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The Elder Hamlet and the Ghost

By JOHN W. DRAPER

HAMLET seems commonly to be considered a one-man play, in which all the characters but Hamlet are nothing and do nothing; and Hamlet himself so much delays his doing as to arouse question and conjecture. Nevertheless, the drama is based on thrilling episode: murder, incest, and, some say, usurpation and adultery, which happen, as in Greek tragedy, before the play begins; and the appropriate symbol of this antecedent action, rich in horrors, is the Ghost. The Ghost, moreover, is the incentive force that starts Hamlet on his career of taking, or delaying to take, condign revenge. Shakespeare himself is said to have played this part; and, whenever present, the Ghost unquestionably dominates the stage. But critics, seeing in *Hamlet* only a one-man tragedy, have until recently given the Ghost only casual mention; and even recently the part has had scant justice; for they have hardly studied it as an essentially Elizabethan concept of demonology and folklore. Dr. Greg has tried to explain it in modern terms as a mere "hallucination"¹ due to Hamlet's distracted nerves: if it were so, a similar state of nerves produced an identical "hallucination" in Bernardo, Marcellus, and even in the skeptical Horatio, all of whom clearly take the Ghost as the "sensible and true avouch" of their own eyes; and Horatio in particular accepts it as "something more than fantasy".² Mr. Bradby, instead of modernizing the Ghost, gives him up as one of Shakespeare's failures: he finds it inconsistently conceived; for, in Act I, it appears for all to see, whereas in Act III it appears to Hamlet's eyes alone;³ but Miss Campbell shows that it runs quite true to Elizabethan ghostly form; for such spirits, as their purposes required, might appear to one or more than one in any gathering.⁴ Perhaps, then, a new study of the Ghost may be permitted, a study of him in relation to his embodiment in life, in relation to Elizabethan ghostly lore, and in relation to the characters and actions of the play.

The elder Hamlet, like Shakespeare's Henry V,⁵ must have approximated the Renaissance ideal of royalty. In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, he is "majestic"; and his Ghost, though it is crudely drawn and boxes the ear of a poor sentinel, is quite properly a "noble shade".⁶ From these slight hints,

¹W. W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination", *M. L. R.*, XII, 401 *et seq.* Cf. J. D. Wilson, *M. L. R.*, XIII, 129; and E. E. Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies*, New York, 1927, 187 *et seq.* and 236 *et seq.*

²*Hamlet*, ed. Furness var. ed., I, i, 23 and 54 *et seq.*

³G. F. Bradby, *Short Studies in Shakespeare*, London, 1925, 161 *et seq.*

⁴Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Cambridge, 85 *et seq.*

⁵See J. W. Cunliffe, "Henry V as Prince and King", *Columbia University Shakespeare Studies*, New York, 1916.

⁶*Bestrafte Brudermord*, III, v and vi.

⁷Line 243.

Shakespeare has developed a truly royal figure. In the first quarto, he is a "gallant king";⁷ and, even more fully, in the standard text, his magnanimity appears. He has great "natural gifts",⁸ and may be compared even to a "radiant angel".⁹ His very murderer says that at his death, the "whole kingdom" was "contracted in one brow of woe";¹⁰ his Queen was "Like Niobe, all tears";¹¹ and Hamlet, who so loved and admired him, was inconsolable.¹² His private virtues, furthermore, appear in the tender "dignity" of his love for Gertrude.¹³ King Hamlet, however, as the Elizabethans would expect, appears chiefly as a king:¹⁴ he had "An eye like Mars, to threaten and command";¹⁵ he was "valiant", and renownedly so;¹⁶ he overcame the Norwegian Fortinbras,¹⁷ and seems likewise to have fought the Poles.¹⁸ Such warlike royalty should fitly show itself "armèd at point exactly Cap-a-pe", bearing a "truncheon"¹⁹ and moving "majestical" with "martial stalk".²⁰ But supernatural terrors apparently obscure even this royal awe and majesty: it was a "dreaded sight";²¹ the soldiers were "distill'd almost to jelly with the act of fear";²² and even the cool Horatio had reason to "tremble and look pale".²³ Dealings with such, even the merest speech, required circumspection;²⁴ and, in the first scene, Horatio, as a "scholar", has been brought to "Question it"²⁵ in proper fashion. The apparition then was doubly terrible; and added to this terror was a doubt concerning its identity.

