'Who's there?' - the first scene of *Hamlet.*

Adrian J. Pinnington

It has been calculated that between 1877 and 1937 not more than twelve days passed without some new item concerning *Hamlet* being published.(1) Since 1937 the flow of publications concerned with the play has almost certainly increased in volume and, as Harry Levin has written, this fact alone removes from the critic the obligation to be either definitive or wholly original.(2) Despite the wealth of research and discussion which the play has provoked, however, it seems clear that critics are no nearer complete agreement about such key issues as the status of the ghost, the character of the hero, the cause of his madness or pretended madness and delay, or indeed the final meaning of the action itself. Although the phase of research into the historical and intellectual background of the play initiated by Dover Wilson's pioneering and influential study, 'What Happens in *Hamlet*',(3) has greatly illuminated Elizabethan notions concerning many issues raised by the play, it has become increasingly obvious that many of the questions raised by Dover Wilson cannot be answered by historical research alone - if indeed they can be answered unequivocally at all.(4) In fact contemporary attitudes themselves have not proved to be decisive guides to a play which has come to seem in many respects a challenge to, rather than mere reflection of, the beliefs of its audience.

All of this seems to argue that there is still an important role for

close readings of the play itself - for a reading which will not attempt to dispel uncertainty or ambiguity by reducing the text to conformity with contemporary attitudes to revenge or ghosts, but will rather attempt to articulate those uncertainties and puzzles present in the text. Indeed it seems that many critics have been so concerned with the notion that '*Hamlet* is a play of ideas' (5) that the way in which the play conveys its ideas as drama has often been overlooked or oversimplified. In particular the way in which the presentation of leading characters and important events changes and develops through the course of the play has not been sufficiently emphasised. In this paper I wish to attempt a close discussion of the opening scene of the play, considering not only the meaning of the scene as such, but also its place within the play as a whole. For the first scene of *Hamlet* is unique amongst Shakespeare's plays in that it is at once vital to the action which follows and yet is, in itself, almost wholly misleading about the significance of what it shows. (In this respect it is perhaps similar to the opening scene of *The Tempest*, in which the violent storm of the first scene is revealed in the second scene to be wholly the work of Prospero.)

A close reading of the scene in fact indicates that it is not merely misleading about what follows, but is actually contradicted by some of the subsequent action, for there is considerable evidence that Shakespeare changed his mind in the course of composing the play about various points mentioned in the first scene. Although, as I will argue, there can be little doubt that Shakespeare did change his mind in this way, the fact remains, however, that he allowed the first scene of the play to stand as it was composed, without revising out a number of inconsistencies. Unless we are to accuse Shakespeare here of simple carelessness, we have to recognise that his decision to let the scene stand unrevised tells us some-

thing about his artistic purposes in the play as a whole. Recently, and in tune with current critical fashion, it has been argued that the state of the various surviving texts of the play reflects revision of the play on Shakespeare's part, evidence for revision being provided by those speeches or parts of speeches omitted in the Folio text.(6) While it is too early to say whether such arguments will win wide acceptance - they involve the sacrifice of some passages traditionally regarded as being of great significance - they do not in fact affect the points where Scene 1 is contradicted by other parts of the play. Indeed the survival of such contradictions in the Folio text might be seen as evidence against revision on Shakespeare's part, for if he was revising anyway, why not make these points more consistent while he was about it? It is the contention of this paper, however, that these contradictions, together with the associated misleading quality of the scene as a whole, are integral to the artistic effect of the play and that Shakespeare decided to retain these contradictions rather than render the play more consistent at the expense of a dramatic effect vital to his purposes.

The scene itself opens with an interrogation of identity, a motif which is to be repeated in different forms and with different actors throughout the play:

> Barnardo: Who's there?
> Francisco: Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself. (I. i. 1-2)(7)

Barnardo's question at once establishes the darkness of the scene - a very necessary device on the Elizabethan stage - and his own uneasiness. Francisco's reply, which anticipates Horatio's later interrogation of the ghost (I. i. 48-52), makes it clear in turn that he is the sentry on duty and that it is his prerogative to challenge the newcomer to the platform. This itself not only shows Barnardo to have been acting in a most irreg-

ular fashion in challenging the sentry on duty, but also leads us to wonder who else Barnardo might have been expecting to see on the battlements - the answer, as we discover shortly, is, of course, the ghost. We are plunged into a world in which each shadow may prove to be a ghostly apparition.

