

Hamlet, the Reformation, and the Spectre of the Unassuaged Father

Abstract

This essay takes as its starting point an observation of Carl Schmitt's: namely, that there is a taboo at the heart of Hamlet, a taboo which at once animates and obfuscates all that proceeds from it. Schmitt locates this taboo in the familial scandals of King James I and the religious schisms which accompanied them. Here, however, the current essay deviates. Rather than identifying the play's 'taboo' with the familial ruptures of James I specifically, it will be argued that the religious controversies of the age worked themselves perform into the most intimate aspects of all family life, transforming relationships among the living and the dead, and converging—after the death of the father—in the son's remembered image of that man. In short, the instructions and supplications of their Catholic forefathers placed on the younger, Protestant generation a duty which, under the current regime, they realised they could neither fulfill nor shirk in good conscience. This taboo—unutterable both at Elsinore and in the world of Elizabethan England—endows ghosts, purgatory, widowhood and 'maimed rites' with a significance which is otherwise mystifying.

Hamlet, the Reformation, and the Spectre of the Unassuaged Father

Are all our fathers lost?

—Nicholas Wyse, *A Consolacyon for Chrysten People to Repayre Agayn the Lordes Temple*

The first questions, according to Carl Schmitt, that occur to anyone watching or reading *Hamlet*, concern Gertrude and the death of her first husband, the King: ‘Was she aware of the murder? Did she even perhaps instigate it? Did she abet it?’¹ The question of the complicity of the Queen, Schmitt writes, ‘poses itself right at the beginning of the drama and cannot be dismissed throughout the entire subsequent course of events’.² Nevertheless, it is a question which remains unanswered. Why should this be so? According to Schmitt, we are here ‘confronted with a *taboo*,’ which compels Shakespeare to exclude the question of the guilt or innocence of the mother.³ He continues:

I can name this very concrete taboo. It concerns Mary, Queen of Scots. Her husband, Henry Lord Darnley, the father of James, was brutally murdered in February 1566 by the Earl of Bothwell. In May of the same year, 1566, Mary Stuart married this very Earl of Bothwell, the murderer of her husband. This was hardly three months after the murder.⁴

If Gertrude can be identified with Queen Mary, and King Hamlet with Lord Darnley, then King James can be identified with Prince Hamlet; and herein lies the source of the taboo. Out of consideration for James (the likely successor to the English throne and an ally of Shakespeare’s patron the Duke of Essex), Mary cannot be inculpated; out of consideration for Protestant England, whose population was sure of Mary’s guilt, exculpation, however, is proscribed.

The significance of this, for Schmitt, cannot be overstated. As a result of the taboo inscribed at the heart of the play, the plot of the drama ‘became unclear and inhibited’.⁵ The

¹ Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 11.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, p. 15.

⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

effect of this was to make the play ‘what it is for us today, that is, something entirely different from a typical revenge drama’:

The astonishing transformation of the typical avenger, the deformation and refraction in the character of the hero of a revenge drama, this entirely surprising turn towards weakness caused by reflection, only becomes comprehensible in the context of the historical situation of 1600-03, and through the central figure of these years, King James.⁶

In the immediate history of James’s family is written the record of the religious faultlines which divided Britain and Europe: the ‘philosophizing and theologizing King James embodied ... the entire conflict of his age, a century divided by belief and religious civil war’.⁷ This central and animating tension puts the play and the prince in a unique position: ‘Don Quixote is Spanish and purely Catholic; Faust is German and Protestant; Hamlet stands between them in the middle of the schism that has determined the fate of Europe’.⁸

