DISCERNING THE GHOST IN HAMLET

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T

HE GHOST in Hamlet is essential to the plot of the play and to an understanding of both the problem of Hamlet and his character. Therefore it is not surprising that it has engaged the close study of critics who offer various and conflicting interpretations.

Spurred by an article by his friend W. W. Greg who maintains that the ghost and all his words are nothing but a figment of Hamlet's overwrought brain, J. Dover Wilson in his reply asserts not only that the objectivity of the ghost is established by its appearance to four different characters who see it but also that these four persons represent three differing points of view concerning apparitions expressed in theological controversies of the time: Marcellus and Barnardo exhibit the traditional Catholic view expounded by Pierre Le Loyer (1586) that a soul might come to earth from purgatory; Horatio displays the skeptical attitude of Reginald Scot (1584), who flatly denies that spirits can assume material form and thereby appear to men; Hamlet expresses the Protestant view of Ludwig Lavater (1570) and King James I (1597) that ghosts, though they might be angels, are generally devils who assume the appearance of the departed.

Roy W. Battenhouse holds that the ghost comes from a pagan hades or a Christian hell, that although he mentions the sacraments, they are to him mere shells in which he does not believe, and that his words reveal him as having a vindictive and vainglorious character incompatible with that of a saved soul.

Replying to Battenhouse, whose article was in part a reply to his own earlier work in which he maintains that the ghost comes from the purgatory of Catholic doctrine, the late Monsignor I. J. Semper cogently counters:

The Ghost pays a moving tribute to the last sacraments, and hence to assert that he merely "mentions" them is to be guilty of understatement. Moreover, on the supposition that the Ghost is pagan, why should he even mention them? A "dumbed spirit" from the infernal regions of the ancient classical world who mourns because he died without receiving the last sacraments of the Catholic Church does not make sense... a figure... utterly preposterous...

Robert H. West remarks that although he knows of no scholar who has argued in detail that the ghost is a devil, most of the points Battenhouse urges for a pagan ghost could serve about as well to support the devil theory. West summarizes the weak element in each theory, as he sees it, and as it might have confronted Shakespeare, had he wished to make his ghost consistently either a devil, a paganistic ghost, or a Catholic ghost.

First, of course, if he wanted the apparition understood to be a devil, he must have eliminated the ghost's concern for Gertrude... Pneumatology attributes many slights to devils, but never the disdain of prescribing Christian forbearance... Or, if he wanted us to recognize it as a ghost from a paganistic purgatory, he must have eliminated its words on Catholic last offices. Or, finally, if he wanted it regarded it without impediment as a saved Christian soul acting as an instrument of God's wrath and justice, he must have eliminated the ghost's personal vindictiveness.

West concludes that Shakespeare deliberately chose to make the nature of the ghost ambiguous, chose to mix the evidence, in order to keep the audience a little uncertain, and thereby to give the apparition dramatic impact and vitality (p. 1111). Although Shakespeare knew contemporary thought on spirits, West thinks he did not wish to establish in Hamlet any such clear rationale as Marlowe does in Doctor Faustus (p. 1110).

I

I wish to propose a rationale of spirits that has the advantage of even more dramatic impact than West's thesis of deliberate ambiguity, because it holds together the alternatives of hallucination, the devil, and a good spirit in one case.
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theory in which inherest essentially the most intense dramatic suspense. Thus while it poses a problem in the play, as it sometimes did in life itself, this rationale furnishes a key to the solution. Agreeing with Wilson that there are three views, it regards them as successive views of the investigator, not separate views of separate and opposing schools of thought. Wilson quotes evidence for the theory I propose but without being aware of it.

I propose the theory of the discernment of spirits, which goes back at least as far as Apostolic times, and I hope to show that the text of Hamlet furnishes evidence that Shakespeare knew and used it as the rationale for discerning the ghost.

In his first epistle, St. John warns the Christian people: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 Jn. 4:1; cf. 6). And St. Paul lists among the diverse gifts of the Spirit of God “the distinguishing of spirits” (1 Cor. 12:10). The discernment of spirits is a doctrine that has received due attention in the Christian Church since the beginning. It prescribes an investigation of the three basic possibilities by successive steps to determine the nature of a spirit: Can a natural explanation, such as 1) delusion or hallucination caused by faulty apprehension of the senses or illness or a too lively or disordered imagination, account for the appearance or the occurrence under consideration? If natural causes must be ruled out and yet the reality, the objectivity of the phenomenon cannot be denied, it is preternatural and must be produced by either 2) an evil spirit, or 3) a good spirit, by God acting either directly or else indirectly through a holy angel or through a sanctified human spirit.

