

Shakespeare's Ghosts

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## SHAKESPEARE'S GHOSTS.

THE dramatic ghost, whose progress through the pre-Shakespearean drama has already been traced<sup>1</sup>, underwent, at the hands of Shakespeare himself, considerable modification. Whereas, in the plays of his predecessors, the ghost was a mere machine, a voice mouthing vengeance, it now became endowed with personality. The Shakespearean ghost, as Lessing declared in a memorable passage of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, is 'eine wirklich handelnde Person.' It is 'no longer a phantom roaming in the cold, evoked from Erebus to hover round the actors in a tragedy, but a spirit of like intellectual substance with these actors, a parcel of the universe in which all live and move and have their being<sup>2</sup>.' In accomplishing this change, Shakespeare stripped the ghost of its 'foul sheet' and 'leather pilch,' and arrayed it in the garb which it had worn before mortality had been put off; while, for the gibberings of the tortures of Tantalus in which the earlier Senecan ghosts had taken delight, he substituted the ghost-beliefs current in England in his own time. Nor was this all. In making the ghost more human, Shakespeare, at the same time, gave to it a spiritual significance of which his predecessors had but a very faint conception. The Shakespearean ghost is at once the embodiment of remorseful presentiment and the instrument of divine justice.

The ghost seems to have fascinated Shakespeare already at the outset of his career. There are several references to ghost-lore in *Henry VI*, while in his early love-tragedy, *Juliet*, after the tidings of Tybalt's death have been brought to her, exclaims,

O, look ! methinks I see my cousin's ghost  
Seeking out Romeo, that did spit his body  
Upon a rapier's point.

Act IV, sc. iii.

With the appearance of *Richard III*, ghosts take their place among the actors of the play. In making the ghosts of Richard's victims

<sup>1</sup> See *Modern Language Review*, January, 1906 (I, 89 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Symonds, *Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama*, London, 1884.

confront him in his sleep on the eve of Bosworth Field, Shakespeare was following the suggestions of his predecessors. Thus in Segar's story of the 'tragical life and death of Richard III' in *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1563), the unhappy king declares:

I thought that all those murdered ghosts, whom I  
By death had sent to their untimely grave,  
With balefull noise about my tent did crie,  
And of the heav'ns with sad complaint did crave,  
That they on guiltie wretch might vengeance have:  
To whom I thought the Judge of heav'n gave eare,  
And gainst me gave a judgment full of feare<sup>1</sup>.

In *The True Tragedie of Richard III* the same thought reappears:

*Richard.* Meethinkes their ghoasts come gaping for revenge,  
Whom I have slaine in reaching for a Crowne;  
Clarence complaines and crieth for revenge.  
My Nephues bloods, Revenge, revenge, doth crie.  
The headlesse Peeres come preasing for revenge.  
And every one cries, let the tyrant die<sup>2</sup>.

Shakespeare goes beyond the author of the *True Tragedie*, and substitutes dramatic action for narrative. He makes the ghosts actually appear, and places words on their lips. These ghosts of Richard's victims are Senecan in character, in that they are represented as spirits of vengeance, but they depart from Seneca's manner in making absolutely no reference to the under-world of classic mythology. For all this, Shakespeare substitutes a superstition drawn from native ghost-lore; at the ghosts' approach, Richard tells us, 'the lights burn blue.' Moreover, these ghosts are something more than spirits of vengeance. They are conceived by Shakespeare as the instruments of that primeval, amorphous power of Nemesis which will not let the criminal triumph in his wickedness, but demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In so early a tragedy as Cinthio's *Orbecche*, 'Nemesi, Dea,' appears in the list of *dramatis personae*; in Shakespeare's plays there is no goddess called Nemesis, but as an unseen force, guiding the issues of the drama, her influence makes itself felt again and again. The ghosts of Richard's victims are forces which sap his courage: he sees in them the voices of a 'coward conscience,' and they send him to the fight with Richmond unnerved and unmanned. The appearance of the ghosts to Richmond is a further development of the Nemesis idea. Shakespeare drew no warrant for this from his sources, but felt that the words of good cheer which the ghosts utter to

<sup>1</sup> Higgins's *Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Haslewood, 1815.

<sup>2</sup> *The True Tragedie of Richard III*, ed. Barron Field (Shakespeare Society Publications).

