

## THE CONTRADICTIONARY NATURE OF THE GHOST IN *HAMLET*

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### Abstract

This article explores the contradictory nature of the ghost in *Hamlet* and shows how Shakespeare seeks to manipulate the reader's response in *Hamlet* by using contradictions and ambiguities. The article also explores the ways in which the reader responds to these contradictions and reconstructs a palpable world in the impalpable world of the text. These contradictions compel the reader to participate in the composition of the text and make him keep changing his own approach to the work with the result that the more he reads the play, the deeper he finds himself entrenched in contradictions. As he fails to grasp the logic of events, the reader relates his own world to the text instead of relating the events of the text to his world and recreates his own world. Therefore, he can easily detach himself from the text and let his imagination run loose as the play proves too vague for him to comprehend. In reading *Hamlet*, the imagination runs wild and travels far beyond the text to an extent where the reader perceives things, which stand not within but utterly outside the text. Eventually, the reality achieved by the reader in the course of reading the play is only the reality which dwells in the innermost recesses of his mind.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, reader response, Iser, contradiction, manipulation

*Hamlet* is replete with contradictions and ambiguities. In different parts of the play, the reader is offered multifarious choices to make and to build his responses in terms of these choices. There lies a signifying force in the gaps, discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities of a text which drives the reader to reshape and reconstruct the events and choose his own strategy of reading from among the strategies offered by the author. These ambiguities, misunderstandings, indeterminacy, or obscurity can usually be cleared up by questions from the recipient, "who can then latch onto the speaker's intention and so enable the utterance to give rise to the action intended" (Iser 1980, p. 58). Contradictions induce the reader to collaborate in the composition of the text, turning his imagination into a crucible. Shakespeare consciously manipulates the reader's mind in an effort to mould it like his own. The reader gradually becomes Hamlet, thinks like Hamlet and feels like him. In brief, the reader becomes immersed in the character of Hamlet only to find himself reflected in him. Shakespeare invites the reader to fashion his own text. He gives ostensible hints as to how *Hamlet* should be decoded, while at the same time he contradicts himself.

These contradictions compel the reader to keep changing his own approach to the work with the result that the more he reads the play, the deeper he finds himself entrenched in contradictions and ambiguities. Thus pinioned by the contradictory clues in the text, the reader feels urged to delve in his own imagination, reassemble the work that the author initially structured, and produce different responses to and interpretations of the text. On the other hand, the reader brings his own baggage of knowledge and preconceptions to the text which may stand in contradiction with what he finds in the text. As Iser (1978) has said, "Part of the baggage that the reader brings to the text includes the repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes and allusions to familiar social and historical contexts that, however, inevitably conflict with certain textual elements that defamiliarise what the reader thought he recognized, leading to a distrust of the expectations aroused and a reconsideration of seemingly straightforward discrepancies that are unwilling to accommodate themselves to these patterns.

Consequently, the meanings he arrives at actually spring from his understanding of his own perceptions spurred by the interplay of the text and his imagination. In reading *Hamlet*, the reader's imagination is fully engaged, resulting in a plethora of individual cognitive responses, which may be as contradictory as the play itself. In this respect, *Hamlet* is to be considered a unique work of literature in which Shakespeare seeks to arrest the mind of the audience but instead lets it run wild to reconstruct a palpable world in the impalpable world of the text. In fact, the reader makes sense of the text provisionally. Consequently, the reality achieved by the reader in the course of reading the play is only the reality stimulated by the text but extrapolated from the innermost recesses of his mind. The contradictory depiction of the Ghost which in reality sets the wheels of the tragedy into motion can be seen as part of Shakespeare's grand strategy to manipulate the imagination of the reader. Indeed the Ghost in *Hamlet* is as equally puzzling a character as Hamlet in the play. A lot of critical subtlety has been expended on determining the mysterious nature of the Ghost with the result that it has proved to be ambiguous to every critical eye. We first come to know a silent Ghost who turns a deaf ear to Horatio's enthusiastic requests: "Speak to me... speak to me... O Speak..." (1.1.129 & 132 & 135).<sup>2</sup> Does the Ghost condescend to answer a commoner? In fact, the Ghost's refusal to speak piques the curiosity of the reader as to what knowledge it intends to impart although Horatio in earlier lines says, "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.69). Furthermore, the Ghost's evasion of verbal communication adds even more to the appalling quality of what it is to reveal. In his encounter with Hamlet, the Ghost first beckons and then with courteous action wafts him on. These very specific gestures are not accidental but are part of Shakespeare's strategy of engaging the workings of the reader's imagination - in this case by substituting movement for oratory (qtd. in Kinny 78). The impregnated silence of the Ghost is then translated into forcible attention in its early words: "Mark me!" (1.5.94). It would be facile to suggest that these two words only function as the Ghost's opening speech.

