

# Hamlet's Ghost: A Review Article

## Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton UP, 2001.

**Peter Goldman**

Department of English  
Westminster College  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84105  
[www.wcslc.edu](http://www.wcslc.edu)  
[pgoldman@uci.edu](mailto:pgoldman@uci.edu)

"Remember me." Hamlet's Ghost calls out to us across the space of four hundred years, and by all evidence we are in no danger of forgetting him. Scholars have tended to focus their attention on the character of young Hamlet, but the Ghost of King Hamlet is arguably the interpretive crux of Shakespeare's play. We must decide, along with young Hamlet, whether the Ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damned." In this paradigmatically modern play, the Ghost hearkens back to the late medieval world of magic and superstition, the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory—as well as the generic conventions of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. In a crucial way the whole plot of *Hamlet* depends upon the Ghost. Yet some critics have questioned the reality claim of the Ghost within the world of the play, along with the ethics of his call for revenge—just as, indeed, young Hamlet himself feels compelled to test the truth of the Ghost's accusation through "The Mousetrap," the play within the play. The Ghost also raises larger questions about the role of the supernatural within early modern culture. For all these reasons, Stephen Greenblatt's new book *Hamlet in Purgatory* is especially welcome.

"I began with a desire to speak with the dead." One of the most striking openings of any book of literary criticism, Greenblatt introduces thus his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988). In his more recent work on *Hamlet*, Greenblatt examines that same desire to speak with the dead in Shakespeare and his audience, a desire, he argues, in which we ourselves, as fans of *Hamlet*, participate. Not only do we desire to speak with the dead, but the dead also desire to speak with us; or, more precisely, they seem to fear the oblivion of forgetfulness. Significantly, Hamlet's Ghost asks for remembrance (1.5.92) as well as revenge. Although the term "Purgatory" is never mentioned in *Hamlet* (such a reference might well have run afoul of Elizabethan censors), the Ghost clearly implies that he has returned from Purgatory. He is "Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in days of nature / Are burnt and

purged away" (1.5.11-14).

In recent years New Historicists have been exploring the complex ways in which Renaissance drama appropriated the power of weakened or damaged traditional religious institutions. Purgatory, for example, was at the center of vast web of institutional rituals and customs, and these practices had been forcibly repressed by the Church of England for almost forty years when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first performed. Leading Protestants in England sought to minimize the purely ceremonial dimensions of late medieval worship; in this effort many of the hallowed images, the statues, carvings, and the furniture of the parish churches were destroyed or defaced with ill-advised haste and violence. Reformers often rushed to discard age-old customs and practices that had acquired the familiarity and authority of ancient tradition. The iconoclasm of the Reformation left an enormous gap in the cultural and spiritual life of the English people, and Renaissance drama stepped in to help fill that gap. It is worthwhile noting in this regard that the rise of the Elizabethan theater followed immediately on the Protestant suppression of the annual mystery play cycles, a rich element of late medieval culture. The more tradition-minded laity found the bare austerities of the Protestant worship service, centered on preaching and biblical exegesis, dissatisfying and inaccessible. Protestant worship in its most rigorous forms was intellectually and morally strenuous. Shakespeare's theater, according to New Historicists, was able to appropriate and transform the spiritual "energy" or charisma associated with forbidden Catholic practices such as exorcism or services for the dead. The attacks on Catholic ceremonies commonly associated them with both magic and theater. The repression of Purgatory was part of a larger attack on the belief in ghosts in general. Efforts to eliminate magic and superstition added to the cultural vacuum created by the forces of modernity.

2

Secularization, as Greenblatt recognizes, is not a process of evacuating religious beliefs and institutions of their sacred contents, leaving for modernity only the secular forms. It is precisely the ritual forms that are left behind; traditional ceremonies such as the Mass for the dead or ritual exorcism were abandoned, while the psychic energy invested therein continued in new forms, including art. The sacred does not simply evaporate in the modern era; it is rather integrated into the fabric of our culture, integrated so profoundly that we hardly recognize it as such any more.

