

## Stephen Greenblatt

# Hamlet in Purgatory

The work-in-progress that I am going to present is a fragment of a book that I hope to write this year on Shakespeare as a Renaissance conjurer. I use the term conjurer here in a very general sense to mean someone who calls forth or makes contact through language with those things — voices, faces, whole bodies and spirits — that are absent. Several other fragments of this book have already appeared in print: an essay on Shakespeare and his great contemporary, Reginald Scot, who blamed witchcraft persecutions on a misplaced faith in poets' metaphors; an essay on the peculiar absence in Shakespeare's drama of what we would term "natural death," and a very short piece on the theatrical appropriation of the Eucharist as — to use Slavoj Žižek's phrase — the sublime object of ideology. My overarching goal in all of these pieces, and in the paper I'm going to give tonight, is to explore some of the ways in which Shakespeare's works acquire their uncanny power, what the great 18th century critic Maurice Morgann called their "magic".

Morgann, no idle dreamer but rather the tough-minded governor of colonial New Jersey, was not using the term in any mystical sense. He used it instead somewhat in the way that people in the 1950s spoke of "the magic of television" — that is, he was interested in a set of aesthetic, institutional, and even technological strategies that produced certain long-term and long-range effects. For him the extraordinary magnitude of those effects was best realized in the huge, wheezing bulk of Falstaff. My own choice is Hamlet, who is unintentionally and oddly linked to the fat knight by Gertrude when, in the fencing scene, she says that her son is "fat and scant of breath".

I want to say one other thing about the setting for tonight's paper or rather about its motivation. At lunch yesterday at the Kolleg, I had an interesting conversation with a fellow Fellow who was maintaining that one must put aside one's family and group identifications, no matter how powerful they may be, in order to think and speak as a just and rational person. I admired these sentiments, but I found myself thinking, and not for the first time, how slyly amusing and acute Plato was in the *Ion* in pointing to the tension between the work of the rational philosopher and the work of the rhapsode or, let us say, the literary critic. I know, in any case, that I am incapable of simply bracketing my own

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origins; rather I find myself trying to transform them, most often silently and implicitly, into the passion I bring to my work. Let me for once be explicit.

My father was born in Boston in the late 19th century. I was the child of what I used to think of as his old age but that I have now, at my point in life, come to think of rather as his vigorous middle age. I saw him, in any case, as embodying the life experience not of the generation directly behind me but of two generations back. His own childhood memories, in other words, seemed to have a quite unusual, almost eerie distance from my life world. Hence, for example, he told me that when he was very young, he was taken, along with the other boys in his Hebrew school class (his *cheder*) to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train. The little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the corpse — which was placed on great cakes of ice, since it was the summer in Boston and very hot — and to recite the psalms, while the man's wife wailed inconsolably in a corner.

All his life my father was obsessed with death. His own father had died dreadfully, clinging to his son and begging for help, and my father carried the scars of that experience with him ever after. The effect on him was not exactly melancholy, but rather something like a strange blend of wonder and denial. The wonder had a specific origin: my grandfather had died in New York where my father had taken him in a desperate, last-ditch search for medical treatment. My father then had to bring the body back to Boston by train. The coffin was in the baggage car and my father was sitting quietly and weeping in the club car — "sitting on a bank,/Weeping again the King my father's wrack" — when, in New Haven, Connecticut, the entire chorus line of the Ziegfeld Follies climbed on board. The chorus girls, leggy, buxom, bejewelled, bedecked in feather boas and wide-brimmed hats, sweetly crowded around my weeping father, kissing and hugging him and trying to cheer him up. It was perhaps my father's purest encounter with the wonderful power of eros over thanatos.

To this experience of wonder my father conjoined denial. He kept us from celebrating his birthday, refused to retire, working until the week before he died in his 87th year, and lied about his age even when he entered the hospital. But when we read his will, we found that he had, after all, been thinking about his death. He had left a sum of money to an organization that would say *kaddish* for him — *kaddish* being the Aramaic prayer for the dead, recited for 11 months after a person's death and then on certain annual occasions. The prayer is usually said by the deceased's immediate family and particularly by his sons — in

Yiddish a son could actually be called a *kaddish*, so that a childless man could be said to die without leaving a *kaddish*. Evidently, my father did not trust either my older brother or me to recite the prayer for him. The effect the bequest had on me, perhaps perversely, was to impel me to do so, as if in a blend of love and spite.

I did not until that moment know that Jews had anything like charities, and I realized that I did not know why Jews prayed for the dead at all. That is a different story from the one that I am going finally to tell tonight, but I hope you will see the relevance of the personal history about which I have just spoken to what I am now about to say.

Early in 1529, a London lawyer, Simon Fish, anonymously published a tract, dedicated to Henry VIII, called *A Supplication for the Beggars*. The tract was modest in length but explosive in content: a Lutheran and an associate of William Tyndale, Fish wrote on behalf of the homeless, desperate English men and women, "nedy, impotent, blinde lame and sike", who pleaded for spare change on the streets of every city and town in the realm. These wretches, "on whome scarcely for horror any yie dare loke", have become so numerous that private charity can no longer sustain them, and they are dying of hunger. Their plight, in Fish's account, is directly linked to the pestiferous proliferation throughout the realm of beggars of a different kind: bishops, abbots, priors, deacons, archdeacons, suffragans, priests, monks, canons, friars, pardoners, and summoners.

Simon Fish had already given a foretaste of his anticlerical sentiments and his satirical gifts. In his first year as a law student at Gray's Inn, according to John Foxe, one of Fish's mates, a certain Mr. Roo, had written a play holding Cardinal Wolsey up to ridicule. No one dared to take on the part of Wolsey until Simon Fish came forward and offered to do so. The performance so enraged the cardinal that Fish was forced "the same night that this Tragedie was playd" to flee to the Low Countries to escape arrest. There he evidently met the exile William Tyndale whose new translation of the Bible he subsequently helped to circulate.

