies, which is an extremely immoral or evil conduct in the Christian context. In that framework, the Ghost, demanding vengeance, is actually a disguised devil or demon, tempting and abusing the hero, rather than a purgatorial spirit. Hamlet's mission brings destruction, rather than a restoration of order to Denmark; order is represented by Fortinbras, the next King. In addition to these key issues, we can find such ambiguities concerning virtually every element of the play; for instance, also in the central play within the play and its aftermath.

In the first chapter, we have already seen that Hamlet himself highlights the contrast of seeming and being, already at his first appearance. Then, in his letter to Ophelia, repeatedly highlighting doubt, he apparently alludes to the Copernican revolution, when he writes, “*Doubt thou the starres are fire,/ Doubt that the Sunne doth moue*” (2.2.116-7). As we have seen, Hamlet does not necessarily deny that the Sun moves; his point is that even if Ophelia doubts that, she should not doubt his love – a point that again proves to be quite controversial in the play. In any case, in his love poem, even if briefly, Hamlet refers to some issues of astronomy, which were a hot topic at the time. Kuhn’s notion of paradigm also draws on Copernicus, highlighting the impact of his discovery, which dramatically upset our earlier notions of the universe.

The history of astronomy provides many other examples of paradigm-induced changes in scientific perception, some of them even less equivocal. Can it conceivably be an accident, for example, that Western astronomers first saw change in the previously immutable heavens during the half-century after Copernicus’s new paradigm was proposed?<sup>374</sup>

Copernicus published his discovery about half a century before Shakespeare’s dramatic career set into orbit.<sup>375</sup> The Copernican revolution contributed significantly to the rise of the scientific revolution; but it has a general relevance on perception and interpretation, and this is largely related to the dichotomy of seeming and being.

As is well known, from a geocentric, Ptolemaic perspective, it is the Sun that revolves around the Earth; from the heliocentric, Copernican perspective, however, the opposite is the case. These two claims or models cannot be reconciled, and as we all know now, Copernicus is right, even though his model or paradigm was not accepted immediately, and Ptolemy is wrong. At the same time, from a certain – limited – perspective, the former, Ptolemaic,

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<sup>374</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edn., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 116.

<sup>375</sup> Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, Nuremberg, 1543).

paradigm *seems* to be true too; if we look at the sky, it does *seem* that it is the Sun the moves around us. This concept of the universe had been universally accepted until Copernicus; it was adequate for many thousands of years and sufficiently served the limited concerns of mankind. Eventually, the Copernican paradigm triumphed and replaced the Ptolemaic, rendering it outdated. The old paradigm could not incorporate the new. However, the Copernican paradigm can contain and explain the old one; not as a valid model, but as a former, partial one that still has some, even if limited, relevance. Without delving too much into physics, it can be noted that Copernicus's model has also been refined since the sixteenth century; it was completed by Newton, whose paradigm has been superseded by Einstein.<sup>376</sup>

What I would like to show is that Copernicus's theory, which was relatively new and indeed revolutionary at Shakespeare's time, has a major bearing on *Hamlet* too, and Kuhn's related theory on cognition and the development of sciences can explain the reception of Shakespeare's work too. From a certain – limited – perspective, the traditional concept of *Hamlet* is valid and sufficient, even if it is a very partial and ultimately mistaken one. As I have argued, Hamlet does *seem* to be a highly moral hero who is bent on doing the right thing; moreover, it does seem that he does so when he kills the King. As for the Ghost, not only does it seem to be Hamlet's father, but, as we have seen, it may also *seem* that the Mousetrap confirms the character's questionable identity; that is how it is usually interpreted and presented in most productions. But this view or paradigm is very partial as well as very problematic in light of the whole play and its issues.

Nevertheless, to a certain extent, all of Hamlet's actions, or almost all events, can be explained or justified within this concept or paradigm; most of the reception, ever since the

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<sup>376</sup> In fact, Copernicus proposed only a mathematical theory, but he did not make the claim that the Sun is really in the centre of the universe; it was only a model involving a possibility. It was Galilei who drew this more radical conclusion from the calculations. Galileo was Shakespeare's contemporary, they were born in the same year, 1564, but most of Galileo's works were published after *Hamlet* was written. At the same time, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), who proposed that the Sun was a star, was burnt as a heretic shortly before *Hamlet* was written. I am grateful to Professor Latré for his observations on these points.

Restoration and particularly since Romanticism, falls within this paradigm. Since Shakespeare criticism proper began only after the Restoration, virtually all critics have approached the play from this paradigm; and their efforts have been either to refine or to defend it, when some dissident voices regarded it as untenable. As we have seen, even Hamlet's desire to damn the King has been praised and explained as a "refinement in malice" by the Romantics, and merely as a "pretext" by the psychological as well as the psychoanalytical critics. Even Hamlet's dealing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has been justified, not only by the Romantics, but also by more recent historical critics, working with a vast apparatus; for instance, by R. M. Frey, who claims that the Prince can be regarded as the rightful monarch who can thus get rid of two potential assassins. Most critics have always viewed the Ghost as a purgatorial spirit, and so has Stephen Greenblatt, applying all the resources of new historicism, even if noting some problems of this view – and even after several critics had argued for a demonic Ghost.

Drawing on Kuhn's notion of paradigm, I would call this common concept of Shakespeare's work as the romantic paradigm of the play, which is not exactly the same as the Romantic *Hamlet* – that is, the influential concept of *Hamlet* that was shared by the producers and critics in the age of Romanticism – but is still largely based on that.<sup>377</sup> Greenblatt, as we have seen, cites Goethe as a starting point for his interpretation of the Ghost; the London National Theatre's *Hamlet* 2000 production was also appreciated primarily as a romantic *Hamlet*, notwithstanding its focus on religion and ritual. But, again, this paradigm is not only partial; it is also very problematic, if we consider the play and its original context in more detail. In particular, revenge, or murder in general, goes against a fundamental principle of Christianity; and so does it to the very idea of purgation concerning the Ghost. Critics who observe this are inclined to believe and argue that Shakespeare's play is problematic or

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<sup>377</sup> I will elaborate on the romantic reading or paradigm below, also as related to the notion of the model reader.

inconsistent; however, again, it not necessarily the work itself that is problematic, but, rather, only a certain concept or paradigm of it.

As a matter of fact, Kuhn's theory involves that we tend to think in concepts or models; we create certain models to describe the world or the universe, as well as the object of our study within that universe, and if these models prove satisfactory in a given context – if they are accepted by the majority of people, or by the scientific community in case of sciences – they can be regarded as paradigms. In literature or literary criticism we cannot really speak about a paradigm proper, not at least as in sciences, for there is no single critical theory, approach or interpretation that is accepted by everyone, or perhaps even by the vast majority of the community of scholars or critics. In this sense, literature or literary criticism can be regarded as still being in a pre-paradigmatic phase.<sup>378</sup> Nevertheless, the notion of paradigm is commonly used in criticism to describe various concepts or schools, usually in the general sense of various models or views. Although the romantic concept of *Hamlet* that I outlined has never been accepted by everyone, and it has been increasingly challenged, in its key points or assumptions it is shared by the majority of people, be they critics, producers or general readers and audiences, and can therefore be regarded as a paradigm, even if in a general sense or the weaker form of the term.<sup>379</sup> Even if offering somewhat more complex interpretations, most seem to agree in some fundamentals: that Hamlet is a moral hero, rather than a villain, the Ghost is his father, rather than a disguised demon, and the hero, however tragically, does justice and thus “sets it right” in the end, rather than causing destruction.