This is not to elide the significant differences between art and religion, and before returning to *Hamlet* it will be worthwhile to dwell briefly on this important point. New Historicists commonly assert that the boundaries between art, religion, and other cultural practices are fluid. What counts for "literature," for example, is a matter of historical convention. For this reason, New Historicists have participated in the widespread trend towards interdisciplinary research, examining the relationships between seemingly discrete

discursive fields. This is undeniably a healthy trend, but this approach sometimes ignores the significant differences between fields such as art and religion. The strength of Greenblatt's work is that he is very sensitive to the relevant distinctions between different cultural practices. For example, comparing the medieval mystery plays to Marlowe's *Faustus*, Greenblatt writes,

there is, to be sure, fear and trembling in the mysteries and moralities of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but a dread bound up with the fate of particular situated individuals is largely absent, and the audience shares its grief and joy in a collective experience that serves either to ward off or to absorb private emotions. Marlowe's *Faustus*, by contrast, though it appears conventional enough in its plot and overarching religious ideology, seems like a startling departure from everything that has preceded it precisely because the dramatist has heightened and individuated anxiety to an unprecedented degree and because he has contrived to implicate his audience as individuals in that anxiety. (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 133)

The experience of the audience in an Elizabethan theater is not collective in quite the same sense as in a religious ritual, or even as in a quasi-ritual such as the mystery plays. An individual's personal response to a religious ritual is often irrelevant—what validates the ritual is the institution itself and the participation of the community. Participation in an ecclesiastical ritual constitutes submission to the institutional authority of the church. And in early modern England, of course, church attendance was mandatory. The essence of the ritual is the individual's submersion in the religious community as a whole. In a theater, by contrast, each individual is free to applaud or not. Watching a play seems to be a more passive experience than participating in a religious ceremony, and in one sense it is. But aesthetic response, in a secular context, is also more individuating, less constrained by institutional pressures, as Greenblatt recognizes. To put this point schematically, the modern theater creates a community of individuals, not a cosmic hierarchy. A certain freedom is gained, but the security of a stable cosmos is sacrificed.

In Greenblatt's work, however, the distinction between theater and ritual remains without any theoretical grounding, anthropological or otherwise. New Historicism shares with Generative Anthropology the typically modern desire to minimize our theoretical presuppositions. But this healthy desire does not free us from the necessity of defining our object of study. Culture is defined by representation, as Greenblatt well knows. This, I take it, is the import of Clifford Geertz's famous conception of culture as semiotic (Geertz 5), a conception which Greenblatt acknowledges as the basis for his practice (*Practicing New Historicism* 20-31). But Geertz's semiotic concept of culture remains at best a description of culture, not a rigorous definition. As a whole, New Historicism is severely limited by its lack of any solid theoretical foundation. Its anthropological insights can be articulated only on an ad hoc basis. Nonetheless, there is a powerful anthropological intuition at work in Greenblatt, despite the lack of theoretical support, and his recent book deserves our careful

attention.

