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“Spirit of Health” *and* “Goblin Damned”

The Ghost of King Hamlet as a Symbol
for the Religious Ambivalence in England
during the Religious Reformation

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Senior Research Honors Project

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A mysterious apparition appears during the opening scene of *Hamlet*, paradoxically seeking revenge and eternal peace. The Ghost of King Hamlet, unlike the supernatural spirits in most of Shakespeare's plays, is one of the most significant characters in *Hamlet* because he is the catalyst that sets the play in motion. Without him, Hamlet would never have known the truth about his father's death and would never have embarked upon the mission to kill Claudius. Because the Ghost's role is so pivotal to the plot, it was essential that the Elizabethan audience believed that the Ghost was real in order for the play to be successful. However, due to the cultural and religious beliefs at the time, this was no easy feat for Shakespeare to accomplish. England was in the midst of the Religious Reformation, swinging back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism – two religions with two very different beliefs about ghosts. Remnants of both religions are present in *Hamlet*, and as a result, a lengthy debate over the Ghost's true religious affiliation has ensued over the centuries since the play was written. However, I believe that the Ghost of King Hamlet cannot be defined as wholly Catholic or Protestant, but rather serves as a symbol for the religious ambivalence present in England during the time it was written.

During Shakespeare's time, three prominent beliefs existed in regard to ghosts and spirits, and each of these views is represented in *Hamlet*. The first of these beliefs that Shakespeare introduces into the play is the scholarly Christian belief that acknowledges the existence of spirits but is skeptical as to a spirit's ability to assume a material form (Wilson 63). This view is represented as the play opens. Marcellus tells Barnardo and Francisco, "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy / And will not let belief take hold of him / Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us / Therefore I have entreated him along / With us to watch the minutes of this night / That if again this apparition come / He may approve our eyes and speak to it" (1.1.23-29). Marcellus invites

Horatio, a scholar, to join him on his nightly watch because he doubts Marcellus's story that he, Barnardo, and Francisco have seen the Ghost of King Hamlet. Because Horatio is a scholar, he is naturally skeptical that a ghost can be seen by humans and thinks that it is a figment of their imaginations. He replies, "Tush, tush, 'twill not appear," which demonstrates his disbelief in ghosts (1.1.30). Despite his skepticism, Horatio does see the Ghost, thereby eliminating the possibility that it is merely a figment of the guards' imaginations. By placing Horatio, the skeptical scholar, in the opening scene, Shakespeare is able to immediately extinguish any doubts about the Ghost's presence in the play.

After implementing the scholarly Christian belief system as the play begins to prove the Ghost is real, Shakespeare then begins to weave the other two beliefs about spirits that existed in Elizabethan England – that of the Roman Catholic Church and of Protestantism – into the play. Catholics believed that ghosts were spirits of the departed, who were allowed to return from Purgatory if they had a special purpose that would help the wandering soul eventually rest in peace (Wilson 62). Several clues in the play hint to the audience that the Ghost of King Hamlet is one such Catholic spirit. First, the Ghost introduces himself to Hamlet by saying, "I am thy father's spirit" (1.5.9). The Ghost bluntly admits that he is, in fact, the spirit of Hamlet's dead father, thus satisfying the first stipulation of the Catholic belief in ghosts and spirits.

The second stipulation – that the spirit is returning from Purgatory – is suggested by the Ghost's confession that he is "Doom'd for a certain term 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" (1.5.10-13). The fact that the Ghost says he is doomed to wander at night and suffer during the day until the sins he committed while he was alive are purged implies that his spirit comes from a Catholic Purgatory. According to the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia,

Purgatory “is a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are, not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions” (<http://www.newadvent.org>). In essence, the soul of a person who does not repent his sins before dying cannot immediately ascend into Heaven because, by not asking for forgiveness from God, the person has not been absolved of his sins. God does not, however, damn the soul to Hell simply because the person did not repent his sins because as an all-loving and all-forgiving Father, He understands that everyone does not always have an opportunity to repent his sins or have his last rites administered. These souls, instead, go to Purgatory, a liminal place that is neither Heaven nor Hell, where the soul remains until its sins have been cleansed.

The Ghost tells Hamlet that he was “Cut off even in the blossom of my sin / Unhous’led, disappointed, unanel’d / No reck’ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head” (1.5.76-79). By saying he was “unhous’led” and “unanel’d” when he died, the Ghost is telling Hamlet that he was murdered without having received the Eucharist or the religious sacrament of the anointing of the sick that many Catholics receive before they die. Thus, the Ghost was killed without having an opportunity to have his last rites administered to him by a priest, making it difficult for him to die in the grace of God. Furthermore, his statement that he was killed with “no reck’ning made” refers to the reckoning, or repenting, of his sins. The Roman Catholic Church places great emphasis on reconciliation of sins. In fact, the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia states, “God requires satisfaction, and will punish sin, and this doctrine involves as its necessary consequence a belief that the sinner failing to do penance in this life may be punished in another world, and so not be cast off eternally from God” (<http://www.newadvent.org>). Although Catholics believe God is an all-loving and all-forgiving God, He will only forgive one’s sins if one repents them. According to the Catholic tradition,

because he did not have a chance to repent his sins before he died, the Ghost's soul is in Purgatory until those sins are purged.

The third condition that must be satisfied in order for the Ghost to be a Catholic spirit is that it must be seeking a special purpose on earth that will help its soul rest in peace. The Ghost tells Hamlet, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" and commands Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.38-39 & 1.5.25). The Ghost informs Hamlet that Claudius killed him while he was sleeping, and the Ghost demands Hamlet to avenge his unjust and untimely death, proving that the spirit has a special purpose to return to earth that will help his soul rest in peace. The Ghost reappears only once more after this encounter with Hamlet. He appears to Hamlet in Gertrude's bedroom immediately after Hamlet passed up the chance to kill Claudius and says, "Do not forget! This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.110-111). Because Hamlet passed up his opportunity to kill Claudius, the Ghost comes back to remind Hamlet that it is his duty to avenge his death, demonstrating that the spirit is unable to rest until his murder has been avenged by his son.

Although all three conditions have been met for the Ghost to be considered a Catholic spirit, Shakespeare complicates the religious significance of the Ghost by including details of the Protestant beliefs about spirits. Protestants do not believe in ghosts or Purgatory; they believe that the soul only goes to Heaven or Hell. To the Protestant, all ghosts are apparitions of the Devil that assume the form of a relative or friend in order to do bodily harm upon those to whom the apparition appears (Wilson 62).

While it seems easy to conclude that the Ghost purely represents the Catholic tradition of spirits, Denmark officially became a Protestant nation in 1536 when Christian III took over the throne after a three-year civil war, and signs of Lutheranism are also present in the play (Knox

1). Worried about her son's depression over his father's death, Gertrude says to Hamlet, "I pray thee stay with us, go not to Wittenberg" after she is informed of his intentions to return to school (1.2.119). Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg, the college where Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses; a fact that suggests Hamlet is a student of the Protestant tradition.

As such, he expresses the Protestant belief that the Ghost is an apparition from the Devil. Hamlet proclaims, "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil, and the devil hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps / Out of my weakness and my melancholy / As he is very potent with such spirits / Abuses me to damn me" (2.2.598-603). This statement shows that Hamlet is not skeptical of the existence of the apparition he saw; rather, he is skeptical as to the origin and motive of the apparition. A Catholic would not question the origin of a ghost that appeared before him in the form of a deceased relative or friend; he would accept the spirit and help it find peace. Hamlet, on the other hand, questions the origin of the spirit much like a Protestant when he says, "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil" (2.2.598-599). Protestants believe that ghosts who appear in the form of a deceased relative are actually apparitions of the Devil; therefore, by wondering if the spirit he saw was the Devil, Hamlet is aligning his views on spirits with that of the Protestant tradition. Moreover, Hamlet knows that the Devil has the power to assume any shape he chooses in order to trick humans into performing his foul deeds. Hamlet begins to think that perhaps the Ghost is one such spirit of the Devil, appearing as his father in order to harm Hamlet in his state of mental instability. In essence, Hamlet does not blindly believe the Catholic conviction that the Ghost is the spirit of his father returning from Purgatory. His skepticism of the Ghost's motives and origin, therefore, aligns his views on spirits with the Protestant tradition; ergo, the Ghost cannot be viewed as a purely Catholic spirit.

In essence, Shakespeare expresses all three predominant Elizabethan beliefs about ghosts and spirits in *Hamlet*. It is essential that the scholarly Christian belief is portrayed first because it proves the existence of the Ghost beyond that of a mere figment of the imagination. However, there are several contradictions present within the Catholic and Protestant representations in the play, creating a theme of religious ambivalence throughout *Hamlet*. As such, many critics have attempted to determine the Ghost's "true" origins – whether he comes from Purgatory or Hell – and this quest has sparked a debate that has endured centuries.