These three steps are stages in elimination in the process of reaching the truth in a given instance. The same mind holds these views as alternatives to be rigorously tested, the second to be considered only after the first has had to be rejected, the third only after the second has had to be eliminated. This systematic procedure represents a healthy scientific caution, even a skepticism, that yields only to sound evidence. Practical necessity through nearly two centuries has many times required the application of this procedure to particular instances. Its inherent suspense suggests the advantages of adapting it to drama. Semper does not explicate this theory but he accepts it implicitly and lists the possibilities to be tested by it. Commenting on Wilson’s interpretation that Hamlet’s words in l.ii.244–246 and l.iii.40–44 show him to be a disciple of Lavater, Semper asserts: “These lines do not bar the interpretation that Hamlet speaks as a Catholic who believes that apparitions may be angels, saints, souls from Purgatory, or devils, and who in his determination to face the Ghost envisages the worst possibility.”12 Similarly Le Loyer, whom Wilson quotes (p. 83), warns against the worst possibility. “Since the Souls do not appear so often as do Angels and Demons, it is necessary to examine diligently the Souls which appear, to discern if they are truly Souls or if it is an ambush of the enemy of the human race” [italics mine].

Semper thinks it likely that Shakespeare derived his ghost-lore not from Lavater, Scot, and Le Loyer, as Wilson suggests, but from two popular books widely available in his time, The Supplication of Souls by Sir Thomas More (1529, reprinted 1537) and The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine (1275, trans. Caxton 1483, reprinted 1527), a book which “in Shakespeare’s youth [was] still living about in house-1 See summary in Pope Benedict XIV, “De Servorum Dei Beatificati, et Beatorum Canonizati,” Opera Omnia (Praet, 1840), ii, 594–614. Also the Catholic Encyclopedia, in, 589; v. 28; xlv, 477 f. These summaries draw from Scripture, St. Athanasius’ Life of St. Anthony (c. 270–356; Migne, Patrologia Graeca, xxxvi), St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard’s XXXIII Sermon, works of St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, St. Catherine of Siena, Gerson, Suarez, etc. The discernment of spirits is applied also to the movements of nature and of grace, as described in Rom. vii. 19–25 and in The Imitation of Christ, Bk. iii, Ch. liv; cf. Hamlet, l.v.53–57.
2 Cf. Eph. vi. 11–12; 1 Cor. xi. 14; 1 Pet. iv. 13; St. Martin resisted the devil when he appeared in the form of Christ. (Migne, Patrologia Latina, xx, 174.)
3 Cf. Acts ix. 3–5; 1 Cor. xii. 4; Gen. xlv. 1–4.
4 Cf. Lk. i. 11, 26; Mt. i. 20; Acts xii. 7–11.
5 Cf. the Voices of St. Joan of Arc; I Sam. xxviii. 11–25. St. Thomas Aquinas comments: “That the devil appears to the living in any way whatever is either by the special dispensation of God; in order that the souls of the dead may interfere in affairs of the living; and that is to be accounted miraculous. Or else such apparitions occur through the instrumentality of bad or good angels, without the knowledge of the departed; . . . And so it may be said of Samuel that he appeared through Divine revelation; according to Eccles. xlv. 23, ‘he slept, and told the king the end of his life.’ Or, again, this apparition was procured by the demons; unless, indeed, the authority of Ecclesiastics be set aside through not being received by the Jews as canonical Scripture? (Summa Theol. i, q. 89, a. 8 ad 2). "The weight of both Jewish and early Christian commentators seems to give an affirmative answer to the question: Did Samuel’s spirit really appear? . . . It was God rather than the witch who summoned Samuel to make clear the connection between Saul’s present misfortunes and past sins? (A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scriptures, New York, 1953, p. 317). Cf. Benedict XIV, p. 572.
6 "Hamlet" without Tears, p. 35.
holds which favoured the old religion.” Semper observes: “The truth is that most of the theology in Hamlet could have been gleaned from... The Golden Legend... with its exposition of Purgatory, with its allusions to St. Patrick as the keeper of a purgatory, with its apparitions produced by the devil, and even with a purgatorial ghost on a mission of divine justice” (p. 40).

II

The ghost in Hamlet is a dramatic success because 1) the four men who see him (and the audience with them) become intensely interested in his appearance; 2) he reveals major antecedent events otherwise undiscoverable which become the essential spring of the action; 3) Hamlet's delay in obeying the ghost's command is adequately accounted for if, as I hope to demonstrate, Shakespeare shows by minutest details which are dramatically convincing that the ghost is being tested (including the play-test) by the group of men who see him in accordance with the procedure for the discernment of spirits outlined above.

