

## SPIRITS, GHOSTS AND GODS IN SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's plays are peopled with creatures of great diversity, and among them one occasionally encounters supernatural beings who, or which, are more or less closely, or loosely, integrated into the action and central concerns of the plays. They are never individually important as characters, and with the exception of the ghost in *Hamlet* they have enjoyed scant critical attention; but as beings who defy the usual rational expectations of drama, certainly of Shakespeare's drama, they are interesting phenomena and deserve both individual and general scrutiny of their credentials. I find three fairly distinct categories of supernatural creatures in Shakespeare and shall refer to them a little arbitrarily as spirits, ghosts and gods.

For a closer look at their business in the plays we may profitably begin by transporting ourselves back to the year 1592, a remarkably good year for spooks (and, incidentally, in its latter half a time of plague, conducive to superstition). It was also the year when the playwright William Shakespeare entered recorded history, since there can be no doubt that Robert Greene had Shakespeare in mind when he penned his *Groatsworth of Wit* and warned fellow dramatists of 'an upstart crow' who was 'in his own conceit the only Shakespeare in a country'. Greene's remark about a 'tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide', as everyone knows, echoes one of Shakespeare's lines in the third part of *Henry VI*, indicating thereby that at least two of the *Henry VI* plays had been performed by then. In fact all three parts may well have been performed during the course of 1592, and there was certainly a 'Harey vj', probably identical with Shakespeare's *I Henry VI*, which Henslowe recorded as having had fourteen performances at the Rose before playing was restrained at midsummer.

Other plays among the considerable number that were performed in London or on the outskirts of London in 1592 were Greene's own *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, probably Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the devil play *par excellence*, and Peele's *The old Wives Tale*.

One thing these plays have in common is the inclusion of ghosts and spirits among the *dramatis personae*. In *The Spanish Tragedy* a ghost supervises the whole tragedy and brings it to its gory conclusion. In *Henry VI*, *Friar Bacon*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The old Wives Tale* there are witches and conjurers. This is not really surprising. Witches were being piously burnt in Scotland and hanged in England without respite in these years, and belief in evil spirits was deep-rooted. At one time in the late nineties when a troupe of touring players performed Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* at Exeter, there was reportedly a panic because the actors thought there was suddenly 'one devell too many amongst them'.<sup>1</sup> The prevalence of ghost beliefs preserved in local traditions may be il-

<sup>1</sup> See E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. III. Oxford, 1923, p. 424.

lustrated by the story of Herne the Hunter, which Shakespeare seems to have borrowed from Windsor folklore and exploited in *The Merry Wives*.

A considerable stir was caused by a pamphlet entitled *Newes from Scotland*. After first being published in Edinburgh it was republished in London in 1592. It describes the examination of 'a notable Sorcerer' and a number of women who were accused of practising witchcraft against King James VI, 'discouering', as the title page has it, 'how they pretended to bewitch and drowne his Maiestie in the Sea comming from Denmarke, with such other wonderfull matter as the like hath not been heard of at any time'. The witches were examined in the presence of King James, 'who in respect of the strangenes of these matters, tooke great delight to be present at their examinations'. When he called one of them a liar, she offered to convince him by indisputable evidence:

And thereupon taking his Maiestie a little aside, she declared vnto him the verye woordes which passed between the Kings Maiestie and his Queene at Vpslo in Norway the first night of their marriage, with their answeere each to other: whereat the Kings Maiestie wondered greatlye, and swore by the liuing God, that he beleueed that all the Diuels in hell could not haue discouered the same.

Another member of the coven confessed that 'at the time when his Maiestie was in Denmarke', she and some other witches

tooke a Cat and christened it, and afterward bound to each parte of that Cat, the cheefest partes of a dead man, and seuerall ioynts of his bodie, and that in the night following the saide Cat was conueied into the midst of the sea by all these witches sayling in their riddles or Ciues.

She also confessed

that the said christened Cat was the cause that the Kinges Maiesties Ship at his comming foorth of Denmarke, had a contrary winde to the rest of the Ships ...

I have dwelt a little on these confessions because they were the kind of stuff that King James gave credence to. And that most of his subjects believed. It was also the kind of material that went into *Macbeth* and that Shakespeare expected his auditors to believe, at least for the duration of the play. At the beginning of *Macbeth* we witness the witches raising a storm at sea, and in the fourth act we see them dropping grotesquely horrible ingredients into their cauldron to produce a magic brew.

In the earliest phase of his career as a playwright Shakespeare seems to have found it tempting on occasion to draw on his audience's obsession with witchcraft. Thus in *The Comedy of Errors* belief in witchcraft is an underlying assumption. The setting is Ephesus, a city associated by Saint Paul with all sorts of devilry, and Shakespeare's two pairs of identical twins are constantly the victims of confusions which make the master and servant from Syracuse imagine the city is bewitched by 'Lapland sorcerers', as Antipholus of Syracuse calls them in one place. All this, of course, may be thought pure comedy, but it gets its punch from unquestioned beliefs concerning the spirit world.