G. Wilson Knight argues in his essay "The Embassy of Death" that the Ghost is an evil spirit. He argues that the Ghost is not a good, Christian spirit; rather it is an evil spirit that takes over Hamlet's psyche, poisoning his mental health. He writes, "The demon of Hamlet's mind is stronger than [the rest of the characters in the play combined.]...Not till it has slain all, is the demon that grips Hamlet satisfied" (Knight 63). Knight suggests that the ability to converse with his dead father has produced a demon in Hamlet's head that causes him to think only in terms of death and cynicism. Hamlet is unable to escape the demon until he completes the mission given to him by the Ghost. Thus, Hamlet is an "element of evil in the state of Denmark" (Knight 63). The Ghost is not satisfied until everyone has been slain, including Hamlet, whom the spirit has possessed. Knight goes on to say

It was the devil of the knowledge of death, which possesses Hamlet and drives him from misery and pain to increasing bitterness, cynicism, murder, and madness. He has indeed bought converse with his father's spirit at the price of enduring and spreading Hell on earth (Knight 63).

The evil spirit that has taken over Hamlet's mind is clearly forcing him to do harm to himself and others. Hamlet cannot control his emotions, and he is not able to regain control of them until he

kills Claudius. However, Claudius is not the only other person who is harmed by the demon in Hamlet's head. Polonius is slain by Hamlet due to a rash reaction caused by his mental instability; Hamlet's madness and cruelty towards Ophelia cause her to commit suicide; and Hamlet cunningly switches the letter that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to give to the authorities in England so that they are executed and not him, callously killing off his two best friends from school. Hamlet truly is the evil element in Denmark, and he cannot stop until the demon kills him as well. Therefore, the Ghost, according to Knight, represents an evil spirit because it possesses Hamlet and causes him to commit evil acts.

However, Knight does not offer an explanation for the evil nature of the Ghost. He simply suggests that he is evil and not a Christian spirit seeking revenge in order to rest in peace. I would expand Knight's argument by offering an explanation for the Ghost's evil nature in his religious significance. Insofar as the Ghost represents the Protestant belief of spirits, the Ghost would be an evil spirit because it is depicted as a Protestant ghost, which can only appear on earth as an apparition from the Devil seeking to do bodily harm to whom it appears, in this case, Hamlet. By using Knight's argument that the demon in Hamlet's head has driven him to bitterness, cynicism, murder, and madness, one can easily conclude that the spirit has caused bodily harm to Hamlet, which follows along the line of the Protestant belief in spirits. In fact, the madness that Hamlet endures after speaking with the Ghost does not cease until Hamlet, himself, is killed. Furthermore, the Ghost certainly has an evil purpose that signifies a Protestant spirit: to avenge his death and kill Claudius. In fact, the Ghost reappears in Gertrude's bedroom to remind Hamlet of his task, signifying that the Ghost will not rest or escape Hamlet's mind until he accomplishes his mission. Hence, the Ghost is not simply an evil spirit, as Knight suggests; rather, he is an evil spirit because he is portrayed as a Protestant spirit.

Finally, the Ghost can be thought of as an evil spirit because it is his appearance to Hamlet that causes the tragic events of the play. When they first begin to converse, the Ghost instructs Hamlet, “So art thou to revenge, when you shalt hear” (1.5.7). The Ghost immediately commands Hamlet that he must avenge his death without question. He must do what the Ghost tells him to do, no matter how evil his demands may be. Later, the Ghost commands Hamlet to remember him and his mission to avenge his death. Hamlet responds to this demand by saying, “from the table of my memory / I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / That youth and observation have copied there / And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain” (1.5.98-103). Not only is Hamlet accepting the Ghost’s command to avenge his death and kill Claudius, but when Hamlet says, “from the table of my memory / I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,” he is admitting that he will erase everything else in his brain in order to concentrate on fulfilling his task (1.5.98-99). By saying “thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain,” Hamlet is saying that he will only think of the Ghost and killing Claudius until he completes the mission (1.5.102-103). Hamlet tells the Ghost that he will stop at nothing to kill Claudius.

The Ghost’s appearance and conversation with Hamlet clearly cause Hamlet’s preoccupation with death and revenge throughout the rest of the play, which results in Hamlet becoming the evil element in Denmark. If the Ghost never told Hamlet that Claudius killed him and that he must avenge the murder, Hamlet would never have become suspicious and mad, causing his friends and family to be afraid of him. Hamlet would never have been cruel to Ophelia, and she would not have killed herself. He never would have been sent to England, and he would not have sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their unjust execution. Claudius and Laertes would never have had a reason to plot against Hamlet; therefore, Gertrude would not

have been wrongfully poisoned. Lastly, without the Ghost's command to avenge his death, Hamlet would not have killed Polonius, Laertes, or Claudius. Therefore, the Ghost can be seen as an evil spirit because it forces Hamlet and the other characters of the play to commit evil acts.

While the Ghost is certainly portrayed as an evil, Protestant spirit from Hell, one can also make a convincing case for his origins to be placed in Catholic Purgatory. This is precisely the argument Stephen Greenblatt makes in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory* when he says, "A young man from Wittenburg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost" (Greenblatt 240). Not only does Greenblatt maintain that the Ghost is a Catholic soul suffering for its earthly sins in Purgatory, but he also asserts that Hamlet, the Ghost's son, possesses a Protestant mentality. His evidence for a Catholic spirit is comprised of acceptance of the Ghost's suggestion that he comes from Purgatory because he was killed without having his last rites administered as well as the Ghost's plea for remembrance from Hamlet. The last words the Ghost says before he disappears are "Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me" (1.5.91). During this time period, it was widely believed by Catholics that time spent in Purgatory could be shortened and punishment endured could be made less painful if loved ones remembered the deceased in their prayers or purchased suffrages in their name. Greenblatt explains this phenomenon as follows:

The whole social and economic importance of Purgatory in Catholic Europe rested on the belief that prayers, fasts, almsgiving, and masses constitutes a valuable commodity – "suffrages," as they were termed – that could in effect be purchased, directly or indirectly on behalf of specific dead persons. The blessed souls in Heaven, of course, had no need of suffrages, since they had already attained eternal bliss, while the damned in Hell could not make use of them, since they were condemned to an eternity or irremediable torment.

But imperfect souls, souls still bearing the stains of the faults they had committed in mortal life, would have to endure excruciating pain. Fortunately, suffrages were available to reduce the intensity and duration of this agony. Masses lovingly paid for and performed in memory of the dead were particularly efficacious, as were the prayers of the poor and sick offered in grateful memory of the benefactor. Similarly, the pious fasts, prayers, and alms of relatives and friends could be directed to relieve the sufferings of a named individual whom they believed to be in Purgatory (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 19).

Ergo, the Ghost's plea for remembrance reinforces the notion that he is a Catholic spirit in Purgatory because, if he were a damned soul in Hell, all the prayers and suffrages in the world could not ease his suffering. Asking his son to remember him would be a moot point for a Protestant ghost from Hell. A Catholic spirit, on the other hand, would greatly benefit from such acts of remembrance. If Hamlet remembers his father in his prayers or purchases suffrages in the King's name, then he can "reduce the intensity and duration of [his father's] agony." Therefore, the Ghost's cry for remembrance is an indication that his suffering is that of temporal punishment in Purgatory, signifying that he is a Catholic spirit.

Greenblatt also maintains that the hero whom this Catholic spirit haunts possesses a Protestant temperament. He looks at how Hamlet addresses the Ghost upon first meeting him as well as what Hamlet does not say to verify a Protestant disposition in the hero. Upon first encountering the Ghost Hamlet says, "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned / Bring with thee airs from Heaven or blasts from Hell / Be thy intents wicked or charitable / Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee" (1.4.40-44). For Hamlet, the Ghost can only be a "spirit of health" or a "goblin damned," indicating that he only recognizes two possibilities for the Ghost's origin: Heaven or Hell. Hamlet does not acknowledge a third

possibility of Purgatory as a place of origin of the spirit; thus, by not mentioning this third option, Hamlet is rejecting Purgatory and the Catholic faith. Essentially, Greenblatt argues that a Catholic spirit returns to earth from Purgatory to speak with his Protestant son.

These two conflicting religious representations are also depicted in the closet scene when the Ghost appears to Hamlet for the second time. The Ghost's wardrobe has changed from the battle armor in which he was seen in act one to a nightgown in act three. He claims that the Ghost's costume change symbolizes that he has been "cleansed of [his] mortal stains...and was now bound for Heaven" (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 209-210). In that regard, the time lapsed in the play runs parallel to the time the Ghost has spent in Purgatory. Whereas when the play opened the Ghost had just recently been killed and had many sins for which to suffer in Purgatory, as the time passes by in the play, the Ghost does his penance for those sins and becomes closer to ascending into Heaven. The white nightgown is a symbol of purity and that his soul will soon be at rest in Heaven, indicating that the Ghost is a Catholic spirit in Purgatory and not an evil demon from Hell.