At the time he wrote *A Supplication for the Beggars*, Fish had probably returned to London but was in hiding. He was thus a man associated with Protestant beliefs, determined to risk his life to save the soul of his country, and endowed, as were many religious revolutionaries in the 1520s and 30s, with a kind of theatrical gift. In *A Supplication for the Beggars*, he not only speaks on behalf of the poor but also speaks in their own voice, crying out against those who have greedily taken for themselves the wealth that should otherwise have made England prosperous for all of its people. The ravenous monkish idlers, Fish tells the

king, "haue begged so importunately that they haue gotten ynto theyre hondes more then the therd part of all youre Realme". No great people, not the Greeks nor the Romans nor the Turks, and no ruler, not King Arthur himself, could flourish with such parasites sucking at their life-blood. Not only do they destroy the economy, interfere with royal prerogative and undermine the laws of the commonwealth, but, since they seduce "euery mannes wife, euery mannes daughter and euery mannes mayde", they subvert the nation's moral order as well. With a politician's flair for shocking (and unverifiable) statistics, Fish estimates the number of Englishwomen corrupted by monks at 100,000. No one can be sure, he writes, that it is his own child and not a priest's bastard who is poised to inherit his estate.

Why have these "bloudsuppers" succeeded in amassing so much wealth and power? Fish's answer is that they have persuaded good Christians that the Pope's prayers can deliver them from the torments of Purgatory. And if "men of great litterature and iudgement" dare to point out that Purgatory does not exist and that "there is not one word spoken of hit in al holy scripture", the priests quickly accuse such men of heresy. Only the king has enough power to save his realm and succor his poor starving beadsmen. He can do so at a stroke by seizing the wealth that the wolvisch priests have stolen from the people and using that wealth to relieve the needy. As for the thousands of lazy monks and friars, Fish urges the king to put an end to their racket once and for all: "Tye these holy idell theues to the cartes to be whipped naked about euery market towne til they will fall to laboure that they by theyre importunate begging take not away the almesse that the good christen people wolde giue vnto vs sore impotent miserable people."

According to Foxe, *A Supplication for the Beggars* was sent to Anne Boleyn, who brought a copy to the king. After Henry "kept the booke in his bosome" three or four days, the story goes, he contacted Fish's wife and, promising safe conduct, told her he wished to see her husband. Trusting one of Henry's promises was probably the rashest thing Fish ever did, but his book's suggestion that the crown seize monastic wealth had obviously delighted the king who "embraced him with louing countenance", talked with him for three or four hours, and even took him hunting. For once the king was as good as his word, giving Fish his signet ring as a token of his protection and instructing his Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, not to touch the fugitive. The king, however, had neglected to say anything about Fish's wife, whom More promptly moved to interrogate.

More had known about Fish and his dangerous book, for some time. Only a few months after *A Supplication for the Beggars* appeared,

though busy with high affairs of state and on the brink of his elevation to the Lord Chancellorship, More wrote a lengthy reply, *The Supplication of Souls*. The length is characteristic of More's polemical writings, most of them disastrously misconceived as rhetorical performances, but it may also reflect a personal stake: in *Utopia*, More had satirized the idleness of friars, and he had imagined radical measures to solve the problem of poverty, homelessness, and hunger in England. In *Fish*, More may have glimpsed a crudely distorted reflection of himself

If *A Supplication for the Beggars* speaks with the voice of the poor, *The Supplication of Souls* speaks with the voice of the dead. The reader encounters a desperate appeal for help, comfort, and pity from "your late acquayntaunce/ kindred/ spouses/ companions/ play felowes/ & frendes". These former intimates are crying out not because they are dead, not even because they are abiding the "greuouse paynys & hote clen synge fyre" of Purgatory, but because they have become "humble & vnacquayted & halfe forgotten supplyauntys". They had once been able to count on relief and comfort from the private prayers of virtuous people and, still more, from "the dayly Masses & other gostely suffrages of prestys/ relygyouse/ and folke of holy churche." Now they fear that this consolation and help will vanish, for "certayne sedytyouse persones" have spread pestilent doubts about the very existence of Purgatory and the efficacy of the Holy Church's good works on behalf of the dead.

*The Supplication of Souls* then begins with the dead crying out in fear that they are being forgotten. The suffering souls know that their loud lamentings will be disturbing to the living, who understandably desire to repose themselves and take their ease. But the dead have no choice: though they have been good souls who have "longe layen and cryed so farre frome you that we seldome brake your slepe," they must now make their existence and their anxiety known. They do so in order to counteract the pernicious influence of *A Supplication for the Beggars*, an influence that threatens not only the souls of the dead but also the souls of the living. Indeed, after initially speaking for their own plight, the dead in More's book affirm that they, after all, are not the real victims of the anonymous author's venom, for when their purgatorial punishment has ceased, they will be "translated" to heavenly bliss. It is the living who run the real risk, for they will find, "for lakke of belefe of purgatory/ the very strayght way to hell". To lure unsuspecting readers down this path is indeed the whole purpose of the wicked author whose identity, More's dead souls declare, is not unknown to them, both because certain of his associates before their deaths repented their heresies, returned to the true faith, and are now companions in Purgatory and because "owre and your gostely enemy the deuyll" has visited

Purgatory in person to brag about his agent on earth. With his "enmyouse & enuyouse laughter gnasshyng the teeth and grynnyng", the devil delights in the venomous power of the book that will deceive many simple readers.