The first judgment expressed in the play concerning the apparition is the prescribed first hypothesis that it is a delusion. Marcellus tells Barnardo:

Horatio says 'tis but our fancy,
And will not let belief take hold of him
Touching this dreadful sight twice seen of us.
(1.1.23; ed. C. J. Sisson)

Properly doubting its nature, yet quite naturally harrowed “with fear and wonder” when he himself sees the apparition, Horatio asks, “What art thou, that apparition so fair and warlike form... of buried Denmark?... by heaven I charge thee speak” (46). The ghost disappears, and Barnardo, noting that Horatio is pale and trembling, asks, “Is not this something more than fancy?” (54). Moved by the experience, Horatio declares solemnly:

Before my God, I might not this believe,
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes. (56)

Thus he rejects his appropriate first hypothesis that his companions had been deluded by fancy, that is, by a phantasm of their imaginations. He now regards the apparition as objective and therefore as preternatural, but he suspends judgment as to its nature: “In what particular thought to work I know not” (67). Horatio does not disbelieve in the possibility of a ghost appearing, as his comments on alleged appearances of the dead indicate (113-120), but, like any healthy-minded person who does admit this possibility, he doubts any alleged instance until he has adequate evidence such as his present experience. He notes in detail the resemblance of the apparition to the dead king. He realizes, however, that it has “not a real but a phantasmal body” and is consequently, as Marcellus discovers by striking at it vainly with his sword, “as the air invulnerable” (145). Therefore when the apparition returns, Horatio bids it, “Stay illusion” (127). Considering now that it must be either an evil spirit or a good one, he takes a recommended precaution against the worse of these two remaining possibilities, making the sign of the cross as he courageously steps forward saying, “I'll cross it, though it blast me” (127). Yet with an open mind as to its nature whether evil or good, Horatio asks the apparition three questions which were thought to be reasons why a spirit might return from the dead: 1) to ask that some good thing be done to ease the spirit; 2) to warn his country to avoid impending danger; 3) to reveal where exorted treasure is hidden so that its restoration may ease the spirit (130). Just then the cock crows and the silent ghost disappears.

Horatio is the spokesman when the three witnesses report the apparition to Hamlet. And now Horatio ventures the opinion that it was the dead king who appeared: “I think I saw him yesternight” (1.1.189). All eagerness, Hamlet begs, “For God’s love let me hear” (195). Horatio obliges with vivid details of the apparition and the effects on the witnesses “distilled almost to jelly with... fear” (205), and he ends with the most impressive detail asserting resemblance: “I knew your father; / These hands are not more like” (211). The fact that the three men saw the apparition and agreed in detail establishes its objectivity. Hamlet decides to join them that night. Like Horatio, he recognizes danger in the encounter because it may be an evil spirit, but he will face it.

14 Quoted ibid., p. 18, from an unsigned review in the London Times Literary Supplement, 9 Jan., 1930, p. 24, of J. Dover Wilson's edition of Leaves Lavater's Of Ghosts and Spirits walking by Night (1929). John Shakespeare, the poet's father (not the Stratford shoemaker), was listed among recluses in Stratford. There is therefore a strong probability that he was a Catholic; Shakespeare's mother was of a Catholic family and his upbringing was consequently probably Catholic. See J. H. de Groot, The Shakespeareans and The Old Faith (New York, 1916), pp. 253, 10, 14, 100-110, 120. It may be worth noting, too, that Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, belonged to a Catholic family.

15 Le Loyer, quoted by Wilson, p. 67.
If it assume my noble father's person,  
I'll speak to it though hell itself should gape  
And bid me hold my peace.  

(244)

When he first sees the apparition on the fourth night it appears Hamlet utters a prayer (i.iv.39) and then addresses it in words that explicitly state the doubt that he properly entertains, since it is preternatural, as to whether it is good or evil. The alternatives he mentions are rightly two, because he must determine whether the apparition, established now as clearly objective but transcending ordinary nature, is evil or good. Only after that is determined would the subdivisions of evil such as devil or damned soul, or the subdivisions of good such as angel or saved soul with the further subdivisions of soul in heaven or soul in purgatory be considered. Although he explicitly states and re-states the alternatives evil or good (40-42), the resemblance to his father inclines Hamlet to regard the apparition tentatively as good. "I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane—o answer me" (44).

Marcellus, like Hamlet and Horatio, is also doubtful whether the apparition is good or evil. Although he remarks on its courteous action in beckoning Hamlet, he earnestly warns him, "But do not go with it" (62). Horatio immediately echoes the warning more insistently and with more detail: the spirit may lead Hamlet to fall from the cliff into the sea; or he may assume some horrible form and drive him to madness (70). Horribly shaken (55), yet ready to risk imminent death as long as he does not risk salvation, Hamlet insists on following the apparition.

Why, what should be the fear?  
I do not set my life at a pin's fee,  
And for my soul, what can it do to that  
Being a thing immortal as itself?  
It waves me forth again. I'll follow it.  

(64)

Marcellus and Horatio seize Hamlet, who cries, "Unhand me, gentlemen" (84), wrenches himself free, and follows the ghost.

How could a dramatist better arouse intense suspense and engage the audience in the burning question as to whether the spirit is good or evil or more emphatically convey to them that that is the question?

When Hamlet is alone with him, the apparition testifies who he is and what is his condition.