Barnardo's reply to Francisco's question is often taken by editors to be a password: 'Long live the King!' (I. i. 3). Dover Wilson remarks of this that the 'watchword is dramatically ironical in view of all that follows'.[8] Certainly this is the case, whether we think of Old Hamlet, who lives even in death, or of Claudius, who is the ultimate cause of the ghost's apparition. What has not been remarked, however, is that the password, like many other of the phrases used in this scene, is at this point not so much ironical as simply misleading, failing to alert the audience to the fact that there may be some question or problem concerning the throne of Denmark. Indeed in the whole of the first scene there is no hint of either the fact that Old Hamlet has recently died - a strange omission in view of the fact that it is his apparition which appears - or that the present king is his brother and has married his wife. To the soldiers and to Horatio, as indeed to the majority of the court throughout the play, the domestic political situation seems perfectly normal.

Francisco, having recognised Barnardo, hastens to explain his failure to recognise him immediately: 'You come most carefully upon your hour' (I. i. 6). This does not so much mean, as T. J. B. Spencer says, 'considerately on time'[9] as 'precisely on time' i. e. 'you are so punctual that I did not expect you yet'. Barnardo in turn denies this: "Tis now struck twelve' (I. i. 7). Twelve is clearly the time at which Barnardo's sentry duty begins but it is also, as an Elizabethan audience would know, the traditional time at which ghosts begin to walk (cf. I. iv. 5-6). Francisco

then makes the odd reply:

> For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold,
> And I am sick at heart. (I. i. 8-9)

Francisco offers no explanation for this mysterious melancholy; one is used, however, to characters in Elizabethan drama sensing impending evil or disaster by a kind of intuition. Indeed in the play itself Hamlet suffers from just such a sensation before his fatal duel with Laertes: 'But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart' (V. ii. 208-9). Hamlet's sensation, however, is confined to his own fate - it is neither shared by other characters nor does it extend to them. Thus when Dover Wilson remarks that Francisco's 'heart-sickness foreshadows Ham.'[10] he overlooks two different facts; the first of these is that in the play as a whole Francisco seems to be the only character who does share Hamlet's melancholy, and the second is that, in context, the audience almost certainly interprets Francisco's melancholy - with hindsight - as reflecting the impending apparition of the ghost. Indeed this is precisely how Barnardo takes the remark, for he immediately checks to make sure that this unease has had no specific cause: 'Have you had quiet guard?' (I. i. 10). Barnardo is clearly concerned as to whether the ghost has already made an appearance. Not only does Francisco's melancholy mislead the audience by giving the impression that the ghost is a source of evil, but in a deeper sense it misleads in its suggestion that such intuitions are as it were communally available - whereas in fact all but Hamlet remain oblivious to the true source of evil within the court, Claudius.

When the others enter, they also begin by expressing their loyalty to Claudius:

Haratio: Friends to this ground.
Marcellus: And liegemen to the Dane. (I. i. 16)

suggesting that they too see no problem in Claudius' succession to the throne. These lines, however, also imply something that is more straightforwardly contradicted by the rest of the play, and constitute one piece of evidence that Shakespeare changed his mind during the course of composing the drama; this is their clear implication that Horatio is Danish. This is confirmed at line 72 when he talks of 'our state' (cf. line 104), at line 84 when he mentions 'our last King' (cf. line 94), and at line 128 when he talks of 'our climatures and countrymen'. Yet this clear assertion of Horatio's Danish nationality in the first scene is contradicted at many points in the rest of the play; when Horatio first meets Hamlet, Hamlet asks him with surprise: 'But what in faith make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?' (I. ii. 168), while the next time he meets him needs to explain Danish drinking customs to him (I. iv. 13-22). Finally, at the end of the act, he says to Horatio in connection with the ghost: 'And therefore as a stranger give it welcome' (I. v. 173). There is indeed one point near the end of the play when Horatio, although he appears in the final act to be ignorant of the identities of both Laertes and Osric, nevertheless seems to revert to his initial Danish nationality:

I am more an antique Roman than a Dane.
Here's yet some liquor left. (V. ii. 346-347)

Although this is not entirely unambiguous (which may explain why it is usually ignored in connection with this question) it certainly seems on the face of it to suggest that although Horatio is in formal terms a Dane, yet in spirit he is more like an ancient Roman. (The association with ancient Rome is of course made in the first scene as well with the speech

about the portents which preceded Julius Caesar's death (I. i. 115-128). This Roman connection clearly serves to underline Horatio's commitment to stoic ideals in the play.)

This contradiction concerning Horatio's status in Denmark, which is combined with a certain ambiguity as to his precise position within the court circle, is usually treated by critics of the play as a matter of little importance because, so it is contended, such a contradiction is rarely noticed in the theatre itself.(11) Such an argument clearly has a certain intuitive validity and yet it is difficult to know how far it can or should be pressed. Of course, if someone were to use such inconsistencies as grounds for arguing that the play is gravely flawed, then the fact that such contradictions are rarely noticed in the theatre itself would surely constitute a valid objection to this line of argument. Yet it is obviously the case that such inconsistencies are noticed, for each new editor of the play feels called upon to mention them, even if they rarely do more than that. If it is retorted (as critics of Bradley's Shakespearean criticism tend to maintain) that such fine points are evident only in the study, then, not only is such a contention hard to prove one way or the other, but it also seems perverse to rule out the results of close reading when considering the meaning of the play. To accept that such contradictions are no grave artistic defect in the play is no more than to insist that even when reading the play closely, we must remember that it is first and foremost a drama designed for performance; this is not to say, however, that we should accept the conclusion which Dover Wilson draws from this, that these contradictions do not imply any revision on Shakespeare's part. Certainly the fact that many people do not notice them in performance - just as they often fail to notice far more important features of the play - while it may explain Shakespeare's willingness to retain them in his final

version of the play, does not in itself rob them of critical significance. The inconsistencies themselves must after all have been prompted in the first place by some artistic motive on the author's part and it is the job of the critic to determine what that motive was.

If we put to ourselves the question why Shakespeare should have been prompted to recast Horatio as a foreigner in the body of the play, one answer immediately offers itself. It is clearly essential to Shakespeare's conception that nobody in the court circle, besides Hamlet, should know of the ghost's existence or its message. If the existence of the ghost were to be known more generally then not only Hamlet's madness but also the play within the play, the murder of Polonius and indeed the bulk of the action would lose much of its point. This fact is underlined by the "swearing" at the end of I. v. when Hamlet enjoins Horatio and the two sentries to absolute secrecy about the apparition. While Horatio's decision to inform Hamlet first about the ghost is sufficiently explained by the fact of their close friendship, it is clearly the case that if Horatio was to be presented as an established and influential figure at court, his silence on the matter - especially in view of Hamlet's increasingly irrational and dangerous behaviour - would become a dramatic issue, forcing Shakespeare to present Horatio as engaged in an active conspiracy against Claudius and thus lessening our sense of Hamlet's isolation. By making Horatio an outsider to the court world this problem is solved - Horatio is both on hand to help Hamlet should any aid be required and yet sufficiently remote from Hamlet's own world not to relieve his suffocating isolation.

While I think that Shakespeare's decision to recast Horatio as an outsider was probably prompted by this dramatic consideration, yet Horatio's foreignness also has a broader thematic significance within the play. Horatio is presented, of course, as a positive figure, an exemplar

of stoic ideals in a corrupt and corrupting world. Horatio's qualities are unambiguously celebrated in one of Hamlet's various protestations of affection for his friend:

> Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice,
> And could of men distinguish her election,
> Sh'ath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been
> As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing,
> A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
> Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those
> Whose blood and judgment are so well commeddled
> That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
> To sound what stop she pleases. Give me that man
> That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
> In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
> As I do thee. (III. ii. 64-75)