Indeed, although the Ghost runs true to form and answers "all the tests" for such an earthly visitant,²⁶ one could not be too sure that it was really what it seemed and that its message could be trusted. Mediæval learned opinion and Renaissance folklore, which largely derived from it, allowed for the dreadful chance that any seeming ghost might be a demon, like the Witches

⁸*Hamlet, ed. cit.*, I, v, 51.

⁹*Ibid.*, I, v, 55.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, I, ii, 3-4.

¹¹*Ibid.*, I, ii, 149.

¹²*Ibid.*, I, ii, 188; and III, iv, 53 *et seq.*

¹³*Ibid.*, I, v, 48.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, III, iv, 55 *et seq.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, III, iv, 57.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, I, i, 84.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, I, i, 86.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, I, i, 63.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, I, ii, 20, 204.

²⁰*Ibid.*, I, i, 143.

²¹*Ibid.*, I, i, 24-25.

²²*Ibid.*, I, ii, 204-205; and I, i, 66.

²³*Ibid.*, I, i, 53.

²⁴See the present writer, "Hamlet's Schoolfellows", about to appear.

²⁵*Hamlet*, I, i, 45.

²⁶Campbell, *op. cit.*, 85 *et seq.* and 121 *et seq.* This discussion is fully documented.

beginning of his speech;³⁶ and, in the *Spanish Tragedy*, the Ghost of Andrea, at the very start, declares himself a *bona fide* ghost and tells his name.³⁷ The doubts of Mediæval lore, intensified by Protestant demonology, made the question of identity the first and basic one concerning any apparition. The in *Macbeth*,²⁷ that assumed this shape to tempt some one to evil. Protestant demonology as expressed in Lavater and in James I,²⁸ which allowed no Purgatory from which Ghosts might escape, attributed not merely some, but all such manifestations to the devil himself; and Reginald Scot, the Elizabethan demonologist, puts the matter plainly:

All the souls in heaven may come down and appear to us when they list. . . . They say that you may know the good souls from the bad very easily. For a damned hath a very heavy and sour look; but a saint's soul hath a cheerful and a merry countenance: these also are white and shining, the other coal black. And these damned souls also come up out of hell at their pleasure. . . . They affirm that damned souls walk oftenest: next unto them the souls of purgatory.²⁹

Nashe, furthermore, declares that the devil assumes the shape of a dead parent, the better to tempt his victim. Thus the question of identity was the natural first reaction of an Elizabethan toward a ghost. Even Macbeth, in addressing Banquo's ghost, though he has good reason to believe it quite authentic, nevertheless suggests that it may be a devil in disguise, when he cries out, "Take any shape but that";³¹ and even the Roman Brutus, on seeing Caesar's ghost cries out at once:

Ha! who comes here?

Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That makest my blood cold and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.³²

In Greene's *Friar Bacon*, likewise, when the "Hostess of Henley" is conjured to appear, Miles mistakes her for a "she-devil";³³ and the apparition of Hercules is described as "the fiend appearing like great Hercules".³⁴ In *Faustus*, the Emperor, on seeing the spirit in the shape of Alexander, exclaims over its identity.³⁵ In Chapman's *Bussy*, the spirit Behemoth says who he is at the

²⁷See W. C. Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of 'Macbeth'", *S. P.*, XXX, 395, 419 etc.

²⁸Campbell, *op. cit.*, 85 *et seq.*

²⁹R. Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1854), in J. D. Wilson, *Life in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, 1920, 31-32.

³⁰T. Nashe, *Terrors of Night* (1594), in *Works*, ed. McKerrow, III, 224.

³¹*Macbeth*, III, iv, 102.

³²*Julius Caesar*, IV, iii, 275 and 279-281.

³³Greene, *Friar Bacon*, iv, 125.

³⁴*Ibid.*, ix, 100.