In the biography of King James, Schmitt finds an explanation for the vexing question of the entrance—into the heart of the play—of the religious schisms of the Reformation and its aftermath. Certainly, such controversies could scarce be entirely avoided. In the lifetime of Shakespeare’s father alone (c. 1530-1601), the changes were dizzying and, to add to the confusion, often liable to revision. These developments—which, as will be argued, play so key a role in *Hamlet*—warrant the diversion of our attention, in preparation for the expansion and generalisation of some of Schmitt’s observations. It will be argued that there is indeed a taboo at the heart of *Hamlet*; that, yes, in *Hamlet* the play and in the prince, the religious conflict of the age does seem inscribed; and, yes, that this troubled confusion does seem to bear the form and imprint of the family. But ultimately we need not rely on King James and his parents to explain this. Indeed, it will be shown that the religious controversies of the age worked themselves perforce into even the most intimate aspects of family life, transforming relationships among the living as well as the dead, and converging, after the death of the father, in the son’s remembered image of that man: the significance of ghosts, of purgatory, of ‘maimed rites,’ and of remembrance, all play a part in this account.

The Reformation Context

⁶ Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 22.

⁷ Ibid, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid, p. 52.

Taking the lifespan of Shakespeare's father as a yardstick, one can begin to grasp how religious confusion might come to trouble even a normally orthodox Christian of the period. No more than five years might bring profound changes; as G. R. Elton notes, 'before 1529 no cleric in England (except a few heretics) doubted the papal claim to be, under Christ, supreme head of the church, even as none could assert this claim after 1534 without jeopardy of his life'.⁹ Within a single reign, the tendency of religious orthodoxy might meander between opposed poles; within the succession of reigns between that of the opportunistic and undecided Henry VIII and that of his great-grandnephew James I (whose own Danish wife converted to Catholicism)¹⁰ the religious mandates of the kingdom variously contradicted, supported and supplanted each other. Little leniency was granted on account of this vacillation; Queen Mary I's bloody regime has become a byword for religious oppression (and garnered her an unhappy nickname in perpetuity) but her Protestant relatives were hardly more clement: as Diarmaid MacCulloch notes, 'England judicially murdered more Catholics than any other country in Europe'.¹¹

G. R. Elton describes the tentative movement made under Henry VIII away from Catholic doctrine:

The signs were clear but by no means bright: there was to be some cautious drifting away from existing practices and beliefs, especially those which, depending on the doctrine of purgatory, were particularly obnoxious to the reformers. The Ten Articles of 1536, enforced by the vicegerent's Injunctions on clergy and laity, embodied this compromise: they 'lost' all sacraments except the three accepted also by the Lutherans (baptism, holy communion and penance) and cautiously adumbrated a growing hostility against the practice of praying for the dead.¹²

The development of reform under Henry's successor was less untroubled, and the boy king, Edward VI, was not aided by any adviser so adept as Henry's sometime vicegerent, Thomas Cromwell. Though Edward and the most powerful peers pursued a programme of zealous reform, the country at large seemed indifferent, and 'old forms of worship continued to be used in many parts where the clergy and the local magistrates had no joy in the innovations'.¹³ This meant that when Mary I suddenly came to the throne in 1553, it was not as difficult as might be expected to repeal the Henrician legislation establishing the monarch's dominion over the

⁹ Elton, 'The Reformation in England', p. 266.

¹⁰ MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, p. 371.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

¹² Elton, 'The Reformation in England', p. 275.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

Church, and to ‘beg the legate for the pope’s forgiveness’.¹⁴ No more than six years later, however, by the summer of 1559, Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity passed under Elizabeth I once again broke ties with Rome, re-established royal supremacy, and restored the Protestant Prayer Book to the Church of England.¹⁵ The effect of so much change, in little over twenty years, on the religious feelings of the men and women of England, can only be imagined.