3

In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt argues that the Ghost of Hamlet is not simply a plot device, a generic convention of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, as sometimes assumed. Its power, both for the audience and for young Hamlet, goes far beyond its function as a plot catalyst. Rather the figure of the Ghost expresses (1) a widespread fear among the living of being forgotten after death and (2) bereavement for those already dead. The Ghost, in brief, inhabits the imaginative space left open by the English Reformation's banishment of Purgatory in 1563. The Ghost returns from Purgatory, and in effect brings Purgatory back with him, albeit in a fictionalized and thereby transformed shape. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as Greenblatt puts it, participates in "a cult of the dead" (203, 257), and we as readers and viewers continue this cult—one with important social functions that he explores at length. Only on this cultic basis can we account for *Hamlet's* powerful and continued fascination. The primary imperative of the Ghost is to "Remember," not to "Revenge," as commonly thought. In this sense, Greenblatt's interpretation shares common concerns with the readings of René Girard and Eric Gans, for both of whom also revenge is secondary to the refusal or delay of revenge. In Greenblatt's reading, the imperative for memory at the cost of revenge accounts for Hamlet's delay that has so puzzled critics over the centuries, as indeed Hamlet himself (in his soliloquies) is puzzled and frustrated by his lack of ready action. In this reading of the play, the problem is not delay but rather revenge itself: the Ghost *does* call out for revenge, and Hamlet eventually fulfills that requirement, if not, perhaps, in exactly the way envisioned by King Hamlet. The problem for Greenblatt's interpretation, as he puts it, is that "Sticking a sword into someone's body turns out to be a very tricky way of remembering the dead" (225). If the play is primarily an expression of the "desire to speak with the dead," and the fear, on the part of the living, of being forgotten after death, then how do we account for the elements of revenge at all? We cannot deny that the play, like all revenge tragedies, ends with a bloodbath. And at least part of the aesthetic experience of the play is the conventional anticipation of revenge. As Greenblatt observes, "Purgatory, along with theological language of communion (houseing), deathbed confession (appointment), and anointing (anelling), while compatible with a Christian (and, specifically, a Catholic) call for remembrance, is utterly incompatible with a Senecan call for vengeance" (237). Ghosts from Purgatory typically ask for prayers to hasten their way to Heaven. How, in other words, do we reconcile revenge and remembrance? In order to see how Greenblatt answers this question, we will need to review briefly the argument of his book.

The larger part of Greenblatt's book is devoted to reconstructing two important contexts for *Hamlet*: the Renaissance controversies over the doctrine of Purgatory in the wake of the Reformation, and representations of Purgatory in paintings, manuscript illuminations, prints, and narratives—for example, the medieval legend of "St. Patrick's Purgatory" in

Ireland (73-101). We remember here Hamlet's excited oath to Horatio early in the play, "by Saint Patrick" (1.5.42), and editors duly note that Saint Patrick is regarded as the keeper of Purgatory. In this popular legend, widely disseminated by vernacular translations and medieval sermons, Saint Patrick discovers a physical entrance into Purgatory in a cave at Lough Derg, Donegal, in Ireland, and then establishes an abbey on the site. An English knight, Owein, comes to the abbey desiring to repent his sins and avoid punishment in the afterlife. He enters physically into Purgatory, has various adventures there including conversations with the devils, suffers punishments appropriate to his sins, and finally, like Dante (two centuries later), achieves a vision of Paradise. He returns to earth to tell his story, giving Purgatory the authority of an eyewitness account, an authority Purgatory was much in need of, given its lack of any ancient authority. The abbey that was built around the entry to Purgatory in a cave was an important destination for late medieval pilgrimages until English Protestants dismantled the site in the 17th century. "St. Patrick's Purgatory" is a significant, yet little known, chapter in the history of lay devotion during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Greenblatt's account is enlightening, not least for the close reading skills he brings to this text, as well as his analysis of the social and institutional functions served by the legends surrounding Purgatory. To a large extent, this is the familiar story of how anxiety is aroused only to be channeled and allayed through appropriate institutional means, thus affirming a particular social hierarchy and cultural economy. Greenblatt's larger purpose in this chapter is to establish the importance of Purgatory in the late medieval imagination, and hence the trauma surrounding its official elimination in 1563, a trauma which found expression through Shakespeare's play.