In two early plays, the first two parts of *Henry VI*, Shakespeare has scenes

of spirit raising. The first part is composed of scenes in England where the nobles begin the Wars of the Roses, and scenes in France where Talbot and Joan of Arc seesaw between victory and defeat. In the French plot Joan is regarded all along as a witch by the English and as a saint by the French, and there is nothing in her behaviour until the last act to contradict or verify either claim. After her capture by Warwick, however, she calls upon her spirits to help her, and they obediently appear. These are unnamed spirits or fiends of a common variety, but we learn from Joan's words that they are 'substitutes under the lordly Monarch of the North', i.e. servants of the Devil, and that they are 'cull'd out of the powerful regions under earth'. She has fed them with her blood and in return they have enabled her to look into the future. They have also provided 'furtherance' of a more tangible kind. All this agrees perfectly with the descriptions of familiar, or attendant, spirits to be found in reports of witch trials. The faithless spirits, however, now refuse to assist Joan or even to accept her desperate offer of 'body, soul, and all' as payment for their help. 'They walk, and speak not', 'They hang their heads' and 'They shake their heads', say the stage directions. Evidently they must be visible to the audience and were probably made to look quite abhorrent, but one cannot help thinking they are rather feeble devils.

The dramatic impact of Joan's evil spirits is nevertheless significant. The English view of Joan is vindicated when she is indisputably revealed to the audience as a witch in a climactic scene and the ambiguity surrounding her is resolved. The conviction and death of Joan make a parallel and contrast to the heroic death of Talbot.

There is a fully fledged invocation scene in *2 Henry VI*, a little like that in *Doctor Faustus*. Eleanor of Gloucester, unbeknown to her husband, engages a witch and two conjurers to foretell the fates of the King and of Gloucester's enemies. The witch, Mother Jordan, prostrates herself on the ground, the conjurers draw a circle round her and read an invocation, which begins 'Conjuro te...' The stage direction specifies that 'It thunders and lightens terribly; then the spirit riseth'. Having emerged in ghostly fashion through a trapdoor, the apparition announces its presence in Latin: 'Adsum', and Mother Jordan hails it by the name of Asmath (conjectured by editors to be a misprint for Asnath, an anagram of Sathan). She enjoins it 'By the eternal God, whose name and power thou tremblest at', to answer her questions. Prophecies of violent death for the persons alluded to follow, and the conjurer Bolingbroke orders the Spirit: 'Descend to darkness and the burning lake! False fiend, avoid!'

Asnath is evidently a highranking fiend, if not Satan himself, and there may have been a certain magnificence in his appearance, unlike Joan's ugly spirits. The scene would probably have been staged with terrifying effect, using fireworks, smoke and deafening noises. But despite such theatrical sensationalism it is entirely serious in terms of the action, and since it leads to the arrest and disgrace of Eleanor of Gloucester and the humiliation of the Duke it is of genuine importance. The prophecies of the Spirit, too, come true, though we have to wait for two later plays to see their complete fulfilment.

In one play of Shakespeare's middle period there are invocations of spirits.

*Macbeth* is an exceptional play in that it purports to deal with Scottish rather than with English history and in that it functions as a tribute to King James I. While still King of Scotland only, James had published his *Damonologie*, a pedantically detailed survey of witchcraft, exorcism, sorcery, conjuring, magic, devils, demons and evil spirits of all kinds, describing the practices by which spirits were raised and the ways in which witches were initiated. He strongly condemned the scepticism of Reginald Scott, who in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) had attempted to disabuse people of their superstitions. So when *Macbeth* is tempted by wicked prophecies, and Lady *Macbeth* invokes the powers of evil, and witches are shown at their filthy rites, this is matter in keeping with King James's intellectual preoccupations.

Lady *Macbeth*'s invocation of the 'spirits that tend on mortal thoughts', though it leads to no visible manifestation of demons, is both serious and horrific. In fact the demons here must be thought to appear invisibly and to be nourished as familiars were usually supposed to be fed by witches:

Come to my woman's breasts,  
and take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,  
wherever in your sightless substances  
you wait on nature's mischief!

There can be little doubt that Lady *Macbeth* between this moment and the murder of Duncan is a woman possessed.

The three 'weird sisters', as the three bearded hags call themselves, may be considered, if one wishes, as agents of Fate or Destiny, which is one of the interpretations to be found in Shakespeare's source, Holinshed. They vanish mysteriously into thin air after speaking their prophecies, and repeat their astonishing performance at the end of the witch scene in Act IV. This ability to appear and disappear mysteriously may prove them spirits or goddesses rather than crazy old women. The word 'witch' is not used at all in the dialogue. But in the very first scene as well as in the cauldron scene they behave like witches of the usual kind, and there is no reason to consider them otherwise. These witches, then, use their magic powers to raise spirits, whom they call their masters, and who in this case assume shapes to accord emblematically with their prophecies: an armed head, a bloody child and a crowned child with a tree in his hand, all followed by a show of eight kings. Undoubtedly these spirits would look striking on the stage, but as in the case of Asnath in *Henry VI* it is the prophetic and ominous rather than the actively evil power of the spirits which concerns the drama.

It must not be forgotten that Shakespeare's contemporaries for the most part believed more unquestioningly than most of us do today in the reality of angels as well as demons, in good as well as evil spirits. There was a strong morality-play tradition touching spirits of both kinds, often represented as competing for the soul of Everyman. Marlowe's *Faustus* is placed in a number of scenes between two such figures. Shakespeare, however, paid scant attention to benevolent spirits. Horatio prays for flights of angels to sing Hamlet to his rest, but the only time we actually see angels in Shakespeare is near the end of the last of the

canonical plays, *Henry VIII*. Queen Katharine, approaching death, has a vision in her sleep of 'six personages, clad in white robes'. They perform a dance and hold a garland over her head, and she describes them on awaking as 'a blessed troop' who invited her to a banquet and promised her eternal happiness. It may be interesting to contrast this happy vision at the end of Shakespeare's career with Joan of Arc's dealings with devils at the beginning, but we should probably not infer any conscious antithesis.

Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are spirits of an indeterminate kind and not essentially either good or bad. Referring to ghosts, who have to avoid the light of day, Oberon declares:

But we are spirits of another sort.  
I with the Morning's love have oft made sport

On the one hand, Oberon and Titania are embodiments of the energies of nature, whose jangling causes disturbances of the weather and the seasons, on the other hand they are King and Queen of the fairies and share their life in the woods. Possibly they have their origin in mythological deities, and both are mysteriously associated with India. As for the fairies, Shakespeare seems to have transformed the often malevolent gnomes and pixies of folklore into the gossamer creatures of modern nursery books, retaining only Puck as the mischievous goblin of tradition; he is related to Queen Mab of Mercutio's description in *Romeo and Juliet* and more generally to such fairies as the Windsor wives and children impersonate in *The Merry Wives*. The fairy world, however, is of a special nature which sets it apart from the supernatural beings I am chiefly concerned with in this essay, and need not detain us further.

There is one more play in which we move for most of the time among supernatural creatures, and in which the spirit world and the human are closely intertwined: *The Tempest*. I shall reserve this for later comment. But before passing on to the ghosts of humans, mention must be made of a particular spirit which seems to be an emanation of the person it inhabits. Shakespeare read in North's Plutarch that the demon of Mark Antony was daunted by the demon of Octavius, and he has the Egyptian soothsayer in *Antony and Cleopatra* warn Antony to avoid Cæsar:

Therefore, O Antony, stay not by his side.  
Thy demon, that thy spirit which keeps thee, is  
noble, courageous, high unmatched,  
where Cæsar's is not; but near him, thy angel  
becomes a fear, as being o'erpowered: therefore  
make space enough between you.

This demon is obviously related to the 'familiar' which was thought to attend on witches, but without its wicked intentions. There is one more reference to it in the plays. Macbeth fears Banquo because, as he says, 'under him my Genius is rebuked, as it is said Mark Antony's was by Cæsar'. But even in *Antony and Cleopatra* this private spirit is hardly more than hinted at and, though psycho-

logically interesting, it is of little concern to the drama.

To turn to our next category of supernatural creatures, ghosts are the apparitions of dead people, usually people who have been murdered and who might be expected to clamour for revenge.<sup>2</sup> The prototype is in several of Seneca's plays, where the ghosts of Achilles, Thyestes, Tantalus and Agrippina call for revenge against their living enemies. Typically in Elizabethan plays the ghosts would shriek in a blood-curdling way as they made their appearance. One is reminded of Edvard Munch's painting which in Norwegian is called 'Skrik' and which might almost be a picture of an Elizabethan ghost. In *Julius Caesar* we hear that on the night of the prodigies 'ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets'. Even the beautiful ghost of Hermione, which Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* tells us he saw in his sleep, disappeared, he says, 'with a shriek'. In a satirical comedy dating from about 1599, *A Warning for Fair Women*, the personified figure of Comedy ridicules the practice of tragic dramatists:

a filthy whining ghost,  
lapt in some foul sheet, or a leather pilch,  
comes screaming like a pig half sticked,  
and cries, *Vindicta!* — Revenge, Revenge!  
With that a little rosin flashes forth,  
like smoke out of a tobacco pipe, or a boy's squib.

It is noteworthy that Shakespeare's ghosts are not usually of this vulgar, screeching kind. With a few exceptions they are dignified, stately presences. Also, as John Jump pointed out in an interesting essay on 'Shakespeare's Ghosts', they are generally 'less busy than those staged by his English contemporaries'.<sup>3</sup>

Ghosts in Shakespeare first occur in the fourth of his English history plays, *Richard III*. These are ghosts that appear in dreams, initially to the Duke of Clarence and then, a whole procession of them, to Richard. They are ghosts of people who have been betrayed and murdered by the two brothers, in Clarence's case the Earl of Warwick, his father-in-law, and the young Prince Edward, son of Henry VI. The shades that disturb Clarence's sleep conform to the common Elizabethan pattern of the shrieking ghost, and this is how he describes the latter part of his dream to his keeper in the Tower:

Then came wandering by  
a shadow like an angel, with bright hair  
dabbled in blood, and he shrieked out aloud,  
'Clarence is come — false, fleeting, perjured Clarence,  
that stabbed me in the field by Tewkesbury:

<sup>2</sup> See Stanley Wells, 'Staging Shakespeare's Ghosts', in Biggs et al., eds, *The Arts of Performance in Elizabethan and Early Stuart Drama*, 1991, pp. 50-1. Wells disqualifies dream visions from his definition of ghosts, but makes an exception for the dreams of Richard and Richmond before the battle of Bosworth. For my present purpose I see no reason to exclude the dream visitations.

<sup>3</sup> John Jump, 'Shakespeare's Ghosts'. *Critical Quarterly*, 12.4 (1970), 339-51.

KRISTIAN SMIDT

Seize on him, Furies, take him unto torment!  
With that, methoughts, a legion of foul fiends  
environed me and howled in mine ears  
such hideous cries that with the very noise  
I, trembling, waked, and for a season after  
could not believe but that I was in hell.

While Clarence recounts his dream so vividly that we almost see and hear the ghosts, in Richard's case we directly experience the ghosts who visit him as he lies asleep in his tent on the night before the fatal battle of Bosworth. There are no fewer than eleven phantoms, who one by one or in twos and threes remind Richard of his atrocities and leave him with a curse for the battlefield, reiterating with cumulative effect the words 'Despair and die!' Each in turn also moves into the other tent on the stage, in which Richard's challenger Richmond is asleep, and leaves him with blessings and promises of victory. Nothing is said in stage directions or otherwise about the appearance of these beings. It is obvious, however, that they must be recognisable to the audience, so we may suppose they are dressed as they were when alive, not 'lapt in some foul sheet', although probably some indication of the violent ends that they met ought to be evident in their clothes and features. But what is important in their presentation is that they cross the stage in a formal procession, rather like a pageant, and since they represent only the dream visions of the two sleepers, the impression of their objective reality should be suitably attenuated.

