

"I have that within which passeth show"*: Hamlet and the Ghost

Hamlet's soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 2 reveals that what he has "within him which passeth show" is more than just his grief for this father. The soliloquy follows closely upon a tense exchange with his mother in which he challenges her needling question concerning his persistent mourning, "Why seems it so particular with thee":

Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not 'seems.'
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play:
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii,76-86)

What else Hamlet has "within him" is appropriately made apparent only when he is finally alone and free from the cool hypocrisy of the court. Only then does the intensity of his feelings burst forth:

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! (I.ii,129-130)

The repetition of "too too" and the use of "sullied" to describe his embodied existence reveals both the inner force of his feelings and the violation he himself has experienced as he is compelled to witness and participate in the public applause of what he views as "rank and gross" (I.ii.136). His wish that his "too too sullied flesh would . . . resolve itself into a dew" is the wish of a man who in the moment finds his life not worth living:

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! O God! (I.ii,131-132)

The repeated "O God! O God!" reads now as an additional intensification of the "too too" from the first line. As "self-slaughter" is not an option for Hamlet, his continued existence becomes for him "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" (I.ii,133). The repeated "Fie on't! O fie!" further echoes the "too too" and marks the trespass that he feels:

Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this! (I.ii, 135-137)

At this point we do not know to what the "this" refers. The following lines, however, reveal that the "this" pertains to the overly hasty marriage of Claudius and his mother:

But two months dead! — nay, not so much, not two:
So excellent a king; that was, to this,
Hyperion to a satyr; so loving to my mother,
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth! (I.ii,138-142)

The exclamation "Heaven and earth!" pushes Hamlet's sense of personal violation outward to encompass Heaven itself. To add to his emotional turbulence, the memory of his father repeatedly forces itself upon him -- he cannot not think on what was and what is now:

Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet, within a month, —
Let me not think on't, — Frailty, thy name is woman! — (I.ii, 143-146)

The stain upon his soul further colors his view of all women, ominously including even Ophelia, and he sees both his mother and Claudius as bestial:

The reoccurrence of the “O God!” here makes clear how his thoughts rain blow after blow upon his conscience:

. . . but no more like my father
Than I to Hercules: within a month;
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married: — O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets! (I.ii, 152-157)

What he has within him is in fact so ‘unseemly’ that he is reduced to silence in his own house:

But break my heart, — for I must hold my tongue! (I.i,59)

Yet for the audience, Hamlet has not held his tongue and we see directly into what he dares not show to others. It is this “sullied” prince who in Act I, Scene 5 projects his inner state in the form of his father’s ghost (“a guilty thing” I.i.148), who speaks not only of “damned incest” (I.v.83) but also of murder, the suspicion of which has clearly been in Hamlet’s mind as well, though perhaps repressed:

Ghost: The serpent that did sting thy father’s life
Now wears his crown.
Hamlet: O my prophetic soul. (I.v.40)

Appropriately, Hamlet finishes off the ghost’s line, as though they were one and the same. Soon after, Ophelia will describe the mad antics of Hamlet as those of one who “had been loosed out of hell / to speak of horrors” (I.i.1040-1041). Ophelia knows nothing about the ghostly visitation, but she has the sense of it.

That the ghost appears to Horatio, Marcellus and Bernardo, though heard only by Hamlet, makes visible the reality of Hamlet’s mental state and establishes the upheaval in Hamlet’s soul as the motive for the play as a whole.

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