

Hamlet - From the Ghost to the Übermensch

An approach to the famous quote: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy"

Quoted numerous times, within and outside its original context, Hamlet's famous lines "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (Hamlet, 1.5.168-169) never stop fascinating us. The function of this essay is to show how these lines work in their specific context and which tasks they fulfill in terms of larger issues within the play. The essay attempts to show and explain not only the contextual workings of Hamlet's lines, but also their larger philosophical, mythological, and religious allusions.

The appearance of the ghost close to the beginning of the play anticipates the clashes between reality and the area of the supernatural, between sanity and madness, and between fact and fiction. Both assuring (the best example is that Horatio obviously can see the ghost at 1.1.39 ff.) and dissolving this: Only Hamlet can talk to the ghost, leaving the question open about the degree of reality of the ghost.

Since antiquity ghosts have been part of the popular belief of humanity as they appear in all major cultures such as the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations in frequent tales. Mostly but not exclusively, they are seen as messengers of the dead, as their (restless) spirits whose appearances in the realm of the living are often seen as sign for some unsolved conflicts. The modern explanation of ghosts is – as it is quite often the fact with other so-called parapsychological phenomena, too – neurological: The sheer thought of the existence of ghosts is being seen as wrongly interpreted sensory stimuli or hallucinations. Aside from being very alive in the popular belief in Shakespeare's times, the question of an evaluation of the ghost-phenomenon in terms of religion is also inextricably intertwined with questions of life and death and the then "official", i.e. religiously approved life after death.

Do Horatio and Hamlet have the same delusions? Is Hamlet more vulnerable to these kind of otherworldly appearances? He eventually is the one to talk actually to and with the ghost of his father. However, I do not think that these questions are central in understanding the ghost's nature in *Hamlet*. More information can be derived from looking at the function of the ghost in the play. The ghost's entry is – at first – a very strong theatrical device for suspense, fright and therefore very useful in giving the play right from the beginning the air of tragedy, mystery and eeriness. Here, as well as in other parts of the play, the dissolution of the borders between audience and actors is made clear: Not only Hamlet and his companions are afraid, the audience is so, too: Hamlet becomes both audience and actor.

What is even more important about the ghost is that he reveals several crucial facts to Hamlet: He is his father's ghost (1.5.9), he has been murdered (1.5.25 ff.), and the murderer is Claudius, Hamlet's uncle (1.5.38-39). In this context it is interesting to note that Hamlet feels somehow "driven" to this ghost, although Horatio tries to hold him back (1.4.56 f.). He talks about following the ghost as a cry of his fate (1.4.66) and is unwilling or unable not to follow this phantom. Not only warns Horatio Hamlet not to go, but he physically tries to hinder him from going by holding him back. It appears that there is some driving force in Hamlet which makes him follow the ghost. One can assume that Hamlet senses some kind of importance or bond in connection with the ghost. At this point, he does not and cannot know that the ghost is his father, but he obviously has an apprehension of this being something vital for him. It can be speculated why this is the case: The most likely answer would be that Hamlet already is in a situation of uneasiness and unexplained feelings, especially towards Claudius. The ghost – however implausible its appearance might be – could supply some much-needed information for Hamlet.

Another aspect of the ghost's appearance is that Hamlet gets a chance to remember through this incident. It is obvious that he is not at all content with the current political situation. His father allows him to remember the state of the world before his assassination, a world which seems to be a better world.

During these moments of story-telling and remembrance, Hamlet is somewhat nostalgic as he idealizes this state of "before". It is interesting to notice that his father's ghost is part of this lost old world whereas in the "new" world of Claudius, Polonius etc. and their conflicts with Hamlet, ghosts do not have any place to be. The humans have become the players of this tragedy without the need of help through any kind of supernatural entities.

Hamlet, whose hesitation has become proverbial, is being shown a way to go, a course of actions to take. And although he does not solve all the problems immediately offensive, he is able to force the course of action forward. This creates new problems (e.g. for Ophelia), but finally solves the conflict, though in a tragic way. Seen this way, the ghost is the starter of the play.