Despite the fact that the Ghost's wardrobe is indicative of his ascent into Heaven – which would make him a virtuous, Catholic spirit – Greenblatt also argues that Hamlet maintains a Protestant temperament about the Ghost's origins during the second visitation. When the Ghost first appears in Gertrude's closet, Hamlet cries out, "Save me and hover o'er me with your wings / You heavenly guards" (3.4.103-104). Greenblatt uses this quote as evidence for a Protestant mentality, arguing that Hamlet is "deeply alarmed" when he sees the Ghost and "prays for supernatural protection" from what he believes to be an evil spirit (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 223). If Hamlet were operating under a strictly Catholic temperament, he would not be afraid of his father's spirit; he would know that it is coming from Purgatory and means him no harm.

Greenblatt adds that Elizabethan Catholics would recall a familiar belief that spirits from Purgatory who appeared in multiple hauntings “displayed their progressive purification by a gradual whitening of their robes” (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 223). Therefore, if Hamlet possessed a Catholic temperament, he would not be afraid of the Ghost because he would recognize that he was a virtuous spirit that had no intent to harm him. Because Hamlet is terrified of the Ghost and does not express this belief when he sees the Ghost in his nightgown, he is operating under a Protestant mentality.

However, Greenblatt does not take into account the fact that in this scene Hamlet later describes the apparition he sees to his mother as “my father, in his habit as he lived” (3.4.135). Hamlet acknowledges the Ghost as his father and is no longer afraid of him. Clearly, these words indicate a Catholic state of mind because they identify the Ghost as the spirit of a deceased family member and not the Devil. Thus, Hamlet expresses both belief systems when he encounters the Ghost in his mother’s closet, not just Protestantism.

Both Knight and Greenblatt raise convincing arguments for the Ghost’s origins to be placed in Hell and Purgatory, respectively; however, I believe there are too many contradictions in the religious portrayals of the Ghost and Hamlet for the play to be viewed as in favor of one belief system over the other. For instance, whereas Greenblatt argues that the Ghost comes from Purgatory, his call for vengeance against Claudius hardly constitutes the convictions of a virtuous soul bound for Heaven. The Ghost’s command to Hamlet to “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25) may seem to represent a special purpose for which his soul has returned to earth to help him rest in peace, but this particular command is inconsistent with the Catholic tradition of Purgatory. The New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia states that the blessed souls in Heaven

are confirmed in good; they can no longer commit even the slightest venial sin; every wish of their heart is inspired by the purest love of God. ...The blessed have no longer the power of choosing to do evil actions; they cannot but love God; they are merely free to show that love by one good action in preference to another. ...The ultimate cause of impeccability is the freedom from sin or the state of grace in which at his death man passes into the final state (*status termini*), i.e. into a state of unchangeable attitude of mind and will. For it is quite in consonance with the nature of that state that God should offer only such co-operation as corresponds to the mental attitude man chose for himself on earth. For this reason also the souls in purgatory, although they do not see God, are still utterly incapable of sin. The beatific vision itself may be called a remote cause of impeccability; for by granting so wondrous a token of His love, God may be said to undertake the obligation of guarding from all sin those whom He so highly favours, whether by refusing all co-operation to evil acts or in some other manner (<http://www.newadvent.org>).

The Ghost makes several statements that imply he is a Catholic spirit from Purgatory; however, if he truly were a saved Catholic spirit whose soul was destined for Heaven, then, according to Catholic doctrine, he would be incapable of committing this new sin of conspiracy to the premeditated murder of his brother because his soul cannot be marred by new sins while it is in the process of purgation to be accepted into Heaven. He would not even be capable of thinking such an evil act, let alone command his son to commit it. Hence, the Ghost cannot clearly be a Catholic spirit returning from Purgatory.

Moreover, R.A. Foakes points out in *Shakespeare and Violence* that the play's stage direction that the Ghost "cries under the stage" (1.5.148) physically links the character to Hell

because “the area below the stage was conventionally known as Hell, corresponding to the ‘Heavens’ depicted on the canopy above” (133). The Ghost is literally placed in the Hell of the theatre by the playwright’s stage direction, making it all the more peculiar that he claims to be from Purgatory. However, even if the Ghost was a Catholic spirit from Purgatory, it would have been inappropriate for him to be crying out from above in the Heavens because he had not yet ascended into the eternal paradise. Therefore, in my opinion, Shakespeare is dubious in the matter of the Ghost’s origin even in his stage directions.

Many critics look to the other religious references throughout the play for clues as to whether Shakespeare was writing with a Catholic or Protestant sympathy and use this evidence as a way to interpret the religious significance of the Ghost. These references also display a great deal of ambiguity that further demonstrates the fact that the Ghost represents both religions simultaneously. For instance, Hamlet does not display a solely Protestant mentality throughout the play. After his first encounter with the Ghost, Horatio says to Hamlet, “There’s no offense, my lord” (1.5.135), to which Hamlet responds, “Yes, by Saint Patrick, but there is, Horatio” (1.5.136). On a fundamental level, this response is significant because the act of calling out to a saint – no matter what saint – signifies Hamlet’s acknowledgement of the communion of saints, one of the underlying principles of the Catholic faith. Because Protestants do not share this belief, Hamlet cannot be considered a strict Protestant. Furthermore, specifically naming Saint Patrick is particularly important because Saint Patrick is the patron saint of Purgatory, the very Catholic place from which the Ghost claims to originate. Many scholars argue that Hamlet’s peculiar response serves to confirm the Ghost’s Purgatorial origins; however, I view it as a layer of complexity that adds to the religious ambivalence of the play – neither the Ghost nor Hamlet can be viewed as followers of one faith or the other.

Additionally, Hamlet expresses religious ambivalence later when he intrudes upon Claudius praying and confessing his sins – an act prescribed by the Catholic faith. Hamlet contemplates killing his uncle by saying, “Now might I do it, now he is a-praying / And now I’ll do’t” (3.3. 73-74). By walking in unnoticed on his uncle praying alone, Hamlet recognizes that he has the perfect opportunity to stab his uncle in the back and complete his task of revenge. However, Hamlet realizes – with a Catholic disposition – that Claudius is praying and repenting his sins. As previously mentioned, Catholics believe that in order to receive God’s forgiveness, one must repent his sins, and doing so renders one’s soul pure and fit to be accepted into Heaven. Hamlet acknowledges this belief when he says, “And am I then revenged / To take him in the purging of his soul / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?” (3.3.84-86). He realizes that killing Claudius with a clear conscience after confessing his sins would send him to the eternal paradise of Heaven, which indicates a Catholic disposition in this scene. Moreover, Hamlet does not view this as true justice because Claudius “took [his] father grossly, full of bread / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May (3.3.80-81). Claudius killed King Hamlet with his soul stained by the guilt of his earthly sins; therefore, he did not immediately ascend into Heaven. By acknowledging this Catholic belief, Hamlet is accepting the fact that his father is in Purgatory because a Protestant need not repent his sins in order to be forgiven and accepted into Heaven in the grace of God.

In contrast, Hamlet never explicitly mentions the word “Purgatory;” he merely alludes to his belief in it by retelling the Ghost’s story that he was killed without the chance to repent his sins. Just as in previous scenes, Hamlet only directly ponders afterlife as Heaven or Hell, which suggests a Protestant disposition. For instance, Hamlet decides to kill Claudius “When he is...about some act / that has no relish of salvation in ‘t / Then trip him, that his heels may kick at

Heaven / And that his soul may be as damned and black / As Hell, whereto it goes" (3.3.89-95).

Hamlet wishes to kill his uncle while he is committing a sin in order to damn his soul and make him suffer for all eternity for killing King Hamlet. He believes acting out his revenge in this way would serve justice because his father is suffering for his sins; thus, Claudius must suffer as well instead of ascending into Heaven. However, Hamlet immediately assumes that Claudius will be damned to Hell. He does not even question the possibility that Claudius may end up in Purgatory and suffer temporal punishment even though he acknowledges the Ghost's claim of being from Purgatory. In this regard, Hamlet also displays a Protestant mentality in this scene.

However, to take this discussion one step further, when Hamlet says, "And am I then revenged / To take him in the purging of his soul / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?" (3.3.84-86), the word "purging" seems to connect Claudius's act of confession to Purgatory in that he can potentially avoid future purgation of sins if he repents them now. Similarly, Greenblatt argues, "The word 'purging' is striking here, since it links prayer in this world (and the preparation or seasoning of a soul for the 'passage' to the other world) to the purgation that may or may not follow" (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 232). Hamlet's link between prayer and purgation is significant in that it loosely associates him with Catholicism. Even though Hamlet never directly admits faith in any Catholic belief, the insinuations he makes to Purgatory indicate that he can not be considered wholly Protestant.