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)

The spirit claims to be the soul or ghost of Hamlet's father. The words I have italicized indicate that he is undergoing temporary punishment for sins, that he is being cleansed or purged by fire; in other words that he is a soul from purgatory. After the ghost has departed, Hamlet assures Horatio: "by Saint Patrick . . . / It is an honest ghost, that let me tell you" (136). As has been pointed out, 17 Hamlet here significantly invokes Saint Patrick, who, as keeper of a purgatory on an island of Lough Derg in Ireland, was regarded in legends of the later Middle Ages as an outstanding witness to the existence of purgatory.

This is the first judgment of the ghost as good, not evil, expressed in the play. Hamlet is convinced that he is an "honest ghost," and is therefore what he claims to be, his father's spirit come from purgatory and consequently a good spirit. The vivid experience of seeing the ghost and hearing his words has convinced Hamlet of the ghost's honesty and goodness just as personal experience had convinced first Marcellus and Barnardo and then Horatio that the apparition was a reality, and not a fantasy. Spontaneous conviction is normal in the presence of such experience. But it is normal also, sometime after the experience, for doubt to return, as it does to Hamlet. Concerning the doubts that arise after a preternatural experience, St. Teresa of Avila writes, mentioning the three possible causes of the experience—imagination, the devil, God: "It may be some time since [the soul] heard the words; and both their working within him and the certainty which it had at the time that they came from God have passed away. So these doubts arise, and the soul wonders if the whole thing came from the devil, or can have been the work of the imagination. Yet at the time it had no such doubts and it would have died in defence of their veracity." As is to be expected, then, Hamlet's doubts return, and he must proceed

15 Shakespeare uses the word purgatory in R & J, iii.iii.18 and in Oth. v.iii.77. Shakespeare's own belief in purgatory is no more involved than is his belief in fairies in MND. Cf. Marlowe in Doctor Faustus (iii.172): "My lord, it may be a ghost, newly crept out of Purgatory, come to beg a pardon of your Holiness."

16 See Scmper, "The Ghost in Hamlet," p. 231, with reference to The Golden Legend and Froissart's Chronicles; Wilson, p. 80, with references to the review mentioned in n. 14 above, to OED, and to books by T. Wright and by O'Connor.

17 Interior Castle, Sixtii Mansion, Ch. ii, Complete Works, tr. and ed. E. Allison Peers, 11, 281 f.
further with the second step in the discernment of spirits by getting evidence more reliable than his initial spontaneous conviction. After approximately two months he finds a means to obtain human evidence that Claudius is guilty and the ghost true.

The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea and perhaps, ...
Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds
More relative than this—the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

(n.ii.627)

The “more relative” grounds to test the spectral evidence are to be sought through reason. Hamlet therefore earnestly asks Horatio, to whom he has meanwhile revealed the ghost’s message, to observe independently the reaction of Claudius to the play so as to make sure of the truth by a double check. His delay until he gets the answer is morally necessary and adequately justified. If the king does not reveal his hidden guilt, Hamlet must conclude that it was “a damned ghost” that wrought in him “imagination... As foul / As Vulcan’s stieth” (iii.ii.98), imaginations that Claudius is a murderer, in order to impel him to action that would damn his soul.19

When the king, unable to endure the scene Hamlet had devised to “test him to the quick” (n.ii.626), rushes out, Hamlet is convinced that he is guilty, and he checks his own judgment with Horatio’s.

Ham. O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Hor. Very well, my lord.

(n.ii.297)

Hamlet has taken the second step in discerning this spirit and he concludes to the satisfaction of his own mind and conscience that the ghost is not an evil spirit. From this point on, having eliminated the second possibility, he holds implicitly to the third, that the ghost is a good spirit, who told the truth about his own identity and about the crime of Claudius (cf. iii.iii.76).

Whether or not we think the test is adequate, it is dramatically clear that the human evidence of the king’s guilty reaction to the scene and talk of the poisoning corroborates the ghost’s revelation, allays Hamlet’s reasonable doubts and proper conscientious scruples, and convinces him that the ghost is trustworthy.

I believe it is fair to assert that the ghost scenes of Hamlet conform in detail to the centuries-old Christian teaching concerning the discernment of spirits, which was current in Shakespeare’s time.

This rationale not only accounts for the attitudes of all four witnesses but it possesses the dramatic advantages of both unity and suspense inherent in the successive steps it prescribes.

III

Do the details the ghost gives of his abode and his condition indicate that he is a soul come from the purgatory of Catholic belief, as Wilson and Semper hold?