In order to combat this satanic adversary, *The Supplication of Souls* launches into an extended defense of the doctrine of Purgatory, an odd enterprise perhaps for souls who profess to be suffering from its tormenting fires but one presumably justified both by their concern for misguided mortals and by their fear of being forgotten. Much of this defense consists of rather strained interpretation of biblical and patristic citations. From time to time, when the strain becomes too great, the souls appeal to the absolute authority of the Holy Church. And on several occasions in the long treatise, they appeal to the experience of the living. Nothing can enable you to "conceyue a very ryght imagynacyon of these thyngys whych ye neuer felte", they concede, but you may be able to grasp the nature of purgatorial suffering if you consider a ship wallowing about in high seas. A small number of passengers are so well "attremped of thym selfe" that they feel "as lusty and as iocunde" as if they were on land. Others are anything but jocund: "But then shall ye sometyme se there some other whose body ys so incurably corrupted/ that they shall waite & tolter/ and wryng theyre handys/ and gnash the teeth/ and theyr eyen water/ theyr hed ake/ theyre body frete/ theyr stomake wamble/ and all theyre body shyuer for payne/ and yet shall neuer vomete at all: or yf they vomete/ yet shall they vomyte styll and neuer fynde ease thereof." If the former figure the saved in heaven and the latter the damned in hell, how shall we imagine the souls in Purgatory? They are the passengers who feel horrible at first and yet who are, after a vomit or two, "so clene rydde of theyre gryefe/ that they neuer fele dyspleasure of yt after". Such is the middle state, the betwixt-and-between condition of More's speakers.

But the problem remains of convincing readers, poisoned by *A Supplication for the Beggars*, that Purgatory actually exists, for dogmatic appeals to the authority of the Church, strained textual interpretation, and metaphors masquerading as realities are precisely what Fish's book attacked as the malevolent hypocrisy of Roman Catholicism. As a last resort, the souls in More's text can point to ghosts. "For there hath in euery contrey and euery age apparycyons bene had," they say, "and well knowen and testyfyed/ by whyche men haue had suffycyent reuelacyon and profe of purgatory/ excepte suche as lyste not to byleue them: & they be such as wolde be neuer the better yf they saw them." To be sure, it would be impious to demand to see such apparitions for oneself; they are rare precisely so that people can believe by faith. Those

stubborn enough to reject the well-authenticated stories of such apparitions and to demand further proof deserve the punishment they will undoubtedly receive after death when they will "to theyr payne se such a grysly syght as shall so greue theyr hartys to loke theron".

But how could apparitions leave the prison-house of Purgatory at all in order to appear on earth, if they are meant to be burning in fires? The souls explain that "we cary our payne wyth vs"; indeed their pain is intensified by witnessing the on-going life of the living. The guardian devils whom God commands to accompany the souls back to the earth compel their miserable prisoners to look at the gold they have left behind and contemplate "our late wyuys so sone waxen wanton/ & forgetyng vs theyre old husbandys that haue loued theym so tendrely and lefte theym so ryche/ sytte and lawgh & make mery and more to sumtyme/ wyth theyr new woars/ whyle our kepers in dyspyte kepe vs there in payne to stande styli/ & loke on". More characteristically does not imagine dead wives looking on at their husbands' carousals, but only dead husbands forced to witness the pleasures, including sexual pleasures, of their wives. The scene, more than any other he invokes in his long work, seems to conjure up a passionate spectral outburst:

Many tymes wold we then speke yf we coulde be suffred/ & sore we long to say to her: Ah wyfe wyfe ywysse this was not couenaunt wyfe/ when ye wepte and tolde me that yf I lefte you to lyue by/ ye wold neuer wedde agayne. We se there our chyl dren to/ whom we loued so well/ pype syng and dawnce/ & no more thynke on theyre fathers soulys then on theyre olde shone: sau yng that sometyme cummeth owt god haue mercy on all crysten sowlys. But yt cummeth owt so coldely and wyth so dull affeccyon/ that yt lyeth but in the lyp pys and neuer cam nere the harte.

Vows are broken, mourning is forgotten, life resumes its round of heedless pleasures, and even piety takes the form of cold lip-service. The dead in their individuality, their intense suffering, their urgent claims on personal remembrance, are consigned to oblivion or become at best an anonymous, generalized category, the "all Christian souls" casually invoked in a ritual phrase by thoughtless children.

Against this terrible indifference the suffering souls in More's text cry out, passionately claiming the rites of memory. They claim something more tangible as well: the alms that will relieve them of some of their pains. Here More imagines dead wives speaking out, not to lament their surviving husbands' pleasures but to regret their own past delight in gorgeous clothing, jewels, and cosmetics. This "gay gere" is now burning

hot upon their tormented bodies, so that, looking back on their lives, they wish that their husbands "never had folowed our fantasyes/ nor neuer had so kokered vs nor made vs so wanton/ nor had geuen vs other ouchys [brooches] than ynions or gret garlyk heddys". For them, of course, such thoughts come too late, but they have a generous desire to save others as well as to help themselves. "We besech you," they cry out from beyond the grave to their living husbands, "syth ye gaue them vs let vs haue them still let them hurt none other woman but help to do vs good: sell them for our sakys to set in sayntys copys/ and send the money hether by masse pennys & by pore men that may pray for our soulys."

How can you show that you remember the dead, that you care for your departed wives and husbands and children, that you are not cruelly indifferent to their sufferings? Give money to the Church. Since masses for the dead were closely linked to alms-giving, it would in principle have been possible for More to reject Fish's premise entirely and to claim that the doctrine of purgatory was in fact a strong incentive to charity, but instead he chooses to set the dead against the living. More's poor souls understand themselves to be in direct competition with Fish's beggars:

If ye pyte the pore/ there ys none so pore as we/ yt haue not a bratte[rag] to put on our bakkys. If ye pyte the blynde/ there ys none so blynd as we whych ar here in the dark sauynge for syghtis vnple-saunt and lothesum tyll sum comfort cum. If ye pyte the lame/ there is none so lame as we/ that nether can crepe one fote out of the fyre/ nor haue one hand at lyberte to defend our face fro the flame. Fynally yf ye pyte any man in payn/ neuer knew ye payn comparable to ours: whose fyre as farre passeth in hete all the firyss that euer burned vpon erth/ as the hottest of all those passeth a feynyd fyre payntyd on a wall.