In *Hamlet* these two concepts or paradigms are mutually exclusive. Hamlet cannot be a moral hero and a bloodthirsty avenger at the same time; a murderer who turns out to be a serial killer cannot be a virtuous man, however hard he or we may wish to believe that. In the Christian context, one cannot be a pious man and wish for one's enemy's damnation at the

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<sup>378</sup> I am indebted to Attila Kiss for his expert ideas on this issue.

<sup>379</sup> Kuhn himself uses the word in different senses, but here I would not go into a more detailed discussion of Kuhn and the terminology.

same time. A spirit cannot purge in Purgatory and ask for revenge at the same time either. One of these claims, concepts or paradigms is correct and true and the other is very problematic indeed, or actually false. As with the motion or revolution of the Sun and the Earth, we can accept only one of these accounts, and it is perhaps time to replace the romantic paradigm of *Hamlet*, even if it can still serve as an interesting, though limited, view, demonstrating the usual subjectivity and limitations of human perception and interpretation. The more complete – and I think more realistic – paradigm can contain the usual, romantic one as a partial interpretation, and explain its problems accordingly. However, the romantic paradigm cannot really cope with the other one, and sooner or later it is bound to be overcome by the increasing pressures that demand a more sufficient and accurate interpretation.

Paradigm, as a term, has been applied to the study of Shakespeare too. According to Gary Taylor,

But if I could rise above our paradigm, I would no longer be in it. If I could show you all that was wrong with our paradigm, I would have destroyed that paradigm and constructed another one. Paradigms cannot be avoided; they can only be replaced.

(Taylor, 1991, 372)

That is how Taylor concludes the chapter on the recent reception of Shakespeare in his comprehensive study of the history Shakespeare's reception.<sup>380</sup> Throughout my study, I have tried to show all that was wrong with our current paradigm of *Hamlet*, from the modern textual editions and the criticism to some major productions. At the same time, I have also offered an interpretation that involves a concept of the play; this concept or model is intended as an alternative paradigm.

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<sup>380</sup> That is, then recent, focusing on the critical output of a single year, 1986. Nevertheless, Taylor's review can still be regarded as valid and relatively recent. Among the many schools and critics, Taylor also discusses Greenblatt and his new historicism (which was indeed quite new in the 1980s); as we have seen, Greenblatt turned to *Hamlet* somewhat later (1997; 2001 and 2004), but he applied the same principles as to *The Tempest*, the interpretation of which is reviewed by Taylor.

Taylor's warning that paradigms cannot be avoided should be considered in some more detail. As I have argued, the modern reception is based on such assumptions that Hamlet is an ultimately moral hero and the Ghost is his father; therefore it is also usually assumed that Hamlet's duty is to obey his father and so restore order, even if his success, the outcome of his attempt, is arguable. Over the twentieth century, all these assumptions, which are typical of the nineteenth-century, Romantic and Victorian concept of *Hamlet*, were challenged, most notably perhaps by Eleanor Prosser, but they were not completely dispelled or even properly refuted, in my opinion for two main reasons. On the one hand, Prosser and others failed to establish the necessary link between the evil Ghost and Hamlet's character; that is, the protagonist's wish to damn his enemy or, indeed, enemies. Because of Hamlet's truly difficult situation, Prosser too tends to sympathise with the hero, despite his cruel motive and deeds. On the other hand, perhaps more importantly, at a certain level, the play, again, itself suggests a *seemingly* moral hero and a *seemingly* good, purgatorial Ghost; these elements are also in Shakespeare's work, and they are undoubtedly much more appealing than those that contradict and actually refute them. Therefore, the concept of the good Hamlet and the good Ghost, even if unrealistic, is much more pleasing than its opposite, the harsh reality of evil; even though evil, or the Devil himself, has also proved fascinating for many in art as well as in philosophy and theology. For one, we can mention King James again.

In the study of paradigms, or in any scientific study, the definition of the subject matter is also very important, and this can be noted about scholarship too. As we have seen in chapter three, if we study the modern editions of the text and take them as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is perhaps inevitable that such interpretations follow as those of Greenblatt or Belsey. If it is taken for granted at the outset that the Ghost is that of King Hamlet, it can only be interpreted as an exceedingly problematic purgatorial Ghost, or as Old Hamlet himself returning from the dead, a character developed from folk tales or superstitions. In that case,



the possibility of a demon or devil abusing Hamlet to his destruction is precluded, and so is the possibility of a more comprehensive – and perhaps more realistic – consideration of the religious issues that were so important to Shakespeare's contemporaries, particularly to King James. In such a paradigm, James's work can be accommodated only in a footnote or endnote, if at all; more importantly, however, that is what tends to happen to the idea of a disguised devil tempting and abusing the hero. Hamlet's concerns, if cited at all, tend to be sidestepped as perhaps interesting but insignificant. In view of Kuhn's notion, it takes a paradigm change to incorporate these elements properly, and to replace the romantic notions, from the textual editions to the critical interpretations and the productions alike.

But the problems perceived by Prosser and others (partly also by Greenblatt, Belsey or Mallin, for instance) can also be taken as the symptoms of a problematic paradigm of *Hamlet*, indicating that the concept that could satisfy the concerns of a certain period – the community of scholars, readers and audiences for quite a long time – can no longer adequately answer the challenges. The twentieth-century reception can testify that we have long been witnessing an inter-paradigmatic phase, when interpretations suggesting a new, more realistic paradigm have been co-existing and competing with the romantic one; again in a general sense, as the romantic paradigm of *Hamlet* was not accepted by everyone even in the age of Romanticism. In scientific study and experiments, the discoveries and the new paradigms are often related to new scientific methods and instruments. In our age, the internet has dramatically enhanced the study of Shakespeare too; now we have easier access to texts than ever before, and this includes texts not only in the usual meaning, but also images and sounds: all kinds of information, as we have seen in chapter four. We can therefore examine the original texts of *Hamlet*, and many other contemporary documents, as well as their later renderings, editions and interpretations, including many productions, with relative ease.

Taylor apparently uses the term paradigm in a general sense, to describe our modern (or postmodern) world concept or paradigm, as well as Shakespeare's prominence in it. As Taylor argues, in the modern critical arena, Shakespeare serves for many as a tool through which they can approach and explain the world, somehow replacing or at least substituting the role of religion in a secular society. Indeed, it seems that for some, religion, Christianity, or some of its concepts are approached via Shakespeare. As we have seen, for Greenblatt, *Hamlet* serves as means to undertake and offer a new historicist study of Purgatory; consequently some students of Shakespeare may have an insight not only into Elizabethan religion but also into Christianity itself mainly through Greenblatt.

But Taylor raises some important questions when he challenges Shakespeare's singularity.

Do we worry ourselves about the divine rights of kings? Do we believe in Hamlet's ghost? Do we actively believe, all of us, in the fundamental premises of Christianity?

And these are all fairly straightforward questions, where Shakespeare's own beliefs can hardly be doubted. I could give many more, were it not for the modern critical tendency to reconcile our morality with Shakespeare's by presuming that Shakespeare almost always wrote with his tongue in his cheek. In this way you can turn any moral statement inside out, thereby proving that Shakespeare endorses all your ethical prejudices – which of course only goes on to show how very wholesome he is.