The next ghost we meet in Shakespeare, and possibly the first ghost that walked the boards of the new Globe theatre at Southwark, is in *Julius Caesar*. Cæsar's ghost appears to Brutus before the battle of Philippi and announces himself as Brutus's 'evil spirit'. It is late at night, and Brutus is in his tent, reading a book by taper-light. The episode is short enough to be quoted in full:

*Brutus:* How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?  
I think it is the weakness of mine eyes  
that shapes this monstrous apparition.  
It comes upon me. Art thou any thing?  
Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,  
that mak'st my blood cold, and my hair to stare?  
Speak to me what thou art.

*Ghost:* Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

*Brutus:* Why com'st thou?

*Ghost:* To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

*Brutus:* Well, then I shall see thee again?

*Ghost:* Ay, at Philippi.

*Brutus:* Why, I will see thee at Philippi then.

[Exit Ghost]

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.  
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

He calls his boy Lucius and his guards Varrus and Claudio, and questions them whether they have seen or heard anything, which they deny, although Brutus insists that they cried out in their sleep. Brutus's reactions make it clear that although he is drowsy he is awake. At first he is frightened, but very quickly he

regains his characteristic calm. And he finally realises the identity of the visitor and the meaning of the visitation. Shakespeare does not allow the ghost another appearance on the stage, but it does keep its promise to be present at Philippi, for Brutus tells Volumnius when the battle is lost:

The ghost of Cæsar hath appeared to me  
two several times by night; at Sardis once,  
and this last night, here in Philippi fields.  
I know my hour is come.

Why did Shakespeare introduce this taciturn ghost, and so briefly? It does not seem to influence Brutus's actions until the moment of suicide, when all is lost anyway. But it does give a sense of the conspirators against Cæsar being up against an enemy more indestructible than one human life. As Brutus says when he finds Cassius dead:

O, Julius Cæsar, thou art mighty yet!  
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords  
in our own proper entrails.

The ghost of Cæsar symbolises the prevailing spirit of Cæsarean Rome. It appears mysteriously and momentarily to the sceptical and stoical Brutus and convinces him as I think it convinces us. It is Shakespeare's finest ghost. And the sort of ghost that a sane man like Brutus might see. This is great art, perfectly controlled, right down to the restraint of not allowing the visitation of the ghost to be repeated on stage.

It is far otherwise with the ghost in *Hamlet*. I have come to realise that I never much liked old King Hamlet, but I may be prejudiced. He killed the King of Norway for a wager and went about smiting Polacks and such folk. A quarrelsome individual, it seems, who likes to prowl around in armour — clank, clank — except at bedtime with Gertrude. And that's about all we get to know of him. I quite sympathise with Fortinbras. Even Claudius has arguably more attractive features.

But seriously, there is all this gothic business, the deliberate eeriness in the ghost scenes: dark night, cold, the battlements of an old castle overlooking the sea, rumours of war. And the place being haunted by a mysterious phantom who returns every night. It is all according to what we now think of as a formula, even though Shakespeare probably helped to establish the formula that provided the gothicism of the romantic age. On the other hand this is no shrieking spectre of the popularly romantic kind. When the ghost finally speaks he pedantically (one might well be reminded of King James) tells the Prince to listen and then launches into a long explanatory speech which serves the dramatic purpose of narrative exposition but is otherwise non-dramatic: 'I am thy father's spirit' etc. Staying so long and saying so much the ghost loses some of his insubstantiality. He becomes too solid flesh.

But, poor ghost, his last appearance is midway through the play, in the closet scene. He is not allowed, like Kyd's Don Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy*, to witness the destruction of his enemies. In fact old King Hamlet seems to be for-



gotten in the eventual execution of the Prince's revenge, where the dialogue indicates that young Hamlet has revenge for his mother in mind but hardly for his father.

Shakespeare used the ghost to provide an explanation for Hamlet's indecision. The Prince had his suspicions about Claudius's villainy, and the suspicion of murder might have arisen in his mind without the interference of a phantom; which is what makes the supernatural business psychologically plausible. In the original source of the Hamlet story, Claudius's guilt is a matter of general knowledge. But to attribute the information to a ghost, whose status and intentions are debatable and whose very existence is questionable, makes for an interesting dramatic as well as psychological development. That the apparition is seen by others than Hamlet, even by the sceptical Horatio, naturally persuades us of its objective reality. On the other hand the fact that it is not seen or heard by Gertrude may seem to undermine that reality. Says Gertrude:

This is the very coinage of your brain.  
This bodiless creation ecstasy  
is very cunning in.

We cannot be certain she is wrong. But Shakespeare is an opportunist, and in this as in so many other matters he has it both ways. It is no good speculating as some critics have that Gertrude is unable to see the ghost, while Horatio and Marcellus can, because she is guilty and they are innocent. We should rather be willing to see that if inconsistency served Shakespeare's purpose he accepted inconsistency.