The miseries of the poor are vastly exceeded by the unspeakable miseries of souls in Purgatory, and the good that alms can do for the living is vastly exceeded by what the same alms can do for the dead. Give more money to the Church. Moreover, the money that is donated for the relief of souls is proof that the giver is not a heretic who dismisses the flames of Purgatory as mere "feynyd fire" and "taketh in hys harte that story told by god for a very fantasyke fable". Consequently, the souls declare, as if their supplication were an investment prospectus, whatever you give "shall also rebownd vpon your self an inestymable profyte". Just give money to the Church.

But, though the text reiterates the appeal for money, it would be a mistake to conclude that More's principal aim was to augment the Church's revenues. His concern is to counteract a serious and potentially damaging attack upon the Church, an attack launched against what the scholarly humanist More knew perfectly well was one of its most vulnerable doctrines. Fish spoke in the name of the poor and dispossessed, but he does not seem a tenderhearted philanthropist, and it is unlikely that his concern lay with their plight. His book takes the form of a petition to the king to whom it offers in effect a convenient, morally upright political cover for a cynical course of action Henry had probably already been contemplating, just as Henry was loudly professing that it was his moral scruples that impelled him to seek a divorce from Catharine of Aragon. Fish's own motives were almost certainly not mercenary; rather he was offering the king and the nation a kind of bait to embark on a path that would lead to a reformed religion.

More understood the bait and struggled to avert the danger by recalling his readers to their deep and ancient religious loyalty. Money is important, to be sure, as both Fish and More agree, but for More it is a sign of remembrance. "Let neuer eny slouthfull oblyvyon race vs out of your remembraunce," the souls cry; "remember what kyn ye and we be to gether"; "remember how nature & crystendom byndeth you to remember vs"; "remember our thurst whyle ye syt & drink: our honger whyle ye be festing: our restlesse wach whyle ye be slepyng: our sore and greuouse payn whyle ye be playing: our hote burnyng fyre whyle ye be in plesure & sportyng: so mote god make your ofsprynge after remember you."

"Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me" (1.5.91). If Thomas Lodge's recollection in *Wit's Misery and the World's Madness* (1596) is to be credited, an earlier Elizabethan play about Hamlet — the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* — featured a pale ghost that cried "like an oyster-wife, `Hamlet, revenge' ". Shakespeare's Ghost too cries out for vengeance: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love," he tells his groaning son, "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.23-5). But the injunction upon which young Hamlet dwells obsessively is that he remember:

#### Remember thee?

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,

That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain  
 Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.95-104)

Does the emphasis in the spectral command fall on "remember" or on "me"? Hamlet's response to the "poor ghost" teases out both terms, with his first repetition emphasizing the memory that holds a seat in his brain and the second insisting that all the contents of that memory, save one, will be wiped away. Contemplating Hamlet's wild and whirling words in the wake of the Ghost's departure, Coleridge remarked that "the terrible, by a law of the human mind, always touches on the verge of the ludicrous." Perhaps the law extends to this anxious insistence on remembrance, since it seems faintly ludicrous to imagine that Hamlet would or could ever forget the Ghost. Or rather Hamlet's reiterated question precisely picks up on what seems to him the absurdity of the Ghost's injunction: "Remember thee?"

What is at stake in the shift of spectral obligation from vengeance to remembrance? In terms of plot, very little. When Hamlet first adjures the Ghost to speak — "Speak, I am bound to hear" — the Ghost's response, implicitly strengthening the force of the word "bound", is a call for action: "So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear" (1.5.6-7). Hamlet hears this call and urgently demands the information that will enable him immediately to heed it:

Haste, haste me to know it, that with wings as swift  
 As meditation or the thoughts of love  
 May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.29-31)

Meditation and love figure the spectacular rapidity of thought, not only the virtually instantaneous leap of the mind from here, say, to China but that leap intensified by the soul's passionate longing for God or for the beloved. Yet the metaphors Hamlet uses here have the strange effect of inadvertently introducing some resistance into the desired immediacy, since meditation and love are experiences that are inward, extended, and prolonged, experiences at a far remove from the sudden, decisive, murderous action that he wishes to invoke. Later in the play Hamlet will famously complain that conscience — here consciousness itself — "doth make cowards of us all", that the "native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought", and that "enterprises of great pith and moment... lose the name of action" (3.1.85-90). This corrosive inwardness — the hallmark of the entire play and the principal cause of

its astonishing, worldwide renown — is glimpsed even in his first frantic response to the Ghost, and it is reinforced by the Ghost's command, "Remember me". From this perspective, what is at stake in the shift of emphasis from vengeance to remembrance is nothing less than the whole play.

Hamlet has made the Ghost's command his watchword:

Now to my word:

It is `Adieu, adieu, remember me'.

I have sworn it. (1.5.12-14)

The commandment, he proclaims, will live all alone in his brain; everything else will be erased. He has made it into an oath upon which he can swear and a watchword that he will daily reiterate. But his actual experience is of a fading of remembrance, a softening into what the play (like More's *Supplication*) repeatedly characterizes as dullness. When Hamlet speaks of sweeping to his revenge, the Ghost commends him in terms that bespeak his own fear of oblivion:

I find thee apt,

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed

That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf

Wouldst thou not stir in this. (1.5.31-34)

And it is with this forgetfulness that Hamlet comes to charge himself: "a dull and muddy-mettled rascal" (3.1.569). "Do not forget," the Ghost reminds him in the scene in Gertrude's closet, "This visitation/Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.100-101). "How all occasions do inform against me," Hamlet berates himself in a soliloquy dropped from the folio text, "And spur my dull revenge!" (Q2:4.4). Remembering the dead proves vastly more difficult than it had first seemed.