(Taylor, 1991, 404)

All these questions pertain to *Hamlet* and to this study too. Whereas I agree with Taylor in his main point, that Shakespeare's world and views – or his paradigm – were probably very different from those of his modern critics, and this should be taken into account in criticism, these points merit further scrutiny. As for the first question, unlike Shakespeare and particularly King James, the modern reception indeed does not worry about the divine rights of kings, and this can partly explain the modern or the romantic tendency to accept Hamlet's

revenge and regicide as his moral duty; as I have argued, this common view is not supported by the whole play or its conclusion, if we read Shakespeare's work till the end.

Even more important, however, is the second question, particularly from the point of this study. Taylor suggests that Shakespeare's own belief in "Hamlet's ghost" can hardly be doubted; the critic presumably means the "Ghost of Hamlet, the late King of Denmark", as he designates the character as the editor of the Oxford Shakespeare, as we have seen above.<sup>381</sup> Taylor's suggestion is that because Shakespeare and his world concept or paradigm believed in the existence of ghosts, we also tend to accept the ghost in *Hamlet*; we do not question it as the late King Hamlet's ghost, even if we have a different world concept or paradigm.

However, as I have argued, Shakespeare's paradigm, the notions and beliefs of his age, were much more complex than usually realised and described by modern critics, and so are his works. This applies to ghosts too. As we have seen in chapter three, the word "ghost" has several meanings, of which the usual modern one: the soul of a dead man, is only one. "Ghost" can also mean spirit; moreover, it can mean different kinds of spirits, both good and evil: in earlier uses, the word could refer to the Devil too. Somewhat paradoxically, it is the modern – mostly secular and sometimes firmly atheist – reception that tends to believe in "Hamlet's ghost", usually quite unconditionally, whereas the original – religious – audiences must have entertained major doubts about the character, as does Hamlet himself.

Thus, unlike modern readers and audiences, Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences could interpret the Ghost in *Hamlet* as a disguised devil; a possibly evil ghost or spirit, rather than simply "Hamlet's ghost". This is also related to Taylor's question on the modern critical attitudes to Christianity. It is evident that modern secular critics tend to have major difficulties in perceiving and interpreting the Christian references in Shakespeare's work; in particular, they tend to miss the play's ironies concerning a seemingly pious avenger or an allegedly

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<sup>381</sup> Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, gen. eds., William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 654.

purgatorial revenge ghost. Shakespeare did not always write with his tongue in his cheek, but he fairly often employed the tool of irony in his work.

This, however, does not mean that Shakespeare would have dismissed Christianity, or even that he was ironic about Christianity per se; the irony involves merely certain dramatic characters and their attitudes to Christianity. As I have argued, the original audiences must have been highly amused by Hamlet's prolonged preaching to the Queen, right after killing Polonius, and soon after expressing his intent to damn the King; all this not long after wishing to drink hot blood and evoking the powers of Hell. A critical and ironic attitude toward the protagonist or the Ghost certainly does not involve the rejection of religion or Christianity. In fact, the opposite is the case. Since the play is packed with Christian references, a certain familiarity with these concepts is necessary to understand and properly evaluate the hero and his motives. As we have seen, a detailed consideration of the play and these issues finds that Shakespeare's work reinforces, rather than subverts, Christianity. It is only the protagonist who subverts or ignores some of the basic Christian principles, and he has to fall accordingly.

The question remains how we use the term paradigm, and what we mean by a paradigm of *Hamlet*; whether we can use the term similarly to the sciences, knowing that such a consensus can never be reached in the study of literature, the theatre or the arts in general as in physics, for instance; that is not my ambition either. Considering the sea of criticism on the play, usually claiming to offer novel ideas and aiming at some differences from earlier interpretations, as well as the diverse critical approaches, which have existed not only consecutively but also alongside each other, how should we use this term, if at all? What I have tried to show is that although the Romantic period and its *Hamlet* may be over, many, if not most, still heavily draw on that; the more recent or modern approaches and readings – even if involving new critical paradigms, at least, in the general sense of the word – have usually been based on the Romantic *Hamlet* and can also be regarded as quite romantic.

Another example is Freudian psychoanalytic criticism, which we have also considered concerning Olivier's film adaptation. As we have seen, Freud and his followers maintain that the play offers no real reason for Hamlet's delay, and they also view the Ghost simply as Hamlet's father, and revenge as a moral duty; in these respects, the Freudian concept falls within the romantic paradigm too. But the play, in part, implies this concept or paradigm too, and these points will become clearer if we apply semiotics to *Hamlet*.

## 6.2 The limits of interpretation and the Model Reader

With a play that has given rise to major critical problems and radically different interpretations, it may be useful to examine the limits of interpretation. As has been noted, this issue belongs to the field of semiotics: how do we interpret the various signs of the text of *Hamlet*, and those of the theatre? According to Umberto Eco,

the interpreted text imposes some constraints upon its interpreters. The limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which does not mean with the rights of the author).<sup>382</sup>

What are the rights of the text, and what kind of constraints does Shakespeare's text impose on the interpreters of *Hamlet*? As we have seen in chapter three, the first question is which text we read and interpret; whether one of the original texts of the three major early editions (that is, the First or the Second Quarto or the First Folio), or a later, modernised edition. This is particularly relevant concerning the interpretation of the Ghost, as the modern editions impose specific constraints upon the interpreters by the added list of roles and the usual modern designations of the character like the "Ghost of Hamlet's father", constituting a decisive limit of interpretation at the very beginning of the reading process. Accordingly, the

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<sup>382</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1990), 7. Eco also explains, "I was studying the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters. I have the impression that in the course of the last few decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed. In the present essays I stress the limits of the act of interpretation". Eco (1990), 6.

rights of Shakespeare's text are not sufficiently respected by most modern editors, who have a major influence on the modern reception in general.<sup>383</sup>

With the original texts, there are other constraints, particularly those of their context. As Eco argues, when he describes two models of interpretation,

A text is a place where the irreducible polysemy of symbols is in fact reduced because in a text symbols are anchored to their context. The medieval interpreters were right: one should look for the rules which allow a contextual disambiguation of the exaggerated fecundity of symbols.

(Eco, 1990, 21)

Eco goes on to explain,

Many modern theories are unable to recognize that symbols are paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but syntagmatically, that is, textually, open only to the indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context.

(Eco, *ibid*)

We may recall that the changing contexts allowed, or at least promoted, remarkably different interpretations of *Hamlet*: the original context, at the end of the Tudor dynasty and the advent of the Stuart rule, was very different from that of the Restoration, when Charles II was mourning his father, the executed Charles I; the ensuing contexts were even more different and detached from the original.

The text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is truly ambiguous, and the contextual disambiguation follows different rules in the different contexts; the rules and views of King James, for instance, are very different from those of the Romantic or the psychoanalytic interpreters; they are also different from those of the new historicist or the cultural materialist critics. As we have seen, the contextual disambiguation, in Shakespeare's time and religious

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<sup>383</sup> As I have argued, the significance of the designations pertains not only to the Ghost. For instance, if the King is designated as "Claudius" in the speech prefixes, as it is throughout Hibbard's *Hamlet* edition (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1987 and 1994), instead of the original "King" (in Q1, Q2 and F1), the theme of regicide on Hamlet's part is easily missed. As we have seen, this is a major theme of the play, which was particularly relevant in the original context: the Essex rebellion and the accession of King James, who explicitly abhorred regicide.

context, suggests an evil Ghost and a no less evil or immoral hero; a disguised devil abusing Hamlet, who is bent on the damnation of his enemy, beyond committing revenge and regicide. This interpretation, however, is actually precluded by most modernised editions, which tend to disambiguate the Ghost differently, already in the added list of characters.