Quite deliberately, the Bard casts the Ghost in full armour to convey a foreboding sign of a disaster looming over the land. The armour and the martial appearance of the Ghost make indirect reference to some military conflict. It is only a few lines

earlier that Horatio established narrative links between past and present events telling the story of the armour: Old Hamlet wore the armour when he defeated old Fortinbras in single combat which terminated with the cession of piece of land to Denmark. The reader cannot help wondering: Does this armour forebode some plans by young Fortinbras to attack Denmark and regain the lost land? Isn't it strange that the play should start with the Ghost wearing this particular armour? Whatever the connection is, it somehow fails to have the desired impact. Why should it be so? At this point, the Ghost proves to be a harbinger of some impending tragic event in the reader's mind.

The reader is then alerted by the Ghost's revelation to real evil lurking in the society. His attention is therefore directed to Claudius who we learn from the Ghost in his interview with Hamlet had poured the juice of cursed hebenon in the porches of the ghost's ears, killed him and usurped his throne. So, "something is rotten in the State of Denmark (1.4.90)" and Hamlet has been called upon to right the wrong. Beginning with the words 'I am thy father's spirit' (1.5.9), the Ghost recreates a link between Hamlet and the memory of a father he has lost. The use of the words 'day' and 'night', 'to walk the night' and 'to fast in fires' is an indication of repeated death and rebirth and a device engineered by the Bard to create a sense of sympathy in the reader. The effect of the Ghost's discourse with Hamlet is so powerful that few readers will find themselves capable of seeing the Ghost as a 'goblin damned'. Instead, they see a soul in torment asking for the eradication of evil personified in the character of Claudius. For some critics, the Ghost however emerges "as a saved Christian soul temporarily suffering the fires of purgatory" (Devlin, p. 50). Conversely, the reader barely finds a saved Christian soul for it is, as it says, 'confined to fast in fires, Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature, Are burnt and purged away (1.5.11-12).' It is still in the process of purgation and his description of the purgatory surely indicates the degree of his sinfulness. Besides, he asks for revenge, which is an unchristian act unless we alter our perspective on that issue. The ungodliness of the act becomes known when the Ghost demands that Hamlet use any inconceivable means to exact revenge with no fear of compunction: "But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,/Taint not thy mind..." (1.5.85-86)

If revenge is to be exacted on Claudius, why does the Ghost enjoin Hamlet not to contemplate taking revenge on his mother who may have had a hand in killing him?<sup>3</sup> Is she not equally guilty? What the reader fails to understand is why the Ghost should think Hamlet may consider taking revenge on his mother. The admiration the Old Hamlet used to have for Gertrude must have been replaced by hate for she has betrayed him as we later learn she had committed adultery when Senior Hamlet was still alive. Therefore, the Ghost's ostensibly undying love for the queen cannot possibly account for his request. By what the Ghost narrates, the reader finds himself in relation to a king who has been bereft of his throne, a father bereft of his son, a husband bereft of his wife and more importantly, a man bereft of his right to live. All these qualities amount to a strengthened degree of sympathy for the Ghost and hatred for Claudius. Perceptibly, the reader cannot help but notice the contrast between a Ghost who first appears in full armour and one who is now reduced to a helpless avenger. So far, the Bard has set the stage for a large-scale tragedy of revenge.

If we see Hamlet set within the fabric of Christian belief, we will encounter some contradiction in the play. The abode of the Ghost is widely believed to be a Catholic purgatory where the souls burn in fire to have their sins cleansed. Among such critics is Dover Wilson who says that the Ghost is the linchpin of *Hamlet*; “remove it and the play falls to pieces” and that he comes from purgatory and is the only non-protestant in the play (Wilson, pp. 52-53). True enough, the Ghost is of paramount importance in the play because he sets the plot in motion. Yet, his claim that he is the only non-protestant in the play is partly true because Claudius has been shown in his reasonings to be a non-protestant and Horatio is apparently a Roman stoic. As for Hamlet, he is just as plainly a Protestant.