"In relation to its motive and main interest," A. C. Bradley wrote in 1904, in what is still the greatest 20th century critical work on Shakespeare, *Hamlet* is "a purely psychological study". Generations of critics have agreed, responding in effect to the Shakespearean shift from vengeance to remembrance. But there is a problem with that word "purely". It is important to recognize that the psychological here is conditioned by the theological, and specifically by the issue of remembrance that, as we have seen, lay at the heart of the crucial early sixteenth-century debate about Purgatory. More's souls are in a panic that they will be forgotten, erased by "slothful oblivion". They are heartsick that they will fade from the minds of the living, that their wives will remarry, that

their children will only mention them, if at all, "so coldly and with so dull affection that it lies but in the lips, and comes not near the heart". They are harrowed above all by the fear that their sufferings will cease even to be credited, that their prison house will be dismissed as a "fantastic fable", and that their very existence, in its horrible, prolonged pain, will be doubted. It is this fear that seems to shape Shakespeare's depiction of the Ghost and of Hamlet's response.

The Ghost makes clear to Hamlet that he is in what Thomas White's early seventeenth-century text called "the middle state of souls", not damned for eternity but forced to suffer torments in a "prison-house" designed to purge him of the crimes he had committed in his life:

I am thy father's spirit,  
 Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
 And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
 Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.9-13)

"For a certain term" — the bland phrase, which looks at first like it serves only to fill out the syllables of a line of blank verse, is in fact significant, since it helps to set up the theological claim of the word "purged". "In purgatorye my soule hath binne/ a thousand yeares in woe and teene," the "Imperator Salvatus" says in the Chester mystery play *The Last Judgment* (c. 1475);

As hard paynes, I darre well saye,  
 in purgatorye are night and daye  
 as are in hell, save by on waye —  
 that one shall have an end.

The excruciating pains of purgatory and of hell were, in Church teachings, identical; the only difference was that the former were only "for a certain term".

That one difference, of course, was crucial, but the Catholic Church — and especially, it seems, the English Catholic Church — laid a heavy emphasis upon the horrors of purgatorial torments, so that the faithful would be as anxious as possible to reduce the term they would have to endure. The intensity of the anguish is brilliantly represented in the greatest of English morality plays, *Everyman* (c. 1495), where God sends his agent Death to demand of the hero "a sure rekeninge/ Without delay or ony taryenge". Everyman frantically begs for time, for his "boke of rekeninge" is not ready, but Death will grant him only the briefest of

respites. Still, the interval is enough for the penitent to begin to scourge himself: "Take this, body, for the sinne of the flesshe!" The grotesque spectacle of a dying man scourging himself only makes sense in the context of a desperate, last-minute attempt to alter the "reckoning" by substituting penitential pain in this life for the far more terrible pain that lies ahead. "Now of penaunce I will wade the water clere," declares Everyman, intensifying his blows, "To save me from purgatory, that sharpe fire".

Everyman has thus narrowly escaped one of the worst medieval nightmares, a sudden and painless death. This nightmare, of course, is the fate that befalls Hamlet's father: the horror is not only the fact of his murder, at the hands of his treacherous brother, but also the precise circumstances of that murder, in his sleep, comfortable and secure. Old Hamlet's ghostly state is a grievous one — the term of his sufferings or their intensity vastly increased — because of the way he was dispatched, unprepared for death:

Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,  
 Unhouseled, dis-appointed, unaneled,  
 No reck'ning made, but sent to my account  
 With all my imperfections on my head.  
 O horrible, O horrible, most horrible! (1.5.76-80)

That he can speak of "imperfections" presumably means that his sins were not mortal; after all, he will eventually burn and purge away his crimes. But his inability to make a proper reckoning weighs heavily against him.

When he first encounters the apparition, Hamlet envisages only two possibilities for the ghost's origin:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,  
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape  
 That I will speak to thee. (1.4.19-23)

Nothing Hamlet says in the wake of his fateful exchange with his father's spirit explicitly acknowledges a third possibility, a middle state between heaven and hell. But there is, as scholars have observed, something strange about the terms of Hamlet's response to Horatio's remark, "There's no offense, my lord":

Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio,  
 And much offence too. Touching this vision here —  
 It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you. (1.5.140-43)

The assertion that the ghost is "honest" seems to mark Hamlet's acceptance of its claim that it has come from a place of purgation, and that acceptance may in turn be marked by the invocation — unique in Shakespeare's works — of Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Purgatory.

To this possible allusion we can add another, a few lines further on, that has not, to my knowledge, been noted. When Hamlet adjures his friends to take an oath that they will not reveal what they have seen, the ghost, from under the stage, cries "Swear". When they shift ground to a new position, the ghost once again cries out beneath them, and Hamlet asks, "*Hic et ubique?*" (1.5.162). The Latin tag here has never been adequately explained. The words obviously refer to restless movement, a certain placelessness, comparable to Roderigo's description of Othello as "an extravagant and wheeling stranger/ Of here and everywhere" (1.1.137-8). The use of Latin — besides suggesting that Hamlet is, like his friend Horatio, something of a scholar — may also convey a theological resonance, one evidently in Shakespeare's mind at the time that he wrote *Hamlet*. In *Twelfth Night*, a play of the same year, Sebastian, baffled by the appearance of his double, declares that there cannot be "that deity in my nature/ Of here and everywhere" (5.1.220-21). The words refer in jest to the divine power to violate the laws of physics, a power that became an issue in the Reformation in a dispute over the Lutheran doctrine of Christ's Ubiquity. If this resonance is present in *Hamlet*, as it well may be, the Prince's jest is deepened by a disquieting association of his father's ghost with the omnipresence of God.