4

Another fascinating piece of lay devotion examined at length by Greenblatt is the popular story of "The Gast [Ghost] of Gy," about a widow in France during the 14th century who is haunted by the Ghost of her departed husband (105-133). A Dominican monk is called in to examine the Ghost in order to determine its nature and the reason for the haunting. What follows is a long dialogue, "which is in effect the transcript of a scholastic disputatio between the cleric and the specter" (105). The rhetorical effect of this dialogue is ambiguous, as Greenblatt notes. The figure of the Ghost himself is highly ambivalent; while he is destined for heaven, he says, "I am a wicked Ghost, as unto my wicked pain that I suffer" (112). The dialogue also attempts to resolve, not entirely satisfactorily, some of the theological difficulties surrounding Purgatory. And finally, the monk is presented as rather simple-minded and limited in comparison to the Ghost, so that the authority of the church in dealing with ghosts seems questionable. The story reveals that the main reason for the haunting is the Ghost's attachment to his wife. The Ghost of Gy says, "I love more my wife / Than any other man alive, / And therefore first to her I went" (qtd. by Greenblatt 130). The haunting turns out to be a touching scene of domestic affection, not unlike the solicitude exhibited by King Hamlet's Ghost for Gertrude, especially during the "closet scene" in the third act (scene four). Purgatory therefore is associated with the private and domestic,

important indicators of modernity. Greenblatt's discussion of Purgatory ghosts and monks parallels his account of "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" (in reference to *King Lear*), the possessed and their demons, in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (94-128). In institutional terms, ghosts and demons are liminal phenomena; official doctrine sanctions them, and institutional means existed to deal with these spirits, but hauntings and possessions tended to arise outside of conventional ritual contexts, and they attracted charismatic figures (spiritual "experts") who existed on the fringes of the official institutions. Hauntings and possessions also permitted active lay participation, with unpredictable results. For these reasons, Reformers seeking to consolidate the power of the church found them threatening. Ghosts were ambivalent and controversial, and they always threatened to escape the bounds of official control.

Given the importance of ghosts in the Renaissance imagination, we might well ask how and why credulous belief in ghosts came to such a sudden end in the seventeenth century. As Greenblatt puts it, "How did it all come to an end? How were the dead killed off? And did they go quietly?" (133). In Greenblatt's account, the ghosts inhabiting Purgatory were forcibly evicted by zealous Protestant reformers, and they did not go quietly: conservatives, speaking on behalf of the dead, protested long and loud. In addition to Renaissance representations of Purgatory, Greenblatt also examines the controversies surrounding this Catholic institution during the English Reformation. For this purpose he examines closely Simon Fish's attack on Purgatory in "A Supplication for the Beggars" (1529), a tract which argues that the vast resources spent on relieving souls in Purgatory would be better spent on relieving the living beggars of the realm. In response to Fish, Sir Thomas More wrote "The Supplication of Souls" (1529), framed as a plea from the dead to save them from the painful fires of Purgatory. For More and other conservatives, the devotional practices surrounding Purgatory were invaluable, not only for the aid of the suffering ghosts, but also as a means of creating a sense of community among the living, a community which included the dead who had not been forgotten. The dead lingered in the memories of the living, just as they lingered in the liminal space of Purgatory. These suffering souls still existed in a relationship of reciprocal exchange and occasional communication with the living. John Donne's obsession with death and dying is examined to good effect in this light, notably his famous Meditation #17 from *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, "For Whom the Bell Tolls." As Donne points out, "No man is an island." We are part of vast community that includes both the living and the dead. Purgatory was a valuable means of maintaining this sense of continuity and community, and its elimination was a genuine loss to Renaissance culture. Greenblatt, agreeing with revisionist historians of the Reformation, points out rightly that late medieval devotional practices were not quite the dead letter that Protestant polemics portrayed. The traditions of Catholicism were still living and vital, and Protestant piety took root in the fertile ground prepared by late medieval developments such as Confession and Purgatory. An intellectual elite imposed many of the Protestant reforms from above; they did not always emerge spontaneously from below as a grass-roots movement, as sometimes claimed. (The question that revisionist historians beg, however, is why the

reformers were so successful if they did not have substantial popular support. The sweeping changes inaugurated by the English Reformation required *both* an active faction of reformers and widespread popular support, even if that support was sometimes limited to popular resentment toward the corruption of the clergy. Contrary to the claims of Christopher Haigh [56-74], the importance of anticlericalism for the Reformation can hardly be overestimated.) *Hamlet*, according to Greenblatt, participates in the debate about Purgatory, although not in any simple fashion. The play in effect stages this debate without necessarily taking sides.