Besides, an attentive reader can notice the dichotomy of heaven and hell, with no room for purgatory, as espoused by Hamlet as part of the Protestant belief in relation to the Ghost:

Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,  
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape  
That I will speak to thee. (1.4.40-44)

‘A spirit of health’ is one, which comes from heaven with charitable intentions, and ‘goblin damned’ is one, which comes from Hell with wicked intentions. For Hamlet, there is nothing in between e.g. purgatory.

On the other hand, if the Ghost is taken to be a Catholic, why is Hamlet who so adores him turns out to be a Protestant? On the other hand, if we assume with Wilson that the Ghost is a catholic, why does he fly in the face of the very principles on which Christianity is built e.g. the injunction to revenge? The idea that the Ghost comes from purgatory is also enunciated by the Ghost itself:

I am thy father's spirit  
Doomed for a certain time to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away.’ (1.5.9-13)  
He declares that the cause of his punishment is that he died unshriven:  
Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,  
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,  
No reck'ning made, but sent to my account  
With all my imperfections on my head:  
Oh horrible, oh horrible, most horrible! (1.5.76-80)

In an adroit way, the Bard later elucidates that the Ghost may have been the devil, and subverts the imagination of the reader.

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil: and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape. (2.2.553-555)

He further suggests that the Ghost may have been the product of Hamlet's imagination.

Yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. (2.2.600-604)

Thus, the imagination of the reader is subverted and liberated again to form another mental image of the truth of the drama and replace it with the one he has already articulated in his mind. In other words, the reader's world keeps forming and reforming because of the hiatuses in the text. As Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, "Hiatuses in the flow of sentences (where sequences that are anticipatory or retrospective cannot be established) do not lead to frustration but rather provide points of perplexity, unexpected twists and turns that are essential to the literary experience. It is at moments like these that the reader's freedom is greatest to exercise his own "faculty for establishing connections for filling in gaps left by the text itself" (1980, p. 279).

Initially, the Bard suspends disbelief in the existence of the Ghost. When the reader believes the existence of the Ghost, his belief is again shaken off into disbelief or doubt. To bring about this effect, Shakespeare draws on contradictions, thereby providing a wider scope for imagination. The reader's mind thus becomes a crucible to be receptive to varying responses and interpretations. While reading *Hamlet*, the reader faces various questions and the answers that he arrives at are so contradictory that one answer only adds to more perplexity of mind. Indeed, Hamlet "is, notoriously, the one which most persistently challenges the structural and semantic patterns we elicit from it" (McAlindon, p. 102). The parts when put together barely constitute a logical entirety, a fact which justifies the varying though contradictory responses in different readers. When confronted with a question, the reader finds his own answer irrespective of its logical relation to the text of the play. Indeed, the text, as Iser says, becomes an arena for the full engagement of the reader's imagination. Our response to literature determines our interpretation of it, and therefore an inevitable polysemy beyond the realm of the text.

The multivalent possibilities of interpreting the Ghost can only account for our response moulded by our perceptions of the world. What allows for such varying possibilities is the unleashing of the reader's imagination by aid of structural and philosophical contradictions. In general, the Ghost may be seen in the light of three different approaches: the Ghost as an evil force, the Ghost as a messenger of good will and the Ghost as the figment of Hamlet's imagination.

### **The Ghost as an evil force**

There is wide speculation that the Ghost is an evil force driving the hero to bloodshed in an unchristian fashion. Paradoxically, the Ghost can be seen as equally good or

evil in the light of Christian belief. Hamlet's reference to the Ghost as 'The spirit that I have seen/May be the devil' (3.1.551-552) led the celebrated critic G. Wilson Knight to induce that it was the devil who took Hamlet on the path of bloodshed and destruction. He argues that the Ghost is conceived throughout the play as a portent - not kind but sinister. He views Hamlet as being possessed by a demon who plays havoc on himself and others: "Not till it has slain all, is the demon that grips Hamlet satisfied... It was the devil of the knowledge of death, which possesses Hamlet and drives him from misery and pain to increasing bitterness, cynicism, murder, and madness. He has truly bought converse with his father's spirit at the price of enduring and spreading Hell on earth" (42).