The ghost claims to be the spirit of Hamlet’s dead father undergoing punishment “for a certain term... till” his “soul crimes... Are burnt and purged away” (iv.10). Semper points out that the very words italicized are found in The Golden Legend: “They that be middle good, be they that have with them something to be burnt and purged.”20 The ghost also says that he suffers from “sulphurous and tormenting flames” (3). This accords with the description of a suffering soul as presented in Sir Thomas More’s The Supplication of Souls: “Finally, if ye pity any man in pain, never knew ye pain comparable to ours; whose fire as far passeth in heat all the fires that ever burned upon earth, as the hottest of all those passeth a seignior fire painted on a wall.”21 Dante, too, expresses the intensity of pain from the fire in purgatory: “I would have flung me into molten glass to cool me, so immeasurable there was the burning” (xxvii.49–51). In expounding the doctrine of purgatory, St. Thomas Aquinas is less emphatic. “In Purgatory there will be a twofold pain; one will be the pain of loss, namely the delay of the divine vision, and the pain of sense, namely punishment by corporeal fire. With regard to both the least pain of Purgatory surpasses the greatest pain of this life” (italics added).22

Where is purgatory located? St. Thomas answers: “Nothing is clearly stated in Scripture about the situation of Purgatory... It is probable, however, and more in keeping with the statements of holy men and the revelations made to many, that... the place of Purgatory is situated below and in proximity to hell, so that it is the same fire which torments the damned in hell and cleanses the just in Purgatory; although

19 For the impact of the disjunctive syllogism implicit here see my Shakespeare’s Use of the Aris of Language (New York, 1947), p. 186.
20 Quoted from Caxton’s translation, vi, 124, in “The Ghost in Hamlet,” p. 224.
21 Quoted loc. cit.
22 Summa Theologiae, III, Appendix 1, q. 2, a. 1. Originally in IV Sententiarum, dist. 21, q. 1, a. 1, sol. 3.
the damned being lower in merit, are to be consigned to a lower place” (III, App. 2, q. 1, a. 2). It is obvious that the ghost’s remarks about the horrors of his “prison-house” (14–22), which he is forbidden to reveal, do not go beyond theological doctrine.

The ghost says that he is expiating “foul crimes” (12) and “imperfections” (79). Translated into theological terms, his words intimate that he is expiating not only the temporal punishment still owed after mortal sin has been repented and its guilt absolved (implying true contrition and confession) but also venial sins, which, unlike mortal sins, do not destroy charity. St. Thomas succinctly explains the doctrine: “there is a Purgatory after this life. For if the debt of punishment is not paid in full after the stain of sin has been washed away by contrition, nor again are venial sins always removed when mortal sins are remitted, and if justice demands that sin be set in order by due punishment, it follows that one who after contrition for his fault and after being absolved, dies before making due satisfaction, is punished after this life” (Ibid., a. 1).

Battenhouse asserts (p. 190) that the “sacraments are no more than shells to” the ghost. On the contrary, the main burden of the ghost’s lament is that he was deprived of the benefit of the customary three last sacraments administered to the dying, namely, penance or confession (of which he was disappointed), communion, called holy viaticum when received at the point of death (he was unhoused), and extreme unction or the last anointing (he was unanointed). The ghost devotes one line (75) to the three-fold but minor loss he suffered from death itself. This is followed by a five-line crescendo concluding with his major spiritual loss, his dying in venial sin,

sent to my account
With all my imperfections on my head—
O horrible! O horrible, most horrible! (78)

In view of the intense suffering of purgatory, the ghost had cause to lament a deprivation that both increased and lengthened his sufferings. St. Thomas describes the effects of dying in one’s sleep which are relevant to the ghost’s lament. Actual sin, even if it be venial, is not remitted without an actual movement of contrition, . . . however much the latter be in the habitual intention. Now it happens sometimes that a man dies in his sleep, being in a state of grace and yet having a venial sin when he went to sleep: and such a man cannot make an act of contrition for his venial sin before he dies . . . venial sin in one who dies in a state of grace is remitted after this life by the fire of Purgatory: because this punishment so far as it is voluntary, will have the power, by virtue of grace, to expiate all such guilt as is compatible with grace. (III, App. 1, q. 2, a. 4)

Battenhouse thinks the ghost resents having to pay for his sins and this suggests that he comes from hell, not purgatory (p. 164). There is, however, a significant moral difference between the attitude that resents and the attitude that laments. St. Thomas explains the latter attitude toward punishment as appropriate and voluntary.

The remission of venial sin proceeds from the will informed by grace, which will be in the separate soul in Purgatory. (Ibid., ad 2)

A thing is said to be voluntary in two ways. First, by an absolute act of the will; and thus no punishment is voluntary, because the very notion of punishment is that it be contrary to the will. Secondly, a thing is said to be voluntary by a conditional act of the will: thus caution is voluntary for the sake of regaining health. Hence a punishment may be voluntary . . . when, although we gain no good by the punishment, we cannot obtain a good without being punished, as in the case of natural death: and then the will does not undertake the punishment and would be delivered from it; but it submits to it, and in this respect the punishment is said to be voluntary. (Ibid., a. 2)

We may fairly conclude then that nothing the ghost says about his abode or his punishment, which is increased by his death in sleep and consequent deprivation of the sacraments customarily administered to the dying, is incompatible with his status as a saved soul temporarily suffering the fire of purgatory until he be cleansed and admitted to heaven.

IV

What is the moral character of the ghost as revealed by his own words?