Eco himself quotes *Hamlet*, when he considers “Unlimited Semiosis and Drift” and the relationship of “Worlds and texts”.<sup>384</sup>

*Ham.* Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a Camel?

*Pol.* By'th masse and tis, like a Camell indeed.

*Ham.* Mee thinks it is like a Wezell.

*Pol.* It is backt like a Wezell.

*Ham.* Or like a Whale.

*Pol.* Very like a Whale.

(3.2.377-82)<sup>385</sup>

In this part of his work, Eco discusses

the double metaphor of the world as a text and the text as a world. To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts.

(Eco, 1990, 23)

The interpreters of *Hamlet* have produced a great many other texts indeed. Hamlet here in point of fact refers to the world by looking up the sky and offering different interpretations of what he can see; in the open Globe theatre, this can actually be performed at daylight. Although his main goal is to tease Polonius, and so to indulge in his antic disposition, Hamlet is at the same time also referring to the difficulties of interpretation.

These lines are quoted by Eco merely as an example of semiotic drift; he does not analyse the context of this passage. At the end of the Play or Mousetrap or Scene, Hamlet is highly agitated, as he finally has his proof of the King's guilt; but he does not actually reveal it to the court by explicitly charging King Claudius; instead, he continues to play the fool by

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<sup>384</sup> Eco (1990), 22-23.

<sup>385</sup> This quotation is from the Second Quarto text; Eco quotes the same passage in modern spelling from an unspecified edition.

fooling old Polonius. After the interrupted show of regicide, put on by *Hamlet*, the terrified councillor agrees – or pretends to agree – with everything the frenzied and apparently mad Prince tells him, unsuspecting that his comic acquiescence will soon cost his life, at the tragic turn of the plot. At the beginning of the Closet Scene (3.4), as we have seen, the Prince slays the hiding Polonius, mistaking or misinterpreting him for the King.

In between these two scenes, in the Prayer Scene, Hamlet decisively misinterprets another crucial situation: he delays killing the praying King, because he fears he would then send him to Heaven; the King, however, admits to himself and the audience that he is unable to repent and attain a state of grace. Ironically, the avenger misses a perfect opportunity to kill *and* damn his adversary,<sup>386</sup> because he misinterprets what he can see: a kneeling and seemingly repentant person. It must be noted, though, that the King at least has some remorse and makes an actual attempt at repentance, in a remarkable contrast to Hamlet, who is not particularly concerned either about the death of Polonius, or dispatching Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; as Hamlet comments on the deaths of his schoolfellows, “They are not neere my conscience” (5.2.58).

These two misinterpretations in the Prayer and Closet Scenes will ultimately cost Hamlet’s life too, by producing another avenger, the son of Polonius, even if the quoted exchange between Hamlet and Polonius is still a fairly innocent and even amusing one. Of course, all this boils down to the interpretation of the questionable Ghost: as I have argued, Hamlet, similarly to most critics, misinterprets the evil, disguised spirit as that of the late King, mainly because of trusting the appearances. Hamlet and most interpreters think that they see – or read and write about – his father. Like the cloud and the camel, the Ghost is in shape of the late King; it is very like him indeed, but not necessarily identical to him.

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<sup>386</sup> Perfect, that is, for his purpose of total revenge, pursuing both body and soul; as has been discussed, Hamlet’s character, particularly this desire, is hardly perfect from a moral point of view.



As I have said, Eco does not consider the context of the above quotation from *Hamlet*, he cites the passage, along with another one from a piece of modern fiction, to remind us of two poles of interpretation.

On the one side it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or – in any case – its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other side it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways.

(Eco, 1990, 24)

Although Eco cites *Hamlet* as an example for the latter assumption, in my view, Hamlet's efforts can be considered as somehow implying both, at least to a certain extent. On the one hand, Hamlet strives to find the correct and possibly perfect interpretation of his situation, when he examines the King, the Ghost, the universe, even a cloud; all of which can be interpreted and described in various ways, but perhaps some interpretations are better than the others. As we have seen, on some questions, much depends on Hamlet's choice: his life, even his afterlife, along with the lives of many others. On the other hand, through his successive similes, the Prince truly exemplifies unlimited semiosis and drift. Hamlet's playful drift of the cloud is quoted by Eco at the beginning of his chapter on unlimited semiosis; let us now turn to his conclusion.

If it is very difficult to decide whether a given interpretation is a good one, it is, however, always possible to decide whether it is a bad one, my purpose was to say, not so much what unlimited semiosis is, but at least what it *is not* and *cannot be*.

(Eco, 1990, 42)

Throughout this study, and particularly in the critical review, I have also tried to show the shortcomings of some famous interpretations of *Hamlet*, from Goethe to Greenblatt, and many others; explaining what the play – Hamlet or the Ghost – *is not* and *cannot be*. But

perhaps we can better understand the nature of the above problems of the reception if we consider and apply some further points of Eco's semiotics.

### 6.2.1 The Model Reader

Examining the role of the reader, or the *Intentio Lectoris*, Eco considers the notions of the "implied reader" and the "ideal reader"; applying, incidentally, the metaphor of the ghost.

Undoubtedly the universe of literary studies has been haunted during the last years by the ghost of the reader. To prove this assumption it will be interesting to ascertain how and to what extent such a ghost has been conjured up by different theorists, coming from different theoretical traditions.

(Eco, 1990, 46)

Referring to his earlier work, the *The Role of the Reader*,<sup>387</sup> Eco reminds us that an artistic text contains, "among its major analysable properties, certain structural devices that encourage and elicit interpretive choices" (p. 50). Eco also points out that

The symbolists of the Renaissance, following the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum*, defined the ideal text as that which allows the most contradictory readings.

(Eco, 1990, 51)

In this respect, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is certainly an ideal text, particularly in its two longer and more reliable versions of the Second Quarto and the First Folio; as we have seen, the play allows and has in fact inspired the most contradictory readings. But are all these readings equally appropriate?

Eco's notion of the Model Reader looks at

the textual strategy as a system of instructions aiming at producing a possible reader whose profile is designed by and within the text, can

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<sup>387</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979).

be extrapolated from it and described independently of and even before any empirical reading.

(Eco, 1990, 52)

Thus, as Eco argues, the text itself produces a possible reader or a Model Reader. The question is how we can describe that reader, and whether the Model Reader and his or her reading can also be regarded as ideal. The real question, of course, is how this theory or strategy works with actual texts, in particular with that of *Hamlet*.

### 6.2.2 Two levels of interpretation

As to the interpretation of *Hamlet*, the most relevant part of Eco's theory, in my view, is that there are, in fact, two kinds of Model Reader. According to Eco, "we must distinguish between *semantic* and *critical* interpretation" (p. 54). Semantic interpretation fills the text up with a given meaning, while critical interpretation is

a metalinguistic activity – a semiotic approach – which aims at describing and explaining for which formal reasons a given text produces a given response (and in this sense it can also assume the form of an aesthetic analysis.)

(Eco, 1990, 54)

Every text can be interpreted both semantically and critically, "but only a few texts consciously foresee both kinds of response" (p. 55). Nevertheless,

many texts aim at producing *two* Model Readers, a first level, or a naïve one, supposed to understand semantically what the text says, and a second level, or critical one, able to appreciate the way in which the text says so.