Similarly, Eleanor Prosser vehemently embarked on substantiating her view that the Ghost was a malignant force, the devil. According to Prosser, 'Both Protestants and Catholics agreed that a soul could not return from heaven or hell. By banishing purgatory, the Reformation thus eliminated the possibility that the soul of the dead return to earth.' She adds that 'since a Ghost cannot be a human soul, it could be only a good or an evil spirit, an angel or a devil' (102-103). Her conclusion is, "the Ghost is probably malignant." When Horatio, Prosser argues, invokes the Ghost to speak (122 & 128), it is forced to leave when Heaven is invoked (98 & 119). It seems just as plausible that the Ghost, 'being so majestic', resents being charged by a mere commoner or that it takes offence because told that it usurps the fair and warlike form of buried Denmark (Honigmann, p. 74). It is also equally plausible that Horatio is not the recipient of the message the Ghost needs to convey. After all, Hamlet is the only character in the play who is capable of communicating with the Ghost although the Ghost is only visible to a few others. This is a widely held belief. Others also share this view that the Ghost is startled at the name of Heaven or that 'it started like a guilty thing Upon a fearful summons' (1.1.148-149).

Such a response could be evoked from any reader and I believe Shakespeare was well aware of such a possible response. So in order to give more credibility to his Ghost and avert such a response from his audience/reader, he made Hamlet say, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy (2.1.174-5)." Here, the Bard consciously controls his audience's/reader's response. The idea that he inspires is that the reader should believe in the existence of the Ghost and that it can return to the earth. Although we come to believe that a Ghost is real and that it can return to earth, Shakespeare, later in the play, contradicts himself when Hamlet says, "The undiscover'd country from whose bourn/No traveller returns" (3.1.79-80). Was Shakespeare aware of such a contradiction? Indeed he was. The degree of certainty we achieved as to the existence of the Ghost is now relegated to the category of uncertainty and doubt. The reader who by now has come to believe what he has been told about the Ghost comes to question the real nature of the Ghost. This technique of usurping and liberating the reader's imagination is effectively utilized only to evoke one response after another. Thus rendering himself an unreliable source of reference, Shakespeare provides a much greater scope for imagination. Now that the reader finds himself at a loss to trust the text or the author, he uses his imagination to the fullest to create a palpable world in the impalpable world of the text.

### The Ghost as the figment of Hamlet's imagination

To view the Ghost as the figment of Hamlet's imagination has some force as it may be vaguely inferred from Hamlet's words:

The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil: and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me: (2.2.600-605)

The tendency to psychoanalyze the Ghost began in the twentieth century and the first critic to make such a claim was W.W. Greg who contended that the Ghost was the product of Hamlet's imagination:

Further, we have seen that it is impossible to regard the narrative of the Ghost as a genuine revelation, but that, on the contrary, it bears internal evidence of being but a figment of Hamlet's brain, and, moreover, that this hypothesis resolves most of the difficulties that have been thought inherent in the play. It is tempting to advance a step further, and to argue that Shakespeare not only constructed his play on the basis of an hallucination on the part of his hero, but that he intended the Ghost to be an illusion throughout. (419)

The Ghost of Hamlet's father has actually appeared twice and the sentinels who have to their horror seen the Ghost stalk away have asked Horatio to speak to the Ghost for they believe he is capable of speaking to the Ghost because he is a learned man: "Thou art a scholar, speak to it Horatio (1.1.50)". Shakespeare takes labour in inculcating the notion that the reader will have to believe the existence of the Ghost upon the testimony and approval of Horatio. In other words, Horatio serves as a witness of events and as an intermediary between the writer and the reader. A fact generally ignored by the reader/audience is that the Ghost is visible to the sentinels, Horatio and Hamlet while he is invisible to others in the play. There is no clear justification for this contradiction unless we assume that the world is made of contradictions and so is the play. At all events, Hamlet is not the only one to see it. Indeed, three other trustworthy witnesses attest to its reality even before Hamlet encounters it.