Something similar to the eclipse of the ghost in *Hamlet* oddly enough happens in *Macbeth*. Banquo's ghost has no existence until the middle of the play and does not speak at all, but it jolts the action forward and then ceases to affect it. One might have thought that since the initial prophecies of the witches concern Banquo as well as Macbeth and promise Banquo's heirs the succession of the kingdom he should be involved in the denouement, at least as represented by his son Fleance. But Fleance is not among the revengers at the end. The dead Banquo as a potential enemy of Macbeth gives place in the second half of the play to the living Macduff. But his spectral appearance at the coronation banquet marks the turning point of the play and is tremendously effective, all the more if we believe that the ghost in this case represents an hallucination which is revealed to us but not to the bewildered banqueters gathered for a great celebration. Macbeth's mental disturbance is made frighteningly clear. The Folio stage direction says 'Enter the ghost of Banquo and sits in Macbeth's place'. So we see it. There is no shrieking, but at the Globe they must have had a ferociously blood-spattered figure to thrill the audience and to shake his gory locks at the man who had ordered his murder. This silent but gruesome apparition will send shivers down modern spines as well, and I do not hold with directors who choose to make the ghost invisible.

The strangest of all the ghostly visitations in Shakespeare's plays is that of Hermione, who appears to Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale*. Strangest because, as it turns out, Hermione is not really dead, and by all the rules of the game she

ought to be when she can both haunt and prophesy. Antigonus is by nature a sceptic. He has heard, he says, addressing the bundle in his arms,

I have heard, but not believed, the spirits o' th' dead  
may walk again: if such thing be, thy mother  
appeared to me last night; for ne'er was dream  
so like a waking.

Hermione wanted Antigonus to leave her baby in Bohemia. And this time Antigonus believes against his better judgment:

Dreams are toys:  
yet for this once, yea, superstitiously,  
I will be squared by this. I do believe  
Hermione hath suffered death; and that  
Apollo would, this being indeed the issue  
of King Polixenes, it should here be laid

Hermione's ghost, then, may be seen as the messenger of Apollo, and I shall return to this point when I come to discuss the gods in the plays. But in the present connection it needs to be added in explanation of the inconsistency concerning Hermione's death that her resuscitation in the last act was probably an afterthought on Shakespeare's part and that his original plot contained no such seeming miracle.<sup>4</sup> In fact her appearance to Antigonus was probably meant to convince us as well as him that the Queen, as in Greene's story which was Shakespeare's main source, was truly dead.

The incomparably silliest of Shakespeare's ghosts appear in *Cymbeline*, but the ghosts in this case are involved with the god Jupiter, and again I shall return to them in discussing the gods. But before I leave ghosts perhaps I should say that the apparitions in *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* seem to me to be particularly well justified in psychological terms because they appear to the guilty persons whose consciences they haunt. Old Hamlet's ghost, on the other hand, should by the same token have appeared to Claudius, not to the Prince. As it is, he is more in the tradition of the Senecan revenge spirit than the Freudian id spirit. He is an intruder. But of course he starts a psychological process which, it may well be maintained, is more fascinating than anything else in Shakespeare.

There is always a heaven presiding over the fates of men in Shakespeare's plays, whether it be the Christian heaven in such plays as are set in Christian times and places, or a Greek or Roman Olympus in those which take place or are presumed to take place in pre-Christian times. There is sometimes a sense of a divine providence guiding events. Sometimes God or the gods are denounced and renounced as in *Lear*, where the whole metaphysical order is a theme of contention. But typically the human characters act as if they are dependent on their own decisions alone. God, or heaven, or the gods are often vaguely subsumed under the idea of fortune or fate, and although this is often

<sup>4</sup> See my *Unconformities in Shakespeare's Later Comedies*. London, 1993, pp. 135-8.

spoken of as an outside force for good or ill, it is personal responsibility for one's actions which determines the ethics of the plays. And so it must be if drama is to engage our human sympathies.

What is undeniable is that a metaphysical dimension, Christian or pagan or a mixture of both, is there as a kind of reference potential for the characters, who sometimes utter religious sentiments, pious or impious, or, much more frequently, colour their asseverations or emphasise their feelings by calling on God, or heaven, or Jove or any other divine authority as is considered opportune.<sup>5</sup> A great number of oaths, of course, bear the stamp of censorship, having had the innocuous 'heaven' or the pedantic 'Jove' substituted for the intended reference to 'God'. But censorship was not always equally severe or equally consistent, at least the texts which have survived in print are not very consistent in this matter. And there are some curious examples. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind and Celia exclaim and swear by the ancient gods in the early part of the play: 'Cupid have mercy', 'O Jupiter', 'Jove, Jovel', 'O most gentle Jupiter'. But from the middle of III.ii their expletives are Christian: 'I thank God', 'God mend me', 'God save you', and similar sentiments. In *Twelfth Night* there are frequent appeals to the Christian deity or to Heaven, but out of the eight Joves in the text, six are incongruously spoken by Malvolio: 'Jove and my stars be praised!', 'Jove, I thank thee, I will smile', 'Well, Jove, not I, is the doer of this, and he is to be thanked', etc. Shakespeare may be deliberately sending up this Puritan bigot. But the evidence more simply suggests that Malvolio's part was the only one to be purged of profanity.

The gods of the classical pantheon are often invoked both in the Christian plays and those set in ancient times. But they can hardly be credited with active participation in the events of Shakespeare's plays before *Pericles*,<sup>6</sup> however much Lear and Gloucester blame the gods for their miseries. Then in the late romances they assume slightly more dramatic importance and even manifest themselves visibly in two of them. The events of *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* may be said to be presided over and to some extent directed in each case by a particular deity, Diana, Jupiter and Apollo respectively.