Although the ghost of Hamlet's father assigns the task of revenge to Hamlet and although he swears revenge, the course of the play is not dominated by the obvious question how and against which odds Hamlet is able to fulfill this job, but rather by the question *if* he will revenge the murder of his father. The focus of the problem therefore shifts from a kind of criminalistic story to the inner conflict of the protagonist. In the same paragraph where we can find the quote of heaven and earth, Hamlet decides "[t]o put an antic disposition on" (1.5.179), meaning he decides to act in an unreasonable, wild, and unpredictable manner – in other words he decides to act mad. In the course of the play, madness and (mental) sanity will be central topics, affecting nearly all major characters in one way or another, e.g. Ophelia. Also, the much-discussed question of Hamlet being

really crazy or just pretending to do so for tactical reasons, starts at this point.

This, however, does not explain the fact that someone who is an obvious rationalist like Horatio (1.1.42) is able to see the ghost, as are Marcellus and Barnardo. One possible interpretation of the ghost is that it is a dramatic device to prepare both Hamlet and Horatio for the things to come. Both of them had never expected a ghost to be reality, both of them had never expected that King Hamlet had been dastardly killed.

Another explanation could be that this is the very moment of change from the medieval times to the early stages of modernity: Whereas in the Middle Ages ghosts and witches were very much alive in the daily culture and horizon of expectations, the modernity is secularized. The ghost, Hamlet's father, obviously belongs to the generation of ancestors, to a generation from a different era. It is now Hamlet's and Horatio's challenge to cope with the adversities to come.

It should be noted that Hamlet reminds Horatio of the borders of his "philosophy" (1.5.175). It is quite interesting to know that Shakespeare uses this term here. Certainly it is not meant in the way the modern word *philosophy* is used generally, as a science, an academic discipline, but rather as a world-view kind of theory for the explanation of different phenomena or thoughts. In this context, it is quite interesting to note that in the German *Hamlet*-translation the word "Schulweisheit" is used, which translates as erudition or book learning, and has a slightly derogatory overtone which is used to point out Horatio's lack of understanding. Furthermore, Hamlet and Horatio are both students (as are Laertes, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, too), thus making this line readable as a general criticism of what can be (and what obviously cannot be) learned through a school or university and what has to be learned by experience of life, trial, error, or even faith, although it can be doubted if this can still be called learning. But not only Horatio seems to be slow-witted in this context, it is also an allusion to the audience's expectations and horizons. It is self-explanatory that Shakespeare wrote his plays within the context of his time so that they could appeal to contemporary audiences who, on the step to modernity in Elizabethan times, probably shared Hamlet's anxieties about the times to come and his obvious hesitation to cope with the tasks that have been given to him.

In the same way that Shakespeare uses the figure of Hamlet as a mirror for the audience and the other characters of the play, he uses some keywords like 'globe' in an allegorical and commentary way, what can also be seen as a meta-commentary about theater itself. The theater of Shakespeare's times with the central stage and the areas under and above it ("hell" and "heaven"), invite the audience to see more than the actual story that is taking place on stage, the theater is in itself an architectural invitation for interpretation. If Hamlet, the undoubted central character of this play, now talks deliberately about the transcendent towards his friend Horatio (and the audience), this can be seen as yet another invitation: An invitation for the public to use the imagination and to be

prepared for the unexpected. Therefore this quote – and it is no coincidence that it is placed close to the beginning of the play in 1.5. – also fulfills the function of a kind of mind-opener, to be ready for and to accommodate to the things to come.

One of the strengths of Shakespeare's plays is the fact that they can be re-read throughout the ages. Critics, literature experts, and general audiences explore new and unforeseeable features of Shakespeare's plays. This speaks for itself with the plays being the foremost exponent of philosophy intertwined with literature and art. Many different poems, plays, and novels fulfill their specific function in their specific context: *Hamlet* is, like some other Shakespeare plays, somewhat out of time, or to be more precise, transcending the realm of time because they address fundamental problems of humanity.

And yet again, the advent of the twenty-first century poses new challenges for the interpretation of this play, and of course – among others – for Hamlet's famous lines "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (Hamlet, 1.5.168-169). If, for a brief moment, we take the time and actually put ourselves in the position of Shakespeare's contemporaries, we can find a radically different world, devoid of most of the technical achievements of our time, but already with the immanent, probably threatening seed of modernity in it. For the case study of the character of Hamlet, the technological limitations of his times do not come into play within the text, it is about the role of the human being: Starting as early as 1492 with Columbus' discovery of America, the self-conception of the Western World started to change slowly. Rules, borders, and boundaries lost their value, and the spectrum of human possibilities was extended.

