



# HAMLET

## IN PURGATORY



PRINCETON  
CLASSICS

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

*With a New Preface by the Author*

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HAMLET IN PURGATORY



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STEPHEN GREENBLATT

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# Hamlet in Purgatory



With a new preface  
by the author

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*For Ramie*



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I have left for last my acknowledgment of the deepest bond, the most cherished indebtedness, to the person who has been essential in every way to meeting the challenges and sharing the pleasures of this project: my wife, Ramie Targoff.

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PREFACE

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AROUND 1600, audiences in London flocked to the Globe Theatre to see a new dramatization of a very old story, a tale of murder and revenge in medieval Denmark. Since the tale of Hamlet had already been adapted at least once before for the London stage in a play performed successfully in the 1590s, the rough outlines of the plot may have been familiar to many who bought tickets to see Shakespeare's new version. But what they saw at the Globe was an unprecedented explosion of theatrical power.

That power was vividly in evidence from the play's initial words, "Who's there?"—the most famous opening line in theater history—to the cannon-fire with which it closes. The sense that something remarkable had happened seems to have led to a heightened desire to read the tragedy's script. A pirated version went on sale almost immediately, and an authorized text ("Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie") appeared soon after. The play has never fallen out of favor; it remains almost eerily alive.

I set out in *Hamlet in Purgatory* to understand some of the sources of *Hamlet's* power. What enabled Shakespeare to infuse so much life into his characters and why should this life seem peculiarly present where we would least expect it, in the figure of a dead man, the ghost of the murdered king? What resources did he draw upon to make the old story so fresh and so gripping? Or, as I put it to myself, into what cultural artery did he plunge his needle in order to release the startling rush of vital energy?

In undertaking the project, I did not want to put this energy back where it came from—as if that were possible—or to explain it away. I wanted to dwell in a particular literary pleasure, to heighten its wonder by burrowing down into the historical materials out of which it was produced. Those materials, I tried to show, reached deep into

Renaissance English culture, into its characteristic ways of burying the dead, imagining the afterlife, negotiating with memories of the departed. The risk was that the play would disappear into the details of that culture, as in a sterile antiquarianism. But my hope was that I could instead disclose the resources upon which the playwright drew and thereby extend the field of imaginative power.

The imagination is not the exclusive possession of experts; rather, the experts—great writers and artists—are singularly gifted at tapping into what is circulating all around them in virtually everyone, high and low. Some are gifted as well at drawing upon what has ceased to circulate, what was once alive but now lies buried beneath the cultural soil. Shakespeare, it seemed to me, had a particular interest in digging up and redeploying damaged or discarded institutional goods, cultural memories that he returned to his contemporaries and bequeathed to the future.

At the University of California, Berkeley, where I taught for many happy years, I conducted several graduate seminars on the topic of memory in Renaissance literature. *Hamlet*, virtually obsessed with memory, figured prominently among our texts, and it was in this connection that I began to read and teach some of the highly charged and revealing accounts from the Middle Ages and Renaissance of ghosts returning to haunt the living. Shakespeare may have directly encountered one or another of these accounts, but my principal interest in my seminar was not in source study. Rather I wanted to explore these texts in order to excavate a set of popular beliefs, practices, fears, and hopes upon which *Hamlet* drew, fantasies that Shakespeare could have encountered in a multitude of ways no longer accessible to us.

When in the course of writing *Hamlet in Purgatory*, I found myself engaged in an attempt to understand the bitter quarrel over the “middle state of souls” and increasingly fascinated by the *Vision of Tondal*, the *Owayne Miles*, the *Gast of Gy*, and the *Supplication of Souls*, I did not therefore succumb to a fear that I was losing the proper literary focus. I felt instead that I was tapping into what I once termed “the circulation of social energy.” It is a mistake, I believe, to try to set certain prized works of art—and *Hamlet*, of course, is one of the most prized—in a special category by themselves, apart from this circulation and uncontaminated by it. Our efforts instead should go

precisely in the opposite direction, toward an understanding of the hidden exchanges that confer on those works their special and enduring resonance.

This resonance, I try to show in *Hamlet in Purgatory*, is linked to a cult of the dead—to competing religious institutions that once attempted to regulate and profit from this cult and to competing cultural institutions that embarked on a similar attempt. Preeminent among those cultural institutions in the early seventeenth century was the theater, to which Shakespeare gave so much of his life. That is, in what he wrote for the theater he not only drew upon the traces bequeathed him from the past, but he also conferred upon those traces his own vital agency. Something of Shakespeare's life, along with the lives of many others who preceded him, survives in *Hamlet*. It has been handed down through innumerable texts and performances; it is passing through the present moment in which I am writing; and it is poised to enter an unknown future. In this sense, *Hamlet in Purgatory* is itself a ghost story.