But I believe that there is a further theological resonance to these words, specifically relevant to Purgatory. Traditional Catholic ritual in England included a prayer to be recited for the dead who had been laid to rest in the churchyard:

*Pro quiescentibus in cimiterio.*

*O ratio*

*Deus, in cuius miseratione animae fidelium requiescunt; animabus famulorum famularumque tuarum omnium, hic et ubique in Christo quiescentium, da propitius veniam peccatorum, ut a cunctis reatibus absoluti, tecum sine fine laetentur. Per Dominum.*

The point is not only that such prayers for the dead make use of the key phrase *hic et ubique* but also that they are specifically connected to a

belief in Purgatory. In *The Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England* (1607), the Protestant Thomas Rogers, ridiculing this connection, quotes the Papal indulgence from the Sarum *Horae Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*: "Pope John the Twelfth hath granted to all persons, which, going through the churchyard, do say the prayer following, so many years of pardons as there have been bodies buried since it was a churchyard". The prayer begins "*Avete, omnes animae fideles, quarum corpora hic et ubique requiescunt in pulvere*" ("Hail all faithful souls, whose bodies here and everywhere do rest in the dust"). In the context of the Ghost's claim that he is being purged, and in the context too of Hamlet's invocation of Saint Patrick, the words *hic et ubique*, addressed to the spirit who seems to be moving beneath the earth, seems to be an acknowledgment of the place where his father's spirit is imprisoned.

The famous problem, of course, is that by 1563 the Church of England had explicitly rejected the doctrine of Purgatory. The twenty-second of the Thirty-Nine Articles declares that "The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God." There is then at least an implicit censorship built into the theatrical representation of the afterlife. It was possible to ridicule Purgatory, as Marlowe does in *Doctor Faustus*: when the invisible Faustus snatches food and drink away from the pope, the baffled Cardinal of Lorraine speculates that "it may be some ghost newly crept out of Purgatory to begge a pardon of your holinesse". As this and many similar moments in Tudor and Stuart drama bear witness, belief in Purgatory could be represented as a fantasy or a lie. But it could not be represented as a frightening reality. *Hamlet* comes closer to doing so than any other play of this period, but Shakespeare still only uses a network of allusions: "for a certain term," "burned and purged away," "Yes, by St. Patrick," "*hic et ubique*". Moreover, even were these allusions less cautiously equivocal, there remains a second famous problem: souls in Purgatory were saved. The fact that old *Hamlet* died suddenly and hence without time for Last Rites — "unhouselled, disappointed, unanelled" — left him with a heavy burden of earthly sins that had painfully to be burned away after death, but he could not possibly commit new sins. The trouble is that Purgatory, along with theological language of communion (houceling), death-bed confession (appointment), and anointing (aneling), while compatible with a Christian call for remembrance, is utterly incompatible with a Senecan call for vengeance.

My intention here is not to rehearse a long series of debates among Eleanor Prosser, Christopher Devlin, Miriam Joseph, Peter Milward,

Roy Battenhouse and others whose intricate arguments, for me at least, are not evacuated by the fact that they are doomed to inconclusiveness. I am concerned rather with the particular uses that Shakespeare made of the struggle between Simon Fish and Thomas More and its aftermath. Those uses are not necessarily direct. Two chantry acts — 1545 (Henry VIII's last Parliament) and 1547 (Edward VI's first Parliament) — resolved that struggle by abolishing the whole elaborate Catholic intercessory system, with its chantries, lights, obits, anniversaries, confraternities, stipendiary priests, and the like, with which English men and women had done suffrages for the sake of the dead in Purgatory and in anticipation of their own future condition as dead people. The brief reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor evidently did little to revive this system, and it is extremely difficult to gauge the extent of residual belief in Purgatory among the great mass of English men and women at the century's end. In the funeral service in the first Edwardian prayer book (1549), the dead person was still directly addressed: the priest is instructed to cast earth upon the corpse and to say, "I commend thy soule to God the father almyghty, and thy bodye to the grounde, earth to earth, asshes to asshes, dust to dust". In the 1552 revision, which was later confirmed by Queen Elizabeth and used throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, the words have changed decisively. The dead person can no longer be addressed. Instead, the priest says to the bystanders around the grave, "We therfore committe his body to the ground, earth to earth, asshes to asshes, dust to dust". These are the words that anyone in late sixteenth and seventeenth century England would have heard. Yet the continued outpouring of polemical literature, reviving the old arguments of Fish and More and rehearsing them again and again throughout the reigns of Elizabeth and James, suggests that the boundary between the living and the dead was not so decisively closed.

It is possible that Shakespeare's sensitivity to the status of the dead was intensified by the death in 1596 of his son Hamnet (a name virtually interchangeable with Hamlet in the period's public records) and still more perhaps by the death of his father John in 1601, the most likely year for the writing of *Hamlet*. When, in April 1757, the owner of Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon decided to retiling the roof, one of the workmen, described as of "very honest, sober, and industrious character", found an old document between the rafters and the tiling. The document, six leaves stitched together, was a profession of faith in fourteen articles, conspicuously Catholic in form; it was, if genuine (for the original has disappeared), by John Shakespeare. The clear implication of this find, that the playwright was probably brought up in a Roman Catholic household in a time of official suspicion and

persecution of recusancy, has found support in a recent biographical study by E. A. J. Honigmann. Honigmann has turned up a network of interlinked Catholic families in Lancashire with whom one "William Shakeshafte," possibly a young schoolmaster or player, was connected in the late 1570s or early 1580s.