Given, then, that such drastic changes occurred, it remains to be asked in what way these doctrinal matters concern *Hamlet*, and how, more specifically, they become entangled with familial relationships in the play. Purgatory in part provides the answer. As Eamon Duffy notes, purgatory may be regarded as ‘*the* defining doctrine of late medieval Catholicism,’¹⁶ a religious conceit whose demise in England has (in the words of Peter Marshall) ‘a good claim to be considered the most radical and complete of all the disjunctures brought about by Reformation in the sixteenth century’.¹⁷ First and foremost, purgatory was done away with for want of scriptural evidence.¹⁸ Before long the question of its existence was being regarded by Protestants as settled: James I dismissed the middle state of souls as ‘not worth the talking of’.¹⁹ And yet, despite this unambiguous, official, Protestant consensus, the ghost of King Hamlet (as has been extensively elaborated by Stephen Greenblatt)²⁰ repeatedly suggests that he dwells in that discredited anteroom to heaven.²¹

So much is already known. The thrust of this particular essay will lie in arguing that the instructions and supplications of their forefathers placed on the younger generation a duty which, under the current regime, they realised they could neither fulfill nor shirk in good conscience. This situation resulted in the remembrance of the father being subject to a polarised and bitter ambivalence—an ambivalence by which that father was alternately lionised and demonised from moment to moment. The effects of this ambivalence were not confined to the dead father: the world outside, which neglected and prohibited the traditional obligations towards the dead, was also liable to be regarded with an embattled scepticism, if not outright contempt. It is the foreclosure of purgatory—and with it intercession for the dead, and faith in the living’s close connection with the departed—which, in this analysis,

¹⁴ Elton, ‘The Reformation in England’, p. 285.

¹⁵ Elton, ‘The Reformation in England’, p. 287.

¹⁶ Quoted in Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 53.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 133.

²⁰ See Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*.

²¹ Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 230.

catalyses *Hamlet*; and it is the impossibility of voicing this anguish which constitutes the play's 'taboo'.

Intercession, Mourning and Remembrance

Under the old Catholic dispensation, Hamlet's duty towards his dead father would have been clear. Though Claudius speaks of the surviving son being 'bound / in filial obligation for some term / To do obsequious sorrow,'²² the onus on the living had not always been so curtailed.

Marshall notes:

In wishing to be remembered after their deaths, the people of late medieval England did not have in mind some fond, passive recollection, shared among a restricted circle of family and friends. To 'remember' the dead meant primarily to include them in one's prayers, and memory in this context was not an involuntary reflex, or a mental straining after an enacted past.

Nor was the desire merely sentimental. The prayers of the living, interceding on behalf of departed friends, family members, benefactors, and so on, were instrumental in hastening the dead through purgatory and into heaven proper: accordingly, as testamentary evidence demonstrates, 'securing intercessory prayer was a priority for the great majority of those facing death,' with the wealthiest constructing chantries and even hospitals to that end, and the poorest urgently craving succour from their children and friends.²³

No sixteenth-century document bears this concern out more forcefully than St Thomas More's *The Supplication of Souls* (1529). Written in response to *A Supplication for the Beggars* (1529) by Simon Fish, which disparaged purgatory and claimed (in Marshall's words) that 'excessive clerical wealth and power was inextricably bound up with intercession for the dead,'²⁴ More's work paints a powerful vision of a world in which Christians have ceased to credit that the dead depend on their prayers. Greenblatt notes that in More's *Supplication*, the reader encounters 'a desperate appeal for help, comfort and pity from "your late acquaintance, kindred, spouses, companions, playfellows, and friends":

These former intimates are crying out not because they are dead, not even because they are abiding "the grievous pains and hot cleansing fire" of Purgatory,

²² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.90-92.

²³ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 20.