5

For a Renaissance audience, the dramatic representation of a ghost from Purgatory would evoke a rich context of legends and lore that have for the most part been lost to modern audiences. Ghost stories, for instance, were a frequent element of medieval sermons. Greenblatt does an admirable job of recreating that context and demonstrating the semantic richness of the Ghost for a Renaissance audience. In this he explains all the ways in which Hamlet's Ghost exceeds the generic traditions of the revenge tragedy. Greenblatt also considers other representations of ghosts in Renaissance drama, including revenge tragedies, noting that Shakespeare's use of ghosts is rather unique in the ways that he was able to effectively exploit the supernatural for dramatic purposes. In his valuable discussion of Shakespeare's use of ghosts (in all his plays), Greenblatt charts "three fundamental perspectives to which Shakespeare repeatedly returns: the Ghost as a figure of false surmise, the Ghost as a figure of history's nightmare, and the Ghost as a figure of deep psychic disturbance. Half-hidden is all of these is a fourth perspective: the Ghost as figure of theater" (157). Shakespeare's use of the supernatural, Greenblatt points out, does not fall neatly into the categories of either skepticism or simple belief. He argues that Shakespeare took ghostly spirits quite seriously. Although Shakespeare's attitude is educated and modern, his drama suggests that the claim of the supernatural upon us is real and substantial. To the extent that we take his drama seriously, we must also take the supernatural seriously. Shakespeare's deployment of ghosts goes beyond "special effects" or theatrical entertainment. The moral universe inhabited by Shakespeare's heroes and heroines suggests that the supernatural is part of the very warp and woof of the *human* cosmos. Ghostly spirits, in Shakespeare, tell us something valuable and irreplaceable about *this* world, if not the life after death. What that something is, however, remains considerably ambiguous.

This brings us back to Hamlet's Ghost and the apparent contradiction between the call to revenge and the call to remembrance. Greenblatt attempts to finesse this contradiction by appealing to ambiguity itself. Shakespeare deliberately left the status of the Ghost ambiguous and open to interpretation, and this is in effect the meaning of the Ghost (239-40). Shakespeare, then, exploits to dramatic purpose the ongoing controversy and uncertainty about ghosts in Elizabethan society. The very ambiguity of the Ghost, according

to Greenblatt, is the key to its dramatic power. The thesis of undecidability has much to recommend it. A case could be made that what constitutes a "classic" is that it draws on a large variety of rich semantic contexts. The dense ambiguity of a classic text allows for a variety of plausible interpretations, and thus for the formation of an ongoing interpretive community surrounding the text. As Greenblatt points out, the banishment of Purgatory left a vacuum in Renaissance culture which required the development of new cultural forms, including, for example, the interpretive community surrounding texts such as *Hamlet*, a community in which Greenblatt's readers participate. The problem with this thesis is that it is too general to account for *Hamlet's* specific role in Western culture. Ambiguity is one of those things such that if you are looking for it, you will find it. To the extent that Greenblatt attempts to resolve the contradiction between revenge and memory, he seems to come down on the side of memory, suggesting that vengeance is really secondary to the imperative for remembrance. *Hamlet*, Greenblatt suggests, is fundamentally conservative in its nostalgia for Purgatory. But then, we might ask, why is *Hamlet* often considered paradigmatically modern, and Hamlet a prototypical modern hero? If the play is backwards-looking, then why does it continue to hold the fascination that it does? Greenblatt overextends his thesis about the Ghost. Purgatory is never mentioned explicitly in the play, and it constitutes only a minor context that fails to account for the play's immense cultural power. Young Hamlet does not seem especially concerned about the eternal destiny of his father. And at the end of the play, as Greenblatt notes, the Ghost is essentially forgotten (226). With considerable ingenuity, Greenblatt takes the forgetting of the Ghost as evidence for the play's larger shift away from revenge. Yet according to Greenblatt, the shift away from revenge is motivated by the turn to memory, so it does not make sense that the Ghost's emphasis on memory would result finally in his own forgetting. Greenblatt attempts to get around this problem by appealing to Hamlet's request for Horatio to tell his story, another example of remembrance. But the absence of Hamlet's Ghost from the end of the play seriously undermines Greenblatt's main line of argument.

