

# The ghost in Hamlet

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One task of analysis, according to Loewald, is to turn ghosts into ancestors. If unconscious, uncanny revenants of the past are conceptualized as “ghosts”, when analyzed and made conscious they lose their eerie unconscious *magnetism* and become *ancestors*, memories of the past rather than compulsive, supernatural repetitions of it. Ghosts in analysis are not our topic: Shakespeare’s use of ghosts as aesthetic vehicles to enhance the psychological dynamic depth of his plays is. While there are ghosts in five of Shakespeare’s plays (Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard the Third, Cymbeline) the ghost in Hamlet is the most developed, a fully fledged character really that promotes the drama, not just a supernatural fleeting presence that is meant to shock and then vanish. I would like to suggest that even without the presence of the actual ghost, the reality of Hamlet’s father’s absence would have been felt throughout the play, “absence the highest form of presence” as Joyce proclaimed in *Portrait of the Artist*. I have argued elsewhere (Mahon 1998) that in his first soliloquy Hamlet makes a most intriguing slip of the tongue in which at first he imagines his father “but two months dead” and then corrects himself immediately saying “nay, not so much, not two”. (Hamlet Act 1, Scene 2: line 138). In this parapraxis Shakespeare has invited the unconscious mind of Hamlet to play a pivotal role in the propulsion (or indeed retardation) of the psychological action throughout the play. In a sense the unconscious mind is a ghost of all that repression has secreted in the psychological under-world.

It could be argued that the presence of the ghost serves a similar function as that haunted parapraxis, for whether Shakespeare “believed” in ghosts or not, he certainly exploited this re-presentation of Hamlet’s father as a way of depicting the turmoil of dramatic, psychological conflict the tragic hero struggles with on stage. In Act 3, Scene 4 when the ghost makes a final appearance Hamlet intuitively, in fact anticipates, the reason for the supernatural visit:

Hamlet: “Do you not come your tardy son to chide...?”

The ghost has two purposes, not only to remind Hamlet: “Do not forget. This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose” but also to ask Hamlet to help Gertrude:

Ghost: “But look, amazement on thy mother sits. / O step between her and her fighting soul. / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works. / Speak to her, Hamlet.”

The visitation of the ghost at this precise moment in the play adds drama to a conflict that had begun two scenes earlier in Act 2, Scene 2 in which Hamlet, having staged the play within a play, has become convinced by Claudius’s guilty reaction that the ghost had not lied when it accused Claudius of killing him. As Hamlet exclaims to Horatio: “I’ll take the ghost’s word for a thousand pounds.”

Convinced as he now is of his stepfather’s guilt he is not without conflict however as he goes to see his mother who has summoned him. It is a manic Hamlet that recites a soliloquy that captures his ambivalence most expressively:

Now could I drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.  
O heart, lose not thy nature. Let not ever  
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom;  
Let me be cruel, not unnatural.  
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.

(Act 3, Scene 2: 379- 387).

Hamlet has heeded the ghost's counsel, given him in Act 1, Scene 5:

Ghost:

Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven,  
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge  
To prick and sting her.

(Act 1, Scene 5: 85-88)

Hamlet will speak daggers to her, but use none. The daggers of her own conscience will "prick and sting her" mercilessly. Of course the same could be said of the guilty Hamlet who has imagined "self slaughter" and dispatching himself "with a bare bodkin". He must obey his father and yet talk straight to his mother, a sort of negative oedipal resolution, and perhaps disguise of the much more positive oedipal drama that the aforementioned parapraxis suggests. That parapraxis reveals a hidden unconscious wish, for if in Hamlet's mind his father had in fact been killed a month earlier than the actual deed perpetrated by Claudius, it seems that the only agency responsible for the crime would be Hamlet's unconscious mind. In fact it is as if the action of the play takes place in Hamlet's mind alone, the actual play itself a mere displacement of the internal psychological drama. This is an overstatement of course, the presence of the ghost a most concrete expression of how the privacy of internal conflict demands public re-presentation outside the stage of the mind, so to speak, if a dramatic *mise-en-scene* of interactive dialogue is to be realized at all. The genius of Shakespeare found a way, through the exploitation of seven soliloquies and a series of subtle parapraxes (Mahon 1998, 2000) to suggest that Hamlet's unconscious mind was as much a member of the cast as the listed *dramatis personae* who "strut and fret their hour" upon the stage.

When Hamlet is beckoned by the ghost to follow him and Horatio and his comrades seek to stop him Hamlet brushes them off saying "I'll make a ghost of him who lets (obstructs) me." This suggests that, once killed, his comrades become ghosts. Surely it is man's consciousness of his own mortality that made the invention of ghosts so necessary as the mind struggled to comprehend the jolting narcissistic injury mortality implies. If man were immortal the need for ghosts would cease to exist. In *The Invention of Purgatory* (Mahon 2007) I argued that when Protestantism did away with the Catholic concept of Purgatory, the banished ghosts or souls that ended up on the Elizabethan stage at first (Greenblatt 2001) eventually made their way to the Viennese couch, summoned as they were by Freud's more enlightened view of the function of guilt than earlier concepts of Hell and Purgatory had conceptualized. Souls had no place in the new Protestant definition of eternity and the afterlife. But man's guilt about his own unconscious death wishes towards loved ones could not be totally dismissed by regal or religious legislation. Public commerce with souls could be forbidden. Private acts of repression and projection of guilt and their manifestation in uncanny threatening apparitions could not!

