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### Historical Interpretations of Hamlet's Father

There are a few ways in which the ghost of Hamlet's father could be interpreted such as being a demon that has been sent from hell, a soul that is stuck in purgatory, or collective hysteria of the characters. Out of the three readings that can be interpreted for the ghost, it was likely intended that Hamlet's father was residing in purgatory until the death of Claudius released his soul to Heaven. Due to this implication, *Hamlet* is an insight to the historical aspects concerning the ghost being an allegory for the religious time period in which it was written in, representing one's path into the afterlife. This can be seen with Hamlet being the only one in close proximity to the ghost throughout, signifying that his father trusted him to take revenge on his behalf. The reason why the ghost considered does not return after the massacre in act five is the result of Claudius' death, as his death was necessary for Hamlet's father to leave purgatory since Gertrude needed God's judgement and not Hamlet's. The religious time period in which *Hamlet* was written, late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, signified when England transitioned from the old religion (Protestantism) into the new religion (Catholicism).

There are many ways in which the ghost of Hamlet's father could be interpreted; as a demon sent from hell, a soul that is stuck in purgatory, or collective hysteria of the cast. Since Hamlet doubts what the ghost is telling him, Hamlet is unable to guarantee that the ghost is not a demon who is taking on the form of his recently deceased father. This should make sense within the context of the demon finding Hamlet to be the most susceptible after the death of his father. In

the first scene of the play, the ghost appears before Barnardo, Horatio and Marcellus, all of whom confirm that the ghost looks like Hamlet's father. This could be explained through collective hysteria in which Hamlet used to claim that the ghost instructed him to kill Claudius. Lastly, it can be explained that the ghost is still attached to this plane of existence, which explains why the three of them were able to see him. This explains how the ghost is aware of how the murder was done, and it is because the ghost and Hamlet's father are one and the same.

With the ghost being perceived as a demon who came up from the depths of hell, it is stated that Hamlet doubts the intentions of the supposed ghost of his father. In act two scene two, Hamlet states that "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil, and the devil hath power / To assume a pleasing shape," (Shakespeare 2.2.594-6). This shows how Hamlet doubts what the ghost is telling him, as Hamlet cannot guarantee that the ghost is not a demon taking on the form, or shape, of his recently deceased father. This makes sense from the lens that the demon would find Hamlet to be more susceptible over the death of his father than others within his immediate family. The main issue with this perception of the ghost, would be how it would know the intimate details regarding the death of Hamlet's father. After being given the information that the father was murdered by his brother, Claudius, Hamlet puts on a play depicting a similar act in front of Claudius in order to test his conscience. Upon watching the play, it appeared to Hamlet that Claudius committed the murder of his father after the hasty exit from his seat in the audience. It is doubtful that a demon taking on the form of Hamlet's father would know intimate details of his murder to warrant such a reaction from Claudius.

Reading the ghost through the involvement of collective hysteria (or as a mass hallucination) amongst those who have claimed to see the ghost is also a likely possibility. In the first scene of the play, the ghost appears before Barnardo, Horatio, and Marcellus. It is even

confirmed by Marcellus that it appears to be of “the same figure like the King that’s dead” (1.1.44). Hamlet, having heard the about the supposed sighting of his father, claims that the ghost instructed him on killing Claudius. Greg claims that the ghost never existed, and that the ghost was “*a mere figment of Hamlet’s brain*” (401, their emphasis). This means that when Claudius was watching the play, he understood the accusations that Hamlet was implying through the play. And when he demanded that the play be stopped, this was a defense mechanism due to the implications that everyone else would understand the allegations that Hamlet was putting forward. Simply put, Claudius did not want the audience members who were watching the play to believe that he was the one who murdered his brother. The main issue with this idea would be with the scene after the play-within-the-play, when Claudius admits to having killed his brother. Claudius is alone, about to pray, when he discusses with the audience how

“It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t –  
 A brother’s murder. Pray can I not,  
 Though inclination be as sharp as will,  
 Guilt defeats my strong intent” (Shakespeare 3.3.37-40).

With the first line discussing Cain in Genesis, Claudius freely admits that his guilt is keeping him from praying for forgiveness even though he wants to be forgiven.

Lastly, it can be read that the ghost portrays the need for closure, this is a result of Hamlet’s father needing resolution for his murder that remained unresolved. At the beginning of the play, it is recognized that the father’s ghost is still attached to this world and has not passed onto the afterlife. This is the most likely example as to why all three of them (Barnardo, Horatio, and Marcellus) are able to see him. The father wants to be seen so that it would be brought to the attention of Hamlet through Horatio in the following scene. This is how the ghost is aware of how

Hamlet's father was murdered, and it is because the ghost and Hamlet's father are one and the same. Claudius genuinely wants to be forgiven for having murdered his brother, yet he would feel compelled to ask for it due to his continued guilt for the crime. Out of the three readings that can be interpreted for the ghost, it is intended for Hamlet's father to be residing in purgatory until the death of Claudius released his soul to Heaven.