That this model of stoic fortitude should be a scholar of Wittenberg is obviously appropriate, for indeed the adequacy of such stock humanist attitudes to the actual world in which Hamlet finds himself is one of the play's many themes.[12] Yet Horatio's answer to the problem of Fortune and its insidious power, a problem emphasised throughout the play,[13] is clearly one of extreme passivity - a response resembling that 'inner emigration' practised by so many Soviet intellectuals in the Stalinist period.[14] In terms of the polarity posed by Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, it is the "to be", 'in the mind to suffer/The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' (III. i. 57-58). In Horatio's case, however, this passivity in the face of the world's vicissitudes is not so much a consequence of that fear of death diagnosed by Hamlet, as the cultivation of an inner calm, beyond the reach of both the 'buffets' and the 'rewards' of Fortune.

In this respect the contrast between the behaviour and fate of Horatio and that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is highly instructive. The latter

duo, like Horatio, although personal friends of Hamlet's, have a relatively humble status; they are, in their own words, 'the indifferent children of the earth' (II. ii. 227). Yet their place at court and their consequent involvement with Claudius' schemes leads to their steady, and, at first at any rate, largely unconscious corruption, until they end by becoming willing tools of the King in his plot to have Hamlet murdered in England, How such corruption of those who remain ignorant of Claudius' true character is to be avoided is one of the disturbing, indeed tragic, questions which the play raises. Horatio, by contrast, remains both uncorrupted and alive at the end of the play, yet the price of this purity is an almost total passivity, a passivity which is at once symbolised and rendered dramatically plausible by his status as an outsider to Denmark. It is in the contradiction between these two possible stances towards the court - involvement and corruption or purity and passivity - that Hamlet himself is caught and that his discovery of a sense of providential control within the corruption itself precariously and uncertainly resolves at the end of the play.(15)

If then Horatio's foreignness has considerable significance during most of the play, why does Shakespeare depict him as a Dane in the first scene? The answer to this question gives us an important clue to Shakespeare's artistic purpose in the scene. If Shakespeare was to present Horatio as a recently arrived foreigner in Denmark from the start, while the play would gain in consistency, Horatio's own authority to interpret the significance of the apparition and the present state of Denmark in the first scene would be considerably weakened. In other words, I think that we must conclude that Shakespeare wants to strengthen the plausibility of what Horatio has to say and, as Horatio's interpretation of the significance of the apparition is completely false, he wants in this way to

mislead the audience. To effectively mislead the audience - an idea which must have occurred to Shakespeare after the composition of the scene in question - involved him in the contradiction between Horatio's status here and in the rest of the play.

Returning to the scene itself, we find that, after the departure of the melancholy Francisco, Horatio speaks his first words in the play:

> Barnardo: Say, what, is Horatio there?
> Horatio: A piece of him. (I. i. 21-22)

This somewhat cryptic reply of Horatio's is variously interpreted as referring to the fact that he is holding out his hand to Barnardo and that he is indicating the extreme coldness of the night. (This itself suggests the importance of non-verbal gesture in this play, an index of the subtlety and complexity of Shakespeare's dramatic practice at this point.) Whatever the true significance of this remark is, it certainly serves to convey Horatio's own sceptical, somewhat reserved attitude towards life. (In terms of character there is, of course, a clear continuity between the Horatio of the first scene and that of the rest of the play.) This is followed by the first mention of the ghost: 'What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?' (I. i. 24). Since the work of Dover Wilson it has been usual to distinguish between the attitudes of Horatio, Marcellus, Barnardo and Hamlet to the ghost, seeing each as corresponding to some important Elizabethan attitude.[16] Yet, as Eleanor Prosser has, with justice, remarked, 'once Horatio has seen the Ghost, he, Marcellus and Bernardo (sic.) respond in exactly the same way'.[17] Until he witnesses the apparition, Horatio regards it as nothing more than a hallucination, a 'fantasy' (I. i. 26), but after he has seen it, he describes it as an 'illusion' (1. 130), a 'spirit' (1. 141) and 'like a guilty thing' (1. 153). Dover Wilson wished to emphasise the diversity of responses available to an Elizabethan

audience while Prosser wants to urge the overwhelmingly negative character of contemporary thought about ghosts; in terms of the play as a whole, Prosser undoubtedly overstates her case, her sense of the complexity of the play surely not matching her exemplary scholarship. If we confine our attention to the first scene alone, however, it seems to me hard to refute Prosser's claims - all the witnesses are united in their fear of the apparition and their concern as to what its appearance may signify.