²⁴ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 49.

but because they have become “humble and unacquainted and half-forgotten suppliants.”²⁵

The spirits of the departed continue:

[L]et never any slothful oblivion erase us out of your remembrance, or malicious enemy of ours cause you to be careless of us, or any greedy mind upon your good withdraw your gracious alms from us. [...] Remember what kin ye and we be together; what familiar friendship hath ere this been between us; what sweet words ye have spoken, and what promise ye have made us. Let now your words appear and your fair promise be kept. [...] Let never the malice of a few fond fellows—a few *pestilent* persons—borne toward priesthood, religion, and your Christian faith ... erase out of your hearts the care of your kindred, all force of your old friends, and all remembrance of all Christian souls.²⁶

Such was the charge under the old dispensation, a fact which could not but have been known by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; and yet the world which More imagined—a terrible world in which the intercessory prayers once due to dear, departed kinsfolk are suppressed and go unsaid—is precisely the world in existence under Queen Elizabeth—and, indeed, it seems a similar world prevails at Elsinore. ‘To persevere,’ says King Claudius, ‘In obstinate condolement is a course / Of impious stubbornness; ‘tis unmanly grief’.²⁷ The disgust Hamlet feels concerning his mother’s hasty remarriage—a disgust which has often been described as overblown—is more understandable given that, until very recently, to be forgotten had been to be damned.²⁸ Thus follows the seemingly demented insistence on time and speed (‘most wicked speed’²⁹) in the play’s second scene: ‘two months dead—nay, not so much, not two!’³⁰; ‘within a month’³¹; ‘a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer’.³² A society which only yesterday had seen remembrance and intercessory prayer as the most fundamental obligation of the living towards the dead, was liable to see the shift to a mere ‘term’ of ‘obsequious sorrow’ in a rather dubious light.³³ The same pricking

²⁵ Greenblatt, *Shakespeare in Purgatory*, p. 137.

²⁶ More, *The Supplication of Souls*, p. 228.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.92-94.

²⁸ Indeed, Marshall, p. 310, notes that ‘the campaign to suppress “superstition” in practices and attitudes relating to the dead was not fought and won in the middle of the sixteenth century, but continued into the reign of James I and beyond.’

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.156.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.2.138.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.145.

³² *Ibid.*, 1.2.150

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.91-92.

sense of a father's neglected remembrance and dishonourable oblivion spurs Laertes into action much later in the play:

His means of death, his obscure funeral—
No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones,
No noble rite, nor formal ostentation—
Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call't in question.³⁴

Neill aptly notes that the funeral rites of *Hamlet* are all 'marked by their insultingly stunted or indecorous form'.³⁵ In the first scene of the play, Hamlet's black mood is unambiguously linked to his anachronistic insistence on persevering in the remembrance of his father, against the wishes of Claudius and Gertrude: 'Do not for ever with thy vailèd lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust'.³⁶ And yet, it is precisely such remembrance that his aggrieved father will demand of him: 'Do not forget'.³⁷

If the once-acknowledged duties of remembrance and mourning constitute a visible, if inadequately fulfilled, onus on the sons of the play, there is one character for whom, as Hamlet obsessively emphasises, such obligations seem to matter little, if at all: Gertrude, King Hamlet's widow, now her 'husband's brother's wife'.³⁸ It is worth noting here that Gertrude's behaviour, though perhaps not entirely respectable under the reformed religion, is more offensive by far under the older, Catholic tenets. As has been noted, the duties towards the Protestant dead were comparatively unburdensome. Marshall writes:

At the start of Elizabeth's reign, in Veron's *Huntyng of Purgatory to Death*, a Catholic character plaintively poses the question, how can we do good unto the dead, 'or how can we acqute our selves towards them', if prayers are taken away? In the manner of such theophrastic dialogues, Veron has his answer ready. Scripture teaches only two ways: decent burial, and the succoring of children, friends and kin.³⁹

True to these ordinances, Gertrude has buried her husband and, in the play's second scene, is succouring her son: 'Thou know'st 'tis common—all that lives must die, / Passing through

³⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.2.206-210.

³⁵ Neill, *Issues of the Death*, p. 246.

³⁶ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.70-71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.4.111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.4.14.

³⁹ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 266.

nature to eternity'.⁴⁰ As such, she is invulnerable on the most fundamental theological grounds.