Stephen Greenblatt  
April 2013





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HAMLET IN PURGATORY



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## PROLOGUE

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THIS IS a book about the afterlife of Purgatory, the echoes of its dead name. Specifically, it is about the traces of Purgatory in *Hamlet* (1601). Thus described, my project seems very tightly focused, but since Purgatory was a creation of Western Christendom as a whole, I found I could not neatly restrict my account, geographically or culturally: Ireland plays an important role, as do France, Italy, and Germany. But my principal concern is with England; to understand what Shakespeare inherited and transformed, we need to understand the way in which Purgatory, the middle space of the realm of the dead, was conceived in English texts of the later Middle Ages and then attacked by English Protestants of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. That attack, as we will see, focused on the imagination: Purgatory, it was charged, was not simply a fraud; it was a piece of poetry. The terms of this attack in turn, I will argue, facilitated Shakespeare's crucial appropriation of Purgatory in *Hamlet*.

As such sketches often do, this one reverses the order in which this book actually evolved. I began with the notion of writing a book about Shakespeare as a Renaissance conjurer. By the term "conjurer" I simply mean someone who has the power to call forth or make contact through language with those things—voices, faces, bodies, and spirits—that are absent. Shakespeare possessed this power to an extraordinary degree, and I wanted to explore some of its sources. I made starts in several different directions: an essay on *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's great contemporary, Reginald Scot, who blamed witchcraft persecutions on a misplaced faith in poets' metaphors; an essay on the peculiar absence in Shakespeare's drama, even in a play like *King Lear* about extreme old age, of what we would term "natural death"; several essays on

Shakespeare's theatrical appropriation of the Eucharist.<sup>1</sup> Above all, I found myself drawn again and again to the weird, compelling ghost in *Hamlet*, and I set aside the overarching project to concentrate on that single figure.

My goal was not to understand the theology behind the ghost; still less, to determine whether it was "Catholic" or "Protestant." My only goal was to immerse myself in the tragedy's magical intensity. It seems a bit absurd to bear witness to the intensity of *Hamlet*; but my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power, so suspicious and tense, that it risks losing sight of—or at least failing to articulate—the whole reason anyone bothers with the enterprise in the first place. The ghost in *Hamlet* is like none other—not only in Shakespeare but in any literary or historical text that I have ever read. It does not have very many lines—it appears in three scenes and speaks only in two—but it is amazingly disturbing and vivid. I wanted to let the feeling of this vividness wash over me, and I wanted to understand how it was achieved.

I believe that nothing comes of nothing, even in Shakespeare. I wanted to know where he got the matter he was working with and what he did with that matter. And so the broad inquiry that had come to focus more and more sharply on one figure in a single play spread out once again to encompass a dauntingly large field. Many of the key features of this field—the "poetics" of Purgatory in England and the struggle over its existence—do not align themselves conveniently with elements in *Hamlet* or in any of Shakespeare's plays. For example, Prince Hamlet does not worry that he, like his father, may serve a prison term in Purgatory (though he does worry that his soul might go to Hell), and Shakespeare never in his career seems drawn to the argument that ghost stories were cynical devices wielded by wolvish priests to extract wealth from the gullible. But I believe strongly that the historical and contextual work that literary critics do succeeds only if it acquires its own compelling imaginative interest, a powerful gravitational pull that makes it feel almost wrenching to turn back to the thing that was the original focus of interest. And paradoxically it is this independent interest—the fascination that I at least have found in Saint

Patrick's Purgatory and *The Gast of Gy* and the *Supplication of Souls*, along with trentals, indulgences, chantries, and requiem masses—that makes the whole subject seem worthy of *Hamlet*.

For even when in the course of this book I seem to be venturing far away from *Hamlet*, the play shapes virtually everything I have to say. This is in part because *Hamlet* has made so central a contribution to what Joel Fineman calls “the subjectivity effect” in Western consciousness that it has helped to condition the sensibilities of its readers and auditors.<sup>2</sup> In part, too, it is because my interest in what years ago I called a cultural poetics, adapting the term from Clifford Geertz, requires a certain hermeneutical patience, a willingness to suspend direct literary analysis, in order to examine more thoroughly what had been treated as mere background for the canonical work of art. If we are in part the unintended consequences of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's play, I will suggest, is in part one of the unintended consequences of the theological struggles with which much of this book will be concerned. But for this book to work properly, the reader should understand literary analysis, and specifically the analysis of *Hamlet*, to be suspended in another sense as well, that is, distributed in tiny, almost invisible particles throughout my account.