It should also be noted that contrary to what many people may believe, the debate over Ophelia's apparent suicide and her right to a Christian burial in act 5 is not a clear indication of Catholic sympathy in *Hamlet*. The doctor of divinity asserts that Ophelia "should in ground unsanctified have lodged / Till the last trumpet. For charitable prayers / Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her" (5.1.229-231)" because "her death was doubtful" (5.1.227). In

other words, the doctor believes Ophelia should not be buried with full Christian rites because it appears as though she committed suicide. Though some Protestant denominations may have altered their stance on suicide over the years since the play was written, both Catholics and Protestants alike firmly condemned suicide during the Religious Reformation. In his book *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600*, Roland Mushat Frye writes that the prevalent attitude about suicide during Shakespeare's time was such that

A sane person who chose suicide...was regarded as willfully guilty of murder in a most obscene and reprehensible degree. A person had no more right to kill himself or herself than to kill another, and the crime of murder was rendered all the more damaging by the fact that suicide, if immediately successful, left no opportunity for repentance. Thus, Elizabethan and Jacobean Englishmen regarded suicide with particular revulsion, and referred to it degradingly as "self-slaughter" (301).

In that respect, because it was viewed as a sin by all Christians, any person who committed suicide during Shakespeare's time was buried without Christian rites, regardless of whether he was a Catholic or Protestant. Therefore, the doctor's insistence that Ophelia should not be buried with full Christian rites because she committed suicide cannot be used as evidence for a preference of the Catholic faith in *Hamlet*.

However, the fact that Ophelia's suicide was caused by insanity is a significant factor in the debate between the doctor and Laertes. Frye also writes,

As early as 563 A.D., the Council of Braga or Bracara had excluded from the full rites of Christian burial only those suicides who inflict death on themselves "by any fault," a qualification which was consistently interpreted as protecting the rights of those who commit suicide "when they are so far deprived of reason as not to be responsible in the

sense of doing it by ‘any fault,’ willfully and consciously.” The Canon of Braga appeared in English church law as early as the excerpts of Egbert in 740 A.D. [and] was maintained in the Church of England throughout the century of the Reformation, and long thereafter” (299-300).

Essentially, suicide committed by one who was regarded as insane, deranged, or mentally retarded was not liable for his actions because he is unaware of the consequences of what he is doing. Those who are incapable of thinking clearly for themselves could not be held accountable for their actions; hence, they were allowed full Christian rites at their burial because they did not “willfully and consciously” take their lives. Ergo, Laertes’s assertion that his sister should have a Christian burial is correct because she was mad when she drowned herself. More importantly, this assertion – that the burial of an insane person who committed suicide be interred with full Christian rites – was held by both Catholics and Protestants. Thus, this scene cannot be used as evidence to prove religious preference for either belief system in *Hamlet*.

By examining the religious details of the Ghost, as well as those in other scenes throughout the play, it is easily discerned that the religious origin of the Ghost of King Hamlet is exceptionally complex. In fact, one cannot help but ask why Shakespeare would create such a beast? Wouldn’t it be easier to distinctly define whether the Ghost was a demon from Hell or a saved soul temporarily suffering in Purgatory? What motivated Shakespeare to include such a variety of conflicting religious details throughout the play? I believe that the religious ambivalence in *Hamlet* is an intentional device utilized by Shakespeare to conform to the popular tradition of revenge tragedy and to ensure that the Ghost’s pivotal role in the plot was believable to all members of the audience during the Religious Reformation in England.

Revenge tragedy, which was exceptionally popular during Elizabethan England, contained several characteristic elements: the ghost, the madness and delay of the avenger, the play-within-a-play, multiple murders in addition to the revenge murder, and the avenger's death (Hallet and Hallet 8). The role of the ghost in this genre, typically, is to provide the hero with an unknown piece of information that provokes him to revenge. The Ghost of King Hamlet certainly imparts Hamlet with such secretive knowledge when he says, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life / Now wears his crown" (1.5.38-39). Moreover, the Ghost commands Hamlet to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25), which clearly provokes the hero to avenge his father's death. The Ghost also fulfills his role to prompt revenge during his second appearance to Hamlet when he says, "Do not forget! This visitation / Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose" (3.4.110-111). As stated earlier, this call to revenge cannot naturally come from a saved soul temporarily suffering in a Catholic Purgatory. The reason for this contradiction can, instead, be explained by the genre in which Shakespeare was operating. Many of the ghosts characterized in Elizabethan drama were representative of the Senecan ghosts of early Greek tragedy, which were marked by three distinct attributes: they came from the underworld, their arrival on earth spreads darkness over the human world, and they are filled with the desire for revenge (Hallet and Hallet 19). The Ghost of King Hamlet obviously portrays these three characteristics as his appearance from the afterlife provokes Hamlet to revenge and causes the death of nearly the entire cast of the play. Despite the Ghost's claim that he is "Doom'd for a certain term 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" (1.5.10-13), without the call for revenge that conflicts with Catholic doctrine, the Ghost would have no purpose to appear in the play and the plot would not be that of a revenge tragedy.

Moreover, as a symbol of the supernatural, the Ghost “informs us that, in the case of [the] hero-revengers, the impulse to revenge originates outside of man” (Hallet and Hallet 8). The ghost of revenge tragedy is “Authoritative, but hardly identifiable with the God of Christianity whose primary attributes include mercy and forgiveness, it exerts irresistible pressures upon the revenger to do a deed which it presents as natural” (Hallet and Hallet 9-10). Due to the fact that ghosts in this genre embody the attributes found in the ghosts first characterized by Seneca in early Greek tragedy, their call to revenge is naturally exemplified as a basic human instinct because the Senecan ghost’s pre-Christian origins are associated with paganism. Hence, the revenge tragedy ghost cannot purely represent Christian ideals, no matter how many references to Purgatory, Heaven, or Hell the playwright includes. To that end, I find a struggle between the Christian commandment “Thou shall not kill” and the basic human instinct to revenge operating throughout *Hamlet* as well as the clash between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Hallet and Hallet write in *The Revenger’s Madness*, “Christian dogma tells [the revenge hero] quite clearly that he should not revenge himself, that revenge is evil. He must practice the Christian virtue of patience. ... Yet somehow he cannot align his will with the sanctions of this culture” (121). Whether Catholic or Protestant, Hamlet knows the Christian commandment that prohibits man from killing another human under any circumstances, and he expresses the consequences of such an action when he questions whether the Ghost is actually the devil in disguise who “abuses [him] to damn [him]” (2.2.632). Christianity has taught Hamlet that murder is a mortal sin, one that will damn him for all eternity in Hell, and that injustice in this world will be reconciled in the next by God. Thus, he is initially reluctant to act on the Ghost’s call to revenge due to his religious tenets. However, after hearing the touring player’s speech for the first time, Hamlet grapples with his Christian morality and pagan desire for revenge, and he

begins to realize that the statutes of the world in which he lives do not resolve the injustice he has been chosen to set right.

Disgusted with his own reluctance to kill Claudius, Hamlet says, “Is it not monstrous that this player here / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / ...What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?”

(2.2.551-553 & 2.2.560-562). Hamlet is astounded that the player is able to easily display grief, sorrow, and anguish when acting his part in the play, while Hamlet, himself, cannot come to terms with these emotions after the death of his father. Moreover, Hamlet surmises that the player, who can easily pretend to be upset when a fictional loved one dies, would not hesitate to avenge a wronged death like Hamlet. In this regard, Hamlet seems to approve revenge and is ashamed that he has not yet carried out the duty given to him by the Ghost. Additionally, the speech given by the player that prompts this response from Hamlet is particularly significant because it describes the fabled story from Virgil’s *Aeneid* in which Pyrrhus, seeking revenge for his father Achilles’s death, kills Priam, the king of Troy (Foakes 122-123). Based on Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* is a Latin/Roman adaptation of Greek mythology. Certain liberties were taken to introduce new characters for dramatic value; therefore, many interpretations of the myths exist. Nonetheless, this account of revenge in Greek mythology reminds us once again that man’s instinct to seek vengeance originates from pagan roots – roots that can be traced back to Greece, where Seneca’s ghost first took the stage.

The clash between divine justice and the natural instinct to seek retribution for oneself is expressed by the Ghost, as well. As previously stated, the Ghost’s cry to Hamlet to “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.25) embodies the ideals of the pagan instinct to seek revenge first seen in Seneca’s tragedies. However, while the Ghost instructs Hamlet to kill

Claudius, he also tells him, “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1.5.85-88). Even though the Ghost suspects his wife committed adultery before he was murdered, making her a possible accomplice to the crime, he asks Hamlet to let her live so that her conscience can eat away at her mind and God can administer her punishment. This striking change of heart and act of mercy is also a change of moral code. In the case of Claudius, the Ghost expresses a Senecan desire for revenge; however, with Gertrude he exhibits a “Christian inhibition against taking life” consistent with the moral teachings of the Ten Commandments (Foakes 121). Ergo, the Ghost displays religious ambivalence between Christian and pagan ideals in addition to the uncertainty expressed in his origins as a Catholic or Protestant spirit.