(Eco, 1990, 55)

Up to this point, this may be a familiar definition of the role of the critic. Whereas the purely semantic interpretation can be regarded as a naïve one, the critical interpretation is a more conscious and complex or sophisticated process; so far it may seem that the difference

between the two readings or readers lies merely in the ability to describe and explain *how* the text implies its meaning, or a given meaning.

However, occasionally, there can be remarkable differences between these two levels of interpretation, ultimately involving different meanings too. This tends to happen in case of more complicated texts, especially when the text is *ambiguous*; according to Eco, a semantic ambiguity also foresees a critical interpreter. As Eco reminds us,

it must be noted that many artistic devices, for instance, stylistic violation of the norm, or defamiliarization, seem to work exactly as self-focusing appeals: the text is made in such a way as to attract the attention of the critical reader.

(Eco, *ibid.*)

It is obvious that *Hamlet* has a very complex text that abounds with artistic devices; as we have seen, many critics have noted the extraordinary ambiguity of the play. When describing the two kinds of Model Reader, Eco focuses on narrative texts, noting that some genres are based on the difference between these two kinds of reader. For instance,

a mystery tale displays an astute narrative strategy in order to produce a naïve Model Reader eager to fall into the traps of the narrator (to feel fear or to suspect the innocent one) but usually wants to produce also a critical Model Reader able to enjoy, at a second reading, the brilliant narrative strategy by which the first-level, naïve reader was designed.

(Eco, *ibid.*)

Accordingly, the critical Model Reader does not fall so easily into the traps of the narrator, and is able to discern a different level of meaning, at least at a second reading. *Hamlet* is a drama, rather than a narrative story, therefore the generic characteristics also need to be taken into account; the semiotics of drama will be discussed below. Nevertheless, there are many narrative elements in *Hamlet* too, and, as I will argue, they tend to produce or foresee the two kinds of Model Reader described by Eco.

Most characters comment on the events; we are provided with a lot of important information from the accounts of the characters. This can be noted throughout, from Horatio, or even from the guards' first report on the Ghost, to the conclusion, again by Horatio and finally Fortinbras. The key narrator, however, is certainly Hamlet himself, who has several long soliloquies, informing, but at times also manipulating, the reader or the audience. Even though there is no appointed narrator in the same way as in narrative fiction, many events take place off the stage – from the murder of the late King Hamlet to the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – and they are related and commented on by the characters, who often function as narrators. Accordingly, the Ghost acts as a narrator of the events taking place before the beginning of the plot, but he may also be manipulating with his story; more to the point, the Ghost may manipulate or deceive not only Hamlet, but also the naïve reader.

One difficulty of interpretation lies in the fact that there are practically as many perspectives as characters; and as the drama progresses, even the same character can have very different views and comments on the events, issues or the other characters. For instance, Hamlet himself entertains different views on the Ghost; Horatio apparently reconsiders his conclusion at the very end of the play. Nevertheless, in modern narrative fiction it is also fairly common to have multiple narration, and the narrators are often the characters participating in the story. *Hamlet* is not a mystery tale, but, as we have seen, critics have referred to it as a mystery, and the play is indeed full of secret plots and mysterious elements from the very beginning, from the appearance of the Ghost.

Eco refers to some detective stories as examples when the texts “explicitly require a second-level reading”. As he explains, in some cases,

the text, while step by step deceiving naïve readers, at the same time provides them with a lot of clues that could have prevented them from falling into the textual trap. Obviously these clues can be detected only at a second reading.

(Eco, *ibid.*)

*Hamlet* is a tragedy, rather than a work of detective fiction, which is certainly a much later development. Even so, the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is based on a secret murder; Hamlet acts very much like a detective when he tries to find evidence about the King's guilt, as well as on the nature of Ghost.

As I have argued and shall further explain below, *Hamlet* implies two main levels of reading; this involves two kinds of Model Reader. On the first level, a *naïve* reader can interpret the Ghost literally as Hamlet's father, a poor, honest Ghost revisiting his son, who is a highly moral hero, and therefore reluctantly "sets it right" by killing the usurper King Claudius. On the second level, in a critical reading, however, we can explain not only how this first reader or reading is implied by the text; we may also find that *Hamlet* implies another set or level of meaning. Although it may take some time and a more careful consideration of the issues, particularly because we are far removed from the original context (as well as from the original texts, as we have seen), the second Model Reader may also realise that the Ghost is, in fact, an evil spirit, or the Devil himself, abusing and eventually destroying the protagonist and, through him, most other characters. As I have argued, neither of these characters is quite as trustworthy and moral as they claim – and as they seem to be for the naïve reader.

There is, of course, a noteworthy difference from detective fiction: there is no Miss Marple or Hercules Poirot to explain all the intricacies of the plot at the end; we have neither a master detective nor an omniscient narrator to offer an explicit, unequivocal interpretation in due course. A critical reader is nevertheless provided with enough clues that can prevent him or her from falling into the textual traps. Eco's theory applies not only to certain genres of modern fiction; as we shall see, he offers an analysis of an ancient text, whose narrator does not explicitly reveal the differences between the naïve and the critical readings implied either.

Applying Eco's theory, we may reconsider *Hamlet* and realise how "the text, while step by step deceiving naïve readers, at the same time provides them with a lot of clues that could have prevented them from falling into the textual trap". As Hamlet is deceived by the Ghost, or his story, so are most readers; but they are also deceived by Hamlet, and tell his story accordingly, usually rather partially, remaining mostly on a naïve level of interpretation. Throughout this study, I have discussed many famous interpretations of *Hamlet* that remain on a naïve level of reading, as well as many details or clues of the text that contradict those readings and imply another level of meaning.

*Hamlet*, of course, is a drama, therefore first we need to consider some specific features of the genre, from a semiotic point too. Within the theatre, an audience has usually no time and a second chance to reconsider a performance of the play, so as to arrive at a critical interpretation; even though one may certainly see a production more than once, and one can certainly reconsider one's interpretation of a performance, when mentally recalling and reconstructing the theatre experience. Normally, however, a spectator can reconsider the events only as they are reconsidered by the characters, as they constantly – sometimes repeatedly – comment on them, pondering on the issues.

In that way, a critical spectator can also realise the second level of meaning of the drama, even while seeing the performance, particularly if one has a chance to see an uncut and unaltered version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, containing all the necessary information. However, as we have seen in the analysis of the productions, that is not the case in the modern theatre experiences of *Hamlet*. A spectator, even a critical one, can interpret only what he or she can see and hear, which tends to be only a selected portion of Shakespeare's text. One may, of course, compare the given productions to Shakespeare's text, and one may also note the differences, as I have done above.

### 6.2.3 Interpreting drama, or *Hamlet* in the theatre

Although this whole study is concerned with the interpretation of a drama, examining Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its reception from various points, in this section I will refer to some of Eco's points on the semiotics of drama, and relate them to *Hamlet*. As Eco explains, when a man or a human body is put on the platform, he becomes

a semiotic device; he is now a sign, something that stands to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity – a physical presence referring to something absent.

(Eco, 1990, 102)

In such a context, codes and conventions are essential.

To interpret this physical presence in one or another sense is a matter of convention, and a more sophisticated theatrical convention would establish this convention by means of other media – for instance, words.