In *Pericles* Shakespeare abandons all the Christian piety of his sources and resolutely turns to classical deities.<sup>7</sup> Fortune is virtually seen as a powerful god, and Neptune represents much of the hostility of circumstances to Pericles's adventures. Diana is throughout a benevolent goddess, as opposed to Neptune, and the protector first of Pericles's wife Thaisa, who becomes her votaress, and then of their daughter Marina, who cherishes her and calls upon her for help. Most spectacularly she intervenes in the final crisis as a *deus ex machina* to di-

<sup>5</sup> In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Charmian and Iras appropriately invoke Isis in mock prayers and oaths, and Cleopatra once swears by Isis.

<sup>6</sup> In *Antony and Cleopatra* there is a short scene (IV.iii) in which Antony's soldiers hear strange music in the air and under the earth and think 'the god Hercules, whom Antony loved, now leaves him'. We cannot tell whether this is to be interpreted as an active interference on the part of the god or merely as a premonition of defeat — perhaps we should understand it both ways.

<sup>7</sup> See my *Unconformities in Shakespeare's Later Comedies*, pp. 110-11.

rect Pericles to her temple at Ephesus, where he is reunited with Thaisa. Having found his daughter and believing that he hears the music of the spheres, Pericles falls asleep and Diana appears to him in a vision and tells him what to do, ending with the injunction:

Or perform my bidding, or thou livest in woe;  
Do't and be happy, by my silver bow!

Her speech is short and her appearance in a dream, like some of the ghosts we have considered, is a way of attenuating her reality, however real she may look on the stage. Strangely enough, Marina, who would seem to be her special care, never sees or hears her. In fact, until the moment of her manifestation she is not actually seen to be doing much, and her intervention effects nothing that could not have happened by further chance in a plot which is so dependent on the whims of fortune. Diana, then, is of more symbolic than dramatic importance in *Pericles*. The presence of the gods, whether seen or unseen, adds a metaphysical dimension to the play which enhances our sense of cosmic significance but which does not alter the fact that the characters, especially Marina, survive and triumph by their own human fortitude and endurance.

In *Cymbeline* there is another dream vision, this time of Jupiter. He is not much in evidence until the last act, but he then makes a very spectacular appearance.

The unrecognised Posthumus has been taken prisoner by Cymbeline's soldiers and while he is asleep his deceased family appear in a dream — his parents and his two brothers who had died in battle. The apparitions circle round Posthumus as he lies sleeping, but they do not address him. Instead they rudely reproach Jupiter for the ill fortune which Posthumus has so long suffered, and appeal to him for redress. The stage direction then has this instruction:

Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle: he throws a thunderbolt. The ghosts fall on their knees.

Jupiter angrily scolds the 'petty spirits of region low', as he calls them, for meddling in his affairs, and informs them that he has planned a happy outcome for Posthumus. He then drops a tablet which he instructs them to lay on the breast of the sleeping Posthumus, tells them to be off where they came from and ascends again into the heavens. When Posthumus awakes he remembers seeing his family. He makes no mention of Jupiter, but finds the tablet and reads it without understanding its message. It contains a cryptic prophecy of the discoveries and revelations which follow, of an end to his miseries and of the future prosperity of Britain. The message is decoded a little later by Cymbeline's soothsayer, but by that time all misunderstandings have been cleared up, and Jupiter's prophecy has no importance for the action. The soothsayer has already had a vision of his own. Before the battle, he says,

I saw Jove's bird, the Roman eagle, winged  
from the spungy south to this part of the west,  
there vanished in the sunbeams.

He now interprets this as a sign of the conciliation of Britain with Rome. The vision makes a fitting confirmation and embellishment of a happy ending, and makes Posthumus's spectral visitation all the more superfluous.

*The Winter's Tale* has no visible god or goddess, but the power of Apollo, especially as regards divination, is recognised by the characters and at a crucial point is central to the action. Leontes sends two officers to Apollo's shrine at Delphos to question the oracle about Hermione's supposed adultery, and the officers return with the answer that she is chaste and he, Leontes, 'a jealous tyrant'. Leontes refuses to believe the oracle, but when he learns the next moment that his son has suddenly died, he realises his error and exclaims: 'Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves do strike at my injustice'. And when Hermione falls in a death-like faint he orders her to be attended to and begs: 'Apollo, pardon my great profaneness 'gainst thine oracle'. Here, then, divine intervention, though there is no actual theophany, causes a turn in the action. There is an indication, too, as I have briefly hinted above, that it is by the will of Apollo that the baby Perdita is abandoned on the Bohemian shore, at least this is how Antigonus interprets Hermione's message. In this play, then, we may see, if we wish, a decisive interference by a deity in the fates of men.

*The Tempest* is a case apart. It resembles the forest scenes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that the whole action is in a world of spirits and witches and one hesitates to bring considerations too inquisitive to bear on it. Prospero has found on his island not only the lubberly offspring of a witch and the devil, but a whole population of spirits which he has learnt to command, chief among them Ariel. They are neither good nor bad, it seems. Prospero impatiently on one occasion calls Ariel a 'malignant thing', and Caliban, whether truthfully or not, asserts that the spirits all hate their magician master. But they obey his instructions. Their main task in the play, apparently, is to perform graceful or uncouth dances. At one moment they appear as nymphs of the sea and dance and sing to Ferdinand, invisible to him but certainly visible to us:

Come unto these yellow sands,  
and then take hands:  
etc.