Although the Senecan ghost derives its attributes from early Greek tragedy, the figure of the Ghost was never a part of Hamlet’s tale until it emerged on the Elizabethan stage. The story of Hamlet’s revenge is based on an oral tradition that was first written down in 1185 by Saxo Grammaticus called *Amleth, Prince of Denmark* (Ashliman 1). In the original story, King Horwendil (King Hamlet) is publicly killed by his brother Feng (Claudius). Because the murder was not a secret, Horwendil’s son, Amleth (Hamlet), is immediately aware of his duty to avenge his father’s death; thus, there was no need for the King’s spirit to appear to his son, and there is no ghost in the story. On the other hand, other motifs of revenge tragedy, such as madness and delay of the avenger, are present in the original tale.

Because Feng murdered his brother in public and the victim’s son was expected to avenge the murder according to the social statutes of the time the tale was first written, Feng was very suspicious of Amleth and feared the Prince would kill him. Knowing this, Amleth feigns madness so that his uncle would not suspect him of being capable to retaliate against him for

killing his father. Amleth then delays murdering his uncle until he is old enough and strong enough to do so successfully. He eventually succeeds and is commended for his cunning intellect and his ability to outsmart his uncle (Grammaticus 1-13). Grammaticus's *Amleth, Prince of Denmark* also includes several plot lines that are never mentioned in Shakespeare's retelling of the old tale, but I will focus on the presence or absence of the Ghost in the transformation of the story throughout the ages.

The Danish revenge story was translated (and slightly modified) into French by Francois de Belleforest and was included in his *Histoires Tragiques*. Belleforest's book was first printed in 1570 and was in its eighth edition by 1600, making it very possible for Shakespeare to have read the story first hand ("Tracing the Text of Hamlet"). The French translation also had a public killing of the King and, thus, did not include a ghost figure either. Belleforest made some changes to the story that intensified Gertrude's adultery and cast a shadow on her morality, but the main point for the purposes of this essay is that a ghost still did not appear in this version (Belleforest 1-25).

The Ghost, however, was not first introduced by Shakespeare; it first appeared in *Ur-Hamlet*, another play about the legend of Hamlet that was performed some time in the 1580s. An exact performance date is not available because no written copies of the play survived, but most scholars agree that Thomas Kyd is the most probable author. Though now lost, the play was well-known enough in its time to be casually mentioned by contemporary writers, such as Thomas Nashe, who ridiculed the play because its author did not receive a university education (Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 294). Years later Thomas Lodge also mocked the play when he referred to a devil who looked "as pale as the Vizard of the ghost which cried so miserably at the Theatre, like an oyster-wife, 'Hamlet, revenge!'" (Greenblatt, *Will in the Word* 294). From this

description, we can infer that the first Elizabethan adaptation of the Danish revenge was a Senecan-type tragedy that included the ghost figure. The introduction of the ghost also implies another drastic alteration to the plot undertaken by *Ur-Hamlet*: the murder was hidden and Hamlet's obligation to seek vengeance was not assumed by all, but proclaimed to him by the spirit of his father.

Most scholars agree that these changes to the plot occurred before Shakespeare wrote his version of the play in 1601. In his book *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare, at the very least, saw *Ur-Hamlet* performed several times and most likely acted in it, in which case he would have had a copy of the lines and cues for his entrances and exits for his part in his possession (294-295). Although copies of entire plays were limited – which caused many of them to be lost over time as is the case of *Ur-Hamlet* – as a professional actor, Shakespeare was equipped with an astute memory, which would have served as his guide and frame of reference to write his own play about the Danish tale, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Greenblatt, *Will in the World* 295). Even though the actual text of *Ur-Hamlet* has not survived, it was an important influence on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not only because it is the only one of his sources to include a ghost figure, but because it changed the plot of the tale in such a way that the internal turmoil of the son's conscience of whether or not to act is the focus of the play. The private murder and addition of a ghost to the list of characters was necessary to keep the story in line with the popular tradition of revenge tragedy that kept audiences flocking to the theatres.

Although the revenge tragedies of Shakespeare's day almost always included a ghost, none of the others were concerned with the religious origin of the spirit. The Ghost of King Hamlet is unique not only because he claims residence in Purgatory, but because he is concerned

with the affairs of Christianity in the first place. *Hamlet* is laden with a plethora of religious details that continuously shift the play's religious context between Catholicism and Protestantism. While it may seem simpler to consistently portray one belief system over the other throughout the course of the play, given the political context of the Religious Reformation going on in England during the late sixteenth century, it made far more sense for Shakespeare to include details of both religions that simultaneously played a large role in his life, as well as the lives of many of his fellow countrymen.

During Shakespeare's time, religious instability was rampant as the state's official religion kept switching between Protestantism and Catholicism. For hundreds of years prior to the reign of the Tudor dynasty the official state religion of England was Roman Catholicism. In fact, during the initial stages of the Religious Reformation that swept through Europe at the instigation of Martin Luther, Henry VIII vehemently defended the Roman Catholic Church against Luther's heresies with his publication *The Defense of the Seven Sacraments* in 1521, and he was subsequently bestowed the title of "Defender of the Faith" by Pope Leo X (Bryant 20). He remained a devout Catholic until Pope Clement VII refused to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry's desire to marry Anne Boleyn and produce a male heir led the House of Lords to bestow upon the King the title "Supreme Head of the Church and clergy of England" on February 11, 1531 (Leonard 215). After a series of legislation enacted by Parliament to remove papal control over ecclesiastical administration of the Church of England, the First Act of Succession was passed in 1534. This act was the first to regulate the succession to the English throne; hence, it seemed to complete the breach with Rome because it barred the pope from interfering with the natural order of succession to the English throne (Bryant 25).

Some Englishmen interpreted Henry's breach from papal authority over England as an invitation to criticize the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Reformers placed the Bible in every church for lay people to read and personally interpret at their disposal. Furthermore, Catholic mass and transubstantiation were ridiculed in plays and other writings. Henry, on the other hand, was not prepared for these radical reactions to the establishment of the Church of England. According to James C. Bryant, "his argument was with papal authority within the realm and not with Church dogma. The Church of England, as he saw it, was still the Holy Catholic Church in faith and practice, but it could no longer be in any sense Roman Catholic" (28). In other words, Henry still believed in Catholic doctrine and intended it to be practiced in England; he just wanted to evade the pope's sanction against divorce and marry Anne Boleyn, which he did in 1533.

Henry responded to the reformers' actions with the Six Articles Act, which restored transubstantiation, clerical celibacy, communion in one kind only for the laity, private masses, and auricular confession (Leonard 223). In effect, Henry reverted the Church of England back to the Catholic faith after a brief stint of Lutheranism on the island. The spread of the Reformation's ideals were further halted when Henry completed the restoration of the Catholic faith by enjoining the cult of the Virgin and the saints in the "King's Book" in 1543, forbidding private readings of the Bible in 1546, and torturing Lutherans who denied the Catholic doctrine (Leonard 223). To the dismay of those who advocated for the Religious Reformation in England, when Henry died in 1547 the country was left with a state church that was, in essence, Catholicism with the monarch as supreme ruler in place of the pope. Henry was actually supported by the vast majority of his subjects, which meant most of the people in England believed in and practiced Catholicism when he died (Bryant 29).

Although it was the minority religious faction in England, Protestantism prevailed during the brief reign of Henry's son, Edward VI. Because he was only nine years old when he ascended to the throne, it is quite possible that Edward was easily manipulated by his Protestant advisors to pass legislation in favor of the minority religion. Nonetheless, the Act of Uniformity, which was passed in 1549, established the *Book of Common Prayer* as the sole legal form of worship in England and abolished the use of Latin Bibles (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). The passage of the Act was controversial and led to rioting in some areas of the country, indicating resistance to the institution of Protestantism as the national religion in England. In an attempt to further reinforce Protestantism, Edward passed another Act of Uniformity in 1552, which replaced the previous *Book of Common Prayer* with a revised, more Protestant version. The Act also stipulated that anyone who did not attend a service where this liturgy was used faced six months in prison for a first offense, one year for a second offense, and life for a third (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). Unpopular as they were, these laws were not enforced for very long, as Edward died the following year.

When Queen Mary ascended to the throne in 1553, she reversed the religious reforms initiated by Henry VIII and Edward VI and reinstated Catholicism as England's state religion, nearly bringing the nation to a civil war (McDonald 315). Mary was determined to bring England back to Catholicism; hence, she repealed the Act of Uniformity and restored papal supremacy over England with the Heresy Act of Philip and Mary in 1554 (Bryant 33). Hundreds of Protestant activists fled the country, and nearly 300 Protestant bishops – who were previously appointed by Henry and Edward – were prosecuted for being heretics, giving the Queen the nickname “Bloody Mary” (McDonald 315). Despite the disapproval implied by her moniker, not everyone was against Mary – there was still a large Catholic population residing in England.