(Eco, 1990, 103)

Let me recall a convention of the Elizabethan (and Jacobean) stage, which I have discussed above, both in the analysis of the productions and the historical context, but also already in the critical review. This pertains to the character that has proved perhaps the most problematic for the modern reception: the Ghost. As we have seen, in the Cellarage Scene (1.4), the "*Ghost cries vnder the Stage*" (1.5.149), which represented Hell in the semiotic conventions of Shakespeare's theatre, the Globe. The physical presence of the actor enacting the Ghost indicates that he speaks from Hell, and it is included in a written stage direction too. Hamlet's question, "Come on, you heare this fellowe in the Sellerige (1.5.151), emphasises this too, along with the jocular, "Ha, ha, boy, say'st thou so, art thou there trupenny ?" (1.5.151).

On the one hand, Hamlet – or the actor enacting Hamlet – here refers to a familiar theatrical convention, calling the attention of the audience, as well as that of the fellow actors, to the significance of the situation. On the other hand, after reverently talking to the Ghost in



their encounter, supposedly talking to his father, these sentences serve as alienating or *defamiliarizing* effects. Hamlet, or the actor enacting Hamlet, indicates that “this fellow” or “trupenny” is not necessarily – or not really – his father at all. The *critical reader*, or the critical spectator, is provided with some very useful clues, so as to be able to get beyond the level of the *naïve reader* or spectator, if he or she has not yet done so.

But, in fact, at this stage of the drama, a critical reader or audience must already be highly suspicious about the Ghost. As I have argued, if the Ghost ascended or descended via the trapdoor, the original audiences could receive another important sign of the contemporary stage conventions. However, Eco emphasises some other codes too, for instance, the *social code* (p. 102). “Since we have approached the rhetorical level, we are obliged to face the philosophical one” (109). The actor can then become “an ideological abstraction”, representing “virtue vs. vice” (ibid.). As we have seen, the Ghost, similarly to Hamlet, seems and claims to represent virtue as opposed to the evil King Claudius, and the *naïve* reader or audience may believe such claims on the first level of meaning.

However, for those who are familiar with the social, philosophical and particularly religious codes or conventions of the context, that is, for a *critical* interpreter, it is clear that revenge, regicide or murder cannot be demanded by a truly virtuous and hence trustworthy character; all these notions represent *vice* for an informed interpreter. Such a call, again, can come from Hell, rather than from Purgatory; only a *naïve* interpreter is ready to believe and accept the Ghost’s claims about purging, remaining thus on the first level of Model Reader. Although this involves a value judgement about the characters, as for the reader, the term *naïve* is purely a technical term. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the contemporary religious authorities, including King James, would have probably regarded someone crediting the

Ghost as rather naïve indeed.<sup>388</sup> I believe this applies to the general audience too; most people at the time were quite informed about these issues – even if they were illiterate, it was mandatory for them to attend church every week, and to listen to sermons preaching not only Christian ethics in general but also the dangers of some concepts in particular, among others, that of Purgatory.

In this respect, we may refer to Eco's analysis of the significance of *speech acts* in the theatre. Eco cites such famous expressions proposed by Austin and Searle such as "I want you to believe," "I believe that you believe", etc. As Eco points out,

We are witnessing the crucial antinomy that has haunted the history of Western thought for two thousand years, that is, the "liar paradox":  
*Everything I am saying is false.*

(Eco, 1990, 107)

As Eco continues,

Well, we ought to face at that precise moment the linguistic and logical set of problems concerning the difference between the *sujet de l'énonciation* and the *sujet de l'énoncé*. Who is speaking, *qui parle*?

(Eco, 1990, 107-8)

Who is speaking, or *who's there*? As we have seen, that is the first line of *Hamlet* too. This boils down to the essence of dramatic representation. According to Eco,

In a certain sense every dramatic performance (be it on the stage or on the screen) is composed by two speech acts. The first is performed by the actor who is making a performative statement – *I am acting*. By this implicit statement the actors tells the truth since he announces that from that moment on he will lie. The second is represented by a pseudo statement where the subject of the statement is already the character, not the actor. Logically speaking, those statements are referentially opaque.

(Eco, *ibid.*)

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<sup>388</sup> As we have seen in chapter five, James himself used the term "ignorant" in his *Daemonologie* to describe those Christians who are deceived by demons or the Devil; James also mentioned the gentiles as particularly susceptible.

All those statements in the theatre – which are, in fact, pseudo statements – are *referentially opaque*: it is as if Eco described the opening scene of *Hamlet*, or indeed any scene of this remarkably ambiguous and mysterious play. Eco describes drama in general, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is undoubtedly a perfect representative of this genre. As Eco goes on to explain,

Through the decision of the performer (I am another man) we enter the possible world of the performance, a world of lies in which we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief.

(Eco, *ibid.*)<sup>389</sup>

In the theatre *we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief*: all these pertain not only to *Hamlet* in general, but particularly to its religious notions, including those concerning the Ghost. Although a modern secular audience may not believe in ghosts or spirits, they suspend their disbelief; as we have seen, even firmly atheist critics tend to credit the Ghost in *Hamlet* and fully believe every word it (or, indeed, he) says.

Whereas all this can explain the difficulties of interpretation concerning drama in general, we may further explain how this works concerning the Ghost. As the character, or rather, the actor enacting the character, says to Hamlet, "I am thy fathers spirit" (1.5.9). Although this statement comes only after the character has already called on revenge (1.5.9), which can make it suspicious for a critical reader and audience, particularly following all the uncertainties and ominous signs in the first scene, if we accept the character's claim and celebrate the suspension of disbelief, it is difficult to reconsider the identity of the character in the referentially opaque theatre. Once we accept the character as the Ghost of Hamlet's father, Hamlet's ensuing suspicions about the dangers of the Devil are very easy to ignore.

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<sup>389</sup> Eco goes on to explain the relationship of drama and narrative texts as follows. "There is a fundamental difference between a narrative text and a theatrical performance. In a narrative, the author is supposed to tell the truth, when he is speaking as subject of the acts of utterance, and his discourse is recognized as referentially opaque only when he speaks about what Julien Sorel or David Copperfield have said. But what about a literary text in which Thomas Mann says *I* and the *I* is not Thomas Mann but Serenus Zeitblom telling what Adrain Leverkühn has said? At this moment, narrative becomes very similar to theater" (108). I made a similar point above, when discussing the narrative elements in *Hamlet* and their relationship to texts with multiple narration.

In drama it often happens that the characters lie to each other; that is a common cause of conflicts in general, and a principal cause of the tragic outcome in many plays, also in Shakespeare. In a sense, the actor lies by claiming to be another man, but that man may lie too. We all know that Iago, the villain in *Othello* lies, as does Richard Gloucester in *Richard III*. However, these characters reveal their evil stratagems to the audience fairly early on. If a character does not explicitly admit to the audience that he or she lies, it can be very difficult to realise this, particularly for a *naïve* reader or audience. In the theatre the actors assume roles by impersonating other men or women, but those characters may also assume roles, and so on; this is a common cause of conflict in Shakespeare, both in the comedies and the tragedies. The change of identity may involve a change of sex too, back and forth, as it does with Rosalind in *As You Like It*, marked by a series of crossdressing. Rosalind, as a character enacts an actor's normal routine. In the theatre, the actors can assume a series of roles as they put on and take off their costumes; as we have seen, it is common to double, triple or even quadruple in various roles.

