



‘The Time Is Out of Joint’: Metaphysical and Cultural Entanglement in *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*

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‘Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away’ (Shakespeare,

Hamlet 1.5.16-18)

Hamlet and *The Spanish Tragedy* are hallmarks of the Revenge Tragedy, characterized by shared foundations conventional to the genre, namely the pursuit of revenge for murder with the endorsement of the ghost of the murdered. In this essay, I will discuss how Thomas Kyd and William Shakespeare incorporate the supernatural into *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1582) and *Hamlet* (c. 1599) respectively, engaging with New Historicist criticism to explore how the collision of spiritual and material worlds in the plays replicates the clashing belief systems and cultural disorientation that defined the early modern period. First, I will explore the use of ghosts and the afterlife in this regard. Then, I will more closely dissect how the physical and metaphysical worlds collide in the act of revenge in Kyd's tragedy, revealing the deep religious and cultural confusion and uncertainty of the time. I will then explore how *Hamlet* similarly employs the supernatural to replicate the cultural and theological tensions of the Reformation, when incongruous Protestant and Catholic beliefs about eschatology and the relationship between the living and the dead came into conflict, and popular consciousness was troubled with deep uncertainties.

Both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* incorporate ghostly entities to blur the temporal boundaries of their settings. Ghosts, metaphysical beings that disrupt the physical world, act as figurative embodiments of the past infiltrating the present. The ghosts of Don Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy* and King Hamlet in *Hamlet* are used as devices to incite action in the living characters, though the degree of their interaction with the living differs. In Shakespeare's tragedy, King Hamlet functions as an active force, propelling the narrative by calling on his son to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). The ghost of Don Andrea, conversely, simply spectates the events of the play, assuming the role of a Chorus member. As Revenge instructs him, his role in the play is "to see the misterie, and serue for Chorus in this tragedie"

(1.1.91). Both ghosts serve as personified entities of the past, inextricably binding the past and the present and, as I will argue, the belief systems that characterised them.

Similarly, glimpses of the afterlife in each play—Tartarus in *The Spanish Tragedy* and Purgatory in *Hamlet*—also serve to confuse past and present. Both models of life-after-death had been resigned to the past, with Protestants rejecting Purgatory and the classical underworld already long antiquated. Zackariah K. Long argues that Tartarus and Purgatory are used as “a complex metaphor for how past rituals and beliefs continued to exert a hold on the present even after their time has supposedly passed” (Long 183). This theme, that the past cannot be erased, is entrenched in both plays as both plays grant the past agency over the present, haunting protagonists in the form of ghosts or outdated visions of the afterlife. In *Hamlet*, Purgatory appears to transgress worldly boundaries, colliding with the world of the living. As Long suggests, Hamlet’s world seems to “mimic the involuntary, invasive, and repetitious patterns of reminiscence found in [...] Purgatory” (Long 176). In other words, Hamlet is enduring a quasi-purgatorial experience despite still being alive. Throughout the play, Hamlet undergoes severe emotional anguish, suffering from indecision and self-inflicted mental torment as he attempts to decipher the events unfolding before him. This is exemplified by his recurrent soliloquies in which, as Stephen Greenblatt writes, Hamlet is “tortured by obsessive recollections” (Greenblatt 193). This echoes the purgatorial experience, as Hamlet is made to relive and recount the experiences that plague him. As such, Shakespeare uses the preternatural parallel of Purgatory to construct the disorienting feeling of existing in a space between worlds—between life and death and, as we will see, between Catholicism and Protestantism.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, characters exhibit an outmoded, classical understanding of the afterlife with references to Tartarus, the Greek underworld, and Elysium, its paradisiacal

counterpart. In the introductory soliloquy, the ghost of Don Andrea describes his journey to the afterlife in which “[his] soule descended straight, / To passe the flowing streame of Archeron” (1.1.18-19). This contrasts with the Christian, Elizabethan setting where the corporeal events of the play transpire. Further, all the characters in the play are judged under classical principles, despite the play being set in the early modern period. As such, both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* capture the “dilemma of feeling caught between worlds, whether Classical or Christian, Protestant or Catholic, material or spiritual” by situating their plays in liminal spaces (Long 156). Through the use of ghosts, anachronisms, and obscured boundaries, both playwrights reproduce the societal and individual feelings of disorientation during times of cultural instability.

Moreover, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the collision of differing eschatologies is mirrored by the collision of differing conceptions of revenge, which is similarly related to the supernatural. Indeed, revenge had considerable supernatural ramifications in the Elizabethan period. Francis Bacon’s “Of Revenge” essay epitomizes the cultural response to revenge during this period—it was to be left to the law or, what many during the time would consider to be the law’s proprietor, God. Forgiveness and faith in the law and God’s power to right wrongs were the virtuous choice (Bacon). Bacon suggests, “In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince’s part to pardon,” and therefore, by usurping the responsibility to enact vengeance, one was circumventing the divine order (Bacon). In taking revenge, one was, as it were, arrogating divine power—the power over life and death. But this is exactly what Hieronimo does in *The Spanish Tragedy* when he kills Lorenzo and the Duke of Castille to avenge his son, Horatio. “[F]aced with a choice between a classically inspired act of vengeance and Christian patience,” he chooses the former, and acts as a vehicle of revenge by directly facilitating the murder of his son’s killer rather than leaving it up to God (Long 184).