Does Hamlet "believe" in the ghost? Shakespeare seems to leave it ambiguous. In the "to be or not to be" soliloquy he has Hamlet refer to the "thought of something after death" as "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns." This would suggest that death is final: once dead "no traveler returns." In that same soliloquy however, Hamlet, at war with his philosophically conflicted self, ponders two afterlife scenarios: "to die, to sleep- no more" and "to die, to sleep- to sleep, perchance to dream." An atheistic and a religious motif seem to be at war here. "What dreams may come" Hamlet wonders "when we have shuffled off this mortal coil?" "Dream" is being used here, not in the Freudian sense of a limited, nocturnal hallucination in which "ghosts", at the dream work's bidding, beguile the sleeper with manifest trickery that conceals the latent message.

No, this afterlife sense of “what dreams may come” is viewed by Hamlet as a supernatural cautionary tale, “a pale cast of thought” “that puzzles the will”, “makes cowards of us all” forcing “enterprises of great pith and moment” “to lose the name of action.” This is castration anxiety in a supernatural key that “enterprises of great pith and moment” experience unconsciously all the time prior to death in the “natural” imaginative fictions of neurosis. What I am calling the “natural imaginative fictions of neurosis” are private matters that the *ars poetica* must make public on stage or page, using ghosts if necessary to dramatize conflict and its displacements and projections in that “willing suspension of disbelief...which constitutes poetic faith” (Coleridge 1817). In the soliloquy Hamlet invokes afterlife dreams but also conceives of death as “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.” And yet the ghost of his father, a traveler from that ‘undiscovered country’ has appeared to him! In tormented human psychological affairs of heart and mind such contradictions must be integrated as instinct and reason, illusion and reality, square off against each other in seemingly unresolvable conflict. When Horatio first confronts the ghost he says: “Stay, illusion” as if he senses he is having a rational conversation with the irrational, and that there are indeed “more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of” in human psychology. This dialogue between the natural and the supernatural is one of the dramatic vehicles Shakespeare has employed to heighten the uncanny, eerie atmosphere of the play. Even at the end of his “To be or not to be” soliloquy when he sights Ophelia and addresses her “Nymph, in thy orizons be all my sins remembered” he seems to be viewing her as mythological sprite more than as the real flesh and blood woman he has loved. Shakespeare again seems to be highlighting the conflict between reality (love as an enterprise of great pith and moment) and the flight from it into the loveless fantastical. Of course if a Freudian Hamlet is always unconsciously agonizing over his own guilty patricidal and incestuous wishes one source of redress is to turn towards the supernatural (nymph) whose orizons (prayers) may absolve his sense of guilt (sins).

It is tempting to imagine Shakespeare’s “sins” as the creative agency behind this extraordinary play. In 2009 in an essay on grief and creativity I argued that the death of Hamnet, Shakespeare’s only son, who was also a twin, can be “felt” in the language of the play itself where twinning (hendiadys, a figure of speech that uses two substantives to denote a single complex meaning), appears several times along with other kinds of twinings. It is as if the ghost of the boy, Hamnet, is on stage alongside the adult Hamlet! A further irony has often been commented upon since Joyce first pointed it out in *Ulysses*: since it is probable that Shakespeare himself played the part of the ghost on stage with Richard Burbage as Hamlet, it could be suggested that Shakespeare, who could never talk to his son after his death in 1596, was able to talk to a son as his ghostly father via the ministry of dramatic illusion. The irony is further supported in the text of *Hamlet* in one minor detail: in Act 1 Scene 5 when Hamlet is demanding that his comrades swear to keep the ghost’s appearance a secret, the ghost himself cries out from under the stage: “Swear”. Hamlet, going along with the spirit of this black humor exclaims: “Ah ha, boy, say’st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny? Come on, you hear this fellow in the cellarage. Consent to swear.” The point I want to extract from this ghoulish exchange, which always makes a nervous audience laugh, is that Hamlet has here addressed the ghost as “boy”. Is not this a most oblique reference to the boy Hamnet, and to Shakespeare’s tragic loss? If absence is indeed the highest form of presence was the ghostly absence of this child not a constant presence in the mind of a bereft father, William Shakespeare? Did Shakespeare ever turn the ghostly presence of Hamnet into a more psychoanalyzed *ancestor* is an unanswerable question. But if the sublimations of genius are akin to a kind of personal analysis one can imagine that he did. Or that is certainly the wish of generations of readers and theater-goers who have marveled at his insights and become more deeply human because of them!