Shakespeare, in any case, is likely to have encountered *A Supplication for the Beggars*, since it was reprinted in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1546), a copy of which was placed, by government order, in every church in the realm. Shakespeare also may well have read More's *Supplication of Souls*. Like the Ghost of old Hamlet, More's poor souls cry out to be remembered, fear the dull forgetfulness of the living, disrupt the corrupt ease of the world with horrifying tales of their sufferings, lament the remarriage of their wives. But all of this and more Shakespeare could have got from texts other than More's or from his own not inconsiderable imagination. Rather, these works are sources for Shakespeare's play in a different sense: they stage an ontological argument about spectrality and remembrance, a momentous public debate, that unsettled the institutional moorings of a crucial body of imaginative materials and therefore made them available for theatrical appropriation.

To grasp the significance of this unsettling, let us return to Fish's pamphlet. Like Tyndale's New Testament, *A Supplication for the Beggars* was first printed on the continent and smuggled into England. Probably as a tribute to government persecution during the chancellorship of Thomas More, only one copy of this edition is known to survive, but inclusion in *Acts and Monuments* assured the widest circulation. Foxe provides a brief account of Fish's life, conveniently omitting More's claim that before his death Fish "repented himself, and came into the church again, and forswore and forsook all the whole hill of those heresies out of which the fountain of that same good zeale sprang". After he reprints Fish's *Supplication*, Foxe glances briefly at More's answer "under the name and title of the poore sely soules pewlyng out of Purgatory". Foxe does not undertake in this place to refute More's theology; instead he ridicules his art.

More makes the dead men's souls, Foxe writes, "by a Rhetoricall *Prosopopoea*, to speake out of Purgatory pynfolde, sometymes lamentably complayning, sometymes pleasauntly dalying and scoffing, at the author of the Beggars booke, sometymes scoldyng and rayling at hym, callyng him foole, witlesse, frantike, an asse, a goose, a madde dogge, an hereticke, and all that naught is". Foxe wryly speculates that so much testiness must be the result of the heat in Purgatory, and he professes to be concerned that the souls' lack of charity may bring them to hell rather than to heaven. He confesses, however, that he is not after all terribly

concerned, for he does not think there is any such place as "Purgatory at all (vnlesse it be in M. Mores Vtopia) as Maister Mores Poeticall vayne doth imagine". "Unless it be in M. More's Utopia": Purgatory, as Hugh Latimer had sardonically remarked in a sermon preached in 1536, is a "pleasant fiction". More precisely, it is, in Foxe's account, a no-place, a piece of poetry with no more claim to reality than More's famous imaginary commonwealth. Elsewhere Foxe will speak of the Pope's conspiracies and cunning frauds, but not here. All of the passionate claims to remembrance, the institutional structures, the dogmatic elaborations by sophisticated theologians, the popular superstitions, the charges of heresy, the indulgences, the confraternities and masses and chantries, the tales of ghostly apparitions: all are for a moment at least deposited not in the realm of lies but in the realm of poetry.

The rhetorical advantage of this polemical game is that Foxe can proceed to play not the committed ideologue but the judicious critic. Quintilian had written of the figure *propopoeia* that it "gives both variety and animation to eloquence in a wonderful degree", so that it is "allowable even to bring down the gods from heaven and evoke the dead". But, he warned, "our inventions of that sort will meet with credit only so far as we represent people saying what it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may have meditated". Hence, in Foxe's account of *The Supplication of Souls*, More, "the authour and contriuer of this Poeticall booke", should be censured "for not keypyng Decorum Personae, as a perfect Poet should haue done". "They that geue preceptes of Arte," Foxe explains, "do note thys in all Poeticall fictions, as a speciall obseruation, to foresee and expresse what is conuenient for euery person, accordyng to hys degree and condition, to speake and vtter." Therefore, he continues, if by More's own account the souls in Purgatory are made clean and wholesome by their sufferings, then he should not have depicted them railing "so fumishly" against their enemies. They should, after all, be on their way to becoming more charitable, not less.

The point here is not to make a serious argument against Purgatory — that has been done by many, he notes, including John Frith — but to make fun of it, to expose it to ridicule. More had tried to exploit horror, fear, and guilt; Foxe tries to blow these away with laughter. Indeed he proposes to treat *The Supplication of Souls* as a comedy. "It maketh me to laugh," he writes, "to see ye mery Antiques of M. More" whose devil arrives in Purgatory "laughyng, grynnynge, and gnashyng his teeth". But then he begins to worry about those teeth: how could the evil angel, "beyng a spirituall and no corporall substance" have "teeth to gnashe & a mouthe to grynne?" And where exactly, he wonders, was More standing to see the devil open his mouth so wide that the souls of Purgatory

all saw his teeth? It must, he decides, have been in Utopia "where M. Mores Purgatorye is founded".

This polemical performance seems very far indeed from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which probes precisely the fears, longings, and confusions that Foxe attempts to ridicule. The Ghost comes from Purgatory bemoaning 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. He tells Hamlet not to let "the royal bed of Denmark be/ A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.82-83) but then warns his son not to taint his mind or let his soul contrive anything against his mother. Hamlet receives the most vivid confirmation of the nature of the afterlife, with its "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" (1.5.3), but then, in a spectacular and mysterious act of forgetting, speaks of death as the "undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns" (3.1.81-82). These are the kinds of representational contradictions that Foxe mercilessly mocks. To notice, publish, and circulate them throughout the realm is to declare that key theological principles and emotional experiences cannot hold together and that the institution that generated them is bankrupt, worthy only of contempt and laughter.

But in *Hamlet* the same contradictions that should lead to derision actually intensify the play's uncanny power. And it is precisely Foxe's comedy that helped make Shakespeare's tragedy possible. It did so by participating in a violent ideological struggle that turned negotiations with the dead from an institutional process governed by the church to a poetic process governed by guilt, projection, and imagination. Purgatory exists in the imaginary universe of *Hamlet*, but only as what the suffering prince, in a different context, calls "a dream of passion" (2.2.554). Indeed there is a striking link between Hamlet's description of the player who

in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his whole conceit  
 That from her working all his visage waned,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit (2.2.554-559),

and the Ghost's description of the effect that his tale of torment would have on Hamlet:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,  
Thy knotty and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end  
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine. (1.5.15-20)

The link is the astonishingly palpable physiological effect of spectral fiction, dream, tale: "And all for nothing" (2.2.559).