At another moment they are 'strange shapes' who bring in a seeming banquet to the shipwrecked King of Naples and his companions and then cheat them of it. Then they are goddesses, Iris, Ceres and Juno in the pageant which Prospero puts on for the newly-engaged Miranda and Ferdinand, followed in the same show by a troop of nymphs and reapers, who perform another dance. Finally they are dogs who chase Caliban and his new-found masters from their pillaging and leave them to the mercies of Prospero's goblins.

The goddesses who appear in the pageant, then, — Iris, Ceres and Juno — are the spirits of the island impersonating deities and have no other function than that of celebrating and adding festivity to the betrothal of the romantic

lovers. This is a function very much like that of Hymen at the end of *As You Like It*, who we must assume to be one of the Duke's attendants dressed up as the god of nuptials.

I have been speaking all along as if Shakespeare alone was responsible for everything included in his plays, but he was not responsible, of course, for **inventing** all the supernatural apparitions. Some of them came with the chronicles and stories he quarried for his plots, or from earlier plays. Thus in the anonymous play *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, which underlies Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the King is tormented in his mind before the battle of Bosworth. His many troubles, he cries,

And horror of my bloodie practise past  
strikes such a terror to my wounded conscience,  
that sleepe I, wake I, or whatsoever I do,  
meethinkes their ghoasts comes gaping for revenge,  
whom I have slaine in reaching for a Crowne.  
Clarence complaines, and crieth for revenge.  
My Nephues bloods, Revenge, revenge, doth crie.  
The headlesse Peeres comes preasing for revenge.  
And every one cries, let the tyrant die.

In *Julius Cæsar* Shakespeare simply took the episode of Cæsar's ghost out of Plutarch, including the brief exchange of words between the ghost and Brutus. As for *Hamlet*, it may be Shakespeare's excuse that he inherited the ghost, though with how much speech and circumstance we cannot now tell. It was probably in a play which must have been in existence by 1589 when Thomas Nashe wrote satirically of 'whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches'. And in 1596 Thomas Lodge described a devil looking as pale as 'the Vizard of ye ghost which cried so miserably at ye Theatre, like an oister wife, Hamlet, revenge', a cry Shakespeare's play did not retain. In *Pericles* Shakespeare's sources told him that Pericles was directed by God in his sleep, or that he saw an angel in his sleep directing him, to go to the temple of Diana at Ephesus; and Shakespeare not unnaturally changed the angel to the goddess Diana and put the necessary words in her mouth.

In some cases he elaborated on hints contained in his sources. In Hall and Holinshed Joan of Arc is repeatedly represented as a sorceress who has intercourse with evil spirits, though there is no description of an actual conjuration. In the same sources Eleanor of Gloucester is reputed to have dealings with conjurers and witches, who make a wax image of the King to take his life, though again there is no mention of an actual conjuration of a spirit as in Shakespeare's play. In *Cymbeline* the appearance of Jupiter may be based on a hint in the anonymous play *The Rare Triumphes of Love and Fortune*, where the fates of the two lovers are at the mercy of a struggle between Venus and Fortune which is finally concluded when Mercury tells them that Jupiter has decided to end the conflict. Jupiter himself puts in an appearance at the beginning of this old play. And in *The Winter's Tale* the embassy to Apollo's shrine at Delphos and Apollo's oracular message are indebted to Greene's prose romance *Pandosto*, where they are described at some length.

I also think there is reason to be particularly wary of supposing that everything we now have in the plays was there from the start or was always intended to be there. In a number of significant cases it looks as if supernatural episodes and phenomena may have been added to plays already completed without them or with much less supernatural business than is found in our received texts. In general what seems to have happened is that the popular demand for thrills and spectacular entertainment was such that either Shakespeare was persuaded to add new or supplementary supernatural business to his plays at some stage of composition or revision, or that someone else added such business. And particularly as the fashion for masques and allegorical entertainments involving gods and fairies and the like flourished in courtly circles the temptation must have been great to embellish the plays with masque-like episodes, all the more so after the indoor Blackfriars theatre was taken into use in 1608 and offered protection from the weather for the lavish costumes which the gods demanded, as well as more advanced machinery for lowering them from the heavens and hoisting them back.

The ghosts in *Richard III* are strictly unnecessary.<sup>8</sup> Like Clarence, Richard and Richmond might have recounted their dreams after awaking and in fact they do briefly tell them to themselves and to their attendants and officers. But even if we accept the majority of the Bosworth ghosts as authentic in the sense that they are Shakespeare's and integral to the play we must make an exception of at least two out of the eleven, the two last to appear, namely the ghosts of Anne and Buckingham. These two incongruously tell Richard and Richmond to sleep and dream on *after* the sleepers have been adjured by several of the ghosts to awake to despair or victory. In addition, the ghost of Queen Anne merely repeats the words of one of the other ghosts. I suggest with some confidence that the ghosts of Anne and Buckingham were late additions to extend an array of spectres which may have proved to have strong audience appeal. A concession on Shakespeare's part, perhaps, and not necessarily a very willing one.