According to the old religion, however, Gertrude's behaviour is highly questionable. Juan Luis Vives, a Spanish humanist—appointed by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey as lecturer in Greek, Latin, and Rhetoric at the new Cardinal College at Oxford—wrote *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (*The Education of a Christian Woman*) in 1523, a work which outlined proper conduct for Catholic women in a variety of circumstances, 'ostensibly for Princess Mary's education but meant for a wider audience'.⁴¹ On the mandates of widowhood Vives is unambiguous: a 'good woman approaches a second marriage unwillingly and reluctantly, compelled by unavoidable necessity,'⁴² because every husband wishes that he 'be mourned by his wife and that he be missed'⁴³: 'Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and all the saints reiterate this same thought: that tears, mourning, solitude, fasts are the adornments of the pious widow'.⁴⁴ That it is better, writes Vives, to persevere in widowhood, is a fact which derives not only from 'Christian purity' and 'divine wisdom' but also from 'pagan, that is, human wisdom'.⁴⁵ In general, he continues, it is preferable for a widow remain 'in holy widowhood, all the more so if she has children, which is the goal and fruit of marriage.'⁴⁶ But for those who insist on remarrying Vives has this stern admonition: 'let it not be immediately or shortly after their husband's death. That would be a sign that they did not love them when they were alive, since they so quickly put aside their sorrow, grief, and mourning'.⁴⁷

Ghosts, Spirits and Graves

The difference between Catholic and Protestant vidual imperatives is not merely arbitrary. It turns on a disagreement concerning a more far-reaching and fundamental phenomenon, the existence of ghosts. Vives makes clear that his recommendations are based on the fact that dead husbands are liable to supervise, as ghosts, that which occurs in the wake of their deaths:

The widow should remember and have it ever before her eyes that our souls do not perish with the body but are released from the burden of the body and freed

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.72-73.

⁴¹ Fantazzi, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁴² Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, p. 311.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 312.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 312.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 322.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 324.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 325.

from the fetters of this bodily weight. [...] [T]he soul does not migrate into another life in such a way that it completely renounces all earthly things. They are sometimes heard by the living, and they know many of our actions and events [...]. Therefore, the pious widow should consider that her husband has not been altogether taken away from her, but that he is still alive with the life of the soul, which is the true and real life, and also in her constant remembrance of him.⁴⁸

Again Vives issues to widows a stern interdiction which pertains closely to Gertrude's behaviour:

Let her so deal with her family, so administer the household, so bring up her children that her spouse will rejoice and feel that he has been fortunate to have left such a wife behind him. Let her not conduct herself in such a way that his angry spirit will take vengeance on a wicked, unprincipled woman.⁴⁹

This insistence on the importance of satisfying the husband's supervisory ghost is not an eccentricity of Vives's: so too in *The Supplication of Souls*, in Greenblatt's words, 'More's miserable ghosts are forced to witness the pleasures, including sexual pleasures, of their widows'.⁵⁰

In the ghostly reasoning underlining this argument may be traced a more fundamental story, namely the decline of belief in ghosts over the course of the Reformation. As Marshall notes, it was often alleged that ghosts were not 'some accidental waste-product of the popish purgatory', but the 'foundation of the whole edifice'.⁵¹ One mid-sixteenth-century bishop of London claimed that the doctrine of purgatory was only upheld 'by feigned apparitions, visions of spirits, and other like fables'.⁵² As the Reformation in England progressed, not only was belief in ghosts discouraged, but increasingly the argument was made that 'the dead on their own account could have no knowledge of what transpired in the created [i.e. earthly] world':⁵³ 'by divine decree, the dead were unable to perceive the needs of the living'.⁵⁴ This marked a significant and sudden change from the culture of ghosts in pre-Reformation England, the hallmarks of whose popular stories were well established (and which find obvious resonance in Shakespeare's play):

⁴⁸ Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, p. 340.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 310.