6

In defending his thesis of ambiguity, Greenblatt discusses what might be called the Protestant elements of *Hamlet* (240-244), notably Hamlet's skepticism about the Ghost that motivates the staging of the play within the play, "The Mousetrap." Greenblatt calls our attention to Hamlet's insistence on physical materiality, for example in his remark to Claudius that Polonius is "At supper . . . . Not where he eats but where 'a is eaten" (4.3.17, 19). As Greenblatt insightfully notes, the supper where one does not eat but is eaten suggests the Lord's Supper. In an outstanding feat of cultural poetics, Greenblatt compares the Reformation controversies over this sacrament with Hamlet's discourse on the physical process of dying and death. The Catholics insisted that during the Mass the bread and wine were physically transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ, through the miracle of transubstantiation. Protestants, in contrast, argued that the Mass, which they preferred to call The Lord's Supper, was merely symbolic and memorial in nature. No literal



transformation took place. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation made necessary elaborate ceremonial precautions to avoid profaning the body and blood of God. The laity, for example, were not given the Chalice during the late medieval period because they might spill some of the blood of God. Protestants delightedly pounced on the logical absurdities involved in transubstantiation, continually taunting the Catholics that the body of Christ must then be chewed, swallowed, and digested, making “a progress through the guts of a beggar.” Likewise, a mouse or rat might catch some leftover crumbs and feast on God’s body. Greenblatt points out that Hamlet’s language insistently recalls these Protestant polemics against the Mass. “A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him [Polonius],” Hamlet tells Claudius; “We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots” (4.3.19-23). Hamlet continues with the logic typical of Protestant polemics against the Catholic Mass: “A man may fish with a worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that had fed of that worm,” thus “a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.27-32). By the same logic, Hamlet demonstrates to Horatio how “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away” (5.1.213-214). In a passage that deserves to be quoted at length, Greenblatt writes,

Hamlet is disgusted by the grossness whose emblem here [3.3.80] is the bread in his father’s stomach, a grossness figured as well by drinking, sleeping, sexual intercourse, and above all perhaps by woman’s flesh. The play enacts and reenacts queasy rituals of defilement and revulsion, an obsession with a corporeality that reduces everything to appetite and excretion. . . . Here, as in the line about the king’s progress through the guts of a beggar, the revulsion is mingled with a sense of drastic leveling, the collapse of order and distinction into polymorphous, endlessly recycled materiality. Claudius, with his reechy kisses and paddling fingers, is a paddock, a bat, a gib, and this unclean beast, like the priapic priest of Protestant polemics, has poisoned the entire social and symbolic system. Hamlet’s response is not to attempt to shore it up but to draw it altogether into the writhing of maggots. . . .

The spirit can be healed only by refusing all compromise and by plunging the imagination unflinchingly into the rank corruption of the ulcerous place. Such a conviction led the Reformers to dwell on the progress of the Host through the guts of a mouse, and a comparable conviction, born of intertwining theological and psychological obsessions, leads Hamlet to the clay pit and the decayed leftovers that the gravediggers bring to light. . . . This is the primary and elemental nausea provoked by the vulnerability of matter . . . . This revulsion is not an end in itself; it is the spiritual precondition of a liberated spirit that finds a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, sacrificially fulfills the father’s design and declares that the readiness is all. (243-44)