Nevertheless, in a way that may have seemed ironic to audiences in the early modern period, both the victims of the play and their agents of revenge—Don Andrea, Horatio, Hieronimo, and Bel Imperia—are envisioned enjoying a happy ending, where the classical ethics of revenge result in a moral outcome completely at odds with a Christian era. Don Andrea envisages his friends enjoying a favorable afterlife, “adding sweet pleasure to eternall daies,” while Revenge drags Don Andrea’s foes “down to deepest hell, / Where none but furies, bugs and tortures dwell” (4.4.24-28). As such, a tension arises between classical and modern belief systems which replicates and mimics the religious and cultural tensions of the time. Kyd thus presents his audience with a moral dilemma by constructing the play around this classical framework. He leaves the audience in a state of uncertainty, as the happy ending seems contradictory not only to Christian assumptions but also to the tragic precedent of the play. Thus, Kyd elicits an equivocal attitude from his audience, facilitated by the use of the supernatural and the colliding belief systems it encodes, which further reproduces the sense of uncertainty that characterised the period.

Likewise, Hamlet uses the supernatural to introduce unanswerable questions and ambiguous motives, underscoring the religious incongruities of Protestantism and Catholicism to recreate the sense of cultural disorientation and entanglement felt during the Reformation. This period of rapid religious upheaval saw Catholicism and Protestantism compete for preeminence in England and across the Continent. As such, cultural anxieties arose in response to the rapidly changing religious sphere, especially in areas where their doctrines disagreed. One such area capitalized upon in Hamlet is the relationship between the living and the dead and eschatology more generally. In Catholicism, an intermedial space existed between heaven and hell—Purgatory—and the living could directly influence the fate of the dead by praying for their

souls. Protestantism, however, rejected the concept of a transitory, liminal realm, opting for a belief in the strict dichotomy of heaven and hell. But, as Greenblatt suggests, it was not easy to abolish Catholic beliefs of the afterlife from popular consciousness, despite the wave of Protestant reforms. He argues that the Protestants “struggled[...] to undo the purgatorial imagination,” even after destroying cultural remnants that depicted Purgatory—manuscripts, artworks, altarpieces, and so forth (Greenblatt 69). *Hamlet* is a testament to this. Riddled with uncertainties, it creates a disorienting atmosphere in which the instability of social structures, particularly religious ones, is emphasised. Once again, an element of the supernatural—a ghost—forms an evocative locus of the discordant belief systems of both the text and its historical moment. Its motives remain ambiguous throughout the play, creating a looming sense of uncertainty. Hamlet questions the authenticity of his father’s ghost, “The spirit that I have seen / May be a de’il,” fearing the devil may be impersonating his father, suggesting that it “... abuses me to damn me!” (2.2.538-543). This line of thinking cites the Protestant belief that ghosts are manifestations of the devil rather than a genuine spirit. However, the ghost also invokes images of Purgatory, a distinctly Catholic belief, when vaguely outlining its experience in the afterworld, recounting how it is “...confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away” (1.5.16-18). The ghost thus represents not merely a collision of the metaphysical with the physical, but also the Catholic with the Protestant. Further, the ghost is witnessed by Marcellus, Horatio, and Bernardo in Act 1, Scene 1, but is only visible to Hamlet after he has killed Polonius in Act 3, Scene 4. And in Act 3, Scene 4, the closet scene, the Queen cannot see the ghost, suggesting the only ones in the room are her and Hamlet by stating that she heard “nothing but ourselves” during Hamlet and the ghost’s conversation (3.4.131). As such, even the actuality of the ghost is somewhat called into question, intentionally problematised to

situate the play in an unharmonious, disorienting space. The dilemmas and uncertainties presented in the play, then, transform the theatrical space into a microcosm for the greater cultural anxieties during the period of the Reformation. This is compounded by Shakespeare's heavy use of contradiction and indecisiveness; questions are brought to the forefront of the audience's mind, but they are intentionally left ambiguous. This ambiguity contributes to an overall sense of anxiety and disorientation, which captures and recreates the spirit of the time.. As Long suggests, the entire play is "...a single, multifaceted metaphor that expresses the perceptual, psychological, and cultural disorientation that constitutes early modernity" (Long 188).

In *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, William Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd use the supernatural to replicate the cultural landscape and feelings of disorientation during a period of upheaval. Both authors inextricably link the past and the present through the supernatural, specifically through the use of ghosts, the interactions of corporeal and incorporeal realms, and the exploration of the liminal space between worlds. *Hamlet* deals with the changing relationship between the living and the dead, and the fate of the soul after death, during the Reformation, while *The Spanish Tragedy* elicits a sense of cultural confusion in the fraught act of Hieronimo's revenge and its apparently counterintuitive consequences.. As such, the theatrical space is made to resemble a jumbled expanse of theological and cultural incongruities, in a way that deeply resonates with the context of the early modern period.

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