⁵⁰ Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 146.

⁵¹ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 235.

⁵² Quoted *ibid.*

⁵³ Ibid, p. 211.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 212.

[T]he recurrent themes of ghost tales are disjuncture, imbalance, malfunction. Ghosts seem often to have been those who had made a bad end, dying unshriven, or in a violent, sudden manner before the end of their natural span. Or they were those for whom rites of burial or intercession had been inadequately or negligently performed.⁵⁵

Gerard Kilroy notes that it cannot be a coincidence that King Hamlet's ghost, 'suffering in a very Catholic purgatory,' should visit a son who, 'as a student at Luther's university of Wittenberg,' would have been taught to disbelieve in both his father's 'prison house' and the possibility of his spectral return.⁵⁶ It is no surprise then, given these divergent and contradictory ways of thinking about the afterlife, that Hamlet might, in the space of a few scenes, go from calling his father's spirit 'an honest ghost,'⁵⁷ to suspecting that he '[m]ay be the devil'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as Marshall notes, this was not a dilemma exclusive to Protestants: Catholics too were aware that what appeared as the ghost of one's kin could in fact be a demon in disguise.⁵⁹ *Hamlet* is unique, however, in 'explicitly addressing the question of whether the apparition is really the spirit of Hamlet's father, or a demonic allusion, and making it central to the action of the play'.⁶⁰ The significance of such a question—in a religious culture which lately held that the souls of the dead were worthy of the living's unflagging devotion, only now to deny their awareness of, and possible benefit by, earthly behaviours—is obvious; and in it lies the heart of the play's paternal ambivalence.

Yet these are not the only grounds for ambivalence. One of the most unsettling effects of the Reformation was its potential to dis sever the son, not only from his father, but from his entire ancestral line, and for all time. The agonising question was, by disavowing the doctrines of papistry, were Protestants damning their forefathers for eternity? Earlier it was seen that the father could be conceived of as a ghost of potential ill-omen; but he could also emblematised generations of ancestors—all plaintive, supplicatory, but irrevocably damned. The issue, according to Marshall, 'was recognized as a minefield for Protestant controversialists':

Archbishop Toby Mathew believed that the enemies of the Church of England entangled people in no 'one quiddity, or cavil, more than in that particular';

⁵⁵ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ Kilroy, 'Requiem for a Prince', p. 146.

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.144.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.2.520.

⁵⁹ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 245.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Thomas Morton's experience with papists identified it as 'the greatest barre and hinderance unto us, for their conversion'.⁶¹

Protestant pamphleteers and sermonisers doubted that *all* papists were necessarily damned, but Catholics could construe this as mere equivocation or, in the words of another play of Shakespeare's, '[s]ome tricks, some quilletts how to cheat the devil'.⁶² As such, they made much of the implications of the Reformation for the ancestors of Protestants. John Freeman writes that Edmund Campion 'warned his executioners about the transgenerational consequences of their persecution: "In condemning us, you condemn all your own ancestors, all the ancient bishops and kings, all that was once the glory of England"'.⁶³ Campion must surely be the one exception to Marshall's contention that no one 'wished even to hint that the illustrious forebears of Elizabeth Tudor and James Stuart might be roasting in hellfire, even when the latter's most immediate ancestor was that champion of popery, Mary Queen of Scots'.⁶⁴ Thus the Reformation could touch most painfully on that perennial concern of the nobleman, the honour of his ancestors and the upholding of their name. The animating concern of *Hamlet*—the unappeased, neglected and dishonoured father—receives a contemporary warrant and significance from this fact, a fact which, once again, Hamlet and Laertes bring to the surface of the play: Hamlet in the insistent classicising and aggrandising portraits of his father ('See what grace was seated on this brow, / Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,'⁶⁵ etc.), coupled with that father's vaguely Catholic torment and vidual neglect; Laertes in his determination to set his father's memory to rights, and his explicit disregard for any religious injunctions which stand in his way. (He'll cut Hamlet's throat 'i' the church'.⁶⁶)

On encountering the Ghost, Hamlet's first concern is to establish the cause of his father's apparent resurrection:

Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,
Have burst their cerements; why the sepulcher,
Wherein we saw thee quietly interred,
Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws

⁶¹ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 206.