This is a very insightful way of understanding Hamlet’s disgust with sex, drink, food, and physicality in general. For Greenblatt, however, this insight serves merely to support his thesis of ambiguity. He does not seem to notice how the Protestant elements of Hamlet’s

character contradict his emphasis on Catholic remembrance. As David Bevington has demonstrated, Hamlet is iconoclastic in relation to traditional rituals (173-187). He does not seem inclined towards the public ceremonies surrounding death, rituals intended for devout recollection. Hamlet, we remember, has "that within which passes show" (1.2.85). Although he dresses in black, he despises the merely ceremonial "trappings and suits of woe," the purely formal "shapes of grief": "For they are actions that a man might play" (1.2.86, 82, 84). Many critics have noted the numerous "maimed rites" in *Hamlet*, from the opening ceremony at Claudius' court to Ophelia's funeral to the ostentatious staging of the final fencing match. The play's antipathy towards ritual, ceremony, and hierarchy poses serious problems for Greenblatt's argument about Purgatory, which was at the center of a vast network of rituals and ceremonies. Hamlet's Protestant skepticism could very well put him at odds with the Ghost and the whole revenge plot in which Hamlet finds himself.

7

By drawing our attention away from revenge, Greenblatt's interpretation shares some affinities with René Girard's pioneering interpretation in *A Theater of Envy* (271-289). For Girard, the problem of the play is not Hamlet's delay, but precisely the question of revenge. Whereas for most critics, Greenblatt included, revenge is an unaccountable holdover from the revenge tragedy tradition, Girard, from his anthropological perspective, sees revenge as another version of the sacrificial, the translation of resentment into action. While revenge might cloak itself within a façade of necessary justice, from an ethical point of view the need for violent personal retribution is banal and ultimately puerile.

Under this definition, revenge is in effect a universal problem for human culture, not simply a theme of Elizabethan drama. Girard's "Fundamental Anthropology" is grounded in his theory of mimetic or conflictual desire. In this view, what distinguishes the human species are our mimetic tendencies. In evolutionary terms, mimesis or imitation is an adaptive learning behavior, a form of intelligence, but mimesis, when transferred to desire and the appropriation of desirable or "sacred" objects, leads to conflict—just as Hamlet, for example, comes into conflict with Laertes at the grave of Ophelia. Our mimetic heritage is distinctly ambivalent: it creates a temptation to violence, but it also serves as the basis for language or representation itself, the distinctly human form of mimesis or imitation.

In Girard's view, Hamlet is modern because he understands revenge; he understands how "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" it is. King Hamlet represents the ancient/medieval world of honor, pride, and heroic combat, while young Hamlet represents the Christian or modern skepticism towards mimetic rivalry in its various traditional forms. In Girard's view, the violence of the ending is a concession to the requirements of a popular, bloodthirsty audience. Girard argues that Hamlet's revenge is morally unjustifiable, as Hamlet in effect realizes, because the poisoned King is just as guilty of murder as Claudius. His purgatorial punishments, as well his slaying of King Fortinbras, demonstrate his guilt. A sophisticated

audience, familiar with Shakespeare's "theater of envy" (that is, his critique of mimetic desire), would see through the atavistic elements of the ending. Girard resolves the conflict between pagan revenge and Christian forgiveness by positing a dual audience for Shakespeare's plays. Hamlet's internal conflict, what Girard calls his "unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit" (284), can be healed only by a complete renunciation of violence.

The problem with Girard's interpretation, however, as Eric Gans points out, is that the elimination of revenge is a utopian solution to the problem of conflictual desire, a solution inappropriate to a modern world which feeds on the social energies released by competition (rivalry) and desire (*Chronicles* #141). Girard sees Christianity as a revelation of the victimary (and hence unjustifiable) basis of the sacrificial, both in ritual and classic tragedy, a moral revelation which demands the radical renunciation of revenge. But insofar as the structure of mimetic desire is inherently sacrificial (the satisfaction of triangular desire would mean the sacrificial destruction of the human obstacles to that desire), the apocalypse entailed by satisfied desire can be only deferred indefinitely. As the very basis of culture, desire, and hence the *possibility* of violence, cannot be coherently refused, only sublimated and thus deferred. Gans writes, "In the last analysis, Girard no more than the other critics can consonance Hamlet's indefinite delay. The difference, and it is entirely to his credit, is that where our pseudo-Nietzscheans impatiently urge Hamlet to wreak vengeance on the patriarchy, Girard wants him to follow the Christian road of renunciation" (*Chronicles* #141).