In *Macbeth* Hecate and the show of kings in the witch scene of Act IV definitely come under suspicion. Hecate was in ancient times a goddess associated both with the moon and with the underworld. In *Macbeth* she is represented as the mistress of witches. But her appearance with her attendant witches and the no doubt grotesque dances she performed are an affront to the seriousness of the play and can have had no other purpose than spectacular diversion. Her speeches, too, in rhyming tetrameters, are so primitive as to be universally judged to be by a poorer hand than Shakespeare's. As for the show of kings, its only dramatic justification is the confirmation it provides of the initial prophecy of the weird sisters that Banquo's issue shall be kings. Extradra-

<sup>8</sup> It is only fair to point out that according to Stanley Wells the appearance of the Bosworth ghosts 'is an important factor in making the closing scenes of *Richard III* the climax not only of the play but of the whole sequence of plays concerned with the Plantagenets'. *Op cit.*, p. 53. He argues that in a sense they summarise the events of the first historical tetralogy (in order of composition). I appreciate the argument but would not give such climactic importance to the ghost scene.

matically, of course, it serves as a sop for James I, who traced his descent from Banquo, and this may be the chief reason why it was included. And again, of course, there is the spectacular appeal of this kind of scenic extravaganza, however much or little Shakespeare himself may have valued it. But Banquo becomes, as I have said, strangely irrelevant in the second half of *Macbeth*. There is no further reference in the play to the show of kings or the genealogy which it portrays. It has little justification in the drama as it unfolds. Macbeth's terrified exclamations as he sees the show seem genuinely Shakespearean, but I am inclined to think the show of kings was inserted in the finished play along with the completely un-Shakespearean Hecate scenes and the songs from Middleton's *The Witch*.

Another obvious interpolation of supernatural material is that of the Jupiter scene in *Cymbeline*. The ghosts in this scene are shades of people who have been barely mentioned in the exposition of the play, have had no part in it before and have no further business in it. Jupiter's intervention resolves no problems that have not already been resolved or will not be resolved without his cryptic message, and Posthumus when he awakes has no memory of what the ghosts of his relatives have told him or even of seeing Jupiter in his dream. There is also clear textual evidence of interpolation. Posthumus is captured by British soldiers as a presumed Roman. One of them says, 'Bring him to th' King'. Posthumus is then in dumbshow brought before Cymbeline, who sends him to jail. There he has his dream. Shortly afterwards a messenger from Cymbeline orders the jailer, 'Bring your prisoner to the King', and the action continues as if there has been no interruption between the first and the second time Posthumus appears in the royal presence. To all this may be added the fact that the verses of the ghosts and of Jupiter are miserably bad poetry. Thomas Marc Parrott thinks 'it is incredible that Shakespeare at his weariest and weakest could have written such pitiful stuff'.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the vision of the soothsayer of seeing the Roman eagle flying westward is more effective, even if it is only reported, than the charade of ghosts and the Thunderer.

Shakespeare probably did not care too much for ghosts. He was an actor in his early days, but hardly a particularly talented one, we may suppose. Nicholas Rowe in 1709 reported a tradition that 'the top of his performance was the Ghost in his own *Hamlet*'. If it was a part he chose for himself he may have thought it an easy one. Or he may have thought it attractive, but I rather think he wanted to save it from being over-acted. We may relevantly remember what Hamlet impatiently tells the murderer in the *Gonzago* play: 'Begin, murderer, leave thy damnable faces and begin. Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge' — this last a satirical jibe at the bluster of the generality of revenge plays. Shakespeare may have remembered the salutary example of the ghost in the *Ur-Hamlet* 'which cried so miserably at ye Theatre, like an oyster wife, Hamlet, revenge'.

It is remarkable that supernatural apparitions never occur in Shakespeare's comedies before we get to the late romances. Until then they are exclusively lim-

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Marc Parrott, *Shakespearean Comedy*. New York (1949), 1962, p. 378.



ited to his history plays and tragedies. Ghosts are basically serious. But they easily become absurd, as Shakespeare well knew, and certainly he exploited the comic potential of the spirits which appear in his early plays. In *Hamlet* he was on his guard. Obviously Lodge found the ghost in the *Ur-Hamlet* laughable, and Shakespeare may have felt the same. He made his own ghost explanatory rather than exclamatory. But he did not quite avoid comicality and seems to have been aware of it, for in the so-called cellarage scene, where the voice of the ghost is heard under the floor enjoining Hamlet's friends to swear to silence, the comedy is explicit. 'Swear', cries the ghost under the stage. 'Ah ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?' says Hamlet. Shakespeare cleverly inoculates us against laughter by relieving the nervous tension in this way, but our respect for the ghost cannot help suffering. Nor is it safely restored when old Hamlet reappears in his nightgown in the Queen's closet in Act III.

Interestingly it looks as if the three main kinds of apparition I have considered dominated three phases of Shakespeare's authorship in turn, whether this indicates a growth in sophistication or not. The spirits mainly belong to the early years, and Shakespeare might have left them there if it had not been for King James. The conjuring scenes hardly agree with the fierce realism of *Macbeth*. But the ghost of Banquo enhances the tragedy. This and the other ghosts belong to a middle period. The gods belong to the third and last, when nobody would take them to be anything but fictions within the framing fiction.

Supernatural apparitions occur, visibly or by report, in twelve of Shakespeare's plays. That is not a great number, considering the prominence of the spirit world in the minds of Elizabethans and Jacobean. One has the impression altogether that Shakespeare was not too keen on introducing supernatural apparitions into his plays and preferred to rely on the ability of his characters to sort out their own problems. It looks, too, as if with the years he grew increasingly sceptical of metaphysical realities and agencies. Prospero speaks disillusioning words to Ferdinand: 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep'. He dismisses his spirits for good and all. Shakespeare was willing to amuse his audiences, especially if it paid to amuse, but it is only when dramatic necessity compelled the use of spirits and ghosts and gods that he put his art into them. We remember with particular admiration the apparitions of Cæsar's ghost and of Banquo's, the weird sisters at the beginning of *Macbeth* and of course in spite of its prolixity and in part because of its comicality, the ghost in *Hamlet*. But the gods had perhaps in Shakespeare's day the kind of appeal that motorbikes and stenguns have on the stage today. For some people.

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