The vexed question of the true status of the ghost - is he a demon or is he what he claims to be, does he come from purgatory (or a purgatory-like state) or from hell? - this question is clearly of fundamental importance to our understanding of the play as a whole and cannot be fully entered into in a paper of this length. A close examination of the first scene, however, such as I am attempting here, does throw some light on this question. For many critics, this issue has seemed to be a matter best settled by reference to Elizabethan ghost-beliefs and much scholarly energy has been devoted to the question of just what these beliefs were. While this phase of research has undoubtedly deepened our sense of how questionable both ghosts and revenge were to many Elizabethan thinkers, points often ignored by earlier critics, it also seems to have resulted in a comparative neglect of the precise details of the representation of the ghost within the play. In particular the way in which the presentation of the ghost changes in the course of the play and the importance of this to our understanding of its significance seems to have been largely ignored.

In the first scene, of course, the chief point made about the ghost is not, as Prosser would insist, its evil nature, but rather its military appearance:

that fair and warlike form
In which the majesty of buried Denmark
Did sometimes march (I. i 50-53)

and Horatio goes on to add the further detail:

Such was the very armour he had on
When he th'ambitious Norway combated. (I. i. 63-64)

(This detail, it should be added, either involves Shakespeare in another contradiction or implies that we should visualise Horatio as thirty years older than Hamlet, for in the graveyard scene we are specifically informed that this duel happened thirty years earlier, on the day of Hamlet's birth (see V. i. 144-157).) As various writers have remarked, to present a ghost in armour seems to have been a dramatic innovation on Shakespeare's part, the average Elizabethan stage ghost being dressed like those described in 'A Warning for Fair Women':

A filthie whining ghost,
Lapt in some fowle sheete or a leather pelch,
Comes skreaming in like a pigge half stickt. (18)

Yet, while the novelty of the ghost's armour has been noted, the reason for this innovation on Shakespeare's part seems to have received less discussion. In fact it is clear that the armour is used to prompt and make plausible Horatio's interpretation of the significance of the apparition, an interpretation given further authority by the fact, emphasised by Marcellus, that he is a 'scholar' (I. i. 45). At first Horatio contents himself with remarking that:

...in the gross and scope of mine opinion,
This bodes some strange eruption to our state. (I. i. 72)

Of course in the most general sense Horatio's prediction is amply fulfilled in the course of the play, yet the eruption which he fears is clearly one of a general and political kind rather than the family quarrel which it proves to be. This is made clear when Horatio compares the apparition to the portents which preceded the death of Caesar:

> A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye.
> In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
> The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
> As stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
> Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
> Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
> Was sick almost to Doomsday with eclipse.
> And even the like precurse of fear'd events,
> As harbingers preceding still the fates
> And prologue to the omen coming on,
> Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
> Unto our climatures and countrymen. (I. i. 115-128)

Even passing over the well-known grammatical difficulties of this speech, difficulties which perhaps indicate some textual corruption, there still remains a certain difficulty in interpreting the import of Horatio's remarks here. At first he seems to be contrasting the 'mote' of the apparition with the far more awesome and compelling Roman portents, yet he closes the speech by emphasising that substantially the same phenomena have been witnessed within Denmark itself. Indeed editors are divided as to the meaning of the speech along precisely these lines.[19] Yet however we resolve this difficulty, it remains a fact that these harbingers' mentioned by Horatio, which are apparently pretty impressive, receive no further mention in the play. Again the first scene gives the impression of an

imminent national and pelitical catastrophn, a catastrophe reflected, as in so much Elizabethan drama, by a general disturbance in the cosmos.[20] Again we can notice that the parallel with Caesar is in one sense highly appropriate - for the apparition of the ghost does indeed signal the ultimate assassination of the king - and yet the murder of Caesar, the archetypal political murder, could not be more remote from a nephew's revenge of his father's death on his uncle.