Because of what he says of himself and his brother the ghost has been charged with self-praise and personal vindictiveness incompatible with the characteristics of a saved Christian soul. I believe such a view overlooks profound differences between a living man and the soul of a dead man, between a man in time seeking the truth and a soul in eternity knowing the truth. In my opinion, the ghost who impersonally

So great is the importance attached to the last sacraments that a priest will risk his life to administer them to the dying. In The Power and the Glory, Graham Greene represents even a priest weak in virtue responding to such a call although he had strong reason to suspect it was a trap, as it proved to be.
silences his son's pity for his sufferings (5) and is now enlightened as to truth and holiness can without vanity but with frank objectivity and balance speak of his own virtue (47-50) as well as his own sins (12, 76, 79); and without personal vindictiveness, he can narrate his brother's sins of seduction and murder (42-46, 50-52, 28, 59-75). It is important to notice that lines 53-57 are not only metaphorical but general and a fortiori concerning the sin of lust, not referring to particular persons or facts. Battenhouse curiously overlooks this point when he asserts that the ghost speaks of himself as a radiant angel, his bed as celestial, his brother as garbage (pp. 170f., italics mine).

The most humanly appealing characteristics of the ghost and the two that convince West that he is a good spirit are his tenderness and Christian forbearance toward his "most esteemed virtuous queen" (46). He strictly forbids Hamlet to let his soul contrive aught against her. He trusts to the thorns of repentance and the designs of heaven to restore her (85-88). Later he begs Hamlet, "O step between her and her fighting soul!" (iii. iv. 113).

Shakespeare, is, of course, writing not a treatise, but tense and effective drama. While preserving by deft, economical strokes his essential character as a saved Christian soul from purgatory, he makes the ghost the dramatic agent who tells Hamlet and the audience in a vivid, impressive scene antecedent events necessary for them to know. Shakespeare's audience had a built-in readiness to accept ghosts, as West has noted, for the dramatist needed only to remind "the audience that apparitions were a subject of current and serious experience and speculation and that anybody might find himself confronted with one. [For example], Dr. Dee... and the Earl of Derby" (p. 1115).

Why might a soul from the dead appear to the living? St. Thomas writes: "according to the disposition of Divine providence separated souls sometimes come forth from their abode and appear to men, as those who are detained in purgatory, nor would it be fitting for them to leave their abode for any purpose other than to take part in the affairs of the living" (III, Supplement, q. 69, a. 3).

The Golden Legend tells of a ghost who came not to ask for prayers, but to announce the judgment of God on a relative who by betraying his trust had lengthened the soul's sufferings in purgatory: "there was a noble knight that... prayed one that was his cousin that if he died in battle, that he should sell his horse and give the price thereof to poor people. And he died, and that other desired the horse and retained it for himself. And a little while after, he that was dead appeared to that other knight, shining as the sun, and said to him, Cousin, thou hast made me to suffer pain eight days in purgatory, because thou gavest not the price of my horse to poor people, but thou shalt not escape away unpunished. This day devils shall bear thy soul to hell" (vi, 127). Consequently, in medieval legend Shakespeare could have found a precedent for his ghost coming as a messenger sent by God to announce a judgment on the living. It may be observed that in this legend the ghost does not explicitly state that he is a messenger sent by God, but the idea is implicit. Any mind instructed in doctrine, tradition, or legend, would clearly apprehend 1) that a soul from purgatory could not come without God's permission and 2) that, being a soul confirmed in grace, he could not speak anything but the truth or give a command to the living unless it conformed to the will of God.

The ghost in Hamlet reveals the otherwise undiscoverable fact that Claudius murdered his brother, and he commands Hamlet, "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (i.v.25). As we have noted, Hamlet tested the apparition, and after seeing his story corroborated by human evidence of his uncle's guilt, he concluded that he was not an evil spirit, but a good spirit who told the truth. Thereupon, Hamlet, whose conscience would not permit him to obey the ghost's command until he was convinced that the command came from a good messenger, regards it as morally just, for he is now relieved of his agonizing doubt (III.ii.627-633; cf. I.iv.65-67); his conscientious question is answered (III.ii.297).

But can the ghost's command to revenge be morally just? St. Paul warns, "Do not avenge yourselves, beloved,... for it is written, 'Vengeance is
mine; I will repay,' says the Lord' (Rom. xii.19; Deut. xxxii.35). But how will God repay evildoers? In this life, through rulers, his ministers, as St. Paul explains: "there exists no authority except from God. . . . For it is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who does evil" (xiii.1, 3, 4). The motive that justifies the killing of an evildoer is, as St. Thomas teaches, the common good: "if the health of the whole body demands the excision of a member, through its being decayed or infectious to the other members, it will be both praiseworthy and advantageous to have it cut away. Now every individual person is compared to the whole community, as part to whole. Therefore if a man be dangerous and infectious to the community, on account of some sin, it is praiseworthy and advantageous that he be killed in order to safeguard the common good, since 'a little leaven corrupteth the whole lump' (I Cor. v. 6; II-II, q. 64, a. 2). Except for the appended authority quoted from Scripture, this argument is based on reason alone.