Richmond were the needful complement to the message of woe which they bring to Richard.

In the plots of the comedies and histories of Shakespeare's middle period there is no ghostly intervention. That Shakespeare, however, still recognised the dramatic value of ghost-lore is proved by occasional references to it in these plays. Thus the disconsolate Richard II, talking of 'graves and worms and epitaphs,' would fain tell his followers sad stories of the death of kings :

How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed ;  
Some poison'd by their wives ; some sleeping kill'd ;  
All murdered.

*Richard II*, Act III, sc. ii.

Again, in 2 *Henry IV*, Lady Percy, reproaching Northumberland for his neglect of Hotspur at the battle of Shrewsbury, exclaims :

Never, O never, do his ghost the wrong  
To hold your honour more precise and nice  
With others than with him !

Act II, sc. iii.

But the ghost is primarily a tragic figure, and it is, accordingly, to Shakespeare's tragedies that we turn to find the character and function of the Shakespearean ghost fully developed.

The ghost of Julius Caesar that appears to Brutus in his tent at Sardis makes a greater demand upon our credulity than those of Richard's victims. The latter, though by the playwright's licence they are seen and heard by the spectators, are, like the ghost of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, sleep-phantoms ; the ghost of Caesar, on the other hand, appears to Brutus as he is reading in his tent. Yet there is much to show that Shakespeare permits us to regard this ghostly visitation as the hallucination of an overwrought mind ; for no sooner does Brutus recover from the trepidation into which the ghost's sudden appearance has cast him, than it vanishes :

*Brutus*. Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. [*Exit Ghost*.  
Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.  
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

Act IV, sc. iii.

In *Julius Caesar*, as in *Richard III*, Shakespeare found in his sources the suggestion for ghostly intervention, and subjected the borrowed idea to characteristic and significant modification. In Plutarch's *Life of Brutus* the story of the ghost is as follows : ' So, being ready to go into Europe, one night very late, as he was in his tent with a little light, thinking of weighty matters : he thought he heard one

come in to him, and casting his eye towards the door of his tent, that he saw a wonderful strange and monstrous shape of a body coming towards him, and said never a word. So Brutus boldly asked What he was, a god or a man, and what cause brought him thither. The spirit answered him, I am thy evil spirit, Brutus: and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippi. Brutus, being no otherwise afraid, replied again unto it: Well, then I shall see thee again. The spirit presently vanished away, and Brutus called his men unto him, who told him that they heard no noise, nor saw anything at all.' Neither here, nor in Plutarch's account of the conversation as to the meaning of the apparition which Brutus holds with Cassius on the following morning, is there any suggestion that the 'wonderful strange and monstrous shape of a body' is the ghost of the murdered Caesar. This is Shakespeare's addition, and in making it, he brings the scene into line with that of *Richard III*; in either case, it is the ghost of the murdered man appearing to the murderer. He retains Plutarch's words, 'I am thy evil spirit, Brutus,' but, in the light of the fact that the ghost is Caesar's ghost, these words acquire a new and bodeful significance. The spirit of Caesar is the embodiment of Brutus's sense of the failure and impending ruin of his cause. There is, accordingly, a sinister meaning in the ghost's declaration that Brutus shall see him again at Philippi, and Brutus himself informs us that its reappearance is regarded by him as a token that his hour is come:

The ghost of Caesar hath appear'd to me  
Two several times by night, at Sardis once,  
And this last night here in Philippi fields:  
I know my hour is come.

Act v, sc. v.

The points of affinity which the ghost of Banquo bears to that of Caesar prompt me to take it out of its chronological order and consider it here. Unlike Shakespeare's other ghosts, it is the pure creation of his genius, without support from his sources. A ghost is demanded in *Macbeth* by virtue of the peculiar constitution of the ghost-seer's mind. The hectic imagination of the Celtic chieftain, which conjures up the air-drawn dagger and the voice crying, 'Sleep no more, Macbeth doth murder sleep,' evokes by inward necessity the ghost of the murdered Banquo. The reality of this ghost is scarcely impaired by the fact that it utters no words. It is silent, just because, to one of Macbeth's temperament, silence is far more appalling than speech; indeed, when Macbeth, summoning up courage, bids it speak, it vanishes away. Yet it cannot, I think, be doubted that Shakespeare, to use the

phrase of Professor Bradley, 'meant the judicious to take the Ghost for an hallucination.' Its two appearances synchronise exactly with the expression of Macbeth's hypocritical wish that 'our dear friend Banquo' were present; its first exit, as just noticed, falls in with Macbeth's bold summons to it to speak, and its final exit with his command,

Hence, horrible shadow !  
Unreal mockery, hence !