This sense of the possibility of a national and political catastrophe involving the whole Danish state is most powerfully suggested in the scene by the coincidence of the ghostly apparition with the feverish military preparations to meet the threat posed by Fortinbras. Once again it falls upon Horatio to explain things:

> Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
> Of unimproved mettle, hot and full,
> Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
> Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes
> For food and diet to some enterprise
> That hath a stomach in't, which is no other,
> As it doth well appear unto our state,
> But to recover of us by strong hand
> And terms compulsatory those foresaid lands
> So by his father lost. (I. i. 98-107)

The whole Fortinbras subplot seems to me considerably more puzzling than is usually remarked; first it is elaborately prepared for in I. i., only to be dealt with by Claudius - with customary efficiency - in I. ii. and to be completely resolved by II. ii. It then entirely disappears from the play, only to make a sudden re-entry in IV. iv.; indeed, it is doubtful whether the term 'subplot' is suitable for such a dramatic device.[21] Again I think that we can only conclude that the elaborate explanation of Fortinbras'

threat in the first scene is designed to mislead the audience, at once lending support to the view that the ghost's appearance has a purely political and military significance and also causing us to be impressed by Claudius' masterly and peaceful handling of this wild and lawless youth. Yet, as has been remarked,[22] the picture presented in the first scene of Fortinbras and his army as a band of 'lawless resolutes' is quite different from the well-disciplined army and its sober commander presented towards the end of the play. Again it suits Shakespeare's artistic purposes to present Fortinbras as a far more threatening and reprehensible force at first than he in fact proves to be. The connection between this military threat and the ghost is neatly made by Barnardo:

> Well may it sort that this portentous figure
> Comes armed through our watch so like the King
> That was and is the question of these wars. (I. i. 112-114)

Thus when Horatio addresses the ghost upon its second entrance with a suitably scholarly list of possible reasons for its apparition - a list which calculatedly omits the true reason - there can be little doubt that the audience has been led to believe that the second of the reasons is probably the true one:

> If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
> Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
> O, speak; (I. i. 136-138)

this being, of course, a well-attested function of ghosts.[23]

Yet on both points the first scene proves to be unreliable. The war with Norway is promptly averted by Claudius and no more is heard of the military preparations, while the true meaning of the ghost's apparition proves to be entirely unconnected with military or national questions. In

fact from the moment Hamlet is told of the ghost's apparition the ghost begins to take on a somewhat different appearance; whereas at I. i. 53 we are told that the ghost looks 'offended', at I. ii. 231 this is modulated to, in Horatio's words, 'A countenance more in sorrow than in anger'. Again to Hamlet the armour of the ghost suggests something quite different from war:

> My fathers spirit - in arms! All is not well.
> I doubt some foul play. (I. ii. 255-256)

Again, whereas in the first scene the fact that the ghost vanishes at dawn suggests to Horatio that it is an 'extravagant and erring spirit' (I. i. 159), later when Hamlet meets the ghost it emerges that the reason that the ghost vanishes at dawn is that it must return to the purgatory-like state in which it spends the daytime:

> Doom'd for a certain time to walk the night,
> And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purg'd away. (I. v. 10-13)

In other words, the ghost seems to me to be progressively humanised as the play proceeds; in this connection the ghost's confinement in a purgatory-like state is surely of the greatest significance. The question of whether the ghost is a 'Catholic' ghost or not and whether, if so, Shakespeare intends us to accept its authenticity, has been fiercely debated. As Prosser emphasises, however much Catholics accepted the possibility of a departed spirit returning from purgatory - all sides denied that a spirit could ever return from heaven or hell - spirits could only do so with divine consent.[24] Thus to accept the ghost as genuinely from purgatory would seem to involve us in accepting that his call for revenge had divine

sanction, something extremely unlikely in view of the unanimous denunciation of revenge by Christian writers of the period.