³⁵Marlowe, *Faustus*, Sc. x.

existence of such a doubt in Hamlet's mind was suggested to scholars in the *Quarterly* as early as 1847;³⁸ but most recent critics of the play dismiss the matter casually: Bradby merely states that Hamlet never doubted the Ghost's word;³⁹ Nicoll thinks Hamlet's uncertainty about the Ghost "manufactured" *ad hoc*;⁴⁰ and Waldock, in a similar vein, remarks that it appears in his soliloquy,⁴¹ "out of a clear sky".⁴² Strange indeed that Shakespeare, who allowed for such a question in *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, should have depicted this more important Ghost of Hamlet's father quite apart from the doubts and pre-conceptions of his audience.

In the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, this question of identity clearly appears in Act I. Though Horatio recognizes the face and form, he is uncertain of the Ghost;⁴³ and Hamlet hopes it is not his father "for the souls of the pious rest quietly till the time of our resurrection".⁴⁴ He carefully checks up on its time of coming and on its appearance to decide whether it really is a Ghost; and, when told it came at midnight, he seems convinced, and addresses the spirit as "my royal father".⁴⁵ In Shakespeare, this doubt lasts longer, and is more significantly used. It certainly does not appear "out of a clear sky" late in the second act; and it assails not only Hamlet but all the others who experience the spectacle. Marcellus mentions the Ghost, not as a king, or even as a person, but as a "thing", a "sight",⁴⁶ an "apparition";⁴⁷ Bernardo wants to be assured of its identity;⁴⁸ so does Marcellus;⁴⁹ and Bernardo calls it, ". . . this portentous figure . . . *so like the king*".⁵⁰ At first Horatio takes it but as mere "fantasy";⁵¹ but he is soon convinced of its spiritual essence, if not of its identity. The Ghost appears: and three of the six lines of the dialogue that immediately precede his speech with it raise this same question of identity:

Ber. In the same figure, like the king that's dead.

Mar. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.

Ber. Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio.

Hor. Most like; it harrows me with fear and wonder.

Ber. It would be spoke to.

³⁶Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, IV, ii, 70.

³⁷Kyd, *Spanish Tragedy*, I, i, 1 *et seq.*

³⁸See *Hamlet*, *ed. cit.*, vol. II, p. 170.

³⁹Bradby, *op. cit.*, 169.

⁴⁰A. Nicoll, *Studies in Shakespeare*, London, 1931, 67.

⁴¹*Hamlet*, II, ii, 574 *et seq.*

⁴²A. J. A. Waldock, *Hamlet*, Cambridge, 1931, 47.

⁴³*Bestrafte Brudermord*, I, iii.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, I, iv.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, I, iv.

⁴⁶*Hamlet*, I, i, 21 and 25.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, I, i, 28.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, I, i, 43.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, I, i, 58.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, I, i, 109-110. The italics are mine.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, I, i, 23 and 32.

Mar. Question it, Horatio.
 Hor. What art thou, that usurp'st this time of night,
 Together with that fair and warlike form
 In which the majesty of buried Denmark
 Did sometimes march?⁵²

If the Ghost were unquestionably the spirit of the King, why re-iterate, and ask confirmation of, the apparent similarity? And why should this matter of identity be the first question on Horatio's lips? The word "usurp'st", moreover, certainly implies that he thought the apparition had no right to such a face and figure; and perhaps it was this implication that "offended"⁵³ the Ghost so that it disappeared. After two or three horror-struck interjections, the watchers raise again the question of identity; this time it is Marcellus: "Is it not like the king?" And Horatio answers: "As thou art to thyself". Horatio admits the similarity; but similarity was no certain proof; and, in the talk that follows, he refers to "Our last king, Whose *image* even now appear'd to us";⁵⁴ and Bernardo speaks of it as "this portentous figure . . . so *like* the king".⁵⁵ Horatio's address to the Ghost upon its second coming, however, implies a greater belief in its being what it seems; and then, a moment later, his calling it a "guilty thing"⁵⁶ suggests an infernal demon rather than his great liege lord, the "goodly king",⁵⁷ whose funeral he had hurried home to honor. Indeed, no less than fifteen times during this first scene, before Hamlet has appeared at all, the question is raised as to the Ghost's identity, and generally with doubts cast on its being what it seems. Throughout this scene, moreover, the apparition is always "it", and is never apparently thought of as a human essence or spoken to with royal attributes or titles; and Horatio addresses it as "thou", like the Witches in *Macbeth*, not with the courtly "you" or the honorific third person of a king.