When Elizabeth I was crowned in 1558, the people of England were apprehensive as to whether a move back to Protestantism would result in another episode of violence and executions for heresy (McDonald 315). Elizabeth, however, was successful in transitioning England back into a Protestant state with minimal religious strife due to a great deal of compromises made in Parliament between proponents of both religious factions. In 1559, the Settlement of Religion was passed by Parliament, of which the Act of Supremacy was of utmost importance because it repealed the Heresy Act of Philip and Mary and abolished papal jurisdiction in England (Bryant 33). The Settlement of Religion also contained the Act of Uniformity of 1559, which reinstated the *Book of Common Prayer* as the official religious text and required every man to attend church once per month or be fined 12 pence (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). In addition, the Settlement provided “adequate legislation for a purely national Church, a standard of discipline, a uniform and official prayer book, and a new Episcopal regime sworn to uphold Supremacy, Uniformity, and the reformed condition of the Church of England” (Bryant 33). Thus, the Catholic restoration was invalidated by Elizabeth and reflected in the law; however, not all subjects – especially those who had practiced Catholicism for their entire lives – faithfully believed in the new Church of England’s official doctrine.

The people were still uneasy about the status of religion in their country. The state religion had flip-flopped between Catholicism and Protestantism several times in less than 30 years – the entire lifespan of some people – causing many to believe that once Elizabeth died and her successor, Mary, Queen of Scots, took the throne, the nation would again revert back to Catholicism (Milward 18). In essence, despite the lawful enactment of the Church of England as the official state religion, by the time Shakespeare was born in 1564 there was no definitive

majority belief system in England because much of the population, especially the older population, ardently held on to their Catholic faith.

In fact, traces of both Catholicism and Protestantism are found in Shakespeare's life, making it difficult to pin the playwright as a follower of one religion over the other. Given the ambiguity as to what Shakespeare's true religious beliefs were, it is not surprising that strong references to both Catholicism and Protestantism are present in *Hamlet*. Because his parents were born before Parliament passed the First Act of Succession, which completed Henry's breach with Rome in 1534 and led to the establishment of the Church of England, it is widely believed that both of Shakespeare's parents were both born and raised as Catholics (Bryant 24-25). However, there is a lot of evidence that leads one to believe that Shakespeare's parents continued to maintain their Catholic tradition despite the numerous religious reforms that took place over the next few decades.

Most notably, Shakespeare's mother, Mary Shakespeare, was the daughter of Robert Arden, a devout Catholic whose family publicly resisted the Protestant reforms in England. Arden, who died during the reign of Queen Mary, maintained his Catholic beliefs after Henry VIII broke away from Rome and died a true Catholic as evidenced by his will, which states, "First, I bequeath my soul to the Almighty God and to Our Blessed Lady Saint Mary, and to all the holy company of heaven, and my body to be buried in the churchyard of Saint John the Baptist in Aston..." (Milward 21). These words are clearly those of a Catholic and not a Protestant because Catholicism is the only Christian faith that believes in sainthood, whereas Protestants reject the existence of saints all together. Moreover, Mary Arden Shakespeare's cousin Edward Arden of Park Hall was indicted for treason in 1583 after Sir Thomas Lucy, a local Puritan magistrate, investigated a plot to kill the Queen. Edward Arden and his son-in-law

John Somerville were executed, their heads set on London Bridge, and the family was imprisoned for remaining loyal to their Catholic beliefs (Richmond 79-80). Given that religious values are most often reinforced by family relationships and that Mary Arden Shakespeare's family was faithful enough to Catholicism to defy governmental authority and refuse to convert to Protestantism, it can be readily assumed that Shakespeare's mother maintained her Catholic beliefs throughout her entire life.

Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, also came from a family with strong Catholic ties. The Shakespeare family has been traced to the neighborhood of Wroxhall, just north of Stratford, where a large convent of nuns was located until it was dissolved by Henry VIII. In fact, for many years in the beginning of the sixteenth century, the prioress of the convent was a woman named Isabella Shakespeare, a name that mirrors one of Shakespeare's heroines in *Measure for Measure*, who happens to be a novice in the sisterhood of St. Clare (Milward 22). Years later, when Henry VIII officially dissolved the convent, the sub-prioress was a woman named Joan Shakespeare (Milward 22), whom many speculate to be the aunt of William Shakespeare because his parents named their first and fifth children "Joan;" although, Velma Bourgeois Richmond claims a more distant kinship is more likely (80). Nevertheless, the Shakespeare family, however distant, included nuns, a fact that suggests a strong Catholic tradition that would have been passed down to the playwright and influence his work.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of evidence that suggests that John Shakespeare himself remained loyal to the Catholic tradition set forth by his family. As the Tudor dynasty reverted back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism over a relatively short period of time, many people adopted a "temporizing policy" with regard to the continually changing religious doctrines of England (Milward 18). Even Catholics complied outwardly to Elizabeth's passage

of the Act of Supremacy, which repealed the Heresy Act of Philip and Mary and abolished papal jurisdiction in England, for the sake of peace and avoidance of legal penalties (Bryant 33).

Additionally, many Catholics did not take this act seriously and looked forward to the restoration of Catholicism since Mary Stuart, a Catholic, was the next heir to the throne. Therefore, during the first decade of Elizabeth's reign, there were few religious disturbances in England (Milward 18).

This "temporizing policy" of Catholics explains many of the actions taken by John Shakespeare during his career in public office. Towards the end of his term as Stratford Chamberlain, John Shakespeare appended his signature to the account of expenses incurred when the Guild Chapel was reformed in accordance with the Queen's Injunctions. Traditionally, this document has been viewed as a sign of John Shakespeare's Protestant sympathies; however, Peter Milward points out that he was merely acting in his official capacity and that a simple signature does not imply John Shakespeare's personal feelings behind the matter (19). In addition, upon his promotion to the dignity of bailiff in 1568, John Shakespeare would have been required by law to take an anti-Catholic oath of supremacy; however, it is unlikely that he would have been faced with this obstacle since the Sherrieff of Warwickshire, who was charged with tendering the oath, was himself a Catholic (Milward 19).

As Elizabeth's government became more determined to enforce its Protestant policy, Parliament passed laws that were increasingly strict against the practice of Catholicism. Likewise, the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth by Pope Pius V in 1570 resulted in a clear division between Catholics and Protestants (Milward 18). Catholics started refusing to attend services in the Church of England and were resolved to follow their conscience, no matter the cost. Those who did not attend church at least once per month, which was required by law, were

termed “recusants” and forced to pay a fine. John Shakespeare’s name is the first to appear on a March 1592 list of recusants, and Sir Thomas Lucy noted that he did not attend church “for fear of process of debt,” an excuse many Catholics used to avoid paying the fine associated with refusing to practice the Protestant faith (Richmond 81). It is likely that John Shakespeare used this as a mere excuse to enable him to forego Protestant services and is not an actual depiction of the state of his finances because he had more than sufficient funds to stand surety for two of his friends in the late 1580s for considerable amounts of money (Richmond 81). Therefore, John Shakespeare’s Catholic beliefs were so strong, he intentionally broke the law and refused to take part in Protestant religious services, regardless of the outcome.

Moreover, the discovery of a Catholic will hidden in the rafters of William Shakespeare’s birthplace, a house on Henley Street in Stratford, supports the argument that John Shakespeare remained a devout Catholic until his death in 1601. Many scholars speculate that he hid the will during the Somerville crisis in 1583 when the homes of all of those related to the Arden family were searched; however, it was not found until 1757 (Richmond 81). The will includes reference to a plethora of Catholic beliefs, such as repentance, purgatory, pardoning of injuries received, reliance upon guardian angels, the Virgin Mary, saints, the sacrifice of the Mass, and the last sacrament of Extreme Unction (Richmond 82). In addition, John Shakespeare’s will also contained the following Spiritual Testament:

I, John Shakespeare, have made this present writing of protestation, confession and charter in the presence of the Blessed Virgin Mary, my Angel Guardian, and all the Celestial Court, as witnesses hereunto: the which my meaning is, that it be of full value now, presently, and for ever, with the force and virtue of testament, codicil and donation in cause of death; confirming it anew, being in perfect health of soul and body, and

signed with mine own hand; carrying also the same about me; and for the better declaration hereof, my will and intention is that it be finally buried with me after my death (Richmond 82).

This Spiritual Testament was a profession of adherence to the Catholic faith composed by St. Charles Borromeo, the Archbishop of Milan, and distributed by Edward Campion and Robert Persons, two Jesuit priests who journeyed throughout the Midlands in 1580 (Milward 21). Sir William Catesby, a relative of Mary Arden Shakespeare, hosted Campion in his home during this time, providing a source from whom John Shakespeare would have been able to receive a copy of the Spiritual Testament before placing it in his will and hiding it in the rafters of his house before the Somerville crisis (Milward 21-22). These clear professions of Catholic faith present in John Shakespeare's will prove that he remained a Catholic throughout his life, and the abundance of Catholic beliefs referenced within it depicts the fervor with which he maintained his faith. Hence, John Shakespeare maintained his Catholic beliefs long after Protestantism was established in England by Queen Elizabeth.