The figure Hamlet is one of the best examples for the man in the so-called Early Modern Age on the verge of modernity: His mission is not primarily god-given, but more ghost-given. He believes in the irrational appearance of the ghost of his father, and it is this thing from the past that gives him a task to fulfill and a direction in which to go. The ghost can be seen as a metaphor for the past and for a time, in which – at least in the view of Hamlet – the matters within his family and within Denmark seemed to work fine. Hamlet shows a certain kind of fondness for this perceived past and in the same breath a feeling of uncertainty and disdain about the current situation, mainly linked to his negative feelings towards Claudius. But fate and his father leave him no other choice but to act and explore the intrigues within the royal court, which can be seen metaphorically as the transition from the medieval times to modernity in which man is his own ruler and not directed by god. His hesitation is a fitting symbol for a psychologically very deep-rooted fear of the unexplored and unexplained and has been subject to numerous interpretations in their own right. The most famous theory concerning his hesitation is that Hamlet is a princess in disguise (Vining, 1881).

It can be concluded that the figure of Hamlet becomes a "modern" figure within play, although seemingly at least partially against his own will. It is this character that formed like no other character from a play of this era the image of the modern man, loiteringly taking part in the creation of the volatile utopia that will be named "modernity" in later times.

But let us again have a detailed look at the quote itself in regard to the issue of modernity. Hamlet teaches Horatio that there are more things "in heaven and earth", of course referring to the ghost. But regarding modernity there is also the possibility to read this quote in a Nietzschean way. On earth we can find the world of things, of animals, and plants – and of human beings. The heavens (and in this I would include the counterpart, the hell) are populated – especially in Shakespeare's times – with all kinds of transcendent entities: a god, angels of all sorts, a devil, good and evil spirits, and in popular cultures things like witches, fairies, and so on. And – ghosts who, as we have seen earlier, had their specific place and function in this round dance of supernatural things. The figure Hamlet adds one more thing to this, which is kind of a hybrid, a polyfunctional being, the "Übermensch". This happens long before this term is coined in the Nietzschean way (in this context, it is worth noticing that the philosophical concept of a somewhat "elevated", "special" being can be traced back to antique Greek philosophy), not to its full extent, but in a rather paradoxical way. Hamlet, through his father's demand, displays a certain will to power, and this plea gives him a certain kind of usefulness, a task to fulfill. It embodies defining elements of modernity which are individualism, the capability to form one's own fate, a sense of equitableness among humans (which has been violated by Claudius), and a certain objectivity, which Hamlet needs to act mad and for example have the vision and view to stage *The Mousetrap* to unmask Claudius. And yet he resists the ideas of disenchantment of the world as he clearly acknowledges the existence of the ghost and the ultimate stage in the Nietzschean concept of becoming a god-like creature oneself: He, how advanced he may seem, still is in the position of a human being with literally both feet on the ground and being servile to some higher, transcendent entities. Therefore, he is and is not the Übermensch: He may *seem* like one (certainly to the people who are of his father's age), but in fact he shows more character traits of a modern man.

Commentary:

This essay is admirably thorough in its exploration of what radiates from Hamlet's famous comment, and still more admirable in its level-headed and acute certainty that the quotation alone can ground an essay. You demonstrate persuasively the density and diversity of signification in Hamlet's lines, and you pursue aspects of both these qualities with determination and verve. Your essay, too, is best when dealing closely with the line itself in its context, and to this extent you show yourself to be a sound reader, thinker, and literary analyst.

Still, much here is very fine indeed—I especially like the point about the early modern world itself experiencing the kind of vast dilation of the field of knowledge indicated by Hamlet's remark—and overall I think this and much of your analysis of this brief passage is both true to the play (for what that's worth) and rich in import for reading this great text.

References:

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare after all*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.

Hamlet. Kindlers Neues Literaturlexikon. Munich: Kindler Verlag, 1999.

Hibbard, G.R., ed. William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Ditzingen: Reclam, 1978.

Nünning, Ansgar, ed. *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*. Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2001.

Vining, Edward P. *The Mystery of Hamlet*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1881.