In the second scene, when Horatio breaks the news to Hamlet, he expresses some uncertainty, and says, "I *think* I saw him [the late King] yesternight",⁵⁸ he calls the Ghost "A figure *like* your father", and he ends his description of the strange event: "I knew your father; These hands are not more like."⁵⁹ The subsequent questions that Hamlet asks seem to be an effort to determine not only whether it looked like his father but also whether it seemed to belong to the order of ghosts or of devils; and, when Hamlet determines to watch that night, his very language shows the doubt that apparently without prompting has come into his mind:

⁵²Cf. first quarto, line 38 *et seq.*

⁵³*Hamlet*, I, i, 50.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, I, i, 80-81. Italics are mine.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, I, i, 109-110. Italics are mine.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, I, i, 148.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, I, ii, 186.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, I, ii, 189. Italics are mine.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, I, ii, 228 *et seq.*

If it assume my noble father's person,
I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape
And bid me hold my peace.⁶⁰

The reference to "hell itself" clearly implies the origin of the "it" which might "assume" the king's appearance: indeed, when no less an authority than King James declared that the devil himself sometimes appeared in human shape to lure a man to mortal sin,⁶¹ such doubts as these must have seemed just and normal. In this uncertain state, Hamlet leans now one way, now the other; sometimes his language implies belief that this really is his "father's spirit in arms";⁶² and sometimes it does not. Horatio once refers to the apparition as "he";⁶³ but otherwise they all use "it". Perhaps Horatio is partially convinced,⁶⁴ but surely not the others.

In the fourth scene, Horatio starts with "his",⁶⁵ and then turns to "it"⁶⁶ when the Ghost suspiciously lures Hamlet to a distance for their talk, and Marcellus suggests the dangers of accompanying it. Hamlet himself is very dubious at first. On first seeing the apparition, he cries out for heavenly aid as if it were the devil, and addresses it in an alternative apostrophe:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!—
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
By thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou comest in such a questionable shape
That I will speak with thee. . . .⁶⁷

The burning question is identity; and, when at last the Ghost unfolds itself, it, for the moment, convinces Hamlet by declaring: "I am thy⁶⁸ father's spirit",⁶⁹ and according to the orthodox opinion, explains that it is being purged of its sins in the Place of Departed Spirits, and so is "Doom'd for a certain time to walk the night".⁷⁰ The revelation of the Ghost is overwhelming; and yet, even as the apparition disappears, Hamlet cries out:

O all you host of heaven! O earth! what else?
And shall I couple hell?⁷¹

But he is still under the spell, and exclaims, "O fie!" to such a doubt, and tells Horatio, "It is an honest ghost".⁷² But what proof had he but the Ghost's

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, I, ii, 243 *et seq.*

⁶¹King James, *Daemonologie*, Edinburgh, 1597, 33.

⁶⁴The present writer questions the theory of Nicoll (*op. cit.*, 67) that Shakespeare, like the author of the *Bestrafte Brudermord*, intended Hamlet to derive his doubt of the Ghost from Horatio.

⁶⁵*Hamlet*, I, iv, 6.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, I, iv, 38 and 69.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, I, iv, 39 *et seq.* "Questionable" is a clear case of double meaning.

⁶⁸Hamlet's father would of course use this familiar form to his son.

⁶⁹*Hamlet*, I, v, 9.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, I, v, 10.

⁶²*Hamlet*, I, ii, 254.

⁶³*Ibid.*, I, ii, 202.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, I, v, 92-93.

⁷²*Ibid.*, I, v, 138.

own word; and, when the dread experience wore off, how could he still be certain? At all events, in the second scene of Act II, he feels himself "Prompted" to his revenge by "heaven *and* bell",⁷³ and then follows his summary of Elizabethan science and folklore on the subject:

The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil; and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape⁷⁴; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,⁷⁵
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this. The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.⁷⁶

Shakespeare could risk delaying this explanation for so long only because his audience did not really need it to understand the previous doubts of all the characters. The world of spirits, good and evil, was close to mankind in that age, as the morality plays and the religious paintings show with their miracles and commonplace events in immediate contiguity; and one's every action was conceived of as prompted by some devil or some angel.