In *Hamlet*, particularly with the Ghost, all this is not so explicit, but acting itself is a prominent theme, which is also marked by the central play within the play, together with the theme of seeming and being, involving the question of deceit. In the theatre we enter a world of lies, but the Elsinore of *Hamlet* is itself characterised by lies. Lying, however, pertains not only to King Claudius and his court. Hamlet also assumes a number of roles; he specifically puts on an *antic disposition*, playing the madman, rather successfully. In this world of lies, where almost everyone is an actor, it is difficult to tell the difference between truth and lies, seeming and being, illusion and reality. Hamlet may have once been a virtuous man, particularly before the plot starts; he may be moral and honest at the beginning of the play. However, once he decides to put on the role of the avenger, fairly early on, at the end of the first act, he plays that role rather successfully too; so successfully that he actually identifies

with it. After the central Mousetrap, he not only pretends to be an avenger, but he becomes a rather real one within the world of the play, turning into a ruthless serial killer by the end, not sparing even his former friends and schoolfellows.

Acting is so central to *Hamlet* that it may also account for the play's prominence and popularity, as a main reason for its unique success. According to Eco,

The elementary mechanisms of human interaction and the elementary mechanisms of dramatic fiction are the same. [...] This finally explains why aesthetics and criticism have always suspected that theatrical performances were instances of everyday life. It is not theatre that is able to imitate life: it is social life that is designed as continuous performance, and because of this there is a link between theatre and life.

(Eco, 1990, 105-6)

*Totus mundus agit histrionem*, we may recall Shakespeare's motto of his Globe theatre, usually translated as "All the world's a stage", quoting Jaques in *As You Like It* (2.7.139). If this is true to that comedy, so is it to *Hamlet*, perhaps Shakespeare's most complex and subtle play, in which dramatic performance, involving role play, is achieved on an even higher level. Indeed, acting, based on pretence and dramatic illusion, is so integral in this play that some of it goes unnoticed even by leading critics. As I have shown, this concerns particularly the uniquely convincing acting of the Ghost, but also that of the protagonist. As the avenger has managed to persuade many, if not most, of the modern reception that he is an exceptionally moral man, so has the revenge Ghost. Moreover, the latter character has persuaded most interpreters not only about being an honest man, but also about being a spirit cleansing in Purgatory.

In Shakespeare's time, this meant a total theatre; the actors represented not only the human world, but also the supernatural. And the role play of the Ghost – or, rather, of the actor enacting the Ghost – is so perfect and convincing that some may not even notice that in the play's religious context he is a disguised Devil tempting and abusing the protagonist.

Although Hamlet suspects that, he eventually succumbs to temptation and falls; even though this level of meaning is usually missed in the modern, secular reception. In the first Globe theatre, the author himself is supposed to have played the Ghost. We cannot actually reconstruct Shakespeare's acting; now we can interpret only his texts and the related contemporary documents. In their light, as we have seen, the manipulation of the character of the Ghost is very subtle indeed; so subtle that much of it goes unnoticed for the modern reception. But, as King James and others explain, that is how the Devil can deceive the ignorant.

In the end of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as we have seen, the often ignored Fortinbras takes over the kingdom, after giving up his claim of revenge, but not giving up his claim of the coveted Danish throne itself. As I have argued, Fortinbras may be a parallel not only to Hamlet, but also to King James, who succeeded on the vacant throne of England in 1603, the year when *Hamlet* was first published.<sup>390</sup> If Shakespeare's play pleased King James, Shakespeare's acting in the role of the Ghost must have particularly delightful for the new monarch. James must have been familiar with the contemporary stage conventions, and he was an expert on the spiritual issues. Therefore, unlike most modern audiences, the new King of England must have been able to differentiate between the Ghost and the late King Hamlet.

Consequently, James, as well as a good part of the original audiences, adequately acquainted with the theatre as well as religion, must have appreciated the multiple level of role play implied by the character: Shakespeare enacting an evil Ghost, or a Devil, from Hell; which, in turn, enacted, or pretended to be, the late King Hamlet, claiming to be purging in Purgatory, even as demanding revenge. Whereas the first level of role play is a harmless form of lie, an instance of dramatic art, whose main purpose is to entertain the audience; the second level, the evil Ghost assuming or usurping the figure of the late King, is a lie that has

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<sup>390</sup> As we have seen in chapter 5, *Hamlet* was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1602, when it was already decided that James would succeed on the throne.

devastating consequences within the world of the drama in imaginary Elsinore. The latter deceit – and Hamlet’s failure to adequately recognise it – causes the fall of the hero in a bloodbath that involves virtually the whole court.

Let us end our analysis of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its reception by recalling the protagonist’s own theory of drama. According to Hamlet, the purpose of playing is to hold a mirror up to nature, to show “the very age and body of the time his forme and pressure” (3.2.22). It must have been a real treat for the new King of England, and perhaps also to his loyal subjects, that Shakespeare’s company, the King’s Men, performed a play that mirrored – among other things – not only some aspects of his own life, but also his spiritual and political principles.<sup>391</sup> In any case, readers and audiences, ever since the beginning of the seventeenth century, have loved the play in all its various editions and adaptations, whatever they may have seen in its mirror.

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<sup>391</sup> James VI of Scotland [later James I of England], *Daemonologie. In Forme of a Dialogue* (Edinburgh, 1597); *The Trve Lawe of free Monarchies: Or, The Reciproock and Mvtvall Dvetie Betwixt a free King, and his naturall Subiectes* (Edinburgh, 1598).

## EPILOGUE

Is there an ideal edition, production, adaptation or reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? Can there ever be one? What do we mean by *Hamlet* at all, and how should we interpret it? In this study of Shakespeare's work and its reception, I have interpreted the Second Quarto text, as this is the most complete of the early editions that can be considered as the original work. We have no access to Shakespeare's manuscript or his Foul Papers, nor do we have to his own thoughts or intentions, even if some may still hope or believe that; we can only interpret these and other texts. I returned to this edition and examined it in its historical context, because, as I have shown, the modernised ones are substantially different from it, not to mention the various productions or adaptations, which tend to mirror the concerns of their respective periods. As I have argued, this applies to criticism too, which is intricately related to these editions and productions. Nevertheless, the quest for the meaning, or rather, the meanings of Shakespeare's work will no doubt continue, probably until the end of time, or at least until that of drama as we know it. Many seek to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery (3.2.363), hence also to reveal Shakespeare's secret.

But what is Hamlet's mystery? Is there really a secret about Shakespeare and his *Hamlet*? And is there an ideal reader who could reveal it all? Who can be an ideal or a model reader? With so many different readers, the very idea of a model reader may seem strange, even though we all tend to think in concepts or models, as theorists of cognition like Thomas Kuhn have explained, whose notion of paradigm can highlight some key issues concerning *Hamlet* and its reception too. As for the Model Reader, I have applied Umberto Eco's term;



but some questions may remain as to how it can be applied to such an old and complex work as that of Shakespeare.

Eco offers an analysis of a much older letter, which may be instructive on the interpretation of *Hamlet* too. The letter was written by Pliny the Younger to Tacitus about the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, during the eruption of Vesuvius at Pompeii, 79 A.D.<sup>392</sup> According to Eco, “Pliny the Younger is explicit: Tacitus can provide immortal glory to the Elder by representing him as a scientific hero” (p. 124). Accordingly, our first impression if we read this letter is that “the Elder was indeed a hero of science who lost his life sailing courageously to the source of the Eruption because of his sense of duty and of his erudite curiosity” (p. 127). However, if we carefully reconsider it, we get “the impression of reading the story of a very narcissistic and narrow-minded Roman admiral, completely unable to cope with the situation” (128). We do not know how Tacitus interpreted the letter, as “his *Historiae* stops at 70 A.D., and the second part is lost. But we do know how other readers have reacted, since our encyclopaedia records the fate of the Elder as a paramount example of scientific holocaust” (127).