Due to the staunch Catholicism of his family, Shakespeare was obviously exposed to the Catholic tradition and belief system, enabling him to incorporate those details into his plays. However, whereas his parent's true religious alliance is clearly proven to lie with Rome, the available evidence for William Shakespeare's true faith opens itself to conflicting interpretations and ambiguity.

As the son of two staunchly Catholic parents, we can assume that William Shakespeare was instilled with their religious values and was exposed to the belief system of Catholicism, later enabling him to incorporate details of the faith into his plays. Moreover, because they lived in Stratford, outside of London where religious reforms were instituted immediately, the

Shakespeares, as well as their fellow townspeople, were able to practice Catholicism for a period of time after Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy. It wasn't until 1560 that a Protestant, John Bretchgirdle, replaced the old Marian vicar in the Holy Trinity Church (Milward 17). Under his supervision, the church was brought into conformity with the new Protestant regulations, and it was Bretchgirdle who baptized Shakespeare on April 26, 1564, in what was presumably a Protestant service (Milward 17). While I believe that it is significant that Shakespeare was baptized a Protestant, I also believe that it is not a determining factor as to what his actual, true faith was because this event occurred days after his birth and was not his own conscious decision to become a member of the Protestant faith through the sacrament of baptism.

After four years of service to the Holy Trinity Church, Bretchgirdle died of the plague and was succeeded by William Butcher, who held Catholic sympathies. After a series of Catholic uprisings, Butcher, in turn, was then replaced with another Protestant vicar, Henry Heycroft in 1569 (Milward 17). We can assume that each vicar preached toward his own religious beliefs, regardless of the state religion imposed by the Queen; therefore, William Shakespeare would have been present at religious services that were both Catholic and Protestant in nature during the early years of his life. In addition, we can also infer that he attended these services regularly with his family as a child because it wasn't until 28 years after his birth that his father's name appeared on a recusant record, indicating that the Shakespeare family complied with the law and attended church services at least once per month. Ergo, despite his parent's obvious religious loyalty to Catholicism, William Shakespeare was also exposed to and practiced the Protestant faith at an early age, providing him with knowledge of Protestantism to incorporate such details into *Hamlet*.

Additionally, Shakespeare most likely received more Catholic religious influence from his attendance at Stratford Grammar School, where most of the schoolmasters were known to have Catholic sympathies. Of the three schoolmasters that served the school between 1571 and 1582, the years that Shakespeare most likely attended the school, two of them were known to be Catholic (Milward 39). Hence, as a child, Shakespeare would have been influenced to believe the Catholic faith at both school and home, leading some to believe that he was truly a Catholic. However, I maintain that while the influence of authority figures during one's childhood has an impact in the decisions one makes as an adult, ultimately as a child, one does not have a choice in his religious affiliation or the religions to which he becomes exposed. He is exposed to and taught to believe what his parents and other authority figures, such as schoolmasters and government officials, believe. As one matures and grows into his adult self, other factors can affect the decision to believe in religion. Personal experiences, additional education, and exposure to new, diverse lifestyles can influence one to question his inherited belief systems and change or modify them. In the instance of William Shakespeare, he certainly would have been faced with challenges to the beliefs he learned as a child when he moved to London to pursue a career in the theatre. Therefore, William Shakespeare cannot be definitively labeled as a Catholic merely because he was raised by and encountered Catholics throughout his life. His association with people of this faith can help us understand how he gained knowledge of Catholicism in order to incorporate references to it in his work, but mere association with Catholics does not make one a Catholic himself.

The details of Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway, or lack thereof, further add to the ambiguity of his religious beliefs. The Holy Trinity Church in Stratford contains a record of a marriage license granted by the Bishop of Worcester, dated November 27, 1682, that allowed

the two to get married without the usual triple announcing of banns on successive Sundays (Richmond 86). Because banns were suspended during the Advent season and Anne was already three months pregnant, there was reason for them to avoid delaying their marriage. However, there is no record of Shakespeare's marriage to Anne Hathaway in Holy Trinity Church, and, while many speculate that the marriage took place at Temple Grafton because Anne's father was dead and she had relatives there, the parish records have not survived (Richmond 86). Thus, we cannot be certain beyond a reasonable doubt where the marriage took place. This seemingly minute detail is actually very important in the debate over Shakespeare's religious beliefs because the two possible churches' services were of different faiths. A wedding in Holy Trinity Church would indicate a Protestant ceremony, whereas those who believe the two wed in Temple Grafton maintain that the service would have been Catholic with Friar John Frith officiating (Richmond 86). Nonetheless, without concrete evidence as to where the marriage took place, we cannot use speculation as a means to place Shakespeare into one faith or the other.

All three of their children, daughter Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith, were christened in Holy Trinity Church, indicating only that the Shakespeares complied with the law and the Church of England. The twins were named after a baker and his wife, Hamnet and Judith Sadler, friends and neighbors of Shakespeare. Hamnet Sadler is considered to be a Catholic because his name appears on the recusancy list of 1606, and some argue this fact is evidence to prove Shakespeare's belief in Catholicism (Richmond 86). I, on the other hand, do not believe that being friends with someone who is Catholic automatically makes one a Catholic as well. Even though Shakespeare was exposed to Catholicism as a child, naming his child after a man whose name appears on a recusancy list does not make Shakespeare a Catholic. I think this is a weak attempt to prove something for which there is not enough evidence to attest.

Shakespeare's daughter Susanna, on the other hand, represents a clear link of continuity of Catholicism in his family. In 1606, when she was 28 years old, her name is one of 22 on a recusants list for not receiving the sacrament at Easter (Richmond 82). Like her grandfather and other relatives, Shakespeare's daughter also refused to partake in Protestant services, signifying that a Catholic tradition was passed down to her either through her grandparents, parents, or both. We cannot be certain that she received this belief system from her father, but we can be certain that Catholicism was a strong value in the Shakespeare family and was reflected in the work of the great playwright.

Although there is an abundance of evidence that determines a clear Catholic influence on Shakespeare's life as reflected in his literature, there is also a great deal of support for the claim that Shakespeare was a Protestant. One of the most striking facts is that Shakespeare, unlike many of his family members, never publicly professed his belief in the Catholic faith. Whereas his grandfather, father, and daughter professed their belief in the Blessed Mother and the communion of saints in their wills, Shakespeare left a Protestant will, one without mention of any of these purely Catholic beliefs. The preamble of his will, which stated, "I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaker of life everlasting, and my body to the earth whereof it is made," is similar to the preambles of most seventeenth century Protestants (Milward 248). Moreover, Shakespeare's will was signed and dated March 25, 1616, a month before his death on April 23, 1616 (Richmond 93). This is significant because any practicing Christian would not and could not, in good faith or conscience, ascribe his signature to a document that proclaims him to believe in a different faith from his own. This is especially true of Catholics because they are taught to believe that Catholicism is the one, true faith. A Catholic

who falsely signed his name to a document that proclaimed himself to be a Protestant would believe that his soul would be damned. If Shakespeare were truly a Catholic, he would not be able to sign his name to a Protestant will in good faith without fear of damning his soul for all eternity. John and Susanna Shakespeare, on the other hand, were devout Catholics and professed their true faith in their last dying testaments despite the political pressures of the Protestant Church of England. As true Catholics, they fear the wrath of God above that of the law. If Shakespeare were a Catholic, he would have left a Catholic profession of faith in his will rather than a Protestant one.

Also noteworthy is the fact that William Shakespeare's name never appears on any recusant list, signifying that he regularly attended Protestant church services (Milward 104). This, too, can be interpreted in many different ways. Perhaps his personal faith was in line with that of the Church of England, and he attended church regularly because he wanted to do so. However, there is a chance that he was one of the temporizing Catholics who attended Protestant services simply because the law mandated attendance. Shakespeare may have attended church as a means to avoid punishment rather than as an expression of his true faith. Then again, if he was a devout Catholic, Shakespeare could have refused to go to church "for fear of process of debt" like his father. However, he could have felt that as a renowned playwright no one would actually believe that claim, and his status as a Catholic would hinder his future success. Perhaps his celebrity was a motivating factor for maintaining a clean record with the law. As a person in the public eye, he may have felt pressured to regularly attend church and maintain a good reputation, especially since his acting company regularly performed at court. He may not have had the opportunity to perform for Queen Elizabeth or King James if he was not in compliance with the laws set forth by the monarch. Although William Shakespeare is not listed on a recusant list at

any point in his life and because there was still a large number of Catholics living in England that also attended Protestant services in order to comply with the law, this cannot be used as definitive evidence to identify him as a Protestant.