It is, of course, visible to the spectators, but so also are the sleep-phantoms of *Richard III*. The ghosts of Richard's victims are the figments of a coward conscience: the ghost of Caesar is the embodiment of Brutus's sense of the egregious mistake he has made in slaying Caesar, and of the approaching overthrow of republicanism. In like manner, the ghost of Banquo is the outcome of the play of Macbeth's frenzied imagination upon his deep sense of insecurity. Here, too, we are prompted to see in the ghost the agent of the dread power of Nemesis, and as such it is a powerful instrument to bring about Macbeth's ruin. In spite of Lady Macbeth's heroic endeavours to shield her husband, the suspicions of the Scottish lords are aroused—how deeply aroused we learn from Lennox's intensely ironical speech almost immediately afterwards.

The ghost of the 'majesty of buried Denmark' stands on a different footing from that of Shakespeare's other apparitions. Of its reality there can be no question. It is not the ghost of a murdered man appearing to his murderer in the hour of sleep, or in moments of nervous excitement; for it is seen, not by the murderer, but by the minister of vengeance, as well as by disinterested persons like Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus. Horatio has 'fortified' his ears against belief in the story of the ghost, but no sooner does it appear on the castle platform than all doubts as to its reality are swept for ever from his mind.

We have already seen that Shakespeare, in his employment of ghostlore, breaks entirely loose from the Senecan convention of placing a ghost in an atmosphere of classic myth. Even when we stand, as in *Julius Caesar*, on classic soil, we are confronted with the beliefs of Elizabethan England, not those of antiquity. The ghost of Caesar tells us nothing of the tortures of Tartarus, but at its approach Brutus's taper burns dimly. It is, however, in *Hamlet* that Shakespeare makes by far the fullest use of the belief in ghosts current in his own day, and to the nature of this belief we must now turn our attention.

In discussing this matter, a distinction must first of all be drawn between the popular ghost-lore of England and that secondary ghost-lore which the theologians of the Middle Ages had constructed out of these popular beliefs. That the ghosts of criminals, suicides, or murdered persons, walked the earth after death, that they sometimes entered into compacts with the living, that they appeared at midnight and 'faded on the crowing of the cock,' and that at their approach the lights grew dim—all this is a part of a primitive ghost-lore common to most European nations. In these primitive beliefs the Church of the Middle Ages found substantial support for its doctrine of a purgatorial state and for inculcating the duty of offering up masses for the souls of the dead. A very clear illustration of the Church's use of ghost-lore is furnished by the medieval verse romance, *The Awntyrs of Arthure at the Tarne-wathelan*<sup>1</sup>, in which the ghost of Guinevere's mother appears to Guinevere and Gawayne, describes, amongst other things, the pains of Purgatory, and declares,—

Were thrithë trentes of masse done  
Betwyx vndur and none,  
My saule were socurt ful sone,  
And broȝte vn-to blys.

The association of ghost-lore with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church brought the whole matter very prominently before men's minds at the time of the Reformation. Mr T. A. Spalding has, in his *Elizabethan Demonology*, drawn attention to the polemics of catholics and protestants on the ghost question, as well as to the light which these polemics throw upon the Elizabethan drama. He quotes passages from the writings of Archbishop Parker and Bishop Hooper, and also from the *Demonologie* of King James, as illustrations of all this. A study of the Parker Society volumes reveals, indeed, the fact that the question of the nature and origin of ghosts was, at the time of the Reformation, one of considerable moment. The reformers, recognising that there was scripture warrant for the belief in ghosts, never ventured to question the reality of ghostly visitations. Their contention, however, was that ghosts were not the spirits of dead men, but manifestations of the devil. Cranmer in England and Bullinger in Switzerland argue this point at great length, and add force to their arguments by quoting Tertullian and Chrysostom to the same effect. That the discussion was a protracted one, is shown by King James's absorption in it in his *Demonologie*, and by the fact that to the

<sup>1</sup> Edited by Robson (Camden Society Publications), 1842.