Thus, we have an example of an ancient text – about five times older than Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – that has been misinterpreted, or at least only partially and rather superficially interpreted, by virtually everyone, even by professional readers including historians, the authors and editors of encyclopaedias, for nearly two thousand years. Eco systematically explains the two levels of meaning of Pliny’s text, and has the following conclusion.

Fortunately, every text is always, more or less consciously, conceived for two kinds of Model Reader. The first is supposed to cooperate in actualising the content of the text; the second is supposed to be able to describe (and enjoy) the way in which the first Model Reader has been

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<sup>392</sup> Pliny the Younger, Letter 6, XVI, 1, C, in Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1990), 123-136.

textually produced. One wonders whether Pliny the Younger would have preferred a Reader accepting his glorious product (monument to the Elder) or a Reader realizing his glorifying production (monument to the Younger).

(Eco, 1990, 136)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, of course, is a much longer and more complex text than that of Pliny, but Eco's example and his theory, which is said to be valid to every text, may shed light to some problems of the play and its reception too.

As the dying Hamlet says to Horatio,

O god *Horatio*, what a wounded name  
Things standing thus vnknowne, shall I leaue behind me?  
If thou did'st euer hold me in thy hart,  
Absent thee from felicity a while,  
And in this harsh world drawe thy breath in paine  
To tell my story.

(5.2.344-9)

Hamlet, like Pliny the Younger, is quite explicit: he tells Horatio to tell his story, so as to cleanse his wounded name. The Prince prevents Horatio from his suicide in order to be glorified by him for posterity. Although Horatio, as we have seen, offers a strikingly impartial account of the bloody revenge drama after the arrival of Fortinbras and the English ambassadors, most critics, editors, producers and directors seem to have felt obliged to do Hamlet's will. Indeed, as I have also shown, most interpretations, productions and adaptations offer a version of *Hamlet* with an exceptionally moral hero who at last fulfils his duty of revenge and thus purifies Denmark from corruption.

Hamlet's mystery, the secret that he withholds from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern after the Mousetrap, is that he has had a supernatural experience; he has met a ghost that has informed him about the secret murder of his father, the late King Hamlet. The Ghost is undoubtedly a key element in the mystery of *Hamlet*. Mystery, which is key characteristic of

religion and the religious practices, is thus apparently an integral part of Shakespeare's art too. But how should we interpret and explain this mystery? The Prince, like most of the modern reception, believes that the Ghost is his father, having returned from the dead; Hamlet believes that the Mousetrap provides sufficient evidence on this issue, and he can therefore freely embark on his bloody mission.

"How seriously would Shakespeare have taken the notion of his theatre as the cult of the dead?", asks Stephen Greenblatt in his Epilogue to his study on the Ghost and its religious significance.<sup>393</sup> To answer this question, however, we should first also consider how seriously he would have taken the notion of the Ghost as a purgatorial spirit, or the notion of the character being identical to the late King Hamlet. We cannot retrieve Shakespeare's own thoughts or intentions, but some other questions in the play itself may be indicative of the degree of his seriousness about these points, particularly if he played the Ghost, as the legend goes. Let us, therefore, recall again Hamlet's own reaction to the Ghost. "Ha, ha, boy, say'st thou so, art thou there trupenny ?/ Come on, you heare this fellowe in the Sellerige" (1.5.150-1). Or, a little later, "Well sayd olde Mole, can'st worke it'h earth so fast,/ A worthy Pioner, once more remooue good friends" (1.5.162-3).<sup>394</sup>

Once again, we cannot retrieve Shakespeare's own thoughts or intentions. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether Shakespeare would have preferred a Reader accepting and admiring his glorious hero, doing moral justice to his wronged father and country (monument to Hamlet), or a Reader realising this glorifying production (monument to Shakespeare). Shakespeare did not live to see the efforts of either the Romantic critics, glorifying the hero, or those of some other authors and critics – including Hegel, Marx,

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<sup>393</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 258.

<sup>394</sup> For an analysis of the reception of *Hamlet* and the Ghost in particular, see Margreta de Grazia, "Teleology, delay and the 'Old Mole'" (*Shakespeare Quarterly*, 50/3 [1999]), 251-267. De Grazia shows that the Mole is "featured as groundbreaking hero" already by Hegel and Marx (p. 253), but she does not make the distinction between the Ghost and the late King Hamlet either, nor does she elaborate on the play's suggestions of the character as a disguised devil, either.

Derrida or Greenblatt – glorifying the Ghost. But the second Model Reader may realise and enjoy how Shakespeare did the impossible: a revenge hero, who seeks the damnation of his enemy and thus becomes a serial killer, is celebrated by some as a hero whose moral perfection is unquestionable. Similarly, the revenge ghost, crying from the “Hell” of the Elizabethan theatre, is celebrated as a purgatorial spirit, representing the cult of the dead.<sup>395</sup>

Some other renowned commentators glorified the Ghost differently, but all tended to take it for granted that the character was identical to Hamlet’s father. For Hegel, the Ghost or *Vatergeist* represented *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, the emerging consciousness of the Enlightenment; “the mole, tunnelling through the earth toward light, provides a neat allegory for the consciousness on the move in its dialectical struggle toward freedom, ” even though, as de Grazia explains, moles are, as a matter of fact, blind animals that avoid light.<sup>396</sup> For Marx, the Ghost represents the spirit of Communism: “the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer – the Revolution”.<sup>397</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, the supposedly purgatorial character, representing – or, rather, misrepresenting – some religious, Catholic, ideas that were regarded as outdated already in Shakespeare’s England by the Protestant authorities, was thus taken to represent some very progressive, modern, even atheist, ideas, too. The second Model Reader, however, may realise that Hamlet is not really virtuous, after all; nor is the Ghost really his father, cleansing his soul in Purgatory (or breaking free toward modernity or Communism). In a careful reading, the second Model Reader can realise that, in its own theatrical and religious context, the Ghost is actually an evil spirit, or a disguised Devil from Hell, abusing the hero and causing his downfall by performing a superb and most convincing role play himself.

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<sup>395</sup> Greenblatt admits, “There is very little direct evidence of a self-conscious and calculated theatrical appropriation of the old system in which spirits solicit prayers and indulgences confer liberation from pain” (ibid.). Indeed, particularly in *Hamlet*; this Ghost surely does not solicit indulgences. It requests only revenge, and, as we have seen, there is no real evidence that it is the spirit of the late King Hamlet either.

<sup>396</sup> De Grazia (1999), 252.

<sup>397</sup> Karl Marx’s speech of 14 April 1856 on the anniversary of the Chartist *People’s Paper*. In de Grazia (1999), 252. De Grazia quotes S. S. Prower, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 246.

But the point of this study was not merely to describe and explain the two levels of meaning of *Hamlet*. Nor do I suggest that Shakespeare would have meant to deceive his readers and audiences, or that it takes some special skills to attain the level of the second Model Reader and to realise these intricacies of the play. As I have suggested, King James, for one, must have been able to make these distinctions about the play of the King's Men, along with a good portion of the contemporary audience, who must have appreciated and enjoyed these aspects of *Hamlet* too. If we return to the original texts and contexts, we can also discern this level of meaning, even though several centuries have passed since the creation of the tragedy. Part of this study therefore aimed to show how the reception has gradually gone astray and simplified Shakespeare's longest and probably most complex play.

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