These theological discussions, however, all rest on the assumption that theologians serve as reliable guides to the attitudes of Shakespeare and his audience to ghosts. In fact, of course, such an assumption, especially in the case of tragedy, is not necessarily a justified one. In this connection it seems to me surprising that critics of the play have not paid more attention to the evidence concerning belief in ghosts in the period marshalled by Keith Thomas in his well-known study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.[25] Thomas, after discussing theological attitudes towards ghosts, goes on to argue that in actual fact most Englishmen in the period continued to believe in them: 'it would be wrong to associate the belief in ghosts with any particular denomination. It was to be found among almost all religious groups, and at virtually every social level'.[26] Thomas provides a great deal of evidence to support this contention, including cases such as that of a well-known Puritan divine, William Twisse, who attributed his own conversion during his schooldays to the apparition of the ghost of a dead schoolfellow, who revealed that he was now a damned soul.[27] If the belief in ghosts survived in contradiction to official religious teaching, what are we to make of the status of the ghost in the play? It seems to me undoubtedly significant that Shakespeare, in making the ghost speak of a purgatory-like state, chooses something close to the one theological option available if the ghost is to be genuinely the spirit of old Hamlet. Yet there is perhaps a further artistic, rather than theological, dimension to Shakespeare's choice here, for he makes the ghost neither clearly bad nor clearly good, neither from heaven nor from hell. In this sense the presentation of the ghost as the spirit of one who is murdered 'unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd' (I. v. 77) serves to em-

phasise the continuity of the ghost with the living man; throughout the play revenge is seen as a demand of 'nature'. the moral status of which is in doubt;[28] this is perhaps how we should see the ghost, neither sanctioned by God nor clearly condemned by him, but in a middle state not so far from Hamlet's own.

This is not to say that the possibility of the ghost being a devil - probability in the eyes of theologians - is unimportant to the action; rather Hamlet himself gives this as the reason for his own testing of Claudius with the play within the play:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be a devil, and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape... (II. ii. 594-596)

Yet Hamlet himself assumes that the appropriate test for the ghost is simply whether or not he has told the truth concerning the murder and this is surely the audience's response as well; Shakespeare is very careful to insert an aside in which Claudius confesses his own guilt for the first time in the scene which immediately follows Hamlet's doubts (III. i. 49-54). This is not to say that revenge is right but that the question of its rightness or otherwise cannot be determined simply by determining the genuineness of the ghost.

The last time the ghost appears - in the 'Closet' scene - this process of 'humanisation' has gone even further; it is interesting to note in this connection that according to the First Quarto the ghost enters 'in his night gowne', something which underlines the contrast between this figure and the armed spectre of the first scene. The ghost, after reminding Hamlet of his duty to revenge, continues:

> But look, amazement on thy mother sits.

O step between her and her fighting soul.
Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
Speak to her, Hamlet. (III. iv. 112-115)

Here the domestic nature of the tragedy is pushed to the fore. Hamlet himself implores:

Do not look upon me,
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects. Then what I have to do
Will want true colour - tears perchance for blood. (III. iv. 127-130)

Again the ghost, far from being shown as a demon screaming for revenge, is presented as a 'piteous' figure whose effect is to soften Hamlet's own hardened heart. Related to this progressive 'humanisation' of the ghost is its internalisation. Whereas in Scene 1 the ghost is seen by all three witnesses, after the ghost has once been alone with Hamlet, he is seen by Hamlet alone. This is made clear by the fact that in the 'Closet' scene, Gertrude cannot see the ghost. Like Horatio, the ghost serves to mark and intensify Hamlet's loneliness and isolation at the court. In this connection it is interesting to note that the 'swearing' at the end of I. v. can be played in such a way that Hamlet alone hears the ghost's commands from beneath the stage.