Hamlet was the only one in close proximity to the ghost, signifying that the ghost trusted his son to take revenge on his behalf. This can be seen in act one scene five, when the ghost emotionally persuades Hamlet into going through the revenge plot since "If thou didst ever thy dear father love—" (1.5.23). It also says that they shared a close connection while the father was still alive, as Hamlet was willing to take up the challenge on taking revenge for his father's death. It should also be noted that this is not the only time in which the ghost only shows itself to Hamlet, as it appears in act three scene four after Polonius is killed. With Gertrude in the room as well, it tells the audience that the ghost does not trust his wife but trusts Hamlet. This is due to the implication that Gertrude is so close to Claudius, whom the ghosts wants killed, that he does not want to risk Gertrude ruining the plan for revenge. When the father tells Hamlet "Do not forget!" (3.4.110), this is a reference to remember their last conversation back in act one. The ghost is trying to urge Hamlet to take action concerning his death as "This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.110-1). This is in response to what Hamlet was telling his mother before the ghost reappeared, as she was being berated for allowing Claudius forced himself onto the throne.

The reason as to why the ghost does not return after the massacre in act five is a result of Claudius' death. This is due to why the ghost of Hamlet's father has appeared before him which is to take revenge beyond the afterlife. However, this does not tie up all of the loose ends into a neat and tidy bow. There has to be a reason as to why the ghost shows up in act three after the

death of Polonius, as plotting to take revenge is the explanation for the appearance at the end of act one. The reasoning for the ghost being in act three is similar to the reasoning for act one and it is because Hamlet needs to remember who the target is when revenging his father. “But look, amazement on thy mother sits. / O step between her and her fighting soul. / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works” (3.4.112-4). Gertrude needs to be comforted in that moment after witnessing Polonius die at the hands of Hamlet, in the manner of what can be described as an accidental death as a best case scenario. This has to be explicitly told to Hamlet as he was in the middle of berating Gertrude for marrying Claudius whom was being described as “A murderer and a villain, / A slave that is not twentieth part of the tithe of your precedent lord, a vice of kings,” when the ghost reappeared (3.4.96-9). The ghost only appears when Hamlet needs to be given information to carry out with his revenge and to be warned against going after people not directly involved. This is why the ghost does not return in act five, it is because there is no need for him to return and with the act of revenge complete his soul is able to leave purgatory.

Claudius’ death was necessary since Gertrude needed to be judged by God. During the first meeting with the ghost of Hamlet’s father, it was explicitly mentioned that Gertrude would not be part of the plot for revenge as it uncertain if she was conspiring with Claudius. The exact phrasing that the ghost tells Hamlet would be to

“Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive  
 Against my mother aught. Leave her to heaven,  
 And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge  
 To prick and sting her” (1.5.85-8).

Gertrude is not part of the revenge plot because she was not present when Claudius killed Hamlet’s father, if Gertrude does in fact have a guilty conscience then she would be judged by

God accordingly. The ghost does not want Hamlet to take the life of his mother, Gertrude, if she was actually innocent in regards to the death of Hamlet's father.

The religious time period in which Hamlet was written, being in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, was when England transitioned from Protestantism to Catholicism which reflects in the text. This is seen in regards to the ghost of Hamlet's father, who is currently trapped in purgatory although it should not exist according to those who are Protestant. It was when Saint Augustine allowed "the early Church [to deny] the existence of ghosts [in the twelfth century]... since God would not allow the dead to return to earth. The deceased were no longer concerned with this world" (Belsey 8). According to this version of events, the dead either go up to heaven or go down to hell with no option to stay behind in order to repent for previous sins. This does not mean that the ghost could not have existed according to the beliefs of the time period. According to Belsey, this can be countered with how "[t]he Protestant abolition of purgatory made very little impact on popular custom" (9). Although this should mean that ghosts are to be considered supernatural, according to the Protestants, it means that the ghost of Hamlet's father is considered to be a possibility which translates into the text. Although others can see the ghost in act one, with Hamlet being the only one able to communicate with him, it becomes Hamlet being the only one able to see the ghost in act three; this is due to changing religious ideas during the time period when purgatory started to become more of an accepted concept. During the massacre at the end of the play, the religious implications of purgatory have been fully accepted and since Hamlet has fulfilled the necessary act of revenge for his father, he does not appear at the end of the play as his spirit has been accepted into heaven.

With the religious time period in which Hamlet was written, being the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century, the main signifier would be when England would transition from the

old religion (Protestantism) into the new religion (Catholicism). Due to this implication, Hamlet is seen an historical insight about the ghost being an allegory for the religious time period it was written in, representing the one's path into the afterlife. With the possible interpretations for the ghost, it was intended that Hamlet's father was residing in purgatory until the death of Claudius released his soul to Heaven. This is the reason as to why the ghost does not return in act five. It is the result of Claudius' death being deemed necessary for Hamlet's father to leave purgatory.

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