The debate becomes even more muddled because Shakespeare's name, unlike many other actors, has not been found in any parish records in London. Hence, because there is no official record that proves he attended Protestant services in London, we can only assume that he attended church because there is no record of him breaking this law. There is a possibility that he was able to use his celebrity and clout to persuade public officials in excusing him from church services, but that is mere speculation. Although he is not listed in any parish record as a parishioner in London, evidence from his plays indicates that he regularly attended Protestant church services.

Peter Milward points out that the familiarity with which Shakespeare references the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Bishops' and the Geneva Bibles, and the *Homilies* are such that would have required direct and personal contact with them on a consistent basis (37). The Protestant references included in plays such as *As You Like It* with its inclusion of a picture of the interior of an Anglican church during the reading of a homily are so detailed that Shakespeare could not have derived them from hearsay or a literary study of the Protestant texts (Milward 37). The facts that Shakespeare frequently references the version of the Psalms that was used in church services as opposed to those found in the Bishops' or Geneva Bible; refers to almost all of the ceremonies prescribed in the *Book of Common Prayer*; and echoes passages of the Elizabethan *Homilies* that were repeatedly read aloud in church suggest that he did, in fact, attend Protestant services on a regular basis and that Shakespeare had a sound understanding of the faith (Milward 104). It does not, however, indicate what he personally believed.

The Catholic and Protestant faiths are both represented throughout Shakespeare's vast collection of works, and we can prove that he was exposed to both faiths extensively throughout his life. However, in terms of his own religious affiliation, this is as much as we can definitely prove and know for certain. There is no proclamation of faith from Shakespeare himself, and the ambiguity that surrounds the religious aspect of his life inhibits us from determining what exactly he believed. In essence, the ambiguity of Shakespeare's religious affiliation is mirrored in that of the Ghost of King Hamlet, whose religious affiliation is also muddled with references to both Catholicism and Protestantism. Therefore, we cannot use Shakespeare's own religious affiliation as a means to prove that of the Ghost's not only because it is unknown, but also because the beliefs of the author are not necessarily the beliefs of the character he pens.

The complicated religious details of Shakespeare's life represent just one example of the religious disorder and confusion prevalent during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Therefore, after taking into consideration the political and social environments in which Shakespeare was writing, as well as his own personal experiences with both religions, it is no wonder that the Ghost of King Hamlet simultaneously – though paradoxically – represents both faiths accurately.

During the time *Hamlet* was written, the theatre and press were censored to restrict publication of material that was politically and doctrinally controversial (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 236). Though it was permissible for Shakespeare to include minute details about the Catholic faith into his plays, it would have been exceptionally risky for him to represent any aspect of Catholicism in a favorable manner. He made a huge gamble with his references to Purgatory in *Hamlet* because the Church of England explicitly rejected Purgatory and any religious practices associated with it in 1563, making Shakespeare's inclusion of it into his play

particularly bold (Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* 235). Although the state religion rejected its existence, that does not mean that every person in England ceased believing in Purgatory. Many people still clung to the old faith, and those who embraced Protestantism certainly were also familiar with it. Either way, everyone was aware of English law and what they were supposed to believe (whether or not they did), and knowing that Purgatory was, in effect, outlawed nearly 40 years before the play was written, the Elizabethan audience would certainly have been shocked to see a ghost on stage claiming to come from this forbidden territory. Essentially, Shakespeare's overt references to Catholicism and Purgatory force the audience to sit up and listen carefully to what the Ghost has to say.

Shakespeare was probably able to escape intense scrutiny because he never explicitly uses the word "Purgatory" in *Hamlet*. The Ghost merely implies that he is from the Catholic liminal afterlife by saying he is "Doom'd for a certain term 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" (1.5.10-13). Moreover, Shakespeare would have been able to avoid reprimand from political authorities for referencing Purgatory in his play because he does not portray it in a favorable or completely accurate manner. Shortly after implying he is suffering from temporal punishment, the Ghost commands Hamlet to seek revenge for his murder – an act that is impossible for a true saved Catholic soul to complete as well as one that is consistent with the Protestant belief of spirits.

Even though Queen Elizabeth established Protestantism as the official state religion and the theatres were heavily censored, it was worth the risk to include Catholic details in *Hamlet* to ensure that every member of the audience connected with the play and believed in the existence of the Ghost in the plot. Because there was a more or less equal distribution of Catholics and

Protestants in the original audience, it was important for Shakespeare to incorporate clues that the Ghost could be interpreted as a representative of both religious factions in order to engage all of his audience members without offending anyone and to create a ghost that everyone could truly believe was real.

It may seem difficult for audience members to believe in a ghost who represents two conflicting theories of spirits; however, I believe that while enjoying a performance of *Hamlet* for the first time, one is more likely to pay attention to the details that confirm his own faith's perception of spirits and ignore anything that contradicts his beliefs. This can be explained by the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, which postulates that

Pairs of cognitions (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another.

If two cognitions are relevant to one another, they are either consonant or dissonant. Two cognitions are consonant if one follows from the other. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase dissonance. The greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater is the pressure to reduce dissonance" (Harmon-Jones and Mills 3).

In the instance of religious beliefs during the Reformation in England, the Catholic belief in and the Protestant rejection of Purgatory are relevant because they both make a claim about the existence of a third afterlife state of being other than Heaven and Hell. These two beliefs are dissonant because their claims are opposite one another. *Hamlet* portrays the Ghost as both a Catholic spirit from Purgatory and a Protestant demon from Hell – two pieces of information that create a psychological state of dissonance in the audience member that he will try to reduce or avoid while interpreting the play.

However, bear in mind that some members of Shakespeare's audience believed in Purgatory and some did not. Therefore, the cognitive dissonance they are experiencing is not only restricted to the plot of the play, but these religious details in *Hamlet* also conflict with the audience members' personal faith, leading to a deeper sense of cognitive dissonance that can be explained by the belief-disconfirmation paradigm. This portion of the cognitive dissonance theory maintains that

Dissonance is aroused when people are exposed to information inconsistent with their beliefs. If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can lead to misperception or misinterpretation of the information, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from those who agree with one's belief, and attempting to persuade others to accept one's belief (Harmon-Jones and Mills 6-7).

For example, a Protestant audience member would feel "psychologically uncomfortable" by the Ghost's assertion that he comes from Purgatory because this person does not believe in Purgatory. In order to reduce or avoid dissonance with his personal faith this person would reject this information by ignoring it and refute it by concentrating on Protestant details of the play, such as how the Ghost causes Hamlet to harm himself and others. Similarly, Catholic audience members would ignore Protestant details of the play and view the Ghost with a Catholic mentality. Hence, theatre-goers can reduce cognitive dissonance – the simultaneous information that the Ghost is both Catholic and Protestant – by ignoring the religious details that do not confirm their personal faith. By doing so, every audience member makes the Ghost believable for himself, which was pivotal to the success and believability of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

As previously mentioned, representing all three predominant Elizabethan beliefs about ghosts and spirits is critical for Shakespeare to convey to every audience member that the Ghost is real because he is the catalyst that ignites the plot of the play; hence, if the Ghost were not believable, then the play would not be believable. By expressing all three beliefs in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare enables each member of his audience to connect with the play regardless of his education or religious affiliation. He first introduced the scholarly Christian view that is skeptical of a spirit's ability to assume a human form in order to extinguish all doubts of the Ghost's presence and enforce the notion that he is, in fact, real. Shakespeare then carefully surrounded the Ghost and Hamlet with elements of Catholicism and Protestantism, intentionally creating an ambiguous religious affiliation in order to appeal to both religions in his audience without offending anyone. This ambiguity furthered his purpose of ensuring that all audience members believed in the Ghost because both the Catholic and Protestant belief systems of spirits are present in the play; thus, everyone can believe in the Ghost according to his faith.

In conclusion, the Ghost in *Hamlet* cannot be classified as wholly Catholic or Protestant; rather, he mirrors the religious ambivalence that was present in Shakespeare's life as well as that of England during the transitional period of the Religious Reformation. Because the Ghost is the catalyst of the tragedy, it is essential that the audience believes the Ghost is real and is not just another supernatural element similar to the spirits in Shakespeare's other plays. Thus, he appeals to all three prominent views of ghosts and spirits that existed during the time he wrote *Hamlet* in order for every audience member to believe in the Ghost's influence over the events of the play. However, Shakespeare was also writing in the revenge tragedy genre, one with its own stipulations for how ghosts and spirits are believed to act. As such, the Ghost also conforms to this ghost theory by providing Hamlet with secret information that provokes him to revenge – a

desire inconsistent with his Christian moral code. Hence, the Ghost also represents the conflict between divine judgment and human instinct as well as the struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. After taking into consideration the political and social environments in which Shakespeare was writing, as well as his own personal experiences with both religions, it is no wonder that the Ghost of King Hamlet simultaneously – though paradoxically – represents both faiths accurately. As such, the Ghost becomes a symbol for the religious ambivalence prevalent in England during the time *Hamlet* was written because he mirrors the conflicting beliefs and faiths of the Religious Reformation.

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