The first scene of Hamlet, then, is systematically misleading - misleading about Horatio, about Fortinbras, about the ghost and, by implication, about Claudius. Why does Shakespeare mislead the audience in this way? The general reasons for this are I think twofold; first Shakespeare is interested in conveying to his audience the contrast between the tragedy of Hamlet and other tragedies of the period, including his own. By beginning the play as though it were one in which the hero's tragedy would be reflected in, and connected with, a general upheaval of the state

and the cosmos, he underlines the fact that in Hamlet's case no such upheaval occurs. In the play the burden of awareness of corruption and disaster falls on the hero alone - the court, the universe, his own mother, all seem equally blind to the fact that there is anything wrong at all. In this sense Hamlet exposes an element of optimism in even the bloodiest Elizabethan tragedy - the optimism which supposed that the tragic sense is one easily available to all. In *Hamlet* part of the tragedy is the loss of men's ability, when surrounded by corruption, to even sense the tragedy of their own corruption, to even know what it is that they have lost. In this sense the play strikes one, in its emphasis upon the indifference of the world to tragedy, the absoluteness of our corruption by power, as strikingly modern in its emphases. The first scene serves to underline the play's pessimism by giving us a glimpse of the relatively easy tragedy which Shakespeare refused to write. The second reason, linked to this first, is that Shakespeare is interested in suggesting to his audience the fallibility and frailty of our attempts to interpret the significance of events, especially their moral significance. The play is full of events, seemingly natural and spontaneous, which are in fact staged, such as Hamlet's appearance in Ophelia's chamber and his other 'mad' scenes, Ophelia's encounter with Hamlet, the play within the play and the final duel. In the first and second scene of the play - the latter I will have to discuss another time - Shakespeare consciously and artfully exposes the audience to the deceptiveness of appearances and, more importantly, to the moral confusion which results from our inability to penetrate those appearances. One of the central themes of this play is the tragic dimension of stupidity, and so the playwright begins by giving the audience an object-lesson in the misleading consequences of overhasty and conventionalised interpretation.

Notes :

(1) See Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*, (1959), Compass Books Edition, New York, 1961, p. 3.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(3) J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, (3rd Ed.), Cambridge, 1951. (Hereafter: W. H. I. H.)

(4) See Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play, and Duel*: A Study in *Hamlet*, London, 1971, pp. 30-33. Cf. Robert Ornstein, 'Historical Criticism and the Interpretation of Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, X (1959), and Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism*, Oxford, 1959.

(5) Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

(6) See *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 8-32.

(7) All references and quotations from the play are from: *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1982. (Hereafter: Arden.)

(8) *Hamlet*, ed. J. Dover Wilson, The New Shakespeare, 2nd Ed. (1936), Cambridge, 1954, p. 143. (Hereafter: N. S.)

(9) *Hamlet*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer, New Penguin Shakespeare, Harmondsworth, 1980, p. 205.

(10) N. S., p. 144.

(11) See W. H. I. H., pp. 232-237, where this question is discussed at length.

(12) See e. g. Hamlet's 'What piece of work is a man' speech (II. ii. 295-310). In the recent B. B. C. production this point was underlined by having Hamlet read much of the speech from a book.

(13) See e. g. III. i. 105-115; III. ii. 181-204; III. iii. 57-64; III. iv. 162-172; IV. vii. 110-122.

(14) See Ronald Hingley, *Russian Writers and Soviet Society 1917-1978*, London, 1979, p. 63 for a brief discussion.

(15) See especially V. ii. 215-220.

(16) See W. H. I. H., pp. 66-75.

(17) Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, London, 1967, p. 123 footnote.

(18) Quoted in *Shakespeare's England*, Volume II, Oxford, 1916, p. 268; Cf. N. S., p. 144 for other references.

(19) Compare e. g. N. S. p. 146 and Arden p. 173.

(20) See Tillyard's classic discussion of this question in his *The Elizabethan World Picture*, 1947, especially Chapter 7. *Hamlet*, of course. is only one of

many works which suggest the limitations of Tillyard's approach. For a very different perspective see J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, Brighton, 1983.

(21) The Fortinbras subplot does not seem to fit very well into any of the various categories proposed by Richard Levin in his exhaustive *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama*, London, 1971, pp. 1-20.

(22) See Arden, p. 172.

(23) See e. g. Thomas Browne, *The Religio Medici and other writings*, Everyman, London, 1906, pp. 35-36.

(24) Prosser, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV, passim.

(25) Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (1971), Harmondsworth, 1973, pp. 701-734.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 708.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 707.

(28) See e. g. I. v. 81-83, IV. v. 117-120.