I wish at this point to consider the morality of the ghost's command from three points of view: the moral situation as grounded on reason, the legal aspect, and the special command.

If it is true that Claudius murdered his brother, where in Denmark is the authority that comes from God? Who in Denmark is God's minister to punish with retributive justice this regicide, to cut away the infection that threatens to corrupt the whole community? Surely not Claudius. He is the infectious member that must be cut away for the health of the whole body politic. Shakespeare has been at pains to communicate to his audience through his imagery a vivid realization of the infection. "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (i.v.90). On the ruler "depends / The safety and health of this whole state" (iii.ii.21); yet the ruler is the "mildewed ear" (iii.iv.64), the "canker" (v.ii.69) from which corruption and poison both literally and figuratively spread.26

The authority that St. Paul says is God's minister to punish evildoers cannot reside in the man who won the throne by murder. One cannot win a right with wrong.27 Claudius has disqualified himself, for he lacks a condition necessary to make him God's deputy, as William Baldwin prescribes it in The Mirror for Magistrates (1563 edition): "For whatsoever man . . . is by the consent of the whole realm established in the royall seat, so it have not bene iniustiously procured . . . is undoubtedlye chosen by God to be his deputie" (italics added).28 If reason demands that the state protect the common good by punishing a murderer, much more does it demand that the murderer be punished when he corrupts the very seat of government itself.29 Although the king of Denmark is elected by the nobles from among members of the royal family, we gather that he (and the king of England also) is an absolute monarch whose will is law and who directly exercises power over life and death (v.ii.18–25). He is the state. How then can he be punished? In whom does the authority from God really reside? Surely in Hamlet.

Hamlet had good reason to expect to be king. Although the crown in Denmark was not strictly hereditary, he would undoubtedly have succeeded his father, who had the latter lived his full, natural time, for he would very likely have named as his successor his son, as Hamlet named Fortinbras (v.iii.366); the electors, it is assumed, would respect the expressed choice. Hamlet says, Claudius "Popped in between th' election and my hopes" (65). Had his father's life not been cut off by violence, he would have been older and better qualified to rule. From the situation itself the throne is morally vacant and we may conclude that Hamlet is morally the rightful ruler, the presumptive heir, the one in whom according to custom and reason, the authority from God really resides and that Claudius is the arch-criminal whom the true ruler of the state should cut away.

There is, moreover, a further, legal basis whereby Hamlet may regard himself as right-
fully king. In his first speech from the throne Claudius publicly and formally named Hamlet heir to the throne, prefixing the announcement with “let the world take note” (i.ii.108; cf. iii.ii.356). Since the throne is morally vacant, although this fact is not publicly known, Hamlet is in truth the legal ruler in whom the authority from God resides and through whom God’s minister the divine prerogative may be verified: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” says the Lord.

Hamlet has a third reason, a special and explicit one, to regard himself as having authority from God to punish the murderer and cleanse Denmark. If the ghost is a good spirit, as Hamlet is satisfied he is after the play-test, he could not come without God’s permission, and as a saved soul confirmed in grace he could not command Hamlet to do evil. The command he brings can only come from God, the sole master of life and death. Is there a precedent for such a special command? Yes. In Exodus, to which Shakespeare alludes seventeen times in his plays, we read that Moses communicated to those who stood with him on the Lord’s side God’s command to kill those who had worshipped the golden calf. “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Put your sword on your hip, every one of you! Now go up and down the camp, from gate to gate, and slay your own kinsmen, your friends and neighbors! The Levites carried out the command of Moses, and that day there fell about three thousand of the people” (xxvili.27). Commenting on this passage, St. Thomas, who states in principle that private individuals cannot lawfully put evildoers to death, admits this as a special exception: “those who, at the Lord’s command, slew their neighbors and friends, would seem not to have done this themselves, but rather He by whose authority they acted thus: just as a soldier slays the foe by the authority of his sovereign, and the executioner slays the robber by the authority of the judge” (xi-li, q. 64, a. 3 ad 1; my italics). In addition, then, to his moral and legal claims to regard himself as genuinely the ruler with authority from God, Hamlet has also a special command from God brought by a good spirit whereby it can be morally just for him even as a private individual to kill the designated evildoer as the executioner of the Lord’s will.

There is, however, an essential difference between acting as a privately commissioned executioner and seeking private revenge. There is Scriptural warrant for the former and invariable moral prohibition of the latter. Furthermore the ghost explicitly attaches to the command a qualifying condition forbidding the sin inherent in private revenge: “howsoever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind” (i.ii.84). How might Hamlet taint his mind and thereby vitiate an act in itself justifiable? St. Thomas points out precisely how a tainted mind may make personally sinful an act of justice whether it be carried out by a public or a private agent.