### The Ghost as messenger of good will

To a casual reader, the Ghost may appear only as a king who has been deprived of his throne and wife and who has come back to earth to demand revenge. However, on a larger scale, we should focus on the long conversation of the Ghost with Hamlet and find out for ourselves what may have remained blur and obscure to others.

An active reader would be quick to discern the religious overtones in the Ghost's speech.

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,  
 A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark  
 Is by a forged process of my death  
 Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,  
 The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
 Now wears his crown. (1.5.35-40)

In these lines, which constitute the focal point of the Ghost's discourse, the reader is encouraged to form a mental image of what has really happened by combining and analyzing the components in the Ghost's message. An active reader will interpret the orchard as the garden of paradise where man was tempted by the devil that appeared in the shape of a serpent. The biblical image is further strengthened in the mind of the reader in the lines that follow: Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand/Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd (1.5.74-75).

The sin of fratricide is the first fruit of the Fall, which is to be interpreted as a murder, the slaying or making mortal of man by the serpent and the forbidden fruit as the poison.<sup>4</sup>

Given the lucid biblical allusion, we tend to see Senior Hamlet as the archetypal Adam who 'has been robbed by the devil (Claudius) of his birthright' (Lings, p. 30) and view the Ghost's injunction to revenge as the only one way to regain what is lost. In the light of this interpretation, we may say that Hamlet is assigned a divine mission, which is to redeem the lost honour of Adam represented by Great Hamlet. In terms of this assumption, therefore, we can be confident that the Ghost is not a devil but rather a messenger who has been sent to deliver a horrid report of things past.

There is another point which is to be taken into serious consideration. The Ghost is omniscient: he reveals two crucial actions that occurred before the play begins - Claudius poisoned him and Gertrude committed adultery with Claudius. However, Hamlet's father was poisoned while he was sleeping, and the adultery must have been concealed from him while he was alive, so how then did "he" find out about them? We may say that we are in the presence of a convention that grants full knowledge to the Ghost. Yet, I believe Shakespeare made his Ghost omniscient because he intended to give him a prophet-like presence in order to provide the reader with an otherworldly atmosphere and create a larger scope for the imagination. This can be inferred from Hamlet's "O my prophetic soul!" speech. Therefore, it is quite naïve to think that the Ghost calls on Hamlet to take revenge on his murderer in order to satisfy his egoistic aspirations.

The ambiguous nature of the ghost evokes ambiguous responses in the readers. Thus, contradictory responses ensue. By using contradictions, Shakespeare affords the reader the greatest altitude to exercise his own faculty for establishing connections for filling in the gaps left in the text. The gaps or the unwritten parts stimulate the reader's creative participation by suggesting certain outlines that the reader can shade in and animate. Whatever response is evoked in reading the text is surely the product of the

convergence of the reader and the text. However, the number of responses evoked from the text is in direct proportion to the number of the gaps and contradictions in the text. The more gaps and contradictions there are, the more responses there will be. Yet, there is a danger of misreading the text in the presence of copious contradictions. In *Hamlet*, contradictions are legion. So imagination runs wild and at times travels beyond the realm of the text. Once Eliot (1950) wrote, "And probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the "Mona Lisa" of literature." Readers have found *Hamlet* interesting because they have found it a reflection of their thoughts, a mirror of their desires. As Hazlitt (2008) once wrote on Hamlet, "Hamlet is a name: his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is we who are Hamlet." Iser (1978) argues that the participation of the reader could not be stimulated if everything were laid out in front of him. This means that the formulated text must shade off, through allusions and suggestions, into a text that is unformulated though nonetheless intended. Only in this way can the reader's imagination be given the scope it needs; the written text furnishes it with indications which enable it to conjure up what the text does not reveal.

Aesthetically speaking, *Hamlet* is a great work of literature because it has engaged and continues to engage the imagination of the reader as s/he realizes how to connect his world to the world of the text and create a palpable world in the world of the text.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ali Salami teaches English literature at Alzahra University in Iran.
- <sup>2</sup> All references, citations, and spelling of names follow the (Folio-based) Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (The New Cambridge Shakespeare). Updated edition ed. Edited by Philip Edwards. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> But, howsoever thou pursuest this act, Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, To prick and sting her. (1.5.84-85)
- <sup>4</sup> For a full treatment of this view, see Lings, Martin. *Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. Pages 27-42