Thus Shakespeare makes his doubt motivate Hamlet's delay in his revenge, and give a reason for the play-within-the-play. The question of returning ghosts enters the great soliloquy;⁷⁷ and he asks Horatio to "Observe" his uncle; and, if he show no guilt, "It is a damned ghost that we have seen . . ." ⁷⁸ The play is played; the King cringes and hurries from the stage; Hamlet is convinced by actual proof at last, and cries aloud: "I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound".⁷⁹ The first half of the play, dominated by doubts of demonology is over. Hamlet's now firm belief gives him an entire change of manner when next he sees the Ghost in Gertrude's closet. He speaks of the apparition as "he" rather than as "it";⁸⁰ he addresses it in the third person as a king—"your gracious figure"⁸¹—or in the second plural, as an Elizabethan son to his parent, and not with "thou" as a human being to a spirit. He calls himself "your tardy son",⁸² and refers to the Ghost as "My father in his habit as he lived".⁸³ He excuses himself like a courtier before royalty, for having neglected "The important acting of your dread command";⁸⁴ and here

⁷³*Ibid.*, II, ii, 560. Italics are mine. "Unpregnant of my cause" seems to signify, as Clarendon suggests, "with insufficient knowledge of". Cf. *Measure for Measure*, I, i, 12.

⁷⁴This was a recognized proof that it was a benign rather than an evil spirit.

⁷⁵The devil was supposed to have special power over melancholy persons. See Campbell, *op. cit.*, 84 *et seq.*

⁷⁶*Hamlet*, II, ii, 574 *et seq.*

⁷⁷When Hamlet says that Death is a country "from whose bourn No traveller returns" (III, i, 79-80), he is echoing the Protestant opinion that would say that the dead could not return.

⁷⁸*Hamlet*, III, ii, 77.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, III, ii, 274-275.

⁸⁰The one exception seems to be III, iv, 134.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, III, iv, 108.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, III, iv, 104.

⁸²*Ibid.*, III, iv, 106.

⁸³*Ibid.*, III, iv, 135.

the "dread" seems more of a king than of a ghost. Such differences of etiquette and phrasing meant much in Shakespeare's day; and Hamlet's entire manner has become somewhat like that of Laertes speaking to Polonius.

The armored ghost is a fit depiction of the warlike king; and, indeed, he is an actual ghost of the departed, despite the current doubts of demonologists, reflected in Bernardo, Marcellus, Horatio and especially in Hamlet, who above all preferred to think his father resting peacefully in heaven. This doubt explains the tardiness of his revenge at least up to the play-within-the-play; and, immediately thereafter, he surely is not tardy in killing the eavesdropper behind the arras. The identity of the Ghost is without question the major problem of the early acts, and is always kept before us until the play-within-the-play has given it solution: could Shakespeare have added to his sources by sheer accident the constant iteration of this theme? If the characters took the Ghost for Hamlet's father, why didn't they call it "he" and "you" as Hamlet does in Act III, after he has become convinced, instead of "it" and "thou". Why do they constantly declare that it is "like" the king? Could any Elizabethan audience, soaked in the folklore, if not the learned demonology, of the age, have seen the Ghost and heard these questions raised without some grasp of their significance? Apparently, in the plays of his middle period, Shakespeare reflects not only the current social, economic and political transition from the Mediæval scheme of things,⁸⁵ but also the transition in popular thought and beliefs: thus, in *Hamlet*, the old Catholic conception of ghosts as the spirits of the departed, good or bad, is shown in conflict with the more purely Protestant conception of them as the devil in disguise; and here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare is conservative—or shall one say Anglican rather than Puritan—in making the Ghost an actual and worthy embodiment of a great and martial king, a characteristic figure of Elizabethan folklore and a primary motive in the action of the play. Though short, it is a major role with opportunities for the grandiose, the terrible and the pathetic; the message it gives Hamlet, even before he fully credits it, starts all the characters unwittingly on their way down to the catastrophe; and it is the basis of the ironic misunderstandings⁸⁶ in which they are more and more inextricably entangled. Indeed, it motivates both Hamlet's action and his long delay, and so makes possible the tragedy.

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⁸⁵See the present writer, "Olivia's Household", *P. M. L. A.*

⁸⁶See the present writer, "Hamlet's Schoolfellows", about to appear.