

# I.5 Enter the Ghost and Hamlet

HAMLET

Where wilt thou lead me? Speak. I'll go no further.

GHOST

Mark me.

HAMLET I will.

GHOST My hour is almost come

When I to sulph'rous and tormenting flames  
Must render up myself.

HAMLET Alas, poor ghost!

GHOST

Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing  
To what I shall unfold.

HAMLET Speak, I am bound to hear.

GHOST

So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

HAMLET What?

GHOST I am thy father's spirit,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night, 10  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid

I.5.1 Where] F; Whether Q2; whither Q1

I.5.0 Enter Ghost and Hamlet There is no break here in the action as it mounts to its first great climax. On Shakespeare's stage the Ghost and Hamlet, having made their exit through one of the two stage doors, move backstage across to the other while Horatio and Marcellus are still talking. Then, as Horatio and Marcellus go out through the first door, the Ghost and Hamlet return through the other. The main purpose of these manoeuvres is, of course, to get rid of Horatio and Marcellus, rather than to signal any change of location, though Hamlet's first words do suggest that there has been some shift.

2 Mark me having remained silent through two previous scenes, the Ghost speaks at last, taking complete control of the situation. Wielding the threefold authority of supernatural being, king, and father, he very appropriately begins with a command.

My hour is almost come i.e. dawn

approaches

3 flames As lines 9-13 make clear, the flames are those of purgatory not of hell.

6 bound 'in duty bound' (Kittredge)

10 walk the night walk throughout the night. Compare *Lear* 4.6.13, 'the crows and choughs that wing the midway air', another example of what Schmidt, with specific reference to these and other passages, calls 'the accusative of space'.

11 to fast The notion that both in hell and in purgatory the punishment was made to fit the sin was widespread. See, for example, Nashe i. 218 and John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore 3.6. Hamlet will say later that Claudius 'took my father grossly, full of bread' (3.3.80), a remark which accords well with the general impression the play gives of old Hamlet as one who enjoyed his mid-day meal and his post-prandial nap.

13 But except, if it were not

To tell the secrets of my prison-house,  
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,  
Thy knotty and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine. 20  
But this eternal blazon must not be  
To ears of flesh and blood. List, Hamlet, O list!  
If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

HAMLET O God!

GHOST

Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

HAMLET Murder!

GHOST

Murder most foul, as in the best it is,  
But this most foul, strange, and unnatural.

HAMLET

Haste, haste me to know it, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love, 30  
May sweep to my revenge.

18 knotty] F; knotted Q2Q1 20 fretful] FQ1; fearefull Q2 22 List, Hamlet, O list] F; list, list, ô list Q2; Hamlet Q1 list!] ~, F; ~: Q2 24 God] Q2Q1; Heauen F 29 Haste, haste] F (Hast, hast); Hast Q2; Haste Q1 know it] FQ1; know't Q2 1] Q2; not in FQ1

17 spheres sockets. There was a close connection in Shakespeare's mind between stars, each enclosed within its sphere, and eyes, each enclosed within its socket. See *Romeo*, 2.2.15-17, 'Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, | Having some business, do entreat her eyes | To twinkle in their spheres till they return.'

18 knotty and combined locks hair carefully and intricately arranged, possibly in curls. During the first act Hamlet should be 'The glass of fashion' (3.1.154).

19 particular individual, separate

20 fretful impatient, bad-tempered

21 eternal blazon revelation of the mysteries of eternity. Schmidt notes that Shakespeare sometimes uses *eternal* 'to express extreme abhorrence', and cites *Caesar*, 1.2.159-161, 'There was a Brutus once that would have brooked | Th' eternal devil to keep his state in Rome | As easily as a king.' A *blazon*, originally a heraldic shield, or the description of such a shield, is here equivalent to a publication or

proclamation.

be i.e. be made

27 in the best at the best

29 haste me to know it i.e. let me know it at once

30 meditation thought. 'As swift as thought' was proverbial (Tilley T240).

31 apt quick to take the right impression

32-3 duller . . . wharf It is not clear which, if any, 'fat weed' Shakespeare has in mind. The asphodel, best known and most frequently mentioned of the plants connected with the underworld in Greek mythology, has often been suggested; but the word *asphodel* is not to be found in his works. *Poppy*, on the other hand, is (*Othello* 3.3.334), and with specific reference to its somniferous effects. It, therefore, seems the more likely of the two. Likeliest of all, perhaps, is the possibility that the Ghost conjures up a plant never seen by eyes 'of flesh and blood'.

GHOST

I find thee apt;

And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,  
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear.  
It's given out that, sleeping in my orchard,  
A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark  
Is by a forgèd process of my death  
Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,  
The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears his crown.

HAMLET

O my prophetic soul!

40

My uncle!

GHOST

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,  
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—  
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power  
So to seduce!—won to his shameful lust  
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.  
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there,  
From me, whose love was of that dignity

33 roots] Q2Q1; rots F 35 It's] F; Tis Q2Q1 my] Q2Q1; mine F 41 My] Q2Q1; mine F 43  
Wit] POPE; wits FQ2 with traitorous gifts—] Q2 (gifts,); hath Traitorous gifts. F; with gifts,  
Q1 45 to his] Q2Q1; to to this F 47 a] F; not in Q2

32 **duller** slower, more indolent. Cordelia gives a list of 'idle weeds' in *Lear* (4.4.2-4).

**shouldst** wouldst. Shakespeare often uses *should* where modern English prefers *would* (Abbott 322).

**fat** gross, lazy (OED a. 11)

33 **roots** This Q2 reading is preferred to F's *rots* because it offers a strong antithesis to *stir* (l. 34), and it fits in perfectly with the other instances of 'things rank and gross in nature' which are so frequent in the play.

**Lethe wharf** banks of the Lethe (the river of forgetfulness in the classical underworld). This sense of *wharf*, found again in *Antony* (2.2.217), appears to be peculiar to Shakespeare (OED sb. 1 2c).

35 **orchard** garden for herbs and fruit-trees (OED 1a)

37 **forgèd process** lying story, fabricated account (OED process sb. 4)

38 **Rankly abused** grossly deceived (OED abuse v. 4). References to abusing the ear of a person are frequent in Shakespeare.

40 **my prophetic soul** Hamlet does not mean that he suspected his father had been murdered by his uncle, but that his deep-seated intuitive distrust and dislike of Claudius have now been justified. He has known all along that Claudius is 'a wrong un'.

42 **adulterate** adulterous (the invariable sense elsewhere in Shakespeare)

43 **traitorous gifts** 'Women are tempted with gifts' was proverbial (Tilley W704).

47 **falling-off** (1) change for the worse (2) revolt from allegiance. Compare 1 *Henry IV* 1.3.93-4, 'Revolted Mortimer! | He never did fall off'.

48 **that such** (Abbott 277)

**dignity** worthiness. Compare LLL 4.3.232, 'several worthies [= excellences] make one dignity'.

That it went hand-in-hand even with the vow  
I made to her in marriage, and to decline  
Upon a wretch whose natural gifts were poor  
To those of mine.

50

But virtue, as it never will be moved,  
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
So lust, though to a radiant angel linked,  
Will sate itself in a celestial bed  
And prey on garbage.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* I, v