Gans is able to give a whole new interpretation of Hamlet's delay as a function of his "delight in 'words, words, words.'" Unlike Fortinbras or Laertes, the Danish prince is an "intellectual who glories in his mastery of language as a means to defer as long as possible the contact of ideas with practical reality" (*Chronicles* #141). Hamlet is modern, in Gans's view, because he would rather linger at the margins of the Danish court-making fun of the other characters, dramatizing his situation in soliloquies-than plunge straightforward towards revenge. Hamlet's linguistic delaying tactics form a valuable, presciently modern alternative to the ancient/medieval world of revenge, embodied in the figure of the Ghost. "[T]he Ghost's objective existence [is] dubious," Gans writes, an illusion created by the mimetic rivalries of the play (*Chronicles* #141).

8

Gans agrees with Girard that the problem of *Hamlet* is fundamentally ethical in nature, the integration of Christian moral values into classical tragedy, but he defines the problem of this combination in different terms (*Originary Thinking* 156-160). His basic model of aesthetic analysis is *the scene of representation*, defined by a [sacred] center and [human] periphery. Centrality denotes significance, but this significance is vulnerable to resentment (hence sacrificial violence) and therefore stands always in need of justification. The classical

aesthetic is distinguished by an *agon* between superhuman heroes whose significance was unquestioned. Christianity, however, reveals the humanity of the sacred center, that is, the essential equivalence of center and periphery. Christianity involves a leveling of the vertical hierarchy implied by classical art. The Neo-classical (early modern or Renaissance) aesthetic remains ambivalently attached to the classical scene of representation, just as Hamlet remains perversely attached to the ceremonial scene of the Danish court. Hamlet defines himself in opposition to the classical scene of representation, yet he is unable to find any coherent alternative. A romantic Hamlet might well elope with Ophelia to Paris or England. The romantic hero would transcend the classical *agon* by internalizing it within himself through a narrative of redemptive suffering. "Hamlet's delight in righteous indignation prefigures the romantic heroes for whom he serves as the primary model" (Gans, *Chronicles* #141). Shakespeare's play complicates, yet still participates in the classical, aristocratic conception of the tragic-heroic. *Hamlet* stages the classical scene of representation, demystifying it, opening it up to questioning and reciprocal exchange, but without creating an independent alternative.

It is this finely nuanced sense of cultural history that distinguishes Gans's analysis from Greenblatt's. Greenblatt can be seen as broadly in line with Girard and Gans, in that the focus of his interpretation is on the mechanisms that bring about the delay of revenge rather than the imperative for revenge itself. Greenblatt adds to our understanding of *Hamlet*, but his reading by no means supplants Gans's reading because it is not grounded in any coherent theory of human culture in its historical development. This limitation becomes evident when Greenblatt overemphasizes the importance of Purgatory and remembrance at the expense of Hamlet's Protestant skepticism. Greenblatt does not have a clear sense of what makes *Hamlet* modern. The weakness of New Historicism, ironically, is that it lacks any strong sense of history. A more complete reading of *Hamlet* would further explore the ways in which the play works "against revenge." Hamlet not only turns away from revenge, he also resists the rituals and hierarchy that legitimate revenge. The heart of Hamlet's mystery remains to be explored as a process of iconoclastic skepticism.

9

#### Works Cited

Bevington, David. *Action is Eloquence: Shakespeare's Language of Gesture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Gans, Eric. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

———. "On Looking Into Branagh's *Hamlet*." *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* #141. Saturday, June 20th, 1998.

- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- . *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, and Catherine Gallagher. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Haigh, Christopher. "Anticlericalism and the English Reformation." *The English Reformation Revised*. Ed. Christopher Haigh. Cambridge GB: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 56-74.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. David Bevington. New York: Bantam, 1980.