Of course, within the play's fiction, Hamlet does not know that Purgatory is a fiction, as the state-sanctioned church of Shakespeare's time had declared it to be. On the contrary, he is desperate to establish the veracity of the Ghost's tale — "I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound" (3.2.274-75), he exults after the play-within-the-play — and hence to establish that the Ghost is in reality his father's spirit and not the devil. But this reality is theatrical rather than theological; it can accommodate elements, such as a Senecan call for revenge, that would radically undermine church doctrine. At the same time, it can offer the viewer, in an unforgettably vivid dream of passion, many of the deep imaginative experiences, the tangled longing, guilt, pity, and rage, evoked by More.

Not all forms of energy in Shakespeare's theater, of course, have been transferred, openly or covertly, from the zone of the real to the zone of the imaginary. Plays can borrow, imitate, and reflect much of what passes for everyday reality without necessarily evacuating this reality or exposing it as made-up. But the power of Shakespeare's theater is frequently linked to its appropriation of weakened or damaged institutional structures. And at a deep level there is something magnificently opportunistic, appropriative, absorptive, even cannibalistic about Shakespeare's art, as if poor, envious Robert Greene had sensed something more important than he knew when he attacked the "upstart crow, beautified with our feathers". In the case of Purgatory, important forces had been busily struggling for decades to prepare the playwright's feast. And the struggle did not end with the performance of the play or the playwright's death.

In 1624, a year after the publication of the First Folio, John Gee, a staunch Protestant who confesses that he had once himself been tangled in the Jesuits' subtle nets, published a book called *New Shreds of the Old Snare*. Gee relates a series of incidents during the past three years in which Jesuits have tried to convert young women to Catholicism, to induce them to flee to the continent and join nunneries, and to lure them to give their money to the Catholic Church. To achieve their

cynical ends, "the thrice honourable Company of Iesuites, Players to the Popes Holiness," turn "heaven and holy things" into "Theatrical and fabulous tricks". Their principal device is to stage mysterious apparitions: with a burst of light, "a woman all in white, with countenance pale and wanne, with long tresses of haire hanging downe to her middle" appears before an impressionable young woman and declares that she has come from the torments of Purgatory. The young woman is told that she can avert these same torments after death if she is "Nunnified". In a related trick, the apparition — "a shape like vnto a woman all in white: from her face seemed to come little streames of fire, or glittering light" — declares that she is St. Lucy, urging the wealthy woman to whom she appears to follow her holy example by giving away her worldly wealth to the priests and joining a convent.

Gee takes it upon himself to dispel the illusion which is not, as some think, the result of witchcraft but rather of theater. The mysterious light, he explains, can be produced by "Paper Lanthornes or transparent Glasses" enhanced by the "artificiall directing of refractions". The acting can be done "by some nimble handed and footed Nouice Iesuitable Boy, that can as easily put on the person of St. Lucy or The virgin Mary, as a Play-boy can act winged Mercury, or Eagle mounted Ganimedes". The key thing is to understand that the Jesuits are a gifted troupe of actors. "I see no reason," Gee writes, "but that they should set up a company for themselues, which surely will put down The Fortune, Red-Bull, Cock-pit, & Globe."

But then, as if he has had second thoughts about their chances for success in the competitive world of London theater, Gee considers three problems with their performances. First, he observes, "the plots of their Comedies twang all vpon one string". It is as if they own a single costume and can imagine only one character: "none comes in Acting but A Woman, A Woman, A Woman, arrayed in white, white, white". In a repertory company performing daily, the device will quickly lose its force. Still, if you are seeing it for the first time, it is, Gee concedes, an impressive show.

The second problem is the more serious one of a failure to observe decorum, the logical and representational contradictions that Foxe had enjoyed observing in *More*. The Poet, Gee observes, makes an obvious blunder by sending a ghost in a white robe "from the smoakie burning Kitchen of Purgatory". Surely that robe should have been scorched. But to this and similar incongruities, Gee counters, with mock generosity, that after all "the Poet kept within his Circle. For he well knew that deepe passions, especially affright and astonishing admiration, doe for the time bereaue and suspend exact inquiring discourse". Once you

regard the apparition as performance and not as truth, you can dispense with anxiety on the score of incoherence and admire the calculation of a powerful psychic and somatic effect.

The third problem is the most serious: quite simply, "they make their spectators pay to[o] deare". Gee had explained how the Jesuits managed to get the astronomical sum of 200 Pounds with just one of their victims; that is, he soberly observes, a very dear market price for what is actually being purchased:

Representations and Apparitions from the dead might be seene farre cheaper at other Play-houses. As for example, the Ghost in Hamblet, Don Andreas Ghost in Hieronimo. As for flashes of light, we might see very cheape in the Comedie of Piramus and Thisbe, where one comes in with a Lanthorne and Acts Mooneshine.

"As for example, the Ghost in Hamblet": this extraordinary remark goes to the heart of the process I have been describing. With the doctrine of Purgatory and the elaborate practices that grew up around it, the Church had provided a powerful method of negotiating with the dead, or rather with those who were at once dead and yet, since they could still speak, appeal, and appall, not completely dead. The Protestant attack on the "middle state of souls" and the middle place those souls inhabited destroyed this method for most people in England, but it did not destroy the longings and fears that Catholic doctrine had focussed and exploited. Instead, 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 is approaching four hundred years, and it has brought with it a cult of the dead that we are serving at this moment.

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