Vengeance consists in the infliction of a penal evil on one who has sinned. Accordingly, in the matter of vengeance, we must consider the mind of the avenger. For if his intention is directed chiefly to the evil of the person on whom he takes vengeance, and rests there, then his vengeance is altogether unlawful: because to take pleasure in another’s evil belongs to hatred, which is contrary to the charity whereby we are bound to love all men. Nor is it an excuse that he intends the evil of one who has unjustly inflicted evil on him, as neither is a man excused for hating one that hates him. (n-n, p. 108, a. 1)

As Battenhouse clearly realizes, if “Taint not thy mind” forbids private revenge, as Semper thinks, it would cut this Ghost off from all his prototypes, from the whole Aeschylus-to-Kyd tradition of ghost-inspired revenge (p. 166). Yes, this ghost is unique. There is only a superficial resemblance between him and the traditional revenge ghost and between this play and the traditional revenge play. To Battenhouse’s question “Is ‘Taint not thy mind’ at all equivalent to St. Paul’s ‘Let all be done in charity’ (I Cor. xvi.14)?” I answer yes, for, as St. Thomas clearly implies in the passage last quoted, the just avenger who does not taint his mind by hatred of the person he punishes, does not act contrary to the charity whereby we are bound to love all men; rather he shows charity on a high level by safeguarding the common good.

What evidence does Shakespeare give that the ghost is seeking the public good? He gives evidence that repeatedly impresses the witnesses and the audience. The ghost appears in armor, in his public capacity as king and protector of the state, and he is so understood. Seeing the “fair and warlike form” “with martial stalk” “portentous,” “so majestic” (i.ii.47, 66, 109, 143), Horatio concludes, “This bodes some strange

10 Cf. God’s command to Saul through an intermediary, Samuel, that he should slay all the Amalecites and spare none. Saul spared Agag, whom Samuel then slew, after telling Saul that the Lord rejected him for the sin of not killing all (I Sam. xv. 3, 9, 23, 33). Cf. I Cor. x. 8-11.
eruption to our state" (69). And Hamlet draws a similar inference: "Armed say you? ... My father's spirit—in arms—all is not well" (1.ii.226, 255). These details indicate that the ghost comes because of political wrong. He is concerned with the poison and corruption of Denmark in the very seat of majesty. "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown. ... Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (v.ii.39, 82). As G. Wilson Knight remarks, the ghost "urged Hamlet to avenge his own death ... for the sake of Denmark's life. ... The imperial honour of Denmark’s throne is primary in the ghost's command." It is significant, too, that Hamlet accuses his uncle, "He hath killed my King" (v.ii.64).

I believe that a careful study of the text of Hamlet shows 1) that the four witnesses test the apparition according to the three steps prescribed for the discernment of spirits; 2) that the abode of the ghost and his character fit descriptions of a purgatorial spirit in both doctrine and popular legend; 3) that the command of the ghost is just on three grounds—moral, legal, and special; 4) that the command is properly qualified. Immediately after Hamlet has resolved his doubt and become convinced through the play-test that the ghost’s revelation is true and his command just, he is morally free to fulfill the command, but he must not taint his mind. Does he fail to observe that condition? This is, in my opinion, the question on which hinges the tragedy, but that is the subject of another study, not this.

As Harold S. Wilson observes, the theatre-goer’s "impressions of the Ghost will be guided by what he sees and hears in the play itself." West remarks aptly:

In the last analysis all we have to go on is the dramatic impression derived from the best and quality of the play as a whole. ... Grant that the mousetrap does not entirely test the apparition, still out of the play’s whole tenor we are likely to feel that the ghost really is Hamlet’s murdered father. ... We thus naturally reject the devil theory. ... Grant, too, Battenhouse’s point that vindictiveness is not a suitable inclination in a purgatorial soul; we still feel that the ghost is Christian and from a Christian purgatory. We thus reject the theory of a pagan ghost from a pagan purgatory because, unlike Lear and The Tempest, Hamlet is a play of Christian men in a Christian time and place. (pp. 1116 f.)

I wish to add that it is fundamentally the dramatic impression which I derived from my experience of reading the play and seeing it acted that I have offered in this paper. I have, of course, sought and found the extrinsic support for it which I present. In its genesis, however, my interpretation depends on the play’s whole tenor as it affects a Catholic mind, which, if W. C. Curry and Lily B. Campbell are right about the Elizabethans, may have an affinity to the minds of Shakespeare and his contemporaries not generally suspected by modern critics.

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22 The Imperial Theme (London, 1931), p. 110.
24 Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns (Baton Rouge, La., 1959): Shakespeare seems “to have possessed a comfortable and accurate knowledge of the basic principles. ... Scholastic doctrine, transmitted by tradition, still persisted in the Renaissance mind as a heritage more or less unconsciously absorbed” (p. xi). Shakespeare was “acquainted not only with the current coin of scholastic terms but also with the traditional doctrines” (p. 23). The modern investigator “will mainly concern himself with clarifying for the modern mind ... those doctrines of the scholastic tradition which the artist has used in the externalization of his work of art” (p. 25). See also pp. 13–24. For Campbell, see n. 28 above.