1665 edition of Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* there was added an appendix, entitled 'A Discourse concerning Devils and Spirits,' dealing at some length with the question of the nature of 'astral spirits.' While theologians disputed, the ghost enjoyed a popularity such as it had never known before. We have seen something of its vogue in the Elizabethan drama; it occupied a distinguished place in the non-dramatic poetry of the time, and forced an entrance even into the popular chap-books. Thus, when the anonymous author of *Ratsey's Ghost* (1605) essayed to relate the highway robberies of the newly hanged Gamaliel Ratsey, he found it necessary to encase the whole story in an elaborate framework of ghost-lore.

The most elaborate treatment of this theological ghost question is that furnished by the Swiss protestant reformer, Louis Lavater, in his work, *De Spectris, Lemuribus...*, published at Zürich in 1570, of which an English translation, with the title, *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Night*, appeared in London in 1572. So direct is the bearing of this work upon the ghost scenes of *Hamlet*, that some detailed examination of its contents seems desirable. Writing from the strictly protestant standpoint, Lavater acknowledges the existence of spirits, and declares 'to whome, when, where, and after what sort spirits do appear and what they do work.' They appear 'especially in the night, and before mid-night in our first sleep,' being chiefly found 'in the fieldes where battels have been fought,' in places of execution, in woods, or in the 'ruins and rubbish of castles.' Such spirits show themselves 'in sundry sort, sometimes in the shape of a man whome we know, who is yet alyve or lately departed; otherwhiles in the likenesse of one whom we knowe not.' In the second Part of his work he declares at full what is the Popish doctrine concerning such spirits. The Papists declare that they come from Purgatory, and are permitted to walk the earth for a season, 'for the instructing and terrifying of the lyving.' They maintain that these spirits 'do not appeare nor answeare unto every mans interrogatories, but that of a great number they scantlie appeare unto one.... And yet they hold that no curious, unprofitable questions shold be demanded of the spirit except he wold of his own accord revele and open them. And yet it wer best that sober persons shold thus question with him on some holy day before diner, or in the night seson, as is commonly accustomed. And if the spirite will shewe no signe at that tyme, the matter shold be deferred unto some other season, untill the spirite woulde shewe hymselfe agayne.... And farther they say that we neede not to feare, that the spirit would do any bodily hurte unto that



persone unto whome it doth appeare. For if such a spirit would hurte any, he might justlie be suspected that he were no good spirit.' The Roman doctrine as to the duty of relieving such spirits is declared a little further on: 'They teach that it is an horrible and heynous offence, if a man give no succoure to such as seeke it at his hands, especially if it be the soule of his parents, brethren or sisters.' Having set forth the Romish doctrine, Lavater proceeds to demolish it, and to show that these visions and spirits are 'not the souls of dead men as some men have thought,' but 'either good or evill Angels,' and quotes from Scripture and the Fathers to show that the devil has 'power to appeare under the shape of a faithfull man.'

Without going so far as to consider Lavater's work the source whence Shakespeare drew the ghost-lore of his *Hamlet*, it will, I think, be allowed that the dramatist was profoundly interested in this dispute of the theologians, and that many of the doctrines set forth by the Swiss protestant find an echo in his tragedy. He makes use of the Reformation ghost question, both to furnish his ghost-scenes with an atmosphere which should take the place of that mephitic air of Tartarus through which the Senecan ghost moved, and also to throw fresh rays of light upon the character of Hamlet. When confronted with the catholic and the protestant doctrine as to ghosts, Shakespeare at once chooses the former—a choice which in no sense proves him to have been a catholic. To have represented the ghost of the dead king as the devil, or as anything but 'an honest ghost,' would have brought the whole play toppling down like a pack of cards. Yet Hamlet, on the ghost's first appearance to him in I, iv, adopts a distinctly protestant standpoint:

Be thou a spirit of health<sup>1</sup> or goblin damn'd,  
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
Thou comest in such a questionable shape  
That I will speak to thee.

Act I, sc. iv.

But then, feeling the insufficiency of the protestant dogma, he falls back upon the catholic, and adds:

I'll call thee Hamlet,  
King, father, royal Dane: O, answer me.

In the conversation between Hamlet and the ghost in the following scene, the latter, knowing the instability of Hamlet's mind, emphasizes

<sup>1</sup> Most editors interpret 'spirit of health' as 'healed or saved spirit.' The phrase, however, clearly means 'good angel,' and the verse falls at once into line with the protestant doctrine that the spirits that walked the earth were either good or evil angels.

the fact that he is, in very truth, confronted by his father's spirit, now doomed to fast in purgatorial fires, until the crimes done in his days of nature are purged away, and able, if such things were but permitted, to unfold a tale of the horrors of purgatory which would harrow up Hamlet's soul and freeze his blood. Such a declaration sweeps from Hamlet's mind every doubt as to the nature of the ghost; he places implicit trust in its story and takes upon his shoulders the heavy burden of vengeance. The subsequent development of the action shows how necessary it was for the ghost to make its identity absolutely clear to Hamlet. For the latter, shrinking from action, ever striving to place new obstacles between himself and the deed of vengeance, seeks in protestant doctrine a covert to which he may flee to escape from the call of duty:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil.

Act II, sc. ii.

In suffusing the ghost-scenes of *Hamlet* with the 'local colour' of catholic and protestant doctrine, Shakespeare had accomplished only half of his purpose. There still remained the task of bringing out the personality of his ghost, and of representing it as a moral and intellectual being, capable of enlisting the spectator's sympathy. The necessity for this was all the greater from the fact that, whereas the spectator is acquainted with Banquo and Julius Caesar and Richard's victims as living beings before they appear as ghosts, the death of Hamlet's father precedes the opening of the play. The first impression that the ghost makes upon us, as it appears to Horatio and the others in the first scene, is that of a great warrior king. It moves across the stage with martial stalk; its armour of complete steel is that in which the dead king had conquered and slain old Fortinbras of Norway. Its fair and warlike form is so majestic that Marcellus recognises the wrong of offering it a show of violence. On its reappearance in I, iv, we still see the majesty of buried Denmark, but also the gracious solicitude of the father. It waves Hamlet aside with courteous action, and, while enjoining upon him the sacred duty of vengeance, is also concerned for his spiritual well-being. Knowing only too well that guilt must be burnt away by the fierce fires of purgatory, its strict injunction to him is, 'Taint not thy mind.'

But far more striking than the ghost's fatherly solicitude for Hamlet is the tenderness and love which it shows to the queen. Gertrude may, or may not, have been guilty of robbing her husband of life, but she

had certainly robbed him of honour while life was still his<sup>1</sup>. Yet he had loved her with a love

of that dignity  
That it went hand in hand even with the vow  
I made to her in marriage.

This love still endures, and his strict command to Hamlet is—

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.

On the ghost's reappearance in III, iv, this love and tenderness flame forth anew. Hamlet has ignored his father's injunction not to contrive against his mother, and, at the moment when the 'gracious figure' of the ghost appears, he is stabbing her to the heart with reproaches, until, in agony of soul, she cries:

O, speak to me no more;  
These words like daggers enter in mine ears;  
No more, sweet Hamlet.

With a tender regard for Gertrude's feelings, the ghost makes itself invisible to her. The object of this visitation, as Hamlet knows full well, is to whet his almost blunted purpose; but no sooner does the ghost see the mental suffering which Gertrude is enduring, than it quietly puts aside self-interests, and, moved by chivalrous solicitude for her welfare, bids Hamlet relieve her poignant thrills of agony:

But look, amazement on thy mother sits;  
Oh, step between her and her fighting soul;  
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works;  
Speak to her, Hamlet.

Act III, sc. iv.

The ghost remains upon the scene a little longer, listens to the words which Hamlet speaks to his mother, and gazes upon wife and child with eyes so full of pity that Hamlet fears lest they may 'convert my stern effects,' and call forth tears where blood should flow. At last, seeing that Gertrude has won a certain mastery over the tortures of her mind, and without further reference to its own most pressing needs, it silently steals through the portal. Thus, for the gibbering ghost of Senecan tragedy, Shakespeare offers us the warrior king, the gracious father, and the husband who bears with him to the abode of spirits a love for a faithless wife which has triumphed over crime and dishonour and death.

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<sup>1</sup> See I, v, 41 f., and Prof. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 166.