A FEW years ago, as a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, I had a conversation with an urbane Islamicist who was maintaining eloquently that one must put aside one's family and group identifications, no matter how powerful they may be, in order to think and speak as a rational person. I agreed with him, but I found myself thinking, and not for the first time, how slyly amusing and acute Plato was in the *Ion* in pointing to the tension between the work of the rational philosopher and the work of the rhapsode or, let us say, the literary critic. I know, in any case, that I am incapable of simply bracketing my own origins; rather, I find myself trying to transform them, most often silently and implicitly, into the love I bring to my work.

Let me on this occasion be explicit. My father was born in the late nineteenth century. I was the child of what I used to think of as his old age but that I have now, at my point in life, come to think

of, rather, as his vigorous middle age. I saw him, in any case, as embodying the life experience not of the generation directly behind me but of two generations back. His own childhood memories seemed to have a quite unusual, almost eerie distance from my life-world. Hence, for example, he told me that when he was very young, he was taken, along with the other boys in his Hebrew school class (his *cheder*) to the apartment of a Jewish railway worker who had been struck and killed by a train. The little children were told by their teacher, whom I can only imagine as a madman, to stand around the mangled corpse—which was placed on great cakes of ice, since it was the summer in Boston and very hot—and to recite the psalms, while the man's wife wailed inconsolably in a corner.

Initiated, perhaps, by this traumatic experience, my father was obsessed throughout his life with death. His own father had died dreadfully, clinging to his son and begging for help, and my father carried the scars of that experience with him ever after. The effect on him was not exactly melancholy, but rather something like a strange blend of wonder and denial. The wonder had a specific origin: my grandfather had died in New York, where my father had taken him in a desperate, last-ditch search for medical treatment. My father then had to bring the body back to Boston by train. The coffin was in the baggage car, and my father was sitting quietly weeping in the club car, when, in New Haven, Connecticut, the entire chorus line of the Ziegfeld Follies climbed on board. The chorus girls, leggy, buxom, bejeweled, bedecked in feather boas and wide-brimmed hats, sweetly crowded around my weeping father, kissing and hugging him and trying to cheer him up. It was perhaps my father's purest encounter with the wonderful power of *eros* over *thanatos*.

To this experience of wonder my father conjoined denial. He kept us from celebrating his birthday, refused to retire, working until the week before he died in his eighty-seventh year, and lied about his age even when he entered the hospital. But when we read his will, we found that he had, after all, been thinking about his death. He had left a sum of money to an organization that would say kaddish for him—kaddish being the Aramaic prayer for

the dead, recited for eleven months after a person's death and then on certain annual occasions. The prayer is usually said by the deceased's immediate family and particularly by his sons—in Yiddish a son could actually be called a *kaddish*, so that a childless man could be said to die without leaving a *kaddish*. Evidently, my father did not trust either my older brother or me to recite the prayer for him. The effect the bequest had on me, perhaps perversely, was to impel me to do so, as if in a blend of love and spite.

I did not until that moment know that Jews had anything like chantries, and I realized that I did not know why Jews prayed for the dead at all. After all, biblical Judaism has only what seems like a vague and imaginatively impoverished account of the afterlife. The Hebrew Bible speaks of a place called *sheol*, often translated by Christians as “Hell,” but it is not a place of torture and has very few of the features of the Christian or classical underworld.<sup>3</sup> It seems to be associated not with torment (or purgation) but rather with privation or depression. “Are not my days few?” complains Job; “cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness” (Job 10:20–22). The phrase “without any order” links this netherworld not with a prison house or penal colony—we are immensely distant conceptually from Dante's circles—but with the state of things before the Creation, when “the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Gen. 1:2). The overall focus in the Hebrew Scriptures is not on assuring oneself a more favorable location in this melancholy kingdom, but rather on valuing life: “For him that is joined to all the living there is hope,” as Ecclesiastes puts it, “for a living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4).

There are, however, some biblical expressions, especially in the Psalter, of a hope to be liberated from *sheol*: “Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling. But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me. Selah”



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