⁶² Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, 4.3.284.

⁶³ Freeman, 'This Side of Purgatory', p. 243.

⁶⁴ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 208.

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4.56-57.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 4.4.125.

To cast thee up again.⁶⁷

This concern is unsurprising in any set of circumstances, but the question is particularly pertinent in the Reformation context of the play. Over the preceding decades, the question of fathers' and forefathers' resting places had become topical for a number of painful reasons, most centering on the dissolution of religious houses. The acquisition of land formerly occupied by monasteries, chantries, convents, and so on, had had disastrous consequences for the dead interred on their grounds. As Marshall notes, no one living at the start of the seventeenth century could be unaware of what religious reform had done to 'overturn the wishes of [the dead], and sometimes to deface and destroy their monuments and very remains'.⁶⁸ Over the previous decades, bodies of the deceased had been dispersed and their tombs destroyed in what the early-sixteenth-century antiquary John Weever called 'a barbarous rage against the dead'.⁶⁹ Brasses petitioning for prayers were pulled down and defaced, 'tombes were battered downe, and the bodies of the dead cast out of their coffins'.⁷⁰ And yet—though these actions 'interfered with the recording of genealogy, lineage, and descent,' and implied 'an impugning of the social and political personae' (often of noblemen) 'which the tombs enshrined'⁷¹—they could only be half-heartedly lamented, with ambivalent regret ('as 'twere with a defeated joy, / With an auspicious and a dropping eye'⁷²), because it was noblemen themselves who most often bought the grounds and proceeded to raze them.⁷³ Tellingly, Henry VIII saved neither the tomb of his ancestor King Stephen, nor that of King Henry I at Reading, from destruction.⁷⁴

There is, then, in *Hamlet* a 'taboo' encoded by the irruption of 'historical time' into the play, and it is indeed one which places Hamlet 'right in the centre of the opposition between Catholicism and Protestantism, between Rome and Wittenberg'.⁷⁵ As John Freeman notes, 'Much of what goes amiss in Hamlet reflects the suppression of Catholic beliefs and practices in Shakespeare's England'.⁷⁶ But we need seek no further than this in order to identify the taboo: that there existed any gravitation at all towards the old religion, or aversion towards the reformed, was of *itself* unutterable. There needed no association with the family of a monarch to render it so. Indeed, that the guilt of Gertrude is never baldly

⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.4.45-52.

⁶⁸ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 306.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 307.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 170.

⁷² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.10-11.

⁷³ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 86.

⁷⁵ Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba*, p. 53.

⁷⁶ Freeman, 'This Side of Purgatory', p. 246.

refuted or expressed, which is the crux of Schmitt's argument, is explicable in a different manner in this paradigm: Gertrude's innocence of her husband's murder is never explicitly stated because to do so would be to exonerate her entirely; whereas the play's subterranean Catholic mores, which cannot be openly articulated, require her conduct as a widow to be called into question. Because Gertrude has fulfilled the curtailed duties of a Protestant wife, and because a Catholic charge obviously cannot be laid against her, the best that can be done is to shroud Gertrude nebulously in the air of guilt which King Hamlet's murder provides. In Eliotic terms, a sufficient 'objective correlative' certainly *exists* for Hamlet's feelings towards his mother; but it is Catholic in origin, and so cannot be articulated either in the court of Elsinore or onstage in Elizabethan England. Like the other manifestations of Catholicism in the play, it is both pervasive and spectral, and pertains to the late